

Current studies of Tai in India

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1. Introduction

Of all the Tai minority groups from China, India and Myanmar, discussed at this conference, those in India are the smallest. However, their history, culture and languages are among the most interesting and well researched. In his comprehensive articles on “Thai and “Tai” in the International Encyclopaedia of Linguistics, and “Tai Language: Varieties and subgroups Terms,” Anthony Diller (1992) lists; Ahom, Aiton, Nora, Phake, Khamyang, Khamti and Turung, as South-western branch Tai languages of Assam in India. In another article, “Tai Languages in Assam: Daughters or Ghosts?,” he describes Khamti, Phake, and Aiton as distinct “daughter” languages. The rest are dying or dead, and Ahom is in a post-mortal “ghostly” state. The number of Tai speakers in Assam is estimated to be around 1.8 million. Research on the Tais in Assam in different fields has been carried out by local scholars, and by western and Thai researchers. In this paper we will briefly survey what research has been carried out on the language and culture of the Tais who are still speaking Tai in Assam.

2. Who are the Tais in India and where did they come from?

At present, the Tais in India (living in the States of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the Northeast) may be divided into two groups – those who use Tai language in their daily lives and those who do not. The first 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.

Interestingly though, the Aiton spoken language has the sounds “b,” “d,” and “r” which are not represented in the writing of the other Tais in this group. These additional sounds from the Aiton Tai phonology make Aiton Tai writing closer to that of the Ahom.

The second 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 (Gait, 1905). 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 Non-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 (and other evidence) 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 (Gait 1905; Gogoi 1971, Gogoi 1996). This is the same mountain range that the Ahom had used to enter Assam about 400 years earlier.

3. On the origin of the names Khamti, Phake, Aiton and Ahom

All Tais in Assam (including the Ahom in Ahom Buranjis) 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. Attempts have been made to explain the meanings and origins of the different names, i.e. Khamti, Phake and Aiton. We will not explain the meanings of these names here. Instead, we will attempt to explain the origin of the specific names in the light of a tradition still practised among the Khamti Tais in Northern Myanmar.

The Tai people in Myanmar appear to have been itinerant until recently due to both natural and social causes. Floods and other natural disasters have caused the Tais to move their villages to new sites time and again. In some cases intruders (such as the Khachin) moving into a Tai village would have caused the Tais to move to a new site. Although they have always been itinerant, the Tais in Myanmar have a tradition of keeping track of their people’s movements. When people moved to a new village, they automatically adopted the name of their previous village as their clan’s name. For example, in a village called Man Lung King, if a person is called Caw Noy Pang Lang,

it means that he has moved from Pang Lang village. The next time he moves, he will use "Lung King" as his clan's name. The Khamti people in Assam are said to have immigrated from Muang Khamti Long in Myanmar - where Wilcox visited in 1826 (Gogoi 1971). They (or other Tais) must have maintained their tradition of keeping track of their previous homeland. Though the Khamti people are widespread throughout Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and though they live among other peoples, in every place they are known by the same name - "Khamti" (the name of their previous homeland). Likewise, Khamyang is the name of a place in Myanmar. It is, in fact, mentioned in the Ahom Buranjis that King Suekaa-pha took some people from Khamyang along with him on his trip to Assam (Chandra Barua 1930, 1985). Quoting Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, Dr. Puspadhar Gogoi (1996), cited the "Aiton District" in the Upper Chindwin Valley of Myanmar as the place of origin of the Aiton. Dr. B. Bandhumedha described (1977) receiving two explanations for the origin of the word "Aiton." According to one (by Dr. Grierson), "Aiton" was the name of a group of the Naga people with whom the Aiton had been living. The other explanation was from the Aiton themselves. They explained that they were living on a mountain called "Aiton" before they came to be where they were. When B. Bandhumedha (1980) wrote, "A brief history of Tai Phake," in the preface of her Phake-English-Thai dictionary she narrated the story of how the king of the Mau Kingdom sent "Chao Tai Seo" to rule a place called Hokong, which later turned into a town called "Meng Phake." After the Mau Kingdom fell, the Phake town fell into the hands of the Myanmarese. Phake Tais later migrated to Assam. Khamyang, Aiton and Phake thus appear to have originally come from the physical locations denoted by their present day names, but the people themselves appear to have forgotten how their names came about. This is probably because they no longer follow the tradition of keeping track of their people's migration. On our field trip to the Shan State in Myanmar (in March of this year) we visited a village called "Assam-Assan." A villager told us that the name of the village came from a British colonel from Assam who was stationed there. What does not fit very well with this explanation is that all the villagers there are Tai and that they normally call the State of Assam by the name "Wesali."

The Myanmar Khamti tradition of keeping track of people's migration has shed some light on how the Tais in Assam came to have their present day names (at least for the Khamti, Phake, Aiton, and Khamyang). There is still a need for further research into the history of the "Assam-Assan" village (and some other place names) before we can really take advantage of this Khamti tradition. For the present however, we at least know that we are 'on the right track'. We know that the specific names of the Tai people's in Northern Myanmar and Assam are related to the names of the places in which they lived prior to their migration.

4. Research on Tai languages in Assam

Research related to various aspects of the languages and cultures of the Phake, Khamti and Aiton has been undertaken by local scholars as well as researchers from the West and Thailand:

J.F. Needham (1894), using the traditional approach, was the first person to study the grammar of the Tai Khamti language. He also presented some vocabulary and useful language samples used in court.

Grierson (1903) surveyed the Tai languages used in Assam and gave some Language samples of all Tai languages there except the Phake.

Banjob Bandhumedha (1968, 1979, 1979, 1987) presented phonological analyses of practically all Tai languages in Assam. She made several insightful comparisons between the vocabulary of the Tais in Assam and those of the Thai in Thailand. In 1987, she compiled a significant Phake-English-Thai dictionary.

Lila Gogoi (1971) contributed enormously to Khamti Tai studies in Assam. He presented the history, folklore, and life cycle culture of the Khamti in Assam in his book, *The Tai Khamtis*, from the viewpoint of a local scholar.

A.Weidert (1977) published a book called "Tai-Khamti Phonology and Vocabulary." Using generative phonology, he analysed the phonology of Khamti and presented a list of phonological rules and vocabulary.

In 1980, the author of this paper wrote an article called "Khamti Tai: from an SVO to an SOV Language." In 1983, she presented a sketch of Ahom and Phake grammars in one chapter of her textbook on historical linguistics.

B.J. Terwiel (1981) presented an excellent analysis of culture and the cultural heritage of the Tais in Assam, especially the Khamti, Phake, and Khamyang. He investigated certain life-cycle rituals and made an attempt to determine how much of Ancient Tai custom had been preserved by the Tais of Assam. He was thorough and methodical in his studies, and his work will, doubtless, remain a very important reference in the field of Tai Studies for a very long time to come.