

The Tai Phake Community in Assam: Some Aspects of Socio-Cultural and Religious Life

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Abstract

The Tai Phakes living in the state of Assam are a tiny minority community of less than 2000 people. They have a set of unique traditional practices in social, economic, political and cultural aspects. The Tai Phake tribe, despite holding a distinctive cultural tradition, are also in transition. This paper is a humble effort to illuminate the socio-political and cultural life of the Tai Phakes of Assam. The focus has also been placed on identifying the various socio-cultural aspects and religious practices, some of which are usually specific to this community, and also on exploring the patterns of transition caused by different external and internal influences.

Keywords: *Assam, Identity, culture, Socio-political, Tradition, Tai Phake*

1.1. Introduction

Tai is a large ethnic community comprised of numerous subgroups currently scattered mainly throughout parts of Southeast Asia and South Asia, especially in Northeast India, having followed distinct migration patterns from their original homeland, believed to be in China. Disputes over the roots of the race are rife because it is not easy to trace the past of the Tai before the Han dynasty. However, there is broad acceptance of the history after the Han dynasty, where the roots of the current Tai diaspora lie. The Tai moved to various parts of Southeast Asia and South Asia after the Han Period — Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and India — as Thais, Laos, Shans, Lus, and so forth.

They had been followers of Buddhism since the traceable history of the Tais. Before the advent of Buddhism it is very difficult to ascertain their religious affiliations. Tai migration and settling relied on their rice cultivation skills — armoured with this, in any terrain they

could settle and reside within themselves. Many Tai families retain their personal farmland and livestock to this date. This is also integral to the sustenance of communal living, which has become a significant marker of their socio-cultural identity. Another distinct cultural characteristic of the Tais, in which they are quite conscious, is that their social system has granted men and women equal status in religious, educational and economic terms. This article provides a contemporary profile of the Tai Phake tribe and also to look at the dynamism among them.

1.2. Objectives

The present paper is a modest attempt to describe and analyze the characteristics of the socio-cultural and religious life of the Tai Phakes. There has also been focus on delineating the different common socio-cultural aspects, as well as religious practices, some of which are usually specific to this tribe.

1.3. Research Methods

This paper is a descriptive and analytical in nature. An attempt has been made to include the information in depth on the basis of observations obtained from the Tai Phake villages of Assam. The paper primarily attempts to understand the characteristics of the socio-cultural and religious life of the Tai Phakes of Assam. Essentially, this study aims to analyze the papers published on Tai Phakes by numerous scholars. Both the primary and the secondary sources are used in this paper. For the primary sources of information solely based on the data collected from the different Tai Phake villages of Assam.

1.4. Tai Phakes of Assam

Tai Phake or Phakial is one of the six Tai groups in Upper and Upper Middle Assam. The Tai Phake population is about 2000 and is mostly found in the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam. The Tai Phake community is a subgroup of the Mongoloid Tai race stock. In present-day Assam, Tai Phake is scattered across Namphake and Tipamphake in the district of Dibrugarh, and Mounglang, Man Mou, Bor Phake, Man Long or Long Phake, Ningam Phake or Ningam, Nonglai and Phaneng in the district of Tinsukia. Tai Phakes are a hill tribe living in plains like many other ethnic groups in Assam (Wonkyo et al, 2010:7). They have their own distinct language and script. The traditional language spoken by this tribe is Tai language, which belongs to the Tibeto Chinese language families (Phukan, 2005).

Historically speaking, they were migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and Patkai Hills and entered Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in 1775 A.D. After their entry

into Assam, they at first settled under their own chief Chow Ta Meng Khuen Meng at a place called Moongkongtat, near Ningroo(A village of present-day Arunachal Pradesh) on the bank of Buridihing(Gait, 1906). In the early part of Nineteenth Century, Ahom commander Chandra Gohain have brought the Tai Phakes from their previous habitat to Jorhat and settled them in various places on the river bank of Desoi. During the Burmese invasion in Assam in the early nineteenth century, the Tai Phakes were ordered by the Burmese officials to return to their traditional land of Burma. Though they went up to Buridihing River, they stopped their journey midway due to various difficulties and stayed back at Namchik (located in present day Arunachal Pradesh). After the annexation of Assam by British in 1826 through Yandaboo Treaty, Tai Phakes shifted their previous habitats from Arunachal and started living in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of upper Assam.

1.5. Socio-Cultural and Religious Life

The social life of the Tai Phakes is simple. The simplicity of Tai Phake society is reflected in their day to day activities and various norms and rituals. They assist each other in constructing their house, planting and harvesting the crops, burying the dead and so onⁱ. Festivity is another trait of Tai Phake culture. Various festivals such as Poi Chang Ken, Poi Noun Houk, Poi Owk Wa, Poi Patesa, Poi Mou Haeing, Poi Kithing, Poi Kanta, Poi Mai Ko Sum Fai, Poi Noun Tsi, Poi Kham Chang, Poi Laeng and so on are celebrated throughout the year. Another noted feature of Tai Phake society is their love for peace.

1.5.1. Marriage in Tai Phake society

The traditionally matrilineal cross-cousin marriage was prescribed among the Phakes. The rule of intra-marriage served the purpose of the continuance of the circulation of same lineages as the previous generations. Now, the rule is not followed strictly. The dynamics of the marriage system is coming along with the changing times. Unlike in the past, the younger generations own choice get preference at present times.

1.5.2. Family

The linear joint family is a distinctive feature of Tai Phake society where the married son and his wife stay together with parents. Till the 1980s, the system of linear joint family among Tai Phakes was 66.2% in Namphake and 56.6% in Tipam Phake village, two most populated Tai Phake village of Assam(Phukan, 2005). With regards the nature of families, a higher frequency was found in the presence of nuclear families. The family system of Tai Phakes is patriarchal in nature where males take the responsibility of cultivation and other

outside works, while women provide helping hands in the field and involve in the household activities. Since the family system is patriarchal, the son inherits his father's property. However, the daughter is given a share of the property.

1.5.3. Clan System

Different clans are found among the Phakes. According to G.C. Sarma Thakur, Tai Phakes had one hundred and one clans but now have only eighteen clans and these are- Thumung, Weingken, Manhai, Chowhailung, Kanmung, Chekhen, Mungnoi, Mahao, Homa, Homen, Chekhap, Choton, Tumten, Lokho, Misa, Tonkha, Pomung, and Kolo (Thakur,). According to Supriti Phukan(2005), Tai Phakes have now twenty two clans and these are- Chakhap, Weingken, Chowhai, Tamten, Thamong, Manhai, Chaton, Gohain, Philung, Khen, Mangloi, Pamoung, Hailing, Aakang, Koloi, Tum-Ten, Mihsa, Langzan, Hai Pan, Hai Khung, Hai Now and Mahao. The clan organization of Tai Phakes reflects various socio-cultural aspects. Their clan names are given after some characteristics of their ancestors and natural objects.

1.5.4. Community Life and Festivals

Tai Phakes celebrates various festivals throughout the year, such as *Poi Chang Ken*(april), *Poi Noun Houk*(May), *Poi Owk Wa*(Mid October-November), *Poi Patesa*(During *Poi Owk Wa* and Occasional), *Poi Mou Haeing*(During *Poi Owk Wa*), *Poi Kithing*(During *Poi Owk Wa* and Occasional), *Poi Kanta*(November), *Poi Mai Ko Sum Fai*(February), *Poi Noun Tsi*(March), *Poi Kham Chang*(Occasional), *Poi Laeng*(Occasional). *Poi Chang-Ken* is mostly popular festival of Tai Phakes. It is a festival of bathing Buddha images and play with water, also known as Pani Bihu. It is believed that by splashing water over each other's body and washing the respectable persons will cleanse them of all sins they have committed in their life (Rungkarn, 2006). *Poi Mai ko Chumphai* is a post-harvest festival celebrated in the month of January-february. During this festival, fire is set on 'Mejis' on the river bank which is the major attraction of the festival. This festival of Tai Phakes have some similarities with the festival of 'Magh Bihu' of Assamese people, which is also celebrated in January. Along with the main 'Meji', Tai Phakes also construct another small 'Meji', which is offered in memory of fifth Buddha or Arimitia (Phikan, 2005). *Poi Nen Huk* is celebrated on full moon day in the month of May-June, popularly called as Buddha Purnima or Buddha Jayanti. This festival is related to the celebration of birth, enlightenment and death of Lord Buddha. *Varsha Vassa* is a religious ceremony of fasting. Buddhist monk undertakes fast for three months of rainy season, from the full moon of June-July to the full moon of September-October. In a

year, the monk selects a particular *Vihar* or monastery for three months and those who want to undertake fast assemble that place for three months.

1.5.5. Religious Life

Tai Phake professes Buddhism as their religion, yet some traditional beliefs are still prevalent among them. Tai Phakes belongs to Buddhist of Theravada School. Lord Buddha is their supreme God, and the socio-cultural and religious life of Tai Phakes is almost centered round the region. They have their specific organization for the practice of their religion. This organization is called *Vihara* or *Kyong* in the Tai languageⁱⁱ. Every Tai Phake village has at least one Monastery or *Vihara*. The Buddhist Monastery is an inseparable part of the Tai Phake community. The life of Tai Phake peoples is deeply connected to the Monastery. The Monastery or *Viharas* are typically built on the eastern side of the village, in a place where monks can live in quiet and calm atmosphereⁱⁱⁱ. The dwelling houses of the monks were built within the entire complex of the monastery. The impact of modernity is clearly visible among various ethnic groups in Assam including Tai Phakes. Development of infrastructure has come very late to the remote areas of Assam compared to other parts of the rest of the country, but it is slowly beginning to happen. Recent governmental efforts in that direction, mainly in the form of better roads and a better communication network, have made remote areas more accessible. Most Tai Phake villages today have access to electricity, and also have some facilities for basic health care. With better access to and facilities for education, many more Tai Phakes are getting educated. The school and college educated Tai Phakes have better prospects for finding gainful employment; there are at least a few Tai Phakes with regular office jobs. This has meant moving away from the traditional occupations. The increased exposure to the western and pan-Indian culture through television and internet has meant that the younger generation of Tai Phake are slowly opting for the new ways over their own traditional life-styles. The mobile phone and internet has brought increased contact with other communities and larger societies. Thus, the lifestyle of the Tai Phakes has changed gradually.

1.6. Conclusion

The above discussion outlines the various aspects of the Tai Phakes socio-cultural structure, family pattern, marriage system, clan system, religious life, customs and traditions. In addition, taking into account the above debate, it can be found out that the advent of different modern institutions, the expansion of education, exposure to external forces and globalization

have some effect on the Tai Phakes ' culture and society. Religion and kinship structures are comparatively finding continuity of traditional values, while the village's administrative system and some social occasions are in transitional stage.

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