The Tai Language as Spoken by the Tai-PhakaeS

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1.1 Tai-Phakae, the people: The Tai-PhakaeS, according to their chronicles, migrated from Mung-Mau (Ken'g-che'n). In 1215 A.D. King Sukhanpha sent one Prince Ca'o-Tai-Cheo, who established Mung-Kwang, the Phakae principality. It was also known as Phakae-ce-hing and Mung-Ho-Kong, as it was situated at the head of the Nam-Kong river. Kwang-Taü was its capital. In 1933 Mung-Mau was occupied by the Chinese. The Phakae principality came under the Mung-Kong kings. Later Mung-Kong was in turn occupied by the Burmese in the middle of the 17th century. Due to oppressions the Tai-PhakaeS left Hukong in 1775 and came to Assam. They joined the Tai-Khamtis in occupying Saiya by defeating the Ahom Governor Sadiyakhoa Gohain. The Ahom reinforcements defeated them in 1798-99 and brought them to Jorhat, the Ahom capital. The Burmese during the First Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 asked them to return to Hukong. They returned as far as the Namchik river when the British occupied Assam in 1826. They came down and permanently settled in Assam mostly on the bank of the Buridihing (Namhuk) river in the undivided Dibrugarh district scattered in ten villages, namely-Namphakae, Tipamphakae, Borphakae, Munglang, Ningkam, Phaneng, Manmo, Nonglai, Long and Lungkung. Their biggest village Namphakae has about 550 individuals. Their total population is nearly 3000.

1.2 The etymology of the term Phakae: It is consisted of two words; Pha (king) and kae (old); another meaning is pha (rock) and kae (old); their chronicles indicate as "ancestors of very old dynasty" or ruling class of the Tai people who lived near a rocky cave near Kwang-Taü. (Tam-nan pha-luŋ nā:k peń tha:m / pha hu yaŋ cam phuŋ wo'läi ək ma'kiŋ nā/ = nearby there was a rocky cave from where at dawn the cows came out for grazing. -Phakae Chronicle.)
1.3 Like all other Tai people the Phakaes dwell on stilt house built facing either north or south. They are Theravadi Buddhists. But they have one non-Buddhistic observance twice a year in May and November in observing a taboo day (wan-kam) while propitiating Phi-Su-Mung (state-deity) in a simple ceremony and is said to have continued since their coming from Mung-Mau. Earlier their education and cultural life, as it is now, was the Buddhist Vihara. Tai monks and laymen from Mung-Kong and Hu-Kong used to come and live among them. During the 19th and early 20th century such communication was maintained. One monk U panna Mahathera composed the Tai Mahabharata in 4 volumes and one version of Ramayana (Lama-Mang) in 1860. The other version of Lama-Mang was composed by Pu-Chamoi, a Phakte scholar, in 1840. The other monk U Gandama Mahathera built up a collection of about 2000 Tai manuscripts before his death in 1934. This collection is now increased upto 3600 Tai manuscripts with about 250 headings.

1.4 Tai-Phakae dress is colourful and very distinctive. The womenfolk weave clothes for their family use. They are proud of their family descent and till recently they rarely married outside their own community. So their strength was deteriorating. However, with modern education and socio-economic pressure, cultural changes have set in in their social customs and behaviours. The learning of Tai-Phakae language is found less in favour among the youths due to socio-economic reasons and lack of Government patronage.

2.1 Relations with other Tai groups : The Ahoms under King Sukapha came from Mung-Mau in 1215, passed through Phakae-ce-ring and conquered Assam in 1229. They ruled Assam till 1825. The Ahom kings had frequent exchange of embassies with the Mung-Kong kings and vice-versa. Both the embassies had to pass through the Phakae principality who were always concerned in their political relations. The Ahoms adopted Assamese as Court language for communications with others. Tai was retained only among the higher and priestly classes for communicating with the Tai Mung-Kong kings and for writing their chronicles. Devoid of royal patronage after the British occupation, the Ahoms have totally forgotten their Tai language.

2.2 Like the Tai-Phakaes other smaller Tai groups came to Assam at the end of the 18th century. The Tai-Khamtis came from their principality Khamtlong. The Tai-Aitons, the Tai-Khamjiangs and the Tai-Turungs came from
Hu-Kong. Now the Khamjangs speak Assamese like the Ahoms and the Turungs speak Singpho (Kachin) dialect. So of the six groups of Tai people in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, only the three smaller groups, viz. the Khamtis, the Phakaes and the Aitons speak Tai. Any dissimilarity of speeches found among these three groups is mere of accent. In writing there is very little difference. Of the total of about 20 million population of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the Tai groups constitute only about an eighth and of it only about .5 per cent (i.e. about .08 per cent of the total population) speak Tai.

3.1 Phonological aspect of Tai as spoken by the Tai-Phakaes:

The alphabets: The Tai-Phakaes has followed and accepted the Mung-Kong northern Shan scripts, which is round in forms, as do the Tai-Khamtis and other smaller Tai groups of Assam. The northern Shan alphabet including the Khamtis has 17 letters. The Ahoms use their older angular form scripts and the alphabet has 19 letters while the southern Shan has 18 letters. The comparative alphabets are shown below:

CONSONANT:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.Shan</th>
<th>Ahom</th>
<th>S.Shan</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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3.1.1 The Ahoms have later by the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century adopted five diphtong letters for writing Hindu names: e.g.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{v/ə} & \text{va} & \text{va} & \text{va} \\
\text{g} & \text{gh} & \text{jh} & \text{dh} & \text{bh}
\end{array}
\]
The last three letters are mere addition of ə to ch th ph.

3.2 **VOWELs**: List of vowel phonemes in Tai-Phakae:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Front</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Back</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-high</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>e:</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-low</td>
<td>E/ai</td>
<td>E:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a:</td>
<td></td>
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**Diphthongs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mid-low</th>
<th>aü:</th>
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</table>

3.2.1 Vowels occur in all positions: initially, medially and finally. e.g.

/i/i:/ high unrounded front:
   /i/: second daughter; /ti:n/ leg; /ki:/ loom.
/e/e:/ mid-high unrounded front:
   /e/: longing; /pet/ duck; /ke:/ less.
/E/E:/ mid-low unrounded front:
   /E/: elephant grass; /pe:t/ eight; /kE/ old, aged.
/a/a:/ central open:
   /a:/ open; /ka:t/ market; /kà:/ dance.
/ü/ü:/ mid-high unrounded central:
   /ü/: yes; /tük/ mud; /tüu:/ to increase.
/ə/ə:/ mid-low rounded back:
   /ə:/ yes; /kək/ cup; /tə:/ to fight.
/o/o:/ mid-high rounded back:
   /ok/ fifth daughter; /kɔn/ man; /kó:/ fear.
/u/u:/ high rounded back:
   /u:/ to stay; /khut/ to dig; /ku:/ bedstead.