

Study on Ethnic socio-cultural identity through textiles among Taiphake of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Tais are the people of Mongoloid origin from South East Asia are settled on the Bank of Brahmaputra valley of NE India. They have been grouped as Tai Ahom, Tai Phake, Tai Khampti, Tai Khamying, Tai Aiton, Tai Nora and Tai Turung. Aims of this paper are: (1) current studies on historical back ground of Tais (2) issues of cultural assimilation among Tais (3) Specific aim to focus on Textiles tradition of Tai Phake in the light of ethnic socio cultural identity. Descriptive method has been adopted with simple random sampling along with structured questionnaire for primary data collection from 75 respondents from the Namphake village of Dibrugarh District, Assam, India and supported by secondary data. Hand loom textiles woven by Tai-Phake women of NE India for their traditional attire which has vast similarity with Thai culture of Thailand. The 'Chin' a female garment use to cover the lower part of the body from waist down to ankles. 'Nangwat' a cloth for married women to wrap over chin for covering the breast; Pha-fek- hang is same as 'Nangwat' is use for grown up girls. Pha-fek mai or Pha-mai is use as a wrapper by men and women while entering the Vihar (Buddhist temple) has important significance in socio-religious occasions. 'Pha-nung' a men's apparel use to cover the lower part of the body from waist down to the ankles. 'Thung' a shoulder bag is an indispensable part of Phake men's dress etc. The textiles of Tai-Phake have distinctive ethnic characteristics. where checked and stripes are arranged in a harmonious pattern to produce conspicuous designed with their indigenous loom. Traditionally they use both cotton and silk yarns in their textiles production. Wearing traditional dress during ceremony and function as well as in village is compulsory to maintain their ethnic socio cultural identity.

Key Words : Ethnicity, Socio-cultural identity, Traditional Textiles, Tais

INTRODUCTION

All Tais in Assam refer to 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. The present habitat of the Tai people extends from Assam in the west to Kwangsi and Hainan in the east and from the interior of Yunnan in the north to the southern-most extremity of Thailand (Siam) in the south.

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

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Phake, Ningam Phake or Ningam, Nonglai and Phaneng in Ledo-Margherita area in Tinsukia district. Throughout history it has been the concern of all the ethnic groups to maintain their ethnicity irrespective of the globalization which has affected each and every community. Irrespective of modernization peeping in each and every household, it has been observed that the Tai Phake community has been able to preserve its ethnicity. This paper aims to explore how ethnicity has been preserved by the Tai Phakes of this village with respect to through their attire.

Objectives :

Aims of this paper are:

- Current studies on historical back ground of Tais
- Issues of cultural assimilation among Tais
- Specific aim to focus on Textiles tradition of Tai Phake in the light of ethnic socio cultural identity.

METHODOLOGY

The present study has been conducted on the Tai Phake people living in Namphake village, situated at a distance of about three kms from the Naharkatiya town of Dibrugarh district, Assam, India

Considering the nature of the data collected, descriptive method has been adopted in the present study. The population of this study comprised of 75 respondents (which are actively involved in weaving) from the Namphake village have been selected as sample for the study. Simple random sampling has been adopted for selecting the sample. For the purpose of the study, a well organized questionnaire has been used for the collection of the data. Respondents were interviewed carefully on a number of questions and supplementary questions through face to face interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presently, the Tais in North east India are living in the States of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh may be divided into two groups on the basis of their language *i.e.* one group those who use Tai language in their daily lives and those who do not. The group, those who are still speaking Tai live in remote rural areas - making their living as rice farmers. They are known by various names, such as-Phake Tai, Khamti Tai, Aiton Tai, Khamyang Tai or simply one of the preceding names without the word “Tai,” These Tais are Buddhists. They share many

traditions, customs, and aspects of culture. They live in the same Tai style houses and they dress alike - especially the women. Minor differences of pattern and colour of clothing material are used to differentiate the groups however. They also have their own writing system. Their spoken languages, though somewhat different, are mutually intelligible. They all share the same writing system. A Phake person who reads and writes Phake Tai writing can read Khamyang Tai texts without difficulty. An Aiton person described the difference between Phake and Aiton writings in terms of the place where the text was found. If a text was from a Phake village, it was called “Phake writing.” The same text would be called “Aiton writing” if it was from an Aiton village. The other group no longer speaks Tai. The best known of this group is the “Ahom.” They are said to be the descendants of the Ahom people who were the rulers of the Ahom kingdom (now Assam), for about 600 years. According to Sir Edward Gait, the Ahom people came to the Brahmaputra valley in the year 1228 AD about 400 years before the other groups. The Ahom were said to be None—Buddhists at this time. Despite the large amount of shared vocabulary, their writing is different from that of the other groups and other Tais simply cannot read the Ahom writing.

There are historical records which prove that the Khamti, Aiton, Phake, and Khamyang Tais were from Burma. They crossed the Patkai mountain range, from the Burmese side, into Assam. This is the same mountain range that the Ahom had used to enter Assam.

Cultural change is inevitable with changing ways of life and language shift. Formerly, being Tai meant being rice farmers and Buddhists. Now Tais are living in cities and working in various fields. Some marry Hindus and are no longer Buddhists. The ‘bamboo culture’ is changing fast. The culture of the Tais in Assam may be considered a ‘bamboo culture’ in the sense that they use a great deal of bamboo in their daily life. Unlike other Tais, most of the houses in Assam are built with bamboo - whole and split. Most receptacles used for storing rice, food and clothes are made from bamboo. The well-known ‘kham-lam’ is sticky rice cooked in bamboo tubes. Pickled bamboo shoots are an essential part of marriage rituals and ceremonies. Other materials are now starting to replace bamboo. The younger generations no longer know all the different terms for different types of bamboo. Similarly, the words for different sizes and shapes for storage and measurement especially of rice are

disappearing - despite the fact that Tai rice has been selling well amongst other ethnic groups.

The textiles of Tai-Phakes *i.e.* one of the small Buddhist groups of Tai linguistic stock have distinctive ethnic characteristics. Tai-Phake textiles are not decorated with elaborate designs. The checks and stripes are arranged in a harmonious pattern to produce conspicuous designs. The checks and stripes which make up the designs in Tai-Phake textiles are very similar to tribal textiles prevalent in Upper Burma, the original homeland of the people. They use their indigenous loom for weaving the textile items for their use. As found among other communities, textiles are produced only for home consumption and not for sale. In the olden day, both cotton and muga yarns, used in their textile production, were produced at home. Those were also dyed with indigenous dyes. These days, home spun cotton yarn is mostly replaced by mill-made yarns. The dyeing with indigenous dyes is still practicing by them. The textile items produced by the Tai-Phakes are discussed below:

Pha-fek-mai:

Pha-fek-mai also known as Pha-mai is a shoulder cloth. This shoulder cloth is generally used by adult. Both male and female wear this cloth which has an important cultural significance. When people go to Vihar or participate in social gatherings then they have to wear this cloth. Fine white cotton yarn is used for weaving. Muga yarn is use to make design at both the ends. The approximate size of Pha-fek-mai or Pha-mai is 2.80-3.00 meters in length and 1.50-1.75 meters in width. Two equal pieces are woven separately and stitched lengthwise to make Pha-fek-mai or Pha-mai

Pha-nung:

Pha-nung is men's attire which is use to cover the lower part of the body from the waist. Pha-nung is made up of two pieces of cloth of the sizes from 2.00-2.25 meters in length and 0.70-0.80 meters in width. Here both the pieces are woven separately and stitched lengthwise to make Pha-nung. Different colour fine cotton yarns are use for weaving Pha-nung with checks and stripes. Sometimes very tiny geometrical flower design known as "maklu" is used along with checks and stripes. Muga silk yarns, dyed with indigenous dyes were also used in the past to weave Pha-nung named as Pha-puchung. The colour generally used for weaving Pha-nung are yellow, violet, blue, green, maroon, black, white

etc.

Pha-fek-hang:

Pha-fek-hang is attire for grown up girls. It is use to wrap over the chin to cover the breast and leaving both the ends hanging in front. Fine cotton yarn is use to weave with white colour. It is decorated with floral design at both the end with coloured yarn

Chin:

It is an attire of Phake women that is wear to cover the lower part of the body from the waist to the ankles. Fine cotton yarn is use to weave the Chin. It is prepared to join three equal pieces in lengthwise direction. The harmonious arrangement of various colour stripes itself produces a rich and pleasing effect. No separate designs are used to ornament this item.

The colour scheme use for chin is like maroon, white, black or blue; violet, blue and black or golden yellow; green, white or yellow etc. The approximate size of the Chin is 2.25 meters in length and 1.50 meters in width. The whole size is equally divided into three parts to weave by harmonious arrangement of cheques and stripes with mentioned colour scheme. After that all these three pieces are joined together to make the Chin.

Nangwat:

Nangwat is an women attire. It is used to wrap over the Chin, to cover the breast and leaving both ends hanging in front. Nangwat is only for married women that are strictly not before attainment of puberty. The size of nangwat is approximately 2.80meters in length and 1.10 meters in width. Fine cotton yarns of different colours are use to weave. In olden days, muga yarns, dyed with indigenous dyes was use to weave this which is known as nangwat-puchung. It is still considered as wedding attire as a sign of prosperity and status. Two equal pieces of the size 1.40 meters in length and 55.00 centimeters in width are woven separately and stitched lengthwise to made nangwat. It is woven in checks and stripes of different colours with sparingly placed tiny flowers called maklu as butis. Nangwat with cross borders having creepers and floral motifs at both ends, followed by fringes, are also being woven these days.

Thung:

It is a shoulder bag used by almost all the Tai-Phake men. The shoulder bag is considered as a representative

item of Tai-Phake culture. Coarse cotton yarn is use for weaving. The colours use to weave is generally in blue, maroon, and black. The motifs and designs they prefer from nature like butterflies, birds, flowers, fruits, creepers, trees, etc. are with different colours to cover the body of the bag. Sometimes the names and address of the weavers are also seen as woven along with the designs.

Gamocha:

Gamocha is another textile item which is newly adopted by Tai phake. Generally fine cotton yarn is use to weave this. White colour is use to weave the body and red colour is use for cross borders. The size of gamocha is approximately one and half meters in length and seventy five centimeter in width. Floral designs are common as cross border generally at one end and sometimes both the end. Red colour yarn is use to produce the design.

Tong-khwan:

It is a decorated sacred hanging. It is offered to Vihar by Phake women especially on sacred days of the Buddhist calendar. Sometimes it is also offered some other occasions too. Various shades of fine cotton yarns are use to weave this. The size varies from half meters to one and half meters in length and twenty centimeters to forty centimeters in width approximately. Generally three different odd divisions like three, five and seven used with fine bamboo sticks woven into the fabric. Colourful fringes are suspended from each of these bamboo sticks as an additional ornamentation. The designs from natural sources like birds, butterflies, flowers, trees etc. along with the weaver’s name and address are woven.

Pha-Chet:

Pha-Chet used as sacred handkerchief. It is a highly decorated cloth. The size is approximately 0.75 meter in length and 0.35 meter in width. It is essential in the Charman ceremony of Phakes.

Chankanfra:

Chankanfra, a small symbolic cloth having seven squares is essentially of religious significance. It is prepared during the annual festival called Poi-kithing observed on the full moon day of Kartika (October-November). It is the tradition that on the day before the festival, the womenfolk of the village assemble either in the Vihar compound or in the village headman’s house

and weave this symbolic cloth in the course of a single night. This cloth is offered at the Vihar in the early morning of the festival day. The Tai-Phakes have a strong conviction that chankanfra is the greatest of all gifts the villagers can offer at the Vihar, in the name of Lord



Plate 1 : Tong-Khwan



Plate 2 : Pha-nung

Plate 3 : Pha-mai

Plate 4 : Pha-huo



Plate 5 : Nungwat

Plate 6 : Phachanglong



Plate 7 : Chin



Plate 8 : Thung

Plate : Photographs on traditional textiles of Tai-Phake

Buddha, for the well-being of the village and its inhabitants.

Phachanglong:

Phachanglong is a socio-religious significance valued item. It is never used as casual attire. Only when a person adopts the life of a Buddhist monk, this decorative cloth is used at the initiation ceremony. Fine cotton yarn is used to weave. The size is generally 2.80 meters in length and 0.80 meters in width. Geometrical and floral designs are used at both the ends and also finished with colourful fringes.

Conclusion:

The Tai-Phakes of Upper Assam, also known as Phakials, are one of the ethnic groups of the Tai family. Agriculture is the major occupation of the Tai-Phake people and they concentrate all their attention upon this economic activity. The Phakes are bilingual. Amongst them they speak the Tai language, but they use Assamese language with Assamese people among whom their villages are located. The Tai-Phakes although a lesser known Buddhist population with its microcosmic existence, is still preserving the traditional traits of their socio-cultural life to a considerable extent. They practice their own religion which is Buddhism. Each Tai-Phake village has a Buddha Vihar (temple) constructed in a central place. All the religious beliefs and practices of the Phakes centre round the Buddha Vihar. Poi Chang Ken *i.e.* festival of bathing the images of Lord Buddha

and Poi-Kitting, the festival of offering a symbolic dress to the image of Lord Buddha are the major festivals of Tai-Phakes. The textiles of Tai-Phakes have also distinctive ethnic characteristics which are produced at home.

Tai Phake is a very less known tribe of Assam with a handful population. They have a glorious culture and tradition. Being such a small in number, the tribe is trying hard to keep their legacy and rich culture alive. They reside in small villages in Dibrugarh district with a major population staying in Namphake village in Dibrugarh. The village has 100 percent literacy, with keeping alive their glorious tradition by still living in their traditional houses, dressing in their traditional attire and also by the food they eat every day. So, it is important to know the tradition and culture of such a culturally rich tribe and also how this small community of people are struggling to preserve their culture in present day modern global culture context.

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