

THAI LANGUAGES IN INDIA : A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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The Siamese-Chinese people and speeches of Assam are very popularly known as the "Tai". The very term "Tai" is a generic name of the Mongolian races settled in the extensive areas of Asia. They are mainly concentrated in Indo-China and are extended from Assam to Kwangsi and from Bangkok to the interior of Yunnan. Dr. Kushing and Dr. Grierson had dealt with the study of the different groups of the Tai people. Dr. Kushing divided the Tai or the Shan people as Northern, Southern and intermediate group. Dr. Grierson gives a linguistic division which shows its groups as northern and southern. The northern group includes Ahom, Khamti, Chinese-Shan and Burmese Shan. The southern group includes Lao and Shyam of Indo-China. There are six groups of Siamese-Chinese speeches found in Assam which are popularly known by their local names as Tai-Ahom, Tai Khamti, Tai Khamyang, Tai Aiton, Tai Turung and Tai Phake.' Tai Khamyangs are most popularly known as the Noras. The first group of Siamese-Chinese people that migrated to Assam were the Ahoms a ruling class who ruled over Assam for six hundred years. The period of arrival of the Ahoms in Assam was in the early part of the thirteenth century i.e., in 1228 A.D. The other Tai groups migrated to Assam during the period of the later part of the eighteenth century when the Shan people were given troubles by Alomphra and his successor Burmese kings.

The Siamese-Chinese people speak monosyllabic Tai language with their local racial identification name. The groups have got similar speech except the Turungs. The Turungs use a language which is mixed with the Singphos as they happened to be with them for a long period. Most of the Khamyangs and Ahoms left to speak their Tai Language and they only kept some of their terms and their kinship terminology. Dr. Grierson has rightly said Tai languages of Assam except some local variations.

The Ahoms are mainly settled in upper Assam in innumerable villages. Khamtis are mostly found in Arunachal Pradesh in the villages - Chowkham, Khelem, Mimi, Mpang, Mankao, Lathao, Momong, Surongtu, Chyengchap, Nanam, Kungyao, Manmu, Inteenpathar, Namchai, Kaisu, Hophai, Nananshyam, Manphaiseng, Inthem, Chariali, Nongtao, Nampong (in Lohit District), Nampong (in Tirap District), Sanglai, Wingku, Piyong, Manphanyang, Mangkying, Pangyen, Mulang etc. In Assam seven Khamti villages are found in Lakhimpur District and these are - Bor-khamti, Sribhuyan, Gosainbari, Borpathar, Deotula, Tipling and Tunijan. More than one thousand souls are found in these seven villages. Khamyang villages are settled in the plain areas of Assam towards the side of the Naga hills. In the Chalapather area of the district of Sibsagar several Khamyang villages are found. Na-Shyam Gaon, Balijan Shyam Gaon and Betbari Shyam Gaon are in Jorhat Sub-division of Jorhat District and Rajapukhuri No.1 Shyam Gaon is situated at the Golaghat Sub-division of Jorhat District. Moreover, Pawaimukh Shyam Gaon is situated in the district of Dibrugarh. There six Turung villages are found in Assam in the Jorhat District with not less than three thousand souls. The Turung villages like Pahukatia, Pather Shyam and Tipomiya are in Jorhat Sub-division and No.1 Veleng Turung village, Naojan Balipather Turung village and Da-basapather Turung village are situated at Golaghat Sub-division. The Tai Phake who are most popularly known as "Phakial" are settled in the District of Dibrugarh in the villages Nam Phake, Tipam Phake and Bor Phake. Eight Aitonia villages are found in Assam: four of them are settled at Karbi Anglong District (Chokihula, Bhitorkalioni, Balipather and Ahomani Aiton Gaon) and the rests are situated in Jorhat District (the villages are - Borhula, Tengoni, Duboroni and Borgaon.)

The Thai or the Tai languages that are found in Assam are the only of this family found in India. These six Tai Speaking groups have got almost a similar script derived from a form of Brahmi in India which is known as the Tai script. This script is similar to the shan script. But the Ahoms used a script which is of angler type when the other groups used rounded type. It is possible that the difference of the script caused mainly due to the handwritten and printed form. Here is an illustration of the Tai script found in Assam'. (Table-1)

Ahom	ṁ, k̄ā	ṁ, kh̄ā	ṁ, ṇ̄ā	ṁ, n̄ā	ṁ, t̄ā
Phake	ṁ k̄ā	ṁ kh̄ā	ṁ ṇ̄ā	ṁ n̄ā	ṁ t̄ā
Khamti	ṁ k̄ā	ṁ kh̄ā	ṁ ṇ̄ā	ṁ n̄ā	ṁ t̄ā
Ahom	ṁ, p̄ā	ṁ, ph̄ā	ṁ, w̄ā	ṁ, m̄ā	ṁ, ȳā
Phake	ṁ p̄ā	ṁ ph̄ā	ṁ w̄ā	ṁ m̄ā	ṁ j̄ā
Khamti	ṁ p̄ā	ṁ ph̄ā	ṁ w̄ā	ṁ m̄ā	
Ahom	ṁ, c̄ā	ṁ, th̄ā	ṁ, r̄ā	ṁ, l̄ā	ṁ, ch̄ā
Phake	ṁ c̄ā	ṁ th̄ā		ṁ l̄ā	
Khamti	ṁ c̄ā	ṁ th̄ā		ṁ l̄ā	ṁ ch̄ā
Ahom	ṁ, p̄ā	ṁ, h̄ā	ṁ, ā	ṁ, d̄ā	ṁ, dh̄ā
Phake	ṁ p̄ā	ṁ h̄ā	ṁ ā		
Khamti	ṁ p̄ā	ṁ h̄ā	ṁ ā		
Ahom	ṁ, ḡā	ṁ, gh̄ā	ṁ, bh̄ā	ṁ, jh̄ā	
Phake	ṁ ȳā				
Khamti	ṁ ȳā				

(Table - 1)

The following two Tables representing Thai or Tai script in Thailand (Table-2) and Shan script (Table-3)

will show the similarity and contrast between the scripts of different places. It is to be noted that the Shan script is closer to that script used in Assam by different groups of Tai speaking population.

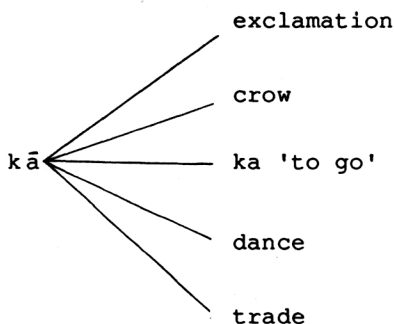
ก	ข	ช	ค	ค	ฆ	ง	จ
k	kh	kh	kh'	kh'	kh'	ŋ	c
ฉ	ช	ซ	ฌ	ญ	ฎ	ฏ	ฐ
ch	ch'	s'	ch	y	d	t	th
ท	ฒ	ณ	ด	ต	ถ	ท	ธ
th	th'	n	d	t	th	th'	th'
น	บ	ป	ผ	ฝ	พ	ฟ	ภ
n	b	p	ph	fi	ph	f	ph
ม	ย	ร	ล	ว	ศ	ษ	ส
m	y	r	l	w	s	s	s
ห	ฬ	อ	ฮ				
h	l	q	h				

(Table - 2)

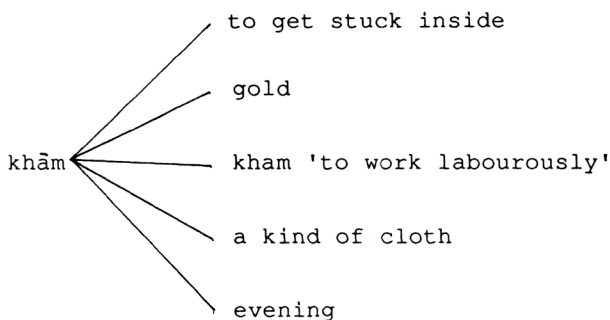
ᵛ kā	ᵛ khā	ᵛ ṅā	ᵛ cā	ᵛ chā	ᵛ nā
ᵛ tā	ᵛ thā	ᵛ nā	ᵛ pā	ᵛ phā	ᵛ mā
ᵛ yā	ᵛ lā	ᵛ rā	ᵛ wā	ᵛ hā	ᵛ ā

(Table - 3)

The Tai languages found in Assam are situated in islands in the midst of the Assamese language of the Indo-Aryan family. The speakers of this Tai group happened to be bilingual. They use their own tongue within the group and in outside they talk in Assamese language which is the principal language of the region. This caused serious affect in the tonal system of the language. The decreasing of tones nature can easily be traced out from the said situation. Though five tones have been observed three of which are more prominent. These are rising, falling and level. Sharp rising and sharp falling are also observed. Below are the examples-(Diagram-1) and (Diagram-2)



(Diagram - 1)



(Diagram -2)

The phonemic system of all these six groups of Tai language is almost similar. Ahom, Khamti, Phake, Khamyang, Turung and Aiton have got eight vowel phonemes namely /i e u o a ɔ̃ ā ü/. These vowel phonemes have their long and short forms. Below is an illustration of these phonemes in a table-(Table-4).

	Front		Central		Back	
	short	long	short	long	short	long
High	i	i:	ü	ü:	u	u:
Higher-mid	e	e:			o	o:
High-mid low					ɔ̃	ɔ̃:
Lower-mid					a	a:
Low			ā	ā:		

(Table - 4)

Except the Ahoms the other groups i.e, Khamti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang and Turung have fourteen consonant phonemes. The point of articulation of these phonemes are bilabial, alveolar, velar and glottal. The manner of articulation may be divided into Stops and Continuants. Stops have aspirate and unaspirate forms while the continuants have fricative, nasal, lateral and

semi-vowel. These consonant phonemes are /p t k ph th kh c m n l h w y/. It is to be noted that in Ahom pronunciation r, d, dh, g, gh, bh are also found which are totally absent in all the other Tai groups found in Assam. But the Turungs in some cases have retained the Ahom r in their pronunciation. In other groups Ahom r and d are pronounced as h and n respectively. Below are the examples-

Ahom

in other groups
i.e. Khamti, Phake, Turung,
Aiton, and Khamyang

r>h

ren 'house'
riŋ 'thousand'
rāi 'lose'
rāo 'we'
rāŋ 'tail'
ruk 'six'

hen 'house'
hiŋ 'thousand'
hāi 'lose'
hāo 'we'
hāŋ 'tail'
huk 'six'

d>n

dentiŋ 'first month of
a Ahom year'

nenciŋ

dāi 'obtain'
di 'good'
dāo 'star'
dun 'moon'

nāi 'obtain'
ni 'good'
nāo 'star'
nun 'moon'

Below is an illustration of the consonant phonemes in a tabular form. (Table-5)

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
<u>STOP</u>					
Unaspirate	p	t		k	
Aspirate	ph	th		kh	
<u>CONTINUANT</u>					
Fricative		c			
Nasal	m	n		ŋ	
Lateral	l				h
Semi-vowel	w		y		

(Table - 5)

The following characteristics have been observed-

- 1) The three sibilants $\$ \$ \$$ found in the Indo-European Assamese language is absent in the Tai Languages found in India. They either pronounce it as 'h' sound when they speak Assamese as bilingual. Below are the examples which will clarify the point.

	<u>Assamese</u>	<u>Bilingual Tai Speaker</u>
a) $\acute{s} > h$	śiva 'Lord Siva'	hiba (Bi-lingual Tai speakers)
	śānta 'calm'	hānta (" ")
	śiśya 'disciple'	hisya (" ")
b) $\$ > h$	śāṇḍ 'ox'	hār
	bīṣ 'pain'	bih (as in bihaise)

c) s > h	sakalo 'all'	hakalo
	sadāy 'every day'	hadāy
	samay 'time'	hamay etc

2) No voiced consonant phoneme is present in the Tai language among the groups Khamti, Phake, Khamyang, Turung and Aiton. But in the Pronunciation of the Tai Ahoms d, dh, g, gh, bh, sounds are found which is stated earlier here. For example Tai Ahom doi = 'hill'; dam = 'death'.

3) No cerebral or cacuminal sound is present in these groups of Tai language. t, th etc. are pronounced as alveolar.

It is earlier stated here in this paper that the Tai groups surrounded by the Indo-Aryan Assamese language and that they are bilingual. In this contact situation some times these Tai speaking groups like Khamti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang and Turung are to use some words of Assamese language. On the other hand the Ahoms who ruled Assam gloriously for Six hundred years left innumerable Tai words in the Assamese language which strengthen the grannery of vocabulary of the Assamese language.

This virgin field of linguistics and culture have not been explored and dealt with properly. This brief note on the subject will throw only a light in the field.

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