

Preserving Cultural Identity: A Study Among the Tai Phake Community of Dibrugarh District Assam

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ABSTRACT:

Culture is the most distinctive feature of human being. It consists of belief, practices, tradition and all the habits shared by mankind. Each tribe and ethnic group has their own culture through which their identity is reflected. Now- a- day Anthropologists are more interested to study the ethnic culture to preserve the indigenous identity. Tai Phake is one of the important Tai groups of Assam who have migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and then Pat Kai Hills and then entered Assam in 1775 and at present they settled down at Upper Assam. Tai Phake community have rich culture heritage. They have their own belief and practices, tradition, religion, language, habits etc., because of which they have unique cultural identity. In order to observe their cultural traits and to study the uniqueness of their cultural life a study has been done among the Tai Phake community of Namphake village, Dibrugarh District of Assam. The standard anthropological methods such as observation, interview and case study are used to enrich the data.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Tai Phake, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is the most important feature of human being which differentiates man from other creatures. It consists of belief, practices, tradition and all the habits shared by mankind. The British Anthropologists E.B Tylor defined culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, art, belief, customs, moral, habits and all other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871). Hence it includes everything we acquired in our daily life be it our food habit, dress pattern, house type, language, belief, religion festivals and so and so on. Each tribe and ethnic group has their own culture through which their identity is reflected.

All Tais in Assam refer themselves simply as “Tai”. The names; Ahom, Khamti, Phake, Aiton, and Khamyang - are used by other people to distinguish those Tai groups from one another. The names, however, are accepted by each and every group of the Tai themselves. The Tai is a generic name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. The Tai people are now mainly concentrated in the Indo-Chinese peninsula.

Tai Phake is one of the important Tai groups of Assam who have migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and then Pat Kai Hills. The Tai-Phakes entered Assam in 1775 A.D during the reign of the Ahom king Lakshmi Sinha (1769- 1780 A.D) and settled at Nangtao of present Arunachal Pradesh. They belong to the great Tai race. Ethnically they belong to the Mongoloid tribe and linguistically

they belong to the Tibeto- Chinese families. They settled in Arunachal Pradesh for a few years and during the British rule they gradually entered Assam and started living in small groups in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts, where they are still found now.

Presently they live in nine villages of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts which are as follows:- Namphake and Tipamphake on the bank of the river Buridihing of Naharkatiya area of Dibrugarh district, and Mounglang, Man Mou, Bor Phake, Man Long or Long Phake, Ningam Phake or Ningam, Nonglai and Phaneng in Ledo-Margherita area in Tinsukia district. (Phukan, 2019)

Tai Phake community have rich culture heritage. They have their own belief and practices, tradition, religion, language, habits etc., because of which they have unique cultural identity.

OBJECTIVES

The present study is conducted among the Tai Phake people of Namphake village with an objective to understand the unique socio-cultural practices among the Tai Phake community and how they preserve their cultural practices with the changing scenario.

METHODOLOGY

The study is done among the Tai Phake people of Namphake village. The village is situated at Naharkatia area of Dibrugarh District of Assam. The paper is mainly based on Qualitative study. A primary study is done to understand the cultural practices of the Tai Phake people by using the standard anthropological methods like quasi participant observation, structured and unstructured interview etc., Case study method is also used for the cross verification of collected data.

THE AREA AND THE PEOPLE

Namphake village is the largest village among the Tai Phake villages of Assam, where the study has been undertaken. Tai Phake is a very less known tribe. They reside in a small village Namphake, 3 km far from Naharkatia town, Dibrugarh district.

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. They are a population less than 2000 all over the world. The total families in the village are over 75 comprising 470 number of total population. In spite of being such a small number they have preserved their cultures and tradition.

FINDINGS

Through the study it has been found that the Tai Phake people of Namphake village have a very rich culture. They have their own system of belief, practices, rituals, food habits, dress pattern, own fairs and festivals, house type etc. through which the uniqueness of their culture can be distinguished.

House Type

The traditional house type of the village is pile dwelling. They build pile dwelling house because of various reasons. The villagers build pile dwelling house in order to get rid of from flood as they live in on the bank of the river. Moreover, they also believe that as sweat removes from the body like that different types of bacteria, viruses also come out from the soil which can affect the human body. Therefore they build pile dwelling house so that such bacteria, viruses cannot touch their body easily. The pile dwelling house which is popularly known as *Chang Ghar* are built on raised platform with bamboo slits and have

thatched roofs made of Assam fan palm, *tangkou* leaves. The staircases of the houses are positioned in the North to South or East to North direction from the ground to the balcony. Another remarkable thing of the staircases is that it must be odd number. The people keep their necessary things under the platform and a portion of it is used for weaving activities for the women folk.

Place of worship

The people of the village are the devote followers of Buddhism. Therefore they go to the Buddhists Monastery. It is an inseparable part for the people living in the village. The day of every Tai Phake people start with the offering made to Monastery. Moreover they also pray to God at home in every morning and evening.

Language

Tai Phake language is a sub branch of greater Thai Language. It is a monosyllabic language which is spoken by the Tai Phakes among themselves. They have their own script. There are 17 consonant and 10 vowels in Tai Phake language. It is a tonal language and is to read melodiously. Same words have multiple meanings. Tai Phake people of Namphake village speak their own distinctive dialect among themselves and have their own manuscripts.

Tai Phake Calendar

Tai Phakes follow a different calendar. They follow the Tai calendar. Independent on the Western calendars, in their calendar they have eight working days and after that there are two holidays. All the Tai Phakes follow this calendar then the next two days they take rest and do household things.

Dress and Ornaments

The Tai Phake people are easily identifiable from their Traditional attire. They prefer to wear their traditional dresses at home. The women put on colourful hand woven garments. They wear *shin*, an ankle length skirt. The upper garment below chest is called *nangwat* and the married females take *Phaa phak* on the upper arm. There are three parts in the *shin* worn by Tai Phake women. Last two parts is known as *Shin* and the upper part of the shin is called as *hou shin*. The colour of the shin distinguishes the age of the people in the village. Younger girls wear clothes with lighter tone and colour becomes darker as the age progress. The marital status is also depicted through their clothing. The married women wear coloured *nangwat* till the age of 45. Newly married women wear more colourful *nangwat* than the others. Unmarried girls' donot wear *nangwat* which differentiate them from married women.

Like the women, Tai phake men also have their traditional dress code. The male members use to wear *Pha nung* (lungi) which is wrapped a chequeured piece of cloth with vibrant colours around their waist. The colour of the *phaa nung* also varies according to their age. Young boys use to wear black, green, purple and white colour mixed *phaa nung*. Due to mixing of equal length and breadth of thread *phaa nung* looks like a square. After weaving they joint it and make it useful for wearing. The aged male members use to take *phaaphuk* in white colour on the arm.

Tai Phake women of the Namphake village use very limited numbers of ornaments. They were white thread in hand provided by the Vante of Buddhist Monastery. Moreover they wear finger ring or bead which is given by the monk uttering some spells which is thought to bring fortune to them.

Food and Drinks

Rice is the staple food of the Tai Phake. The rice that they eat is grown by themselves in their fields. The rice is steamed cooked and is sticky. The sticky rice which they eat is made with a special technique. The rice is cooked in double decked pots. The lower pot contains water which is set on fire. The upper pot contains rice. Hot water is added at regular intervals to this rice in the upper pot. This method of preparing rice makes it sticky when the rice is cooked, it is spread on a bamboo plate called *dolla* and then cooled. This traditional method of cooking rice is called *tang hou he*. They then stored the rice with the help of *koupat*, a kind of leaves. The Tai Phake women of the village cook it in the morning and boiled some fresh vegetables which they offer to the monk before eating at 7 am in the morning.

Moreover the Tai Phake people of Nam Phake village also prepare different types of dishes. Among them some are mentioned as. *Paasa* is a Tai Phake traditional delicacy which can be with variety of fishes. *Paisoo* is another traditional delicacy of the Tai Phake people. This is made on some special occasions like wedding or naming ceremony of a child. *khaw pat pitha* is the traditionally made sweet items which is made from sticky rice sesame.

Traditional Occupation

Tai Tai Phake people of the village mostly depended on agriculture. Each and every household of the village cultivate different types of food grain. Among them they mostly cultivate lahi paddy locally called *khawtai* and hali paddy known as *khaw moo noon*. Agriculture is the traditional source of occupation of the Tai Phake people of the village.

Family

Traditionally Tai Phake people live in joint family. They have honour and respect towards the head of the family. All the members of the family follow and obey the rules as well as his or her decision in any household work. Moreover in the studied village, in most of the houses it is found that the head of the family whether male or female sleeps in the last room where day do their daily prayer and they sleep in the middle of the post as they consider it their traditional savior or the traditional God. After that the first son and his family members use to sleep. In the next room the second son and his family members sleep. Similarly in the first room next to the drawing room the youngest child used to sleep.

Marriage

Marriage is everywhere a set of cultural pattern to guide the individual in their choice of spouses. Marriage among the Tai Phake people is a social obligation and they consider it as a duty for them. Tai Phake people mainly follow the monogamy marriage where cross cousin marriage mainly MBD i.e. mothers brothers daughter is must. But in case of someone don't want to marry his maternal uncle's daughter he can go for his choice. There is not any strict rule for that. Another noticeable thing is that Tai Phake people are endogamous; mostly want to marry among the same tribe. Tai Phake people prefer this type of marriage because of some reasons. Firstly, they want to keep their property among their family members and secondly they have deep loved towards their own culture. If they marry with the boy outside their own tribe then they have the fear that they may lose their culture. Both arranged marriage and marriage by elopement is found among them.

Religion

The Tai Phake people of the village want to maintain peace and harmony which is taught by their religion i.e. all the people of the village follow the Buddhism religion. They follow the Panchsheel rule provided by the Buddhist monk. These are- no killing, non -stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying and no intoxicants. Every day of the Tai Phake people start with the monastery. The monastery of the village was established in the year 1850. Since then the monks of the monastery offer their service in propagating peace and harmony among the villagers. The monk is known as Vante. Before taking breakfast the villagers first offer their food to the monk.

Fairs and Festivals

The Tai Phake people celebrate different types offestivals. These are- *Sangken, Kham sang, Mai ko sum fai, Pet mou si hen, poi pa te sa* in different seasons. These festivals bring the Tai Phake people of the villagers together. Festivals are surrounded around Buddhism and involve Monastery for performing the rituals together.

Birth

Tai Phake people observe a number of rituals after the birth of a child. Without performing the ritual the new born child is totally prohibited to take outside. According to their tradition when they observe the birth ritual that day only they named the child. There are many peculiar things which are associated among them in naming the child. From the name itself it can be ascertained whether the individual is male or female, elder or younger and his or her day of birth. Therefore by the name itself the sex, sequence and born day of the child can be identified. In case of male child they use the following word according to the sequence-

Son according to sequence	Sequence wise word	Example
1 st son	<i>Ai</i>	<i>Aiken, Ai Chet in</i>
2 nd son	<i>Ngi</i>	<i>Ngi Yot, Ngi Tan</i>
3 rd son	<i>Cham</i>	<i>Cham sing</i>
4 th son	<i>Chai</i>	<i>Chai Pe,</i>
5 th son	<i>Ngu</i>	<i>Ngu Sing kya</i>
6 th son	<i>Nuk</i>	<i>Nuk Sen</i>
7 th son	<i>Naak</i>	<i>Naak am</i>

In case of female child name, they add the following words-

Daughter according to sequence	Sequence wise word	Example
1 st daughter	<i>Ye</i>	<i>Ye Hom, Ye Lawn</i>
2 nd daughter	<i>E</i>	<i>E paw</i>
3 rd daughter	<i>Aam</i>	<i>Aam Caw</i>
4 th daughter	<i>Ai</i>	<i>Ai Phe</i>
5 th daughter	<i>Ouk</i>	<i>Ouk Lawn</i>
6 th daughter	<i>Eiyot</i>	<i>Eiyot Ken</i>
7 th daughter	<i>Aat</i>	<i>Aat pa</i>

And the day of a child if it is a male then the letter is written in second part and in case of female it is written in last part. The letter which identified the born day of a child is written as

Day	Letter
Monday	<i>Ka, kha, nga</i>
Tuesday	<i>Cha, ngya</i>
Wednesday	<i>La, wa, yo, who</i>
Thursday	<i>Pa, pha, ma</i>
Friday	<i>Cha, ha</i>
Saturday	<i>Ta, tha, na</i>
Sunday	<i>Aa</i>

The naming style of Tai Phake signifies the discipline itself. After the removal of umbilical cord they select a day in the Tai Phake calendar and perform the purification ritual as well as the naming ceremony. For that they invite two old ladies who should be grandmother in relation to the child and should be born on the same day with the child. They first bath the child and dress with new clothes. And if the new born child is a male member then while taking outside from the house they carry a knife or axe and in case of female child they carry the hand loom instruments. That day the child is blessed by touching the soil and all the villagers tie white clothes in his hand. After the name of the child is declared before gathering and a feast is arranged for them. In the birth ritual women play greater role than the male members.

Clan

The Tai Phake people have a number of clans which are exogamous. The clans which are found in the studied village are- Weingken, Chakhap, Thoumoung, Hailoung, Manhai, Tumten, Choton, Chowhai, Khenlung, Pomoung etc. They donot trace the clan origin from any totemic object. But as per the information it is mentioned that Chakhap clan are regarded as King family whereas the Weingken clan were considered to work as border force.

Kinship Terminology

In all societies people are bound together in groups by various kinds of bonds. The most universal and the most basic of these bonds is that which is based on reproduction, an inherent human drive, and is called kinship. Various types of terms were used in designating and addressing the different kith and kins. The following kinship terms were found in the study village.

Sl. No.	English terms	Tai Phake terms	Assamese terms
1	Father	<i>U</i>	<i>Deuta, Papa</i>
2	Mother	<i>Mei</i>	<i>Maa</i>
3	Grand Father	<i>Pu</i>	<i>Koka</i>
4	Father's elder brother	<i>Lung</i>	<i>Bordauta</i>
6	Brother(elder)	<i>Chai</i>	<i>Dada, kokai</i>
7	Sister(elder)	<i>Pei</i>	<i>Ba, baideo</i>
8	Sister(younger)	<i>Nongchau</i>	<i>Bhanti, bhoni</i>
9	Brother(younger)	<i>Nongchai</i>	<i>Bhaitee</i>
10	Grand mother	<i>Yaa</i>	<i>A:aita</i>

Death and Disposal

The Tai Phake people consider death as natural and it is an inevitable phenomenon and people cannot escape from it. They believe that when a person is about to die, his eyes go up and become whitish and his hand, feet and the whole body get cold and still. Death among the Tai Phake can be categorized into two – natural and unnatural. Unnatural deaths include dead bodies of children below ten years, persons who commit suicide, deaths caused by accident, snake bite etc, or victims of diseases like cholera, small pox etc,. Moreover person who dies outside the boundary of the village is considered as unnatural death. The dead bodies of such persons are taken out from the house immediately after birth. They do not cremate the dead bodies which is done in case of natural deaths. For the unnatural ones burial is prescribed and not much honour is shown to the dead bodies.

Except these deaths, all other deaths are considered as natural death. In case of natural death they bath the dead body and for this the son in law carries water in a pot. After that the dead body is dressed with clothes in a reversed manner. The eldest son puts fire on the face of the dead and the monk pray for his soul. They perform the death ritual till the sixth days after death. They have the belief that soon after death the soul cannot become free and therefore it moves around the home boundary. For this reason the household member is not allowed to go outside the boundary at night and all the villagers pray for the condolence of the soul. The main purificatory ceremony is observed on the 6th day where a flag is hosted in a common ground and they formally give farewell to the soul. On the 7th day the household members of the deaths along with the villagers go to the monastery and pray for the peace and harmony of the soul, which is initiated by the monk of the monastery. Then a feast is arranged for all the villagers.

The Tai Phake people while going to the death person house on the day of cremation they hold a knife in hand so that the soul of the death person cannot do any harm to them. Moreover, if the dead body is already taken out for cremation and they reach late then it is the rule that they must put his step to the staircases. After returning home they must take bath and enter home. Otherwise the soul may come with his body.

CONCLUSION

The Tai-Phake people have their own distinctive customs, belief system and a distinct cultural identity. However, due to different factors like modernization, advancement of education, development of transport and technology, a number of changes can be seen in occupation, dress pattern, food habit as well as their way of life. 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. The study area has 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 they also have the fear to lose their language, culture etc, and so more initiatives should take to continue their cultural practices and preserve their unique ethnic identity.

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