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**Origin of the Tai-Phake community of the Brahmaputra valley and their  
acculturation with the greater Assamese society**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper tries to throw some light on the origin of Tai-Phake community living in selected pockets of Assam and deal with the change in life and culture of Tai-Phake community of Namphake village. The Tai-Phake people were originally from the Hu-kwang valley of Myanmar. They migrated in and around 1775 from Hu-Kwang valley to Assam in search of better life. To sustain their lives the people settled around the river side because of availability of water for various works. Water also helps them for cultivation of crops i.e. agriculture, which was their main occupation. The river plays an important role in the Tai-Phake community of Namphake village. The process of modernization is observed with the help of comparison in lifestyle, food, traditional practices among the older generation and new generation. Many of the festivals have vanished because of the irregular practices. There is influence in the language of the Tai-Phake community because of acculturation with different culture like the Assamese, Bengali etc. Monastery was considered to be the place where people worship, cultural gathering and educational hub but in the present period it is used only for worshipping and considered as a tourist hub. The people of Namphake village has tried to hold on to their original customs and beliefs and has preserved it by arranging evening classes of tai languages for the people, wearing traditional dresses during festival and marriage festivals and marriages. Conclusions are drawn based on the analysis of the collected information during the survey time.

**Key Words:** Tai-Phake, Cultural Acculturation, Namphake village

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tai Phakes migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and then Pat Kai Hills and then entered Assam in 1775 and then settled in Brahmaputra valley (Roy et.al. 2016). The *Tai-Phake* are a small Buddhist community of who had settled along the bank of *Buri-dihing* River, in the state of Assam. This community are believed to be one of the descendent of the great Tai family who once believed to be settled in the *Yunnan province* of China in a kingdom called “*Moung-Mao*” the kingdom of Tais. This community has a long history of their journey from “*Moung-Mao*” to finally settling in the plain valley of upper Assam in the later half of 17<sup>th</sup> century. The main occupation of Tai-Phake community is agriculture. This community have their own language and their own alphabets.

The objective of this paper is to understand the history of the Tai-Phake people along with their culture and tradition and the practices they have sustained throughout this journey. This paper also aims to understand about their acculturation with the surrounding communities.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The present study is mainly intended to access the process of migration from their roots and acculturation of the Tai- Phake community with the greater Assamese society with special emphasis on the cultural transformation among the residents of Namphake village. However, to meet the need of present study the following objectives are framed-

- To study the root/ origin of the Tai-Phake community living in Assam and their original customs.
- To access the present cultural traits followed by the Tai –Phake community in the study area.
- To analyze the cause of changes in cultural customs and belief if any in the study area.
- To explore the process of acculturation of the Tai-Phake community with the greater Assamese society and access its impact on life of the people in the study area.

## **DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY**

## **Database**

Collection of data relevant to the present study is done mainly through primary sources using door to door interview, observation methods and focused group discussion among different section of respondents based on the need of the study. However, secondary data is also used from sources like books and journals and internet sources.

## **Methodology**

The present study is mainly qualitative in nature as the chief aim of the work is to understand the process of cultural acculturation of a community.

Field data mainly includes facts regarding the diaspora of Tai-Phake community to the present state. However, the process of modernization is observed with the help of comparison in lifestyle, food, traditional practices among the older generation and new generation.

Conclusions are drawn based on the assessment and analysis of the collected information during the survey period.

## **STUDY AREA**

Namphake village is the largest Tai-Phake village of the entire Phake community village located in Assam in terms of population with more than 150 families. It is situated about 56 km from Dibrugarh town, its district headquarter. It is located from 27°17' N 95°21' E to 27°16'N 95°22'E and is at an elevation of 122 meter above sea level.

## **Historical background of the Community**

The root of this small community is believed to be started from “*Moung-Mao-long*” the kingdom of Tais which is situated in the *Yunnan province* of China. This kingdom had four princes. The eldest was *Seukapha*, followed by *Seukhanpha*, *Seupatpha* and the youngest of all *Seuchatpha*. “Prescient and farsighted, these four princes in order to expand their kingdom and for the added well being of the people and with a strong desire for a dream kingdom of their own, resolved to set out on a journey taking along with them a group of nobles, general army of soldiers and a large group of people.” (Weingken.N, 2004). The eldest of all the princes, *Chau Seukapha*

started toward the west direction of the kingdom, while the second eldest prince, ***Chau Seukhanpha*** decided to go northward and the third prince, ***Chau Seupatpha*** went eastward from the kingdom. The youngest of all the princes, ***Chau Seuchatpha*** however established his reign over own diverse and prosperous kingdom in “*Moung-Mao*” the kingdom of his forefather. (Weingken, 2018)

***Chau Seukapha*** travelled across the *Patkai hills* and came down to valley of Assam in 1228 AD. It is said that the valley of Assam was very fertile and soft at that time as recorded in some manuscript. Seeing such fertility they named the valley “ *Moung-Nuun-Choun-Kham*”, where ‘*Moung*’ means ‘Kingdom’, ‘*Nuun*’ means ‘cotton’, ‘*Choun*’ mean ‘field’ and ‘*Kham*’ means ‘gold’. By the given name it can be compared that the soil was soft as cotton and due to the fertility, the crops grown here were compared to gold. ***Chau Seukapha*** established his great “Tai Ahom” kingdom due to his adroit skills, mental strength and courage in Assam. (Weingken, 2018)

***Chau Seukhanpha*** travelled northward and he established his own large kingdom with the help of his army and people in a place called “*Moung-kawng*” situated in present day Myanmar. The king ordered a group of Tai people to settle on their own in a placed called “*Hu-kawng*” valley near Burma (Myanmar) in 11th century. It is said that this valley had three rivers flowing through it in those days. The name of the river as mentioned in some manuscript was “*Namm-khe-Turung*”, “*Namm-khe-Taram*” and “*Namm-khe-Chalip*”. This river come together to form a single large river with huge magnitude but unable to break mountain which fall on its path thus changing its own direction toward other side forming a gorge. The Tai people living there called the mountain “*pha-ke*”, where ‘*Pha*’ means wall and ‘*ke*’ means old. So the Tai people living near that valley were called “*Tai phake*”. The Tai-Phake people stayed peacefully in that valley for 560 years. As described in manuscript it said that this valley was surrounded by hills from all sides. In the north lies the *Patkai hills*, in the east lies the “*Noi-lang-ka*”, in the south lies “*Noi-Champu*”, and in the west lies “*Noi-po-ngi-po-nga*”. Here, the word ‘Noi’ means hills. But unfortunately this valley was captured by then Burmese king (‘*Aalongg-fra*’, name called to the Burmese king by *Tai-Phake* people). (Weingken, 2018)

The Burmese king tortured the *Tai-Phake* people in every possible way. Unhappy, bothered and overwrought by the Burmese king, the *Tai-Phake* abandoned their lovely kingdom and slipped through the dense forest at night to reach till the foothills of “*Noi-Champu*” where they met with the people of ‘*Singpho*’ tribe who were also troubled by the Burmese King in the year . Facing the same trouble together, these two tribes form a brotherhood between them and together they escaped in the hope to form a new kingdom away from the Burmese king. Days after walking through dense forest and fog, they followed up route once taken by the King *Chau Seukapha*. There they rested in one of the highland named ‘*Pang-sau*’, where ‘*Pang*’ means place, ‘*Sau*’ means rest. After resting in *Pang-sau* for a short period of time they move westward in the fear that the Burmese king might follow them. Then after cutting through dense forest they came to halt near a large pond called ‘*Nong-tau*’, where ‘*Nong*’ means pond and ‘*tau*’ means moss. The pond was filled with moss. And later they moved on to enter the ‘*Woisali*’ kingdom (the kingdom of Assam). (Weingken,2018)

During this time they met with the ‘*Khampti*’ tribe and started to live together. Knowing of arrival of new people in the area the ‘*Sadiya*’ king, “*Sadiyakhua Gohain*” dispatched his army to capture the *Tai phake*. These three tribes form a brotherhood together and fought with the ‘*Sadiya*’ king and won the war in 1797 AD.

By this time the ‘*Ahom*’ had already established a strong kingdom in Assam. Knowing about the war which was fought between the ‘*Sadiya*’ king and *Tai phake*, *Khampti* and *Singpho*, the ‘*Ahom*’ king recognised the *Tai-Phake* as their own and embraced them and took the *Tai-Phake* people and allowed them to reside along the ‘*Desoi*’ river in the year 1789 AD. The *Tai-Phake* slowly started to settle near the bank in relief that their days of sorrow were over. (Weingken 2019)

Seeing the weak king of the *Ahom* the Burmese attacked the Kingdom of *Ahom* under the leadership of ‘*Borphukan*’. Most of the soldiers of *Borphukan* being from Burma and of *Tai* origin, they recognised the *Tai-Phake* people residing along the bank of *Desoi* river. This *Tai* soldier decided to take back the *Tai-Phake* with them to Burma. The *Tai-Phake* left the bank of *Desoi* river in 1814 AD to return to *Hu-kwang* valley, a place once they left to escape from the torture of Burmese King. The season was monsoon season on the time they reached near the

foothill of Patkai hills, and the rain pour heavily as mention in some manuscript and poem during that time. They waited in a place called ‘*Namchik*’. ‘*Nam*’ means forest and ‘*Chik*’ means dense in *Singpho* dialect. The Burmese soldiers moved forward to cross the Patkai hills leaving behind the *Tai-Phake* people to follow them later when the monsoon is over in the year 1815 AD.

By this time the Assam was under the rule of British and the *Tai-Phake* people told their problem and sorrow about their lives in *Namchik* to the Englishman. The British favoured the *Tai-Phake* and they left *Namchik* to settled near *Margherita* to form a village called ‘*Ingthong*’ in the year 1830 AD. It was estimated that about 1000 family settled there. During this time, then ***British Governor Mr Newville of Rongpur*** deemed to arranged a rent free land for *Tai phake*. But finding the place unsuitable to settled due to destruction caused by wild elephant and other problem they broke into smaller group and moved downward to settled in different place, thus living a nomadic life for a while. Some of the place the *Tai-Phake* settled were *Tirap, Powai, Dirok, Makum* etc. “Finally *Tai-Phake* form nine village in the Assam mostly along the bank of *Buri dihing* river namely *Namphake, Tipam Phake, Borphake, Manmau, Manlong, Ninggun, Phaneng, Nanglai, Lalung village* mostly form between 1845 to 1860”. (Weingken.N, September 2004)

## **CULTURE AND TRADITION**

The *Tai-phake* community follows their own cultural traits which they have been preserving from “*Hu-kwang*” time. But it has transformed through passage of time and has adopted some new trend but still the original has not been totally lost. The lifestyle of the *Tai-Phake* are very simple. They are nature and peace loving people. Agriculture has been their primary occupation. Most of the male members of the community leave for work in the field in the morning. Some members of the family go to the forest for collecting woods and vegetables. As most of the villages were near the river, they would go fishing. The female member in the community wave clothes, prepare food, look after the family. They would also go to the field to help the male members working in the field. This was the daily routine of most of the *Tai-Phake* till 1990s.

The Tai-Phake people wear their own traditional dress which are wave by the women in the community. The type of dress worn by men are ‘*Seo*’ (shirt), “*Pha-phok*”(white clothes wore around shoulder), “*Pha-ho*”(clothes wore around head), ‘*Pha*’ (lungi).

The women in the community wear “*Pha-ho*”, Blouse, ‘*Nangwatt*’(clothes wore around the waist), ‘*Shin*’(mekhela in assamese), “*Pha-phok*” (white clothes wore around shoulder). There are some basic differences in the colour of clothes according to age of the person. The colours of ‘*Shin*’ wore by a teenage girl is different from the colour of a married women which is different from old age women. Same goes to the ‘*pha*’. The clothes are generally made of silk, cotton, thin wool. Jewellery are used by women in the community. Some of the jewellery name are “*Poi-kham*” “*kongpong-kham*” “*kham-kaw*”, “*ween-kong*”, “*pei kham*”. (Chakhap,2018)

The houses of the Tai-Phake community are usually 7 to 8 feet above the ground. They are usually made out of bamboo, wood and hay and large leaf. Most of the foods are cooked on wood by the female in the community, which are usually boiled or streamed. They cooked various cuisines found from nearby forest or vegetable field which are grown near the house. Rice is grown on own paddy field. Agriculture was done by using animals like buffalo, cow etc.

Most of the education that was taught is Tai language or the Pali language in the monastery. The male person in the community has to live in monastery as monk for some period of time at point of his life to serve the monastery.

## **FESTIVAL AND EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

Festival has always been a platform to bring the community together. The Tai community celebrate many festivals, starting from “*Poi Sangken*” in the month of April, “*Buddha Purnima*” is celebrate in the month of May, “*Khao-wa*”( Entering varsa retreat period) is celebrated in the month of august, “*Okk-wa*” (Finish of varsa retreat period) in the month October , “*Poi Sangkha*” is celebrate before harvesting of paddy, “*Poi pet moun shi heng*” (festival of eighty four thousand pagoda), “*Poi mo heng*” (festival of thousand lotus flower), “*Poi ka kong*” (festival of dance and drum), “*Poi myank mo tong*”, “*Poi mai ko shum fai*” (also known as Mezi in Assamese culture) and many more. Festival has extinct due to few number of the participant in the festival. Some

festival has lost in course of time as no one knows or aren't able to organize such festival like "Poi Myank mo tang", "Poi mo heng", "Pet moun si heng". (Chakhap, 2018)

The Tai-Phake people does many activity together like the women crushing grain for rice together, going to cultivate field together and together they sing song "Soi yo" in which they express their own stories through the journey in the passage of time. (Thakur, 1982)

### **ACCULTURATION OF THE TAI-PHAKE COMMUNITY WITH THE GREATER ASSAMESE SOCIETY**

Namphake village is surrounded by the Assamese speaking people. The Tai-Phake people being very simple and straight forward, has mixed up with the surrounding society. Being assimilated with the Assamese society, they have preserved their customs and beliefs. Assamese language has been used mainly for communication beside Phake language. There is generally exchange of information, goods like clothes, grain between them. The Tai-Phake people have learned the way of making Assamese dishes due to the acculturation and vies-versa. There are now inter caste marriage between the two communities and it has been accepted so far. The Tai-Phake person generally depends on the labour community living nearby during the period of cultivation and harvesting of crops in today's time.

Earlier days the Tai-Phake community was fully dependent on the agriculture as their occupation but slowly with flow of time the people took secondary and tertiary activity as occupation. Originally the Tai-Phake used Chang ghar to live but with the passage of time they have constructed concrete house like the Assam type and RCC. The night classes that are arranged by the elder people of the village are one among the positive change that is adapted by the people for preserving their Tai language. Namphake village include tourist from Thailand mainly because the Tai people who resides at Thailand have forgotten their own culture, customs and beliefs due to different factors. They visit Namphake to see and learn their own preserved culture, beliefs and customs. The condition of the connectivity of the study area is not good. There is also lack of permanent public transport from the nearby Naharkatia town.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

The preservation of Tai language is in the initial stage. It is said to be initial because the elder of the village are arranging the night classes for the children of the Tai-Phake community in the fear of extinction. Therefore the local people must ensure that the Tai language doesn't become extinct. The connecting linkage of the Namphake village is poor so government should take special care of it. Then only the tourist will be attracted. The government should introduce some schemes for the better of the local Tai-Phake people. Modernization is one such thing which cannot be avoided therefore the younger generation should embrace the modernization without forgetting the roots. There should be some information centers for the tourist from where they can get the information about the village and the residing Tai-Phake community.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Tai-Phake community people have their own distinctive customs and belief, however, due to different factors like migration of people, change in occupations etc. Earlier they took agriculture as their main occupation but with the change of time the Tai-Phake community people took secondary and tertiary activity as occupation. Due to change in occupation the agriculture practice is less, compared to earlier days. The study area had increasing number of tourist in the present time, by which they are gradually increasing their economy values. The increase in tourist also disturbs their inner calmness among themselves. In the era of modernization the old generations have the fear to lose their language so they have arranged night classes for the children for learning their Tai language.

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