

The Tai-Buddhist Communities of Assam: Cultural Identity and Preservation

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Abstract : *The Tai people living in Assam, represents a distinct indigenous group. Their identity is deeply entwined with cultural heritage, language, and religious practices, especially Theravada Buddhism. These include the Tai Phake, Aiton, Khamati, Khamyang and Turung communities. The persistence of these communities in preserving their oral histories, practices, and socio-cultural institutions, despite political marginalisation and colonial disruptions that severed previous historical links, is the focus of discussion here. Religion plays a vital role in Tai society, with Buddhist monasteries (Vihars) serving as centers for community life and cultural transmission. Studying the Tai language is a significant part of preserving identity. Although they belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family, their language is influenced by Pali and Burmese due to historical contacts. This linguistic heritage complements an extensive corpus of folk literature, manuscripts and oral traditions, which serve as important repositories of collective memory. Tai identity experiences in the pages of history: an increasing number of professions and community-led organisations strive to preserve and promoting Tai culture, language and history in the political and social dynamics of Assam. The Institute of Tai Studies and Research and the initiatives of various Tai organisations actively seek recognition and cultural revitalisation. The challenges faced by the Tai Buddhist communities highlight the importance of political and cultural integration to preserve their heritage and identity in the diverse socio-political environment of Assam.*

Keywords: *Tai Buddhist, Identity, Culture, Politics.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the land of Assam there are numerous indigenous people that are settled here. Among them the Tai people are one of those who carried their inheritance and memories to associate with present. To study their common journey about their past, oral history plays a vital role. Considering oral history is an old approach, it essential to recognised that the technique has gone through varying phases of acceptance and popularity.¹ In the study of memory common issues that were one arrives to: how appropriate it is to distinguish between memory and history, the difference between genuine memory and fabrication, and the difference between nostalgia and active social participation.² A community's perception of its permanent settlement identity impacts its current socio-political identity. The concept of identity in social science encompasses the essence such as defining attributes, beliefs, personality traits, physical appearance, and modes of expression that constitute an individual's self-identity or the collective identity of a social group.³ The process of identity construction demands more than passive experience; it is built upon active engagement through political discourses, ritualized practices, sites and stories of memory and entanglements of life events, interpersonal relationships, and impressions of lasting psychological or emotional frameworks. Beyond this literal structure, identity also takes on a metaphorical dimension, in which thoughts and emotions are symbolically communicated through cultural expressions that visually and effectively represent the complexity of thoughts and difference.⁴ The studies on migration and memory offer the possibility of constructing hybrid, liminal identities, where communities inhabit the physical, economic, and political spaces of their adopted lands but maintain socio-cultural connections to their former places across the country. There are currently six Tai communities in Assam, they are: Ahom, Aiton, Khamyang, Khamti, Phake and Turung. Questions have of course been raised over a period of time on the meaning and origin of the term Tai or should it be Thai. Edward Gait said that *Tai* means glorious corresponding to Chinese celestial.⁵ Hoontrakul in his massive work gives the meaning of the term *Tai* as a high stage or tower or respectable and independent personage in address. According to him *Tai* is an ancient official title giving certain rights and privileges to its holder.⁶ According to Max Muller the original seat of the *Tai* or *Siamese* branch of the Indo-Chinese people was in Central Asia and it was from

that area that these people were the first to move towards the south and settle down along the rivers Mekong, Menam, Irrawady and Brahmaputra. At present days the majority of tai people are located in the districts of Upper Assam i.e. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi Anglang etc. Each community arrived at a different period. In Assam there were two main Tai migration waves. The first wave of Ahoms migrated to Assam in 1228 for political reasons, led by Prince Suu-ka-faa of Mogaung, an old Tai Kingdom of the Tai Mao people, which was located near Ruili in what presently constitutes China's Yunnan province.⁷ Most of the Tai communities entered Assam by crossing the Patkai Hills. The Ahoms arrived as breakaway group of political interlopers and established a ruling dynasty by incorporating local elites and population. The Ahom dynasty remains one of the longest reigning dynasties to have ruled over 600 years (1228–1826 AD) till Assam was annexed by the British by the Treaty of Yandaboo. The on-going persecution by Alongphra, the monarch of the Burmese Konbong Dynasty, caused several minor Tai populations to migrate in various batches into the Ahom Kingdom, making up the second wave.⁸ Emerging in this next wave, the Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, Khamti, and Turung communities reviving forgotten entity through inheritance; their narratives and customs reflect echoes of reclaimed and revitalised heritage. All of these communities except Ahoms adhere to the Theravada branch of Buddhism. These communities, which were descended from Southeast Asian migrants, particularly those from the Shan states, they have adapted to Assam's broader sociocultural terrain while keeping their own Buddhist customs. They are counted as Tai-Buddhist people in Assam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Padmeswar Gogoi's book *The Tai and Tai kingdom* describes the racial identity of the Tai people and about the Tai Kingdom. This work based on the origin of the Tai people and their migration throughout history. Additionally, a thorough explanation of how several subsequent Tai Buddhist communities moved to Assam during the reign of numerous Ahom Kings.

B.J. Terwell's work *The Tai of Assam and ancient Tai ritual* presents them as 'survivals' and trying to studying certain areas of folk religion and culture of them.

Koncheng Buragohain's Ph.D. thesis on *Ethnic Identity and Social Change: The case of Buddhist Tai communities in Assam*. The thesis tries to enumerate the level of change among the Buddhist Tai communities in different aspects and intensity of ethnicity between them.

P.R. Gurdon published a work *On the Khamtis*. His work based on the social and cultural life of the Khamti people.

Lila Gogoi's book *The Tai Khamti of the North-East* is a path-breaking research work on Tai Khamti.

Bornali Borah Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Tribes and beliefs in Assam: A study of Buddhism among the Tais of Assam in historical perspective*; this study reveals that many elements of culture, attitude towards their socio-religious position, their heritage makes them more authentic to restore them.

Supriti Phukan's literary work *Tai Phake: A Historical and Cultural Study* bring attention specifically on their original home, migration, tradition, culture and transition in the context of present-day globalization. This work describes their different rituals and their festivals related with the religion of the Phake people followed.

3. RESERCH AIMS/METHODOLOGY:

The narratives of Tai people in Assam emerged a different picture through the eyes of local historians', vernacular documents, colonial and post-colonial documents. To study on Tai-Buddhist peoples identity in Assam profoundly related to the religion that they follow. This discussion perceived cultural and political marginalization as the primary theme of the critique of Tai-Buddhist identity. The political presence and dominance of the Ahoms in Assamese society cannot be ruled out. An integrated approach applies in this study that combines oral study with historical analysis. Mostly field observations, community and religious leader interviews, and documenting of religious practices have all been used to collect primary data. Historical text, monastic records, and earlier research on Tai communities in Northeast India are examples of secondary sources.

4. Religion and Cultural Tradition

In Tai Buddhist communities, society and religion are inextricably linked, supporting each other's social institutions and spiritual practices. The all Tai-Buddhist people in Assam follow their religion very devoutly. They follow the Theravada Buddhism. Theravada is the form of Buddhism that dominates the religious life of many communities. The concept of Theravada is the religion of a community, ethnic group, and even nationality as a whole is a recent development.⁹ Their society is also well organized without avoiding the importance of religion. On the basis of religion the population of a village can be divided as follows, the monks with the trainees who reside permanently in the Vihar and villagers. Later the category can be further divided into two division, namely the elderly persons, who follows the eight principal of Buddhism, i.e., *Asta Sheel* - Right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort,

mindfulness, meditation. And others followed five principal or *Pancha Sheel* - Abstain from lying, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and intoxicants. Each village possesses a Buddha Vihara constructed in a central place of the village. All religious beliefs and practices of the Tai Buddhist communities centre round the Buddha Vihara. Buddha images, both life size and half size generally made of marble, wood and brass are installed and regular prayer is offered by the monks as well as the villagers. In religious matters the monk is guide, philosopher and friend. They followed their monastic life. Their presence is essential in all religious occasions. Every household of the village offers the first portion of the morning meal (*Khawsom*) to the monk at the Vihar and it has been a custom that nobody even the children should take the meal before taking it to the Vihar. Due to following the same religion most of the festivals, practises and customs has a bare line of differences. They call their festivals as Poi. Throughout the year they celebrated various festivals related to Buddhist monks, religious and material life, e.g., Poi Sangken, Poi Khao wa, Poi Kanta Sangha, Poi Kathin, Poi Lu Kyong/Chong, Poi Lu Phra, Poi Kham Chang, Poi Dun Si, Poi Leng, Poi okwa, Maiko Chumphai, Lu Cheti, Barshabash, Buddha Purnima and so on. The focus on the luni-solar and lunar calendar underscores the earthly significance of these celebrations, shaping the communities experience and reinforcing the cultural image of the Tai Buddhist tribes in Assam. Within the traditional festivals, these communities carve out a distinct identity, emphasizing the unique cultural and religious practices that bind them together. The focus on the lunisolar and lunar calendar underscores the earthly significance of these celebrations, shaping the communities experience and reinforcing the cultural tapestry of the Tai Buddhist tribes in Assam.

5. Language and script preservation

The culture also includes language as a symbol of communicating tool for all social existence. It is like the most important mark of group identity. Depending upon geographical location the linguists have divided the languages of the world in four main regions.¹⁰ All these Tai languages are branches of Tibeto-Chinese family. These languages are widespread in the large areas of East and South-east Asian countries. G.A.Grierson¹¹ says, Tai or Shan languages all belongs to the Siamese-Chinese family of the Indo-Chinese form of speech. Hence, they show many points that connect with Chinese, it is a living language. Though there may be seen some difference between the scripts used by all the Tais in Assam their original script is Brahmi.¹² Tai language among the later Tai migrants like the Aiton, Phake, Khamti, Khamyang and Turung had changed a little due to contact over the span of several hundred years with other Tai groups in Shan states and also due to Burmese and Pali influence. Various Pali and Burmese words are present in these Tai language groups.¹³ In different villages of Tai Buddhist communities there are many unpublished manuscripts and literature. Most are of historical, socio-cultural and religious nature. Apart from it, they carried their own folklore, myths, tales, riddles, proverbs, superstitions, narratives influencing and shaping their world view. Historians have started using folklore in the recent decades when the discipline has expanded the scope of definition of sources. These living traditions with rich historical narratives reflect cultural evolution, while they serve as vital repositories of collective memory and identity across time.

6. OBSERVATION:

It is well established that all histories are dynamic. Yet, the transformation of Assam and the Tai people under nineteenth-century colonial intervention was sudden and not foreseeable. The core issue lies in the colonial disruption, which abruptly disrupted existing historical pathways and severed communication with groups now identified outside British Indian borders. This rupture effectively changed earlier connections and stories. Therefore, any analysis of changes during the colonial period must closely examine the policies and representational categories imposed by colonial authorities, considering what they reveal and what they deliberately conceal. Such an inquiry is essential to understanding the full impact of colonialism on regional histories and identities. Identity politics in Assam has its own dynamics reflecting the disruptions caused by colonial intervention and its contentious claims framed within larger questions of Indian national Identity and politics. When analysing the foundations of nation-building and cultural identity formation, it becomes imperative to examine the historical antecedents that shaped these communities. The consciousness about the distinct identity of the Tai of Assam is not a new phenomenon; it could be traced from the British era. Despite simultaneous identity construction attempts of various Tai Buddhist societies, their histories are marginalised as a consequence of greater scholarly concentration on Tai-Ahom studies as a master narrative in historiography of Assam. Even the relatively privileged Tai-Ahom narrative is not fully articulated, indicating that that adequate cultural recognition depends not just on historical antecedent alone, but instead on contemporary political interference - a reminder that legitimacy of claim requires discursive engagement. A dynamic continuum of sovereignty, subjugation, and revival can be used to describe the political history of the Tai groups in Assam. A sociocultural and religious political movement arise that claims the difference of the Tai Ahom from the Assamese. The voice of the Tai-Ahom Movement opens new door for the presence of the Tais in Assam. During British era ethnically they claim they are Tai which situates them as Buddhist and not Hindu. The suffix Tai invokes for Ahoms a historical connection with

southeast Asia which has assumed mythic proportions.¹⁴ Numerous associations with a variety of goals were established during the colonial and post-colonial eras, but their primary goals are socio-political recognition in Assam as Tai communities. Some of the prominent organisations include- Ahom Sabha (1893), All Assam Ahom Association (1910), All Assam Ahom Students' Federation (1944), Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam (1955), All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailing Sanmilan (1962), All Assam Tai Students' Association (1964), Tai Ahom Mongoliya Rajya Parisad (1987), Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha (1981), All Tai Ahom Students' Union (1988), Tai Ahom Council (1987- present), all Assam Tai Phake National Council (1987), all Assam Tai Phake Development council (1994,renamed), All Assam Tai Khamyang Council (2010), All Assam Buddhist Association(2019) and so on. Over time, these organizations have worked for the betterment of their communities. However, the steps taken by government of Assam in this regard are also noteworthy. Except Ahoms all other Tai communities officially added to the Man (Tai speaking) Scheduled Tribe(2010) category.¹⁵

Intellectuals have been trying their best to introduce a homogenous identity of the Tai people.¹⁶ Whether it for historical purposes or to bring them the attention of the people. George Coedès, in his book *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia* (translated into English in 1963), introduced the Ahoms as a Tai group to scholars of South and Southeast Asian history and culture. But it was not until 1979, and that Ahom history became a subject of discourse outside Assam.¹⁷ In the same year Berand Jan Terwiel an anthropologist of Thailand who was undertaking research on the rituals of the Tai peoples of south-East Asia, visited Assam. To enumerate this connection between people and place and show its linkage with peoples and cultures outside India, in 1968 Padmeshwar Gogoi, a professor at Guwahati University and a self-proclaimed Ahom, wrote a book titled *The Tai and the Tai-Ahom Kingdom of the Brahmaputra Valley*. In the year of 1971, Lila Gogoi, Director of DHAS edited the book on *The Tai Khamtis of the North-East*. Professor Jogen Phukan presided over the newly organized Guwahati University Tai Students Association, which, as reported by the Assam Tribune on October 5, 1967, passed a resolution that Tai languages should be taught in schools and colleges in Tai majority areas; scholarships [should] be awarded to Tai students for pursuing higher studies in Thailand and Burma; proper care and preserved of historical documents should be taken up; and the publication of Tai historical manuscripts and development of the Tai Central Academy at Patsaku, Sibsagar were necessary. Numal Gogoi, a founding member of the Ban Ok and a professor at Dibrugarh University under-took the compilation of an Assamese-English-Tai dictionary (1987) by collecting Tai words from old dictionaries along with current words from (Khamti, Phakey, Aiton, and Khamyang) Tai-speaking groups.¹⁸ Another remarkable organisation is The Institute of Tai Studies and Research it is an institute for scientific studies and research on the socio-cultural heritage, traditions, language, literature, culture and relationships of the Tai people living in the North East of India It was established in 1997 at Moran, Charaideo. The main objectives of the Institute are to promote knowledge of Tai society, literature, culture, language, religion, politics, economy, etc., to preserve old manuscripts and heritage materials by establishing well-integrated libraries and museums. To organize scientific seminars, lectures, workshops etc. on various issues of the North East, to publish research books and journals; establishing cultural and educational relations with the Tai people of Southeast Asia and to make the youth partners of the Cultural Revolution by giving them the opportunity to expand their intellectual thinking. Social media appears to be one of the ways that the Tai-Buddhist people in several districts of Assam i.e. Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi-Anglong, Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, and Sivasagar, are aware of their own festivities.¹⁹

7. CONCLUSION:

The presence of the Tai people, who love to live peacefully, is not confined to books, but the continuity that is now observed reflects their struggle to preserve their identity. It is difficult to study culture separately from individuals and their communities. The concept of cultural characteristics permeates various social phenomena and shapes the daily lives of ethnic groups within society. The autonomous presence of Tai culture among the people of Assam is the main topic of this study. In particular, it attempts to attend to the transmission of customs from one generation to another. The responsibility of preserving the Tai heritage has an intense sense among the Tai Buddhists of Assam. In this regard, cultural preservation and political presence are sometimes challenging. In the present scenario, the Government of Assam has played a role in the activation of the celebrations of Poi Pe Mau(Tai Buddhist New Year), Poi Sangken, Maiko Chum phai, the establishment of Vihar in their villages and culture. The homogeneous level of these individuals appears to have been slightly enhanced during this period, particularly the historical context of the Tai-Ahom movement. Without becoming politically marginalised, all of these communities are maintaining their own existence while also preserving the heritage of their own languages and cultures.

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