

# The Tai Phakes of Assam: A Crisis of Identity

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## INTRODUCTION

The word 'Phake' is derived from Tai Language. 'Pha' means king, wall or mountain and 'Ka' means old. Hence, it means old king, old wall or old mountain. So, Phake were the people who belonged to the dynasty of the old king, or the people who lived near the old mountain.

The Phakes are one of the six branches of the Tai race. It has been enumerated in the royal manuscripts that the Tai Phakes, also known as Phakials, originally lived in 'Mungkong' kingdom in the Hukwong 'valley in Upper Myanmar about 1215 A.D. At that time it was called Munghukung. They ruled there for 650 years and during this time they had 23 kings. In 1658 when the Burmese king Alangfrai invaded Mungkong kingdom the Tai Kings under his suzerainty were terrified. The Phakes found it safe to left the Kingdom.

According to the preserved manuscripts, the Khamtis came to Assam through the 'Choukong" range in 1770 and the Phakes followed them five years later, i.e. in 1775 through the Pangchau range.

From 1775 to 1850 the Tai Phake people were wandering from one place to another in search of a permanent settlement and at first, they settled down in Nong tao (Nong Pong. Tao-Alagac). After that, they came to Sadiya and started living with the local Khamti population and Deshoi (near Jorhat). In 1817 after the first invasion of the Burmese (Maan)' they returned to Namchik in Arunachal Pradesh. After a few years in 1826-27, they again came down and settled in Ingthong (now Inthem near Margherita) presently known as Barphake. Some of them had come down through the Buridihing River and established Namphake and Tipamphake villages near Naharkatia in about 1850. Since then they have been living permanently there and their literature, culture and society started flourishing in various aspects.

The Tai Phake population is spread over nine villages in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam and some of them are in Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Tai Phake people are strict followers of Hinayana Buddhism. In each village, they establish a Buddha Vihar where Buddha images made of brass are installed and regular prayers are offered by monks (Known as Cho Moan) and the villagers.

### **Factors responsible for the crisis of Identity of the Tai Phake people:**

The identity of a group of people is reflected through the culture it maintains. Culture does not mean the mere accumulation of some festivals, songs and dances. it provides the value system according to which the society functions and this value system is determined by the material conditions of living which change thereby making changes in the value system inevitable.

With the departure of the British not much was left of tribal culture so as with the "Tai Phake Culture' to be preserved, the Phake society has changed due to its inner contradictions where non-tribals have had no role to play.

With increasing westernization and globalization of the national economy against which the leaders of the Phake Society have had nothing much to say, whatever culture may be left of it is more likely to be threatened than any action on the part of the so-called 'foreigners' or non-tribals against whom such a great deal of hue and cry is being raised.

The Tai Phake are Hinayana Buddhists and observed all traditions-customs and festivals as celebrated in Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Some of the festivals they observed are

- (a) Buddha Purnima.
- (b) Barshaba.

- (c) Prabarana.
- (d) Faguni/Chait Utsav
- (e) Maghi Purnima.
- (f) Changchen festival.

Like the other Tai communities, the Phakes were also a worshipper of ancestors. This practice is called 'Fisung Mung'. They have been observing this since living in their kingdom. This is royal prayer, and others simply observed. Pu-Fi-Su was the earliest chieftain of the Phakes and annually common prayer was organized in honour of Pu-Fi-Su. Since worshipping socially it later came to be known as 'Fi-Sung Mung'. Earlier there was a system of animal sacrifice in this worship but after coming into the fold of Buddhism this festival came to be celebrated with white flowers. There is a difference between the 'Fi-Sung-Mung' prayer and the Buddhist way of prayer. Through the celebration of 'Fisung Mung', they could get rid of diseases and ailments, and maintain peace in society. But this prayer cannot lead them to 'Nirvana' which is the final goal of Buddhism. If following the path of Buddhism this festival has no necessity. Buddhism does not permit the worship of ancestors. There are many other traditional rituals and myths amidst the Tai Phake which in course of time became extinct. For instance 'Me-Pi', and 'Cha-le'.

The Tai Phake population in Assam is scattered in nine villages of Upper Assam, 'Namphake' and 'Tipam Phake' villages near Naharkatiya in Dibrugarh District. Barphake, 'Longphake', 'Ningam', 'MaulangFaneng', 'Man Mo', 'Long Lai' near Margherita and Ledo in Tinsukia district. In all, the population would be around fifteen hundred. This scanty population often makes them feel isolated from the greater Asomiya Society. Marriages in close relationships are permitted among the Tai Phake people and probably because of this the entire village is like one single family living individually. This family hood amidst the 'Tai Phake' pervades them from the 'clancency' which further affects preserving their culture and tradition.

The Tai Phake possess their language called 'Phake', with eighteen alphabets depending on the sound, resembling the 'short-hand' symbols. This language now survives only in the spoken form within the family. No noteworthy books or journals have been produced in the Phake language in Assam, nor there is any institution to propagate the study of this language. To the new generation, the Phake language has no practical utility. The few available literatures preserved in the Buddhist Monasteries and by industrious people are translation works from Pali and Myanmarese Buddhist languages. Some of the oral literature is 'Khongpung' (Tale), 'Lick -Puson- Lan' (child Moral teaching), 'Khang-Ta' (Puzzle), 'Khga-Khiang' (a form of long poetry), 'Choi- Toi'-Che- Aoi (rhythmic folk song) etc.

Again, the folk songs of Phake, generally based on agriculture are orally transmitted from generation to generation. But the practice in this folk literature amidst the new generation is rarely seen. This lack of practice is a great threat to their cultural identity. Our matter of concern today is that the 'Phake' language is regarded as one of the most endangered languages in the world in a recent study carried out by CIEFL, Hyderabad.

The Phakes have their traditional dress woven in their looms. Women's dress consists of a sorong (a blouse), open at the front, and a chin (Mekhela). Men wear 'Fa' (lungi), and elderly men and women wear Head Turban called Fahu. These traditional dresses are worn for social functions and rituals. Elderly men and women put on their traditional dress in the village. Even after two centuries of coming into Assam, the dress of the Tai Phake, colourful and distinctly different from that of the other tribes are lesser known to the common Asomiya people.

Till 1826, the Tai Phake had maintained a good relationship with Myanmar. All festivals are being observed as per Hinayana Buddhist Calender, according to which all rituals observed had been borrowed from Myanmar. But after political changes took place the Tai Phake in Assam have been following their way of life.

Apart from the Tai Phake in Assam others do not have a dilemma in observing the practices of Buddhism as well as the practices of other Tai counterparts. In Assam out of the total population of 266 lacs according to the 2001 census, the Buddhist population is 51029 and the Tai Phake population is only 1500.

In the Assamese society where Hinduism forms the majority, the Phakes feel isolated and neglected to live in the vicinity of Upper Assam. Culturally they are different from other communities and tribes of Assam. While most of the other tribes have mingled with the Asomiya society, the Tai Phake cannot do so.

Migration of the Tai Phake people from their native places for work has certainly weakened the ethnic bondage because class differentiation forces them to treat themselves also as unskilled workers or professionals. Again professionals from

among the Tai Phake like to identify themselves more with the non-tribal middle class rather than with the rest of the tribal people.

The Phakes of Assam has brought about 'double allegiance' amidst themselves as they are unable to forget their past and simultaneously they are made to be a part of a new world view Buddhism. This double-identity though broadens the economic and socio-cultural base, but they are not able to get out of ethnic bondage in the larger sense of the term.

Since independence several govt. have ruled the state, but none of them has adopted a concrete proposal for the development of the Tai Phake population now restricted to 250 odd families. Nor has the govt. adopted policies for the preservation and projection of the Tai Phakes culture even in state-sponsored programmes.

Lack of intertribal solidarity has always been one of the serious obstacles to achieving the most common ends. Different tribes have not come together to share the same platform mainly because of the perception of exclusivity of one tribe and a sense of pride in being superior or at least not inferior compared to any other tribe. The Tai Phake, because their number is less often do not receive due recognition and is neglected.

### CONCLUSION

To bring the Tai Phake people to the forefront of society -

Creation of Books and Journals in Phake language, more and more practical application of the language situation should be undertaken. An atmosphere to use the Phake language should be provided. Setting up an institution to carry out works on a research base to preserve everything that may describe the culture of the Tai Phake for the future generation.

Govt. actions/policies towards the Tai Phake people should be viewed in a new light so that they do not feel isolated and neglected.

Coordination among the tribes and especially that of the 'All Assam Tribal Sangha' should take steps to bring the Tai Phake people to the forefront of society to check for a threat of an identity crisis.

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