



Tai Phakes of Assam: A Tourism Perspective

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Abstract

Tourism is that broad subject which can be studied from various perspectives. Among those ethno tourism is one of the subjects of importance which covers culture, religion, society, economy of the ethnic groups. Tai-Phakes of Assam is one of those ethnic people who are living in Assam with their ethnic identity which attracts the tourists very much. In this article an attempt has been made to discuss about their traditional values which could be considered an area of research. Secondary sources and discussion with the source persons proved to be helpful in preparing this article.

Keyword :*Tai Phake, Tradition, Rituals*

Introduction

Tourism, particularly ethno tourism could be a source of benefit for local communities as well as the tourist. Ethno tourism plays an important role in preserving cultural values and also traditions. Literary, Ethno-Tourism focused on exploration of indigenous populations and their respective culture and traditions. Ethno-tourists usually seek to learn more about native peoples and their livelihoods. With the perspective of ethno-tourism here we are going to discuss about the cultural as well as traditional values of the Tai Phakes of Assam. The Tai Phakes are one of the important tribes of Assam living in the land with their distinct culture and societal values at all. They are an important section of the Tai people residing in Assam like, Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung, & Tai Ahom. In this article an attempt would be made to focus on the society and culture of the Tai Phakes with the perspective of ethno tourism and this is based on the secondary source only.



Etymology and the background

Before going to the details of Tai Phakes, the ethno tourists should know about the Phakes and their background to some extent. Tai Phakes are also known as Phakial or simply, Phake. In the Royal History of the Phakes, *Lik-Khou-Khoon*, it was written that *Pha* means Wall of Stone and *Ke* means ancient or old. Hence the people who lived in the place where a cave was formed out of a huge stone came to be known as Kun Phake. While coming to Assam, they introduced themselves as phake-yat (Jat) i.e people of Phake caste as there had been no letter pronouncing ‘Z’ in Tai language. In course of time the word ‘phakejat’ changed into ‘phakeyal’ and latter on ‘phakial’.

LikKhowMoung and *Lik-KhowKhun* are the two Tai Phake Treatise, also called Buranji furnishes a complete account in Tai Phake script about the genealogical and also the migration of the Tai Phake people. The Tai Phake people are believed to have migrated from the South-West China, in the second half of 18th century. Prior to their immigration into Assam, they were residents on the banks of the Nam Turung or TurungPani. They entered the land under their chief Chow Ta MengKhuenMeng of the royal line of Mung Kong. The Ahom king allowed them to live in Moongkongtat, on the bank of Burhidihing. In 1804 A.D., the Tai Phake people were subjugated by the then Ahom officer Chandra Gohain who visited the eastern districts with a small force against the Singfos. Chandra Gohain brought them from their original habitat to Jorhat.

During the time of Burmese invasion, they and others of the Shan race were ordered by the Burmese authorities to return to their original homeland. The Tai Phake people went up to Namchik of Arunachal and after the Burmese left Assam they settled themselves on the south bank of Burhidihing. During the time of British they started living there as BorPhakial and Nam Phakial. The Tai Phake people are now living in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia districts of Assam and Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The most populated Tai Phake village is Namphake village of Dibrugarh district. Besides Namphake, they are also found in Tipamphake, near Naharkatiya; Borphake, Manmau, Nanglai, Longphake villages near Margherita; Manlong near



Ledo ; Ninggum near Tirap ; Phaneng near Jagun ; Lalung near Bordumsa etc. So, 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.

CULTURE AND TRADITION :

Language

Being a part of broader Assamese society, they are well versed in both Assamese and Phake language. The Phake language is similar to those of Shan. They have their own separate scripts but only the religious scriptures are preserved in form of manuscripts. Most of their folklore, folk tales, riddles , proverbs are practice by the people in oral form. It is a matter of concern that only the old aged people are well versed in these and at the same time , less practice are there among the new generation of the Tai Phake.

Marriage

Marriage is the grand social occasion comparing with the other social celebration among the Tai Phakes. The Tai Phakes do not keep any matrimonial relations with people of other caste or tribes. Usually they are monogamous but polygamy is not forbidden, provided the man has the requisite means to support such a family. Widow and cross cousin marriage are common in the Tai Phake society. Dowry system is absent in the society. In spite of this, the groom has to provide the expense of the marriage ceremony to the bride's family. In special situation, Sometime the groom agrees to live in the bride's house after marriage and this system of marriage is called *Khownkhoi*. The marriage is celebrated with a detailed ceremony. In the society the marriage ceremony is performed by the aged people of the society instead of any religious priest. Divorce is not a common affair in the Phake society, The Husband or a wife files a divorce case before the *Gaonburha* (headman of the village)who takes a decision in the meeting of the village elders, which is final. Divorce can be made effective only by the verdict of the village elders meeting.



Beliefs

The Tai Phakes believe in the existence of spirit and certain rituals are observed to appease the spirits. Sympathetic magic is practiced and efficacy of mantras is very much believed by them. For the ordinary personal ailments, the Tai Phakes have their indigenous treatment. Traditional prescription in respect of sickness and cure are also practiced occasionally.

Houses

One of the most important cultural features of the Tai Phakes is *Chang Ghar*. The particular house where the Tai Phakes live is called *Chang Ghar*, which are built on piles of wood above the ground locally known as *Haun Hang* (Haun means House and Hang means lifted). They use the materials like *TakauPat* (leaves of a particular tree called *Takau*), timber and bamboos in the construction of their houses. There are two fireplaces in each house and the inside one is considered as sacred. Every house has a drawing room called *KanNok*, a bed room known as *Kan Non*, a prayer room called *Khok Tang Som* with a kitchen called *HaunTangkhaw*. Another part of the *Chang Ghar* is the *Sshan*, a lifted open place without any roof where the Tai Phake people do their daily activities like kitchen activities, gossiping, washing and drying cloths etc. They use the ground under the *Chang Ghar* for storing various materials, weaving etc.

Dress and Ornaments

Women are used in wearing colourful home woven traditional dresses. Their outfit consists of a blouse open at the front known as *Fa-Nang-Wat*, an ankle-long skirt called *chin* that is fastened around the armpits and a girdle, called *Chai-Chin* to tighten the skirt around the waist. Before the attainment of puberty, girls do not wear *Fa Nang-wat*. Instead, they wear a white cloth, *Fafek*, to cover the upper half of the body. If a girl has an unmarried elder sister, she does not wear a *Fa Nang wat* even though she has attained puberty. Wearing a *Fafek* is a sign of unpreparedness for marriage. All the women wear a traditional white chaddar when they go to the Vihar or to a distant place. The bride during marriage ceremony uses a similar chaddar as a veil. A white turban



known as *Phahu* is worn by the women folk on individual preference .They use little amount of ornaments too. The married women wear a pair of bangles i.e. *Beyan* made of either gold or silver. Gold or silver ring is called *Ungehop* is also worn by those who can afford. Necklace made of small beads is worn by the small children in order to avoid dangers from evil spirits.

The elderly male generally wear home woven checkered Lungi (*Fatong*) of green and black color lined with red, yellow or white yarn, one Genji, one shirt called *Sho* and a white turban that is called *FaHo Ho*. A white chaddar *FaFekMais* and white long sleeved shirt are worn by the elderly people when they go to the Vihar or to any distant places. For their warm clothes the elderly male persons prefer *EndiChaddar* (*Fa Jang*) which they collect from the market. In the congregational prayer, every one, except the boys and girls below the age of 10 years, wears the chaddar. The boys usually wear trousers and shirts but, while in the village they use their traditional lungi.

The monks dress is of yellow in colour. The monks wear a *lungi* called *Cham Paying*, one chaddar like cloth known as *Chang Kan*, which is used in the upper part of the body, one *sanghati*.i.e. a locally prepared genji and one piece of cloth to cover inner parts. The eight inevitable goods which is known as *AstaPariskar*, of a monk include the above-mentioned four varieties of clothes and a filter cloth known as *JalChakani*, a blade for shaving the head fortnightly and thread and needle.

Hair dressing

The Phakes have their own tradition in hair dressing. The womenfolk keep their hair long. Men wear their hair short, except the followers of eight principles of Buddhism. Wearing of long hair is strictly prohibited for the monks and they have to shave their head after every fortnight.

Weaving

The Tai Phake women are very much expert in the art of weaving and dyeing. In almost every houses, there is at least one indigenous loom . The woman folk produce various textile items



with distinctive characteristics cloths of good texture, colour and traditional design in their age old technique. The cloths, they produce are mainly meant for their own consumption.

Food habits

The Tai Phake preferred cooked or steamed rice wrapped in banana or tara leaves and boiled vegetables. Meals comprise meat, fish, eggs, steamed rice, dry fish, sour fish, dry meat, rice cakes. Tea is their favorite beverage. They also prepared *Pa-Som*(sour fish), sour bamboo shoot, dried fish, dried meat, and fish wrapped in banana leaves, all put under fire ashes to be cooked.

RELIGION, FESTIVALS AND PRACTICES

Festivals are one of the most important part of our life. These are an expressive way to celebrate glorious heritage, culture and traditions. As like Tai Phakes have several festivals which strengthen the sense of community too. Most of the festivals of the Tai Phakes are based on religion. As regards to religion, the Taiphake people worship Lord Buddha. The monks with the trainees reside in the Buddha Vihar or monastery. The culture of these people is very rich which is still being maintained.

The major festival of the Tai Phakes is *Poi-Chang-ken*. It is similar to Songkran that is celebrated in Thailand. According to the Tai calendar, this festival marks the beginning of new year. It starts from 13 or 14 April every year and is celebrated for three days. In this festival people throw water on each other which signifies washing away the sins of one another. They also cleans the statues of Buddha. They keep the statues of Buddha of their household shrines as well as from monasteries in a place called Kang-Fra for fifty two hours and during these period they cleans the statues by gently pouring water over them and offer prayer with flowers, candles and incense sticks.

Buddha Purnima is also celebrated by the Tai Phakes. It marks the birthday of Lord Gautama Buddha. On this day the people gather together in the Buddhist Monastery and offer prayers to the God. This is followed by a feast. Along with Buddha Purnima the observe *Poi-Naun- Houkin* the sixth month of their calendar.



Poi-Khauwais observed in the full moon day of the eight month. From this day they observe several particular rules for three months. The Buddhist monk do *BarshaBash* or fasting for a period of three months from the full moon of the month. It is not a festival but an important religious occasion. This is not hard and fast rule for everyone. This three months period is known as *Naun-wa* and during this period, no marriages or construction work are done. In each month during the day of *Purnima*(full moon day) the people of the village gather together in the monastery and offer prayers. It is not festival but an important religious practice. On this occasion of the union of Buddhist monks gather in a particular place and pray to forgive them for their faults. *Cha-Leis* observed in the full moon day of tenth month of their calendar. On this day the villagers offers basket full of food items like rice, fruits in the monasteries.

On the fifteenth day from *Cha-Le* and on the *Amavassya*(Dark fortnight) they observes *Me-Pi*. On this day they all have bath in the very early morning and the day before the hangs the horny branches of tree on the door and windows of their houses, storehouses. *Poi-ok-wa* marks the end of *Naun-wa*as it is celebrated after the three-months period of *Naun-wa* on the full moon day of eleventh month of their calendar. It is worth to mention here that this is observed in next two or three days with their own convenience. *Poi-Ok-wa* is ended with the celebration of *Poi-Po-Te-Sa*, *Po-Mou-Heing*, and *Poi-Kithing*. *Poi-Kanto-Sanghais* observed within one month of *Poi-Ok-Wa*. This is organized to pray God to forgive them for their faults during the period of *Naun-Wa*.

Poi-Mai-Ko-Chum-Fai is a festival which is celebrated during the full moon day of third month of their calendar i.e. in the February month. Small pieces of wood and hay are set on fire by the people at late evening of this day. During this occasion, they prepare *Khichiri* or *Yaku* rice for all.

Poi-Naun-Chi is celebrated on the full moon day of fourth month. This festival is celebrated with different observance like *Poi-Je-Ti*, *Poi-Mang-Ka-Pa* and *Poi-Pet-Mou-Chi-Heng*.

Mang-Kala is a family oriented celebration which is observed in the beginning of a new year for the well being of the family. The particular family invites the villagers and the monks on the morning of the very day where they organize prayers in the presence of all . On the other hand,



Aantreis another celebration like *Mang-Kala* where the prayer is organized in the evening.

Hong-Khonis a customary celebration. The meaning of the word *Hong-Khon* is “Adress the soul”. They believes that sudden illness of a person caused as he owned a weak soul and by observing *Hong-Khon*, they try to make the soul of the person strong enough to face the illness. This is observed in two different way. Sometime the womenfolk of the village do fishing in the river with the particular equipment called *Jakoi* in Assamese and sometime they recite books at home.

Another religious observance of the Tai Phakes is *Kham-Chang*. The procedure of initiation of the young boys to Ascetic (or a Buddhist monk) is celebrated as *Kham-Cheng*. Though this is organized the particular family of the initiated boy, the villagers also take part and help them in every possible way.

Poi-Longis a *Sharadh*or death rituals of the Buddhist Monks. Tai Phake people take part in these rituals as they considered it as a sacred or heavenly pursuit. *Ngap-Maan* is an observance which is organized for the welfare of the society with religious rituals.

Death

The funeral ritual is a traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone we love. It helps us to acknowledge the reality of death.

While the death occurred normally, the dead body is cremated and for abnormal ones, burial is prescribed among the Tai Phakes. In case of normal death, the dead body is cremated in the Cremation ground and the elderly male of the society participated in the cremation. The womenfolk keep little knife or horny leaf with them while entering the deceased home. They believe that in this way the departed soul won't be able to harm them. The people who visit the deceased would have to take bath and also take the heat of charcoal before entering their own home. Usually the cremation is done in the evening time or in the night. The purification ceremony, in case of normal death is observed on the seventh day after death. They believe that the departed soul don't achieve *Moksha* i.e. emancipation and remain their around the home. So



the pray for seven days continuously for the *Moksha* of the soul. On the sixth day , they put three or four flags in a field and in this way they forward valediction to the departed soul. They offer the favorite and used stuff of the deceased and these are kept in the monasteries.

In case of the abnormal death the deadbody is buried. Even the death of a child is considered as abnormal. The death rituals of these type of death is not organized immediately after death, instead it is observed at the interval of several months and would have to do all the formalities in one day only.

The Tai Phakes have special provision for the disposal of the dead body of a monk. The monk's dead body is not disposed on the same day, rather it is kept for a year or so in a watertight coffin. After about one year a big festival is arranged and all the Tai Phakes of different villages are invited and the dead body of the monk is ceremonially cremated.

LITERATURE

The Tai Phakes have both oral and written literature .There are hundreds of volumes of manuscripts preserved unscientifically in the monastery and at homes, on themes like history, fables, novels, proverbs, folktales, riddles, Jataka tales, religion, astrology, architecture, herbal medicine, and lots more. Many old manuscripts are in need of scientific preservation. They sing traditional songs with words praising the nature and its beauties. *Soiyoi*, *khekhyang* (narrative song) are few of them. The Tai Phakestraditional dance, *Kaacong*, *kaa-Paan*, *Ka-Kkong*, *Kaa-Won*, is performed during festivals.

Folksong

Folksongs are the music that is transmitted orally from generation to generation. These are the music of unknown composers. The traditional songs are composed with words praising the beauty of nature. Some of these are like *Soiyoi*, *Khekhyang* (narrative song) etc. The Tai Phakestraditional dance are like *Kaacong*, *Kaapaan*, *Kaakong*, *Kaa won*, generally performed during festivals.It reflects the colour of culture as well as the history of a community.



ECONOMY

As like other Tai people, cultivation is the major occupation of the Tai Phakes with other diversified occupation of present day. The age old economy has been maintained. They believe on Natural fertility of their field. Mustard, arum, potatoes are grown as cash crops which contribute largely to boost up their economy.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The Phakes followed an essentially democratic & simple administrative structure. The highest legal and judicial powers of a village is hold by a non formal council of village elders headed by the *ChowMaan or Gaonbura*(VillageChif).. Any dispute among the people are settled by the monks. The Phake possess a written code called *Thamchat*, which is referred to by the village elders while deciding of local nature.

Besides the culture and tradition of the Pakhiyals , the tourist can enjoy the sunset in Namphake, boating in the river Buridhing, Pagoda built in 1937, BuddistMonastery, symbolic Ashoka pillar, NongMungchiringta (Musulinda tank), traditional stilt house, traditional dances like *Kakong*(drum Dance), *Kapan* (welcome dance), *Kachong* (umbrella Dance) and *Kafeefai* (diamond dance).

Conclusion

Ethno tourism , being a part of Tourism, could attract the people who are interested in it and also those people who are interested in tourism for aesthetic pleasure. The Phakiyal villages, particularly, Nam Phake and the Tai Phake village can assure the tourist to fulfill the desire of the tourists who are interested in culture, ethnicity, village, beauty of nature etc. as well. So the promotion of tourism in this field could benefit the villagers, tourist as well as the Government.



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