

## A Study of Folk culture of the Tai Phake tribe in Assam

Bikash Das

*Research Scholar,*

*Guwahati University, Assam, India*

### Abstract

The Tai people belong to the Thai-Sino branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. They are scattered from Assam to Yunnan in a vast area of India and China. There are six communities in Assam in the north eastern part of India who speak different forms of Tai language. They are—Tai Ahom, Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton, Tai Khamyang, Tai Phake and Tai Turung. Though the origins of these six groups are derived from the same root, they all have uniqueness in their language, culture, customs and social norms. This research paper seeks to study the folk culture of the Tai Phakes. The population of this ethnic group in Assam is only two thousand. The globalisation and modernisation posed many serious threats to the language, society and culture of the Tai Phakes. At such juncture, it is need of the hour to study various aspects associated with the Tai Phake community. This paper titled ‘Folk festivals of the Tai Phake tribe in Assam’ will discuss the folk festivals, language, songs, dance, beliefs, marriage, food and other aspects associated with the Tai Phake people living in Assam.

**Keywords:** Culture, Tai, community, globalisation, Assam etc.

**0.0 Introduction:** India is a multilingual country. India is the fourth multilingual country in the world. Like other parts of the country, various ethnic groups of different language families also entered Assam at different points of time. They have become the permanent inhabitants of Assam with social and cultural assimilation. After Austroasiatic, Mongoloid was the major ethnic group to enter Assam. The influence of the Mongoloid in the language, society and culture of Assam is predominant. Tai Phakes are among various tribes that belong to Mongoloid ethnic group. Though the culture and rituals of the Tai Phakes are influenced by the various Aryan elements, the language and society of the Tai Phakes also impacted the Aryans in Assam whose number is majority.

Folk culture means the homogenous and collective lifestyle of a community or an ethnic group. The Tai Phakes are enriched with an array of different forms of folk culture. They have uniqueness in their religion, language, folktales, beliefs, festivals, folk songs, folk dance, medicine, art, costume, ornaments etc. compared to other tribes of Assam. These elements of folk culture are resources for extensive research. This paper titled ‘Folk festivals of the Tai Phake tribe in Assam’ studies

some unique aspects of the Tai Phake folk culture.

**0.1 Objective of the study:** There are a few research works available on the Tai Phake society and culture. The aim of this research paper is to study the folk culture of the Tai Phake tribe. It is expected that this research paper will draw more academic attention to the folk culture of this tribe.

**0.2 Area of the study:** The area of this study includes festivals, dance, marriage, beliefs and language of the Tai Phakes which are an integral part of their folk culture.

**0.3 Methodology:** While preparing the titled ‘A Study Of Folk Culture Of The Tai Phake Tribe In Assam’ descriptive method has been applied.

In this study, for the collection of data, I have used both primary and secondary sources. As a primary sources of data collection, I have used participant observation and made interviews among tai phake. And as a secondary tools of data collection, I have used many articles, books, news paper and novels.

**0.4 significance of the study:** Tai phake community which is residing in some particular districts of Assam. They have been always

taking care of their cultural beliefs, practices and language. Researches should make study and explore means to restore their uniqueness among various ethnic groups. Moreover, if we start studying on them, then it will spread social identity among the new generations. However, govt. should commercialized their food culture, traditions through which the tourists could be attracted. It is very important to do research on them in depth so that we can know about them in a more distinct way.

### 1.0 Migration and present habitants of the Tai Phakes:

Sir George Abraham Grierson (1851-1941) divided the Tai people into two main categories from the linguistic perspective—Northern and Southern. Tai Phakes are among those four tribes in Assam associated with the Northern branch. The Tai Phakes were original inhabitants of Yunnan in China. First, they migrated to Shan province in middle Myanmar from Yunnan. They entered Assam in 1776 crossing the Patkai mountain range from Hukawng Valley in Myanmar. Initially, the group of Tai Phake people settled down at ‘Nong Tao’ in present-day Arunachal Pradesh.

There are only two books which tell the history of the Tai Phakes. These two historic documents are—‘LikKhoukhun’ and ‘LikKhoumoung’. The history of migration of the Tai Phake people has been described in both these books. ‘LikKhoukhun’ explains the origin of the Phake—“A cave was created following a rift (Phat) in a gigantic stone. Therefore, the people who lived in that particular region were called Phake. Their king was also named as Phake.”<sup>1</sup> The explanation about the meaning of the word ‘Phake’ varies from scholars to scholars. According to some experts, ‘Pha’ means an island of stones or the king and ‘ke’ means old. Therefore, Phake means ancient or the descendants of the old king or the inhabitants of an old island of stones.

In Assam, the Tai Phake people now live in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts only. There are two Tai Phake villages in Tinsukia and two in Dibrugarh. These villages are—

1. Borphake
2. Nong Lai
3. Pha Neng
4. Mung Lang

5. Man Mo
6. Long Phake
7. Ning Gam
8. Nam Phake
9. Tipam Phake

### 2.0 Folk Festivals of the Tai Phakes

All the societies in the world celebrate various festivals at different points in the year. But the festivals may not be celebrated at the same time among all the societies. A period of time which is significant for a society may not be significant for others. Festivals are recurring moments of special significance.<sup>2</sup> (R.J Smith, “Festivals and Celebrations in Folklore and Folklife”, id, RM. Dorron 1972, P-159).

The Tai Phakes in Assam celebrate various festivals in the year. The Tai Phakes believe in Theravada in Buddhism. The Buddhist religion has immense influence on them. They don’t worship other gods or goddesses. Buddha is the only god for them. This religious belief has a tremendous impact on their folk festivals.

**2.1 Poi Sangken:** Poi Sangken is the most popular festival among the Tai Phake people. They welcome the New Year through this festival. This festival is celebrated with a two-day programme on April 14 and 15 every year. Since it is celebrated on the ‘Sankranti’ of the month of Bohag, therefore it is called Poi Sangken. Phra (Idols of the Lord Buddha) are brought to the ground according to the Sactet (Tai calendar). They carry these idols to the ‘Kangfra’ (The place where the Buddha is given a bath) with reverence. The villagers worship the idols after they are set up at the Kangfra.

At the end of this festival, the elderly people in the village prepare a drink with red sandalwood, white sandalwood, scutch grass and cobra saffron leaves. It is believed that this holy water keeps away disease and illness. In some Tai Phake villages, young boys and girls perform songs and dances. According to the time mentioned in the ‘Sactet’, the elderly people establish the Buddha idols at the altar of the monastery from the Kangfra.

**2.2 Poi Nown Howk:** Poi Nown Howk is celebrated by the Tai Phake people in accordance with the Buddha Purnima. Here Poi means festival, Nown is month and howk means six. It means that the festival which is

celebrated in the sixth month of the year is Poi Nown Howk. There are no specific norms to celebrate this festival. It is celebrated with religious rituals and other functions according to the convenience.

**2.3 Me Pi:** The Tai Phake people celebrate Me Pi festival after 15 days of Poi Nown Howk. As a celebration of this festival, the villagers keep thorny branches of trees at the doors and windows of their houses. They believe that it prevents evil spirits from entering their homes.

**2.4 Poi Mow Heing:** In this festival, one thousand lotuses are offered at the monastery to pray the Lord Buddha.

**2.5 Mangala and Aantre:** The families celebrate these festivals of their own for their peace and prosperity.

**2.6 Poi MaiKo Sum Fai:** This is one of the winter festivals of the Tai Phake tribe. The meaning of Poi is festival. Maiko means a stack of small pieces of dry woods and Sum means to set fire. Therefore, Poi Maiko Sum fai is considered as the festival of setting the dry wood stack on fire. The youngsters of the village keep ready small pieces of woods and other materials for the 'Maiko' before 10-15 days of the festival. After the woods get dried, they start preparing the Maiko before 3-4 days of the festival. The Miko is made in a triangle shape. It is decorated with colourful papers and other decorates. On the eve of the festival, the young boys and girls sing and dance around the Maiko. On the day of the festival, the villagers set the Maiko on fire and take part in a feast later.

The other festivals of the Tai Phake people include Poi Leng, Hong Khon, Gam sang, Poi Kithing, Poi Nown Chi etc. All these festivals are predominantly influenced by the Buddhist religion.

### 0.3 Folk dances of the Tai Phakes:

**3.1 Ka Kong:** Ka means dance and Kong is the drum. Therefore, it signifies the dance form which is performed with the drums. Since the traditional drums get prominence in this dance, therefore it is called Ka Kong.

The group of dancers perform this dance form in a circle. Many circles are created within the

circles according to the number and genders of the participants. The hand moves are given importance in this dance.

**3.2 Ka-Pan:** The meaning of Ka-Pan in Tai language is a dance with Bota (A special kind of utensil that is used to offer betel nuts to the guests). This dance is performed while there is a religious festival in someone's home. At the end of the programme, the head of the family dance with that special utensil of bamboo adorned with flowers seeking forgiveness from Buddha for any mistake.

This dance form is almost similar to the Ka Kong. The head of the family dances at the centre of the circle with the Bota (the bamboo utensil to offer betel nuts). The women dance with the rhythms of the music by folding their hands.

### 3.3 Ka-Song:

The meaning of Ka-Song is the dance performed with umbrellas. The Tai Phake people have been preparing this umbrella with bamboo, colourful papers, gum etc. It is similar to Chinese umbrellas. The taiPhake girls perform this form of dance taking this umbrella.

### 0.4 Folk songs of the Tai Phakes:

The folk songs of the Tai Phakes can be divided into several categories according to their tune, styles and subjects. These categories are—Sa-Oi, KheKhang, Kham Non San, Kham Lao Luk On, Kham Pai Fra, Kham Pu Son Nan etc.

**4.1 Sa-Oi:** These are the songs of love. The beauty of flowers, butterflies and nature is described in these songs. These songs are particularly popular among the young people of the Tai Phake tribe.

**4.2 KheKhang:** KheKhang is a group song. These songs are rhythmic. No one can sing or compose it without much knowledge about the tune and rhythms.

**4.3 Cradle songs:** Lullabies or cradle songs are integral parts of the folk literature of the Tai Phakes. They are sung for the children.

**4.4 Kham Non San:** These songs are like lullabies. Through these songs, various moral lessons are conveyed to the children.

**4.5 Kham Pai Fra:** These are the prayer songs. No instrument is used while singing these songs.

**0.5 Wedding tradition of the Tai Phakes:** The wedding tradition of the Tai Phakes is basically of two types.

These two types are—

1. Societal wedding
2. Marriage after elopement

In the first type of wedding, the groom family visits the bride's family and hands over a packet to them. A little amount of tobacco is wrapped with a white paper in this packet. If the bride's family receives the packet, it signifies their acceptance. In the morning of the wedding, people from the groom's side reach the bride's home with costume and ornaments. The bride wears traditional attire and ornaments.

In the marriage system of the Tai Phakes, the bride doesn't go with the groom together to his home. The groom moves in advance. Later, the people from the bride's side take her to the groom's home.

In the second type of marriage, the lovers elope while their families do not accept their relationship. This type of marriage is not seen with high regards in the Tai Phake society. The couple has to pay a fine of Rs. 140 to the society for their marriage.

**0.6 Various beliefs prevalent among the Tai Phakes:** Like other tribes of Assam, the Tai Phake people also have different types of folk beliefs which they inherit from generation after generation. Some examples are given below:

1. Though the Tai Phakes are Buddhists by religion, they believe in the existence of some evil spirits. They organise Mepi festival on the no-moon day of the Bhadra month. According to the beliefs, the Mepi or the goddess arrive in the earth on that day. The evil spirits and ghosts roam here and there to welcome the goddess. The Tai Phake people believe that by keeping thorny branches of jujubes at the entrance and windows of the house, the entry of the evil powers is prevented.

2. After buying new clothing, the head woman of the family has to hit the stairs of the house

with a stick. Then after only, a family member can put on the dress. In some other places, the domestic dog is hit before the children of the family wear the new clothes. The Tai Phake people believe that ghosts or evil spirits can enter the home if these norms are not followed.

3. The Tai Phake people offer any edible to their children after heating it in the fire if the item is bought from the market.

4. The entry of the snakes or animals to the houses is also considered ominous.

**0.7 Language of the Tai Phakes:** The Tai Phake people are bilingual. They use the Tai language within themselves. They always use Assamese while they are talking to persons of other communities. There are 16 vowels and consonants each in the Tai Phake language. This language is mainly tune-centric. The meaning of a word varies according to the tune. There are five types of tunes in the Tai language. These tunes are—

1. High
2. Low
3. Mid or level
4. High rising
5. Low falling

These tunes can be open or closed.

Here are some examples:

Nam	<sup>1</sup> :	Flag
Khao	<sup>1</sup> :	Rice
Nam	<sup>2</sup> :	Water
Khao	<sup>2</sup> :	To wave, to jerk
Nam	<sup>3</sup> :	Thorns
Khao	<sup>3</sup> :	Enter
Nam	<sup>4</sup> :	In a higher amount
Khao	<sup>4</sup> :	A thread in the weaving set
Nam	<sup>5</sup> :	Black
Khao	<sup>5</sup> :	White

### 0.8 The traditional foods of the Tai Phakes:

The main food of the Tai Phakes is Khaolam. It is prepared by keeping the rice in a bamboo cylinder. They also prepare various *Pithas* (rice cakes). Khao Kun, PengHo Khan, KhaoPuk, Tongtep, etc. are some of them.

They also eat non-vegetarian foods. The Phakes usually eat Pa Soum and No Soum after keeping the meat or fish with salt for four-five days. They also eat various types of dry fishes.

### 0.9 Rituals in funeral:

The last rite of a person is performed after one day of his/her death. Before the funeral, the relatives put dresses on the deceased person keeping him to the east. The fingers are tied with white threads. The body is covered with a white cover. After that, the body is taken for the cremation.

**Conclusion:** After studying various aspects of the folk culture of the Tai Phake tribe, we arrive in the conclusion that the Tai Phake people are aware of their identities. Therefore, despite various challenges, they have kept their culture, music, dance, food, festivals alive. The uniqueness and variety of the culture of the Tai Phakes has become a centre of attraction for many domestic and foreign tourists. However, the population of this culturally rich tribe is gradually decreasing. It is the need of the hour to make everyone aware of this tribe with studies and research works.

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