

FOLKSONGS OF THE TAI PHAKE TRIBE OF ASSAM: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract

The Tai Phakes, one small branch of Tai ethnic groups, live in a total of nine villages in Assam. Though this ethnic group is small in population, yet it has retained its own language, script, folk literature and cultural characteristics. *The Atlas of World's Languages in Danger*, published by UNESCO in 2010, lists the Tai Phake language as severely endangered. The extinction of a language has an adverse impact on the folk literature and culture of the linguistic group concerned. There is a need to take steps to collect, preserve, study and discuss the folk literature of the aforesaid endangered linguistic group. Therefore, the present topic has been adopted for the purpose of studying the various genres, functions, relevance, present social status etc. of Tai Phake Folksongs. Field studies as well as texts collected and published by various individuals and organizations have been taken as the primary data or resources. The methodology of the research paper is descriptive, analytical and functional method.

Key words: Folksong; Function; Present social status; Relevance; Tai Phake etc.

INTRODUCTION

Tai ethnic group is a large ethnic group living in the vast region of the Asia continent. Different people have suggested various opinions regarding original residence of the Tai people. These people are spread across from the Yunnan plateau of China to Malay Peninsula, from Vietnam to India.¹ George Abraham Grierson opines that South-Western China is the original residence and at this region only their separate race was developed.² Padmeswar Gogoi said the valley of the Huang Ho River as the initial residence of Tai people.³ According to Edward Gait Tai people are of great Tai Shan race, who are spread all over Assam.⁴ Lila Gogoi says that people of Tai family are spread from interior region of Yunnan of China to the coast of Pacific Ocean in south.⁵ Therefore, based on various opinions by different people regarding the original residence of Tai people a decision can be reached that China is the original residence of all the Tai people along with the North-Eastern part of India. From Thirteenth century till almost Eighteenth century initially Tai Ahom and subsequently Tai Aitan, Tai Khamti, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung Tai Phake people came to Assam. Presently Tai Phake people are mainly living in the following nine villages – Namphake and Tipam Phake village of Dibrugarh district and Borphake, Manmomukh, Nonglai, Long Phake, Mounglang, Ningam, Phanengvillage of Tinsukia district along with several villages of Luhit, Changla etc. districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Though the ethnic group is small from population point of view but have managed to retain their distinctive cultural characteristics. Tai Phake people belong to Mongoloid ethnic group and Thai-Sinobranh of Sino-Tibetan language family. They are Hinayana or Theravada under Buddhism.

Folk literature is created by folk society. Emotions & feelings of folk people, folk life, knowledge and experience transferred orally from generation to generation through folk literature. Folk literature of Tai Phake ethnic group has taken role in enriching the folk literature of Assam. *The Atlas of World's Languages in Danger*, edited by Christopher Moseley, published by UNESCO in 2010, lists the Tai Phake language as severely endangered.⁶ In this situation, it is necessary to take steps to increase awareness toward practising, study and discuss, collection, preserve in written form the folk literature of the endangered linguistic group among the younger generation. Therefore, the present topic has been adopted for the purpose of studying the various genres, functions, social roles, relevance, present social status etc. of Tai Phake Folksongs.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although there are research studies about the language, society and culture of the Tai Phake ethnic group, no detailed research study has been done covering all the genre, functions of the folk literature. Few books have provided introductory discussion of Tai Phake folk literature and Assamese translation. Few such books are – *Buridihingor Pare Pare Tai Phaker Surabhi* (2020), *Tai Phake Lokageet Aru Loka Kabita* (2020) written and edited by Paim Thi Gohain, *Tai Phake Sanskriti* (2020) written by Ngipe Thoun Gohain, *Natiloikokadeutar Upadesh* collected and edited by Ngipe Thoun Gohain then translated by Aimya Khang Gohain (2020) etc.

IMPORTANCE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Functional study will help to perceive about the importance of practice & preservation of Tai Phake folksong. Moreover it is necessary to introduce the younger generation with the knowledge & experiences accumulated, reflected socio-cultural-history etc. in Tai Phake folksongs. Therefore, the topic has been adopted for the purpose of studying the various genres, functions, relevance, present social status etc. of Tai Phake Folksongs.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive and analytical method has been adopted as the method for the study. Moreover Functional Theory has been adopted as method of folklore study. Functional Theory focuses on the aspects like actions or work, necessity, importance, affect, role etc. of folk culture on personal-life as well as social-life. About the function of folklore for the first time William R. Bascom discussed in detail on 1954 in an article titled 'Four Functions of Folklore' published in *The Journal of American Folklore*.⁷

Field Study Method has been applied to collect data materials. Moreover, books about the Tai Phake folksongs collected and published in print mode by different individuals as well as institutes have been taken as primary resources.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Study of the aspects like brief introduction, various genre, functions, relevance and current scenario etc. of Tai Phake folksongs has covered in the scope of the topic.

Already mentioned Tai Phake inhabited villages have been covered for data collection.

DISCUSSION

BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF TAIPHAKE FOLKSONG

An attention to the field of folk-literature of Tai Phake ethnicity brings into notice various myth, legends, tales, various folksongs, proverbs, riddle, mantra etc. Folksong is a melodic medium to spontaneously express various customs observed from birth till death by the folk society, the colours & joys of festivals and functions, emotions & feelings of day to day life, accumulated knowledge & experiences etc. A brief introduction of the Tai Phake folksongs has been provided below.

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS CENTRIC SONGS

Kham Lao Luk On: 'kham' means song or word. 'Kham Lao Luk On' is a cradle song which is sung to sooth the infants or children if they bother to fall asleep.

Kham Non chan: 'Non' mean sleep, and the meaning of the word is 'chan' the open arena of the traditional residence houses 'chang ghar' of Taiphake. During evening hours grandmothers perform 'Kham Non chan' at 'chan' of 'chang ghar' together along with the children.

Kham Pu Chon Lan: 'Kham Pu Chon Lan' means the ethical education grandfather gives to grandchild. In the past elders tried to give ethical education to child-adolescents through songs while sitting on the 'chan'.

Kham Lein: 'Kham Lein' is children's games & fun songs prevalent in Tai Phake society.

RELIGIOUS PRAYER SONGS

Kham Pai Fra: 'Kham Pai Fra' is melodious religious prayer song. 'Kham Pai Fra' sung on various occasions like burning candles, offerings food in front of Buddha statue, offering flowers etc. Various themes are observed but the main theme is devotion, religious philosophy etc.

Kham Lik Sangken: 'Kham Lik Sangken' presented in 'Poi Sangken'. Similarly 'Kham Jya Molang' is tradition to prohibit demon, evil forces through various folk customs.

BLESSINGLY SONGS

Kham Lik Woi: 'Kham Lik Woi' is a praise offering song to shower blessings at the end of family or social function, religious ceremony.

Kham Phuk Mai: 'Kham Phuk Mai' is the blessings that seniors sing melodiously while tying threads on the hands of the juniors.

JOYFUL SONGS

Cha Oi: Main theme of these songs are the love offering of young men and women by describing the beauties of various elements of nature, joys & sorrows, sulkiness born out of love, description of beauty & qualities of the loved one etc. applying various symbols. Moreover along with love other theme also getting a place in 'Cha Oi' songs is observed.

Kham Hong Chao Mao: In wedding ceremonies held socially of Tai Phake people the groom's side perform 'Kham Hong Chao Mao' to welcome the bride's side along with the bride.

Kham Yon Kong: In the donation festivals organised at the public as well as the private levels the kind of songs performed by the young men playing traditional Tai Phake instruments like Kong (Dhol – Drum), Cheng (Taal – cymbal) etc. along with dance praising the people as well as the host, asking for 'manoni' (i.e. money) is called as 'Kham Yon Kong'.

LAMENTATION SONG

Kham Hai Kaap: When a relative dies, it is sung in a sad tone describing the activities, appearance and qualities of the deceased during his lifetime.

PHILOSOPHICAL SONG

Kham Kammathan: In 'Kham Kammathan' philosophical descriptions about changes of human body from birth till death, the pain, uncertainty, transitoriness of the world, the path to nirvana etc. is observed.

SONGS RELATED AGRICULTURE

Kham Hong Khon Khaw: Songs that are usually performed by elderly Tai Phake women at the time of reaping the last fistful of paddy, at the time putting the cleaned rice seed at the store after thrashing the crops are called as 'Kham Hong Khon Khaw'.

Kham Choy Yoy: Meaning of 'Choy' is rhythmical and 'Yoy' is imitating word of 'Choy'. In the past there was tradition of singing this song with the rhythm of husking paddy on the wooden mortar (udal).

FUNCTION OF TAI PHAKE FOLKSONGS

Folk literature is created at the need of the folk society. Apart from the own observation, analysis regarding the accomplishment, relevance, current scenario etc. of the Tai Phake folksongs opinions of the representatives of the ethnic group have been accepted through oral and written interviews. A brief discussion about that has been provided below. Tai Phake folksongs contained in the following books are used for example in different context. These are *Tai Phake Lokageet*, 2015, edited by Gitimallika Gogoi, *Buridihingor Pare Pare Tai Phaker Surabhi*, 2020, and *Tai Phake Lokageet Aru Loka Kabita*, 2020 written and edited by Paim Thi Gohain.

PROVIDE VARIOUS FORMS OF EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Folkknowledge and experience gained over a long period of time gets accumulated in folk literature. Though objective of many elements of folk literature is not directly related with providing education and knowledge, it is accomplishing this feat. Illiterate, literate everyone can gain different knowledge from the folk literature. Here is a brief overview of the learning aspects in the Tai Phake folksongs.

PROVIDING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL TEACHINGS:

Folk literature transfer traditional knowledge to the next generation. It is observed that folk literature influences aspects like well integrated behavior, conversational style, avoidable tasks etc.

In Tai Phake folksongs a lot of traditional knowledge and experiences are accumulated. 'Kham Lein' provides entertainment along with domestic solutions for various diseases. Like –'medicine for sleep – red tea' etc.

In 'Pu Chon Lan' advisory for well behaviours in personal as well as social life, inspiration for ideal living is distinctively reflected. Influence of Buddhist philosophy on the songs is clearly visible. The five-fold principle of Buddhism gives importance in building moral character by providing teachings of refraining from taking a life, stealing another's property, mistreatment or rudeness toward others, using unspeakable or false words etc. Example of influence of Buddhist religion tradition-

'If want to be good human

Do not kill any living being.'

'Go with candle, flower on the full moon's night

To worship Buddha and gain knowledge.' Etc.

Composed with the objective of providing practical knowledge of life to children & adolescents in these songs are identity of life's philosophy of Taiphake people, accumulated knowledge & experiences beginning from past, cultural life etc.

'With the woods having more branches & leaves

Don't build house will rot sooner.'

Attempts are made to introduce with various angles of folkculture through 'Kham Non chan' also is observed.

'Quarrel starts with the usage of voice & speech

Without maintenance of cows, buffalo

One day cowshed also gets empty.' Etc.

PROVIDING MORAL EDUCATION, SPIRITUAL EDUCATION:

In blessing offering song 'Kham Lik Woi' teaches to be grateful, respectful toward everyone, compassionate toward all living beings.

'Phuk Mai' songs develops sincere faith to be respectful toward seniors along with in seeking their blessings.

In 'Kham Yon Kong' the greatness, importance, receiving the merits of donating is expressed. These songs teach to offer donations with open heart. Example –

Offer money as donation with open heart,

As dew overwhelms the earth.

'Kham Hong Khon Khaw', 'Kham Lik Tang Som' offers teachings about food or importance of food, trouble of farmers, to be grateful toward Earth for the help in constant food production.

PROVISION OF HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL, ETC. INFORMATION

Folk literature reflects an event in history, political, socio-economic and cultural images of the past. The history of migration of the Tai people, the geographical location of the Tai Phake people, their relationship with the Buridihing River, etc. are found in folk songs. Several folk songs have helped us to learn about the oral history and folklore of the Tai Phake people. They tell the story of migration in songs. For example -

'First we were in Yunnan Province

From Yunnan we came to the kingdom of Moun Mao.

We lived in Moun Mao together'

REFLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF THE IMAGES OF FOLKLORE AND FOLK LIFE

Folk literature preserves various aspects of the lifestyle of the people of the ethnic group. Folk literature, on the other hand, influences the way of life, thoughts, imagination, and ideas of the people. There are many folk songs prevalent in the Tai Phake society that teach us about religious and folk traditions. For example, in weddings, 'Poi Sangken', 'Barshabas', etc., festivals the elders tie threads in the younger one's hands and bless with tunes. 'Kham Lik Wai' is also known for its tradition of thanking and blessing those who help in every way at the end of domestic or social and religious ceremonies, etc. The Buddhist influence in folk literature is clearly expressed through religious prayer 'Kham Pai Fra'. Buddhist rituals such as 'Lik Lu Chi Mi' about offering candles, 'Kham Lik Tang Cham' about the tradition of offering tang cham (food) in front of Buddha statues in the morning at home or during festivals, the importance of flowers in Buddhist culture. The tradition of offering flowers

during prayers is also mentioned in the song 'Lik Lu Mok Ya', and the tradition of paying homage to the Buddha, religion and Sangha at the beginning of dances and songs in religious and public places is mentioned in 'Kham o' Vati'. 'Kham Lik Sangken', performed during the main festival of Poi Sangken, describes the tradition of bathing the Buddha statue.

'I am today at this moment with pure heart and devotion

I am bringing the water of this holy pure wave to wash the Buddha.

I put it in a rotating kaungpan

Brought from the city and washed it with a pure heart.'

Folk beliefs about evil forces and ghosts are clearly expressed in 'Kham Jya Molang'. The 'blessing song sung when seeing a snake' is an introduction to the beliefs and traditions of the Tai Phakes about snakes. Snakes also have a special place in Buddhism.

The 'Kham Hong Khan Khao', 'Choy Yoy' song sung during the harvesting of rice in the Urals reflects the work culture and folk life of the agricultural Tai Phakes. There are many references to chicken and cows farming in the lullabies.

ENTERTAINMENT PROVISION

Folk literature is an artistic medium of expression. One of its functions is to provide entertainment to people during their leisure time, festivals and other occasions. There are many different elements of folk literature that have entertained folk society as well as modern society since the past. Radio, television, mobile phones, etc. are popular modern media for entertainment.

Before these inventions, folk literature was the main medium of entertainment. The performers enjoyed themselves as well as the audience. Folk literature currently preserved in print, audio and audio-visual media has helped the younger generation to learn and practise these. Folksongs are performed in electronic media, social media, stages, etc. to create an entertaining atmosphere. In addition, the folksong 'Khye Khyang', which is prevalent in the Tai Phake society, is still composed by folk poets about contemporary events, situations and characters.

Some elements of folk literature entertain all classes of people regardless of age and gender and some elements entertain specific classes of people. For example, 'choy yoy' is one of the ways women entertain themselves. 'Kham Lao Luk On', 'Kham Lain', 'Kham Non Chan' etc. entertain mainly children and adolescents as well as the elderly, women and men.

'Khamlein's are usually entertained by children playing through group performances. Some songs also tell a story. Example-

‘E Chong (Chanda fish), why are you blind?

-For water contamination

Water, why are you dirty?

-Due to river erosion’

The people of the tribe happily participate in the festivals and ceremonies related to agriculture by singing songs. They also perform 'Kham Hong Chao Mau' at weddings. This song also serves as a form of folk entertainment.

'Cha Oi' is a lyrical medium of expression of the emotions, thoughts, imaginations, joys, feelings, etc. of a creative writer of the Tai Phake people. These folk songs express universal feelings and are joyful. These are not limited to the individual but have been passed down orally from generation to generation among the community. These songs are more popular and enjoyable among the youth, although they are performed by all people.

Although the main purpose of religious prayer songs is to express devotion, they also involve in the joy of devotion. In 'Kham Yon Kong', children, teenagers, youth, old men and women dance and sing with traditional instruments.

MAGICAL FUNCTION

Magical beliefs are one of the characteristics of folk societies. Different ethnic groups perform various folk customs, festivals, songs and dances due to magical beliefs. Furthermore, traditional medicine is also influenced by magical beliefs. Traditional medicines are divided into two categories, namely—natural or herbal medicine and magic-religious treatment.⁸ Treatment using herbs to cure diseases is called natural or herbal medicine. The treatment by performing mantras, songs, etc. is called — Magic Religious Treatment. In some cases, both methods are applied in parallel.

It is believed that if healthy children suddenly fall ill and their health deteriorates, it is due to the influence of evil forces. In such circumstances, they pray for healing by observing certain folk customs and performing folk songs. 'Kham Jya Malang' is a song involving such magical healing practices.

Some folklore is believed to have magical effects. Behind such folk beliefs is the tendency of the people to get rid of their problems, suffering, frustrations, etc. These songs are based on folk beliefs but help to increase the moral values, self-confidence and peace of mind of the people of the community. After the wedding of the Taiphake community, when the bride reaches the courtyard of the groom's house, the groom's mother or any other elder performs the traditional 'Jya Malang', which forbids evil spirits. They perform 'Kham Jya Malang' to prevent evil forces from entering the groom's house and to prevent any evil influence on the bride.

ASSISTANCE IN NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION

Various genres of Tai Phake folk literature have helped in conserving various elements of nature, raising environmental awareness and creating a generous attitude towards all elements of nature. It has helped to create a sense of friendship and interrelationship between man and nature. For example, the Tai Phake community has a tradition of blessing snakes when they pass by or in front of the road. There is a tendency for some people to kill snakes when they see them due to their unreasonable fear of snakes. In contrast, such traditions have helped in the conservation of snakes. The meaning of this blessing is expressed in the book *Tai Phake Samaj aru Sanskriti* by Paim Thi Gohain as follows:

‘Go away. You go on your way.

Don't bother us. We will not stand in your way either.’

SOCIAL CONTROL AND COORDINATION

Social control is based on the traditional ideals and values prevalent in a society. Folk literature plays a special role in controlling society. There are many customs and traditions that are traditionally followed by different ethnic groups to manage and control the society. Folklore plays a role in bringing such aspects to all sections of society.

Many elements of Tai Phake folk literature belong directly to community traditions. For example, prayer songs, songs associated with festivals and ceremonies, etc. Similarly, folklore, proverbs, advisory songs, etc. have helped in social control by passing on traditional ideals, beliefs, values, etc. from generation to generation. The social control of the Tai Phakes is influenced by Buddhist philosophy and tradition. Folk songs sung in groups promote emotional cohesion, social unity and harmony. It also helps in the socialization of the people of the community.

RELEVANCE AND PRESENT SOCIAL STATUS OF TAI PHAKE FOLK SONGS

The modern education system has influenced the status of the folk literature of the Tai Phake, changes in belief and mindsets, new scientific inventions and discoveries, globalisation, the Assamese language, the predominance of the English language and its impact, cultural assimilation, less influence of the aged people, due breakdown of the joint family system and decrease of interest in the literary pursuits of own's folk literature among others. The Tai Phake people must realise the urgency to preserve their language, dialect, and folk literature and the relevance of the same. The above-discussed functions of the folksongs of Tai Phake ensconce their social significance. Tai Phake people also believe that preservation of folksong and folk literature is necessary. Folk literature has had a positive impact on their personal and social life. At present, the Tai Phake language is prevalent among different generations of the community in oral form but in a limited way. The Tai Phake language has lost its charm among the new generations due to the widespread prevalence of Assamese, Hindi, and English language. Very few of them knew the Tai Phake language and its dialect.

Marriage with different communities is another primary reason for this. Recently, workshops and awareness programmes on the Tai Phake language has been organised. More or less, each generation is associated with the folk literature of Tai Phake. They have learned the folksongs through elders, texts, workshops, and festivals. Significantly the elders have contributed towards preserving the folksongs through the tradition of singing performance. However, the community has expressed that such an endeavour has not happened satisfactorily. The folksongs deeply connect with the various festivals, folk culture, and religious ethos of the Tai Phake community.

Furthermore, folksongs are performed compulsorily in some festivals. Thus, these festivals and traditions also have played a role in preserving folksongs. Though Tai Phake people wear different comfortable attire in normal times, they compulsorily wear traditional dresses when performing any folksongs, folk dance and folk musical instruments. Folk dance and folk instrument do not connect much with the Tai Phake folk songs. No any instruments are used in folksongs of Tai Phake except 'Kham yon kong' which is associated with dance performance also. Though instruments were used earlier, since the adoption of Buddhism, instruments came to be strictly associated with a religious ethos. As an element of mass media, folksongs have instilled unity and a sense of cohesion among communities in different parts. Tai Phake folksongs, with their distinctive features, have helped the Tai Phake community to create a unique identity.

SUMMARY

The collection of data about the Tai Phake literature through Field studies can highlight new dimensions of the community. There is further scope for research in this field. The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of this study-

FINDINGS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Tai Phake folksongs have a distinct cultural identity. One can trace the social and cultural life of the Tai Phake people through these songs. Furthermore, the influence of Buddhist culture and traditions are visible in these songs.

Tai Phake folksongs have helped to impart practical and spiritual knowledge, moral lessons, entertainment, and information, maintaining social control and preserving the history and folk culture of the community.

At present, the Tai Phake language is prevalent among different generations of the community in oral form but in a limited way. Presently workshops have been organised for the promotion of the language. The new generation has tried to learn the folksongs through the elders, written texts, workshops, festivals etc.

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NAME AND ADDRESS OF RESOURCE PERSON

- Paim Thi Gohain, Namphake village, Dibrugarh district, 49 Years
- Lown Wiengken, Namphake village, Dibrugarh district, 28 Years
- AmChaw khya Chakhap Weingken, Namphake village, Dibrugarh district, 64 Years
- NgiiMya Myat Chaton, Borphake village, Tinsukia district, 58 Years
- YePan Pomung, Manmomukh village, Tinsukia district, 80 Years
- AamHom Pya Chakhap, Long village, Tinsukia district, 71 Years
- AaiMoun Chakhap, Phaneng village, Tinsukia district, 64 Years
- NgiiMong Myat Manhai, Nonglai village, Tinsukia district, 62 Years
- Jepeng Chakhap, Nigam village, Tinsukia district, 44 Years
- AamMok Chakhap, MOUNGLANG village, Tinsukia district, 54 Years