

ENDANGERED LANGUAGE AND CULTURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TAI-PHAKE OF ASSAM

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Abstract: When a language is likely to become extinct it is called an endangered language. It is a serious concern for any society. Language spoken by the Tai-Phake of Assam is designated as one of the endangered languages in India. This language is at a risk of falling out of use because it has a smaller number of speakers at present. For sake of present study adult Tai-Phake of four villages (Ningam, Long Phake, Phaneng and Bor Phake) of Tinsukia district, Assam were selected randomly. A total of 405 adult Tai-Phake were studied. Data were examined according to different generations. Number of subjects gradually decreases from generations 3 to 1. More than 91 percent respondents were born in own village. Language self-assessment diminishes from generations 1 to 3. It reveals that process of modernization is playing an important role in different spheres of life of older and new generation of the study population. There exists a fear that this language is likely to become extinct near future. In view of this they have started arranging night classes at village level for the children particularly though it is in initial stage. To arrest becoming extinct of Tai-Phake language thus the local people must play an important role.

Keywords: Tai-Phake, Assam, Language, Endangerment, Modernization.

Introduction

A language that is on the verge of extinction because its speakers have either died out or switched to another language is considered to be endangered. The next century will see the extinction of these endangered languages if current trends are not reversed. Many other languages will go extinct when their last speaker dies because they are no longer being taught to future generations of children or adults (Woodbury 1992).

Endangering languages is a significant issue. Many speakers of smaller, less common languages switch from their native tongue to one that is more widespread for a number of reasons. The intergenerational transmission of the heritage language may be interrupted if parents start only using that more popular language with their kids. As a result, there are fewer people who use the language as their first or major language, and eventually, it might stop being spoken altogether. A language may go dormant or extinct, remaining only in transcriptions, written records, or recordings. Languages that have not been sufficiently recorded completely vanish. Due to this, it is crucial to preserve languages and cultural records (<https://www.sil.org/sociolinguistics/endangered-languages>).

There are 192 languages of India, which are classified as vulnerable or endangered. According to Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered

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Languages (SPPEL), Government of India Tai-Phake or Phakial language of Assam is considered to be one of the endangered languages in India. As there are fewer Tai-Phake people who talk in this language at present there is a possibility that it might stop being spoken altogether. Slowly or gradually this language may go dormant or extinct. In view of this it seems to be an important study to understand its present situation. This study deals with endangered language and culture with special reference to the Tai-Phakes of Assam.

Tai-Phake

From South China's Men Mau, Tai-Phakes traveled through Burma, the Pat Kai Hills, and Assam until dispersing in the Brahmaputra valley in 1775 (Roy and Ghone 2016). A tiny group of Buddhists lives in Tai-Phakes. They assert that they are descended from the legendary Tai family, who were originally thought to have established a kingdom named "Moung-Mao" in the Yunnan province of China. The Tai-Phake are descendants of the Mongols. This community has a lengthy history of migration from "Moung-Mao" to Upper Assam's plain valley, where they eventually settled in the latter half of the 17th century (Lahkar and Chakhap 2019).

In Assam's rural communities, locals have a tradition of asking newcomers their caste whenever they interact with them. As a result, when the Phakes were required to reveal their caste in front of the Assamese people, they did so by introducing themselves as "Phake yat," or members of the Phake caste or tribe. The possibility exists that Phake Yat eventually became Phakeyel or Phakial.

Culture and Tradition

Phake society is a stratified one but the stratification is not carried to extremes. Except on socio-religious occasions the social divisions are hardly noticed. Broadly, the society may be split into two categories, viz., the ordinary villagers whose main occupation is cultivation and the cultivator monks. Again in the first category there are office bearers namely *chouman* i.e. the village headman and the *pathak* i.e., reader of the scriptures. While the former is mainly concerned with the secular affairs, the later concerns himself with religious matters (Singh 2003).

The Tai-Phake community adheres to its own cultural practices that it has been conserving since the "Hu-Kwang" era. Although it has changed over time and incorporated certain new trends, the original has not entirely disappeared (Lahkar and Chakhap 2019).

Language

Language of the Tai-Phake is bilingual. Tai language is spoken among themselves in their day to day life but they speak Assamese when they converse with the non Phakes. Except for a few old persons, others do not know the Tai script well. The

school going boys and girls learn their lessons in Assamese, English and Hindi can read and write these languages (Singh 2003).

The Tai belongs to the Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic group. The Tai-Phake language has 10 vowel phonemes, 15 consonant phonemes, 2 semivowels, a few diphthongs, and 3 consonant clusters. It is a tonal language and retains 6 prominent tones-rising, falling, high (mild). low high (falling) and low (mid). It is also monosyllabic. Suffixes are added to retain the monosyllabic quality of the words (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tai_Phake_People).

The Tai-Phake is a tonal and monosyllabic language. Linguistically they belong to Tai-Chin group of Sino-Tibetan family. They have own script (Burmese and Tai). They have handwritten manuscripts at monastery and their homes (Morey 2005).

History of the Language

Tai-Phake belongs to the Tai Kadai language Family. The other Tai Kadai languages spoken in Assam are Tai Ahom, Tai Khampti, Tai Turung, Tai Khamyang and Tai Aiton. These six languages are commonly known as ‘Tai’ in Assam. The Phake language can be found in both written and spoken forms.

Domains of Use

The Tai-Phake language is used by the Phake people in daily life. Their culture is preserved in folk songs like *Khe Khyang* and *Soy yoy* and religious books like *Ho Tham* and *Lik Woi* that are written in the Phake script. Tai-Phake has its own script, which is a Brahmi-derived script and similar to the Shan script used in Burma.

Vocabulary

The vocabulary of Tai-Phake is filled with words from Pali, Burmese, Assamese, English etc. Different Pali words have entered Tai-Phake through Tripitok, the most religious book of the Buddhists. Burmese words have entered through the Burmese people who have settled in Assam; these Burmese words are used in religious festivals. Although they use Tai Phake in their domestic life, the Tai-Phake also use Assamese; as a result, Tai Phake consists of several Assamese words. English words have entered through the modern lifestyle (Moran 2017).

Distribution

Presently the Tai-Phake people live in nine villages in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district of upper Assam.

District	Village
Dibrugarh	Namphake, Tipamphake
Tinsukia	Bor Phake, Man Mou, Nonglai, Long Phake, Mounglang, Ningam, Phaneng

Namphake and Tipamphake villages are situated on the bank of Buridihing river of Naharkatiya area of Dibrugarh district. Rest of the villages are situated in Ledo-Margherita area of Tinsukia district.

A few Tai-Phake people are also scattered in different places of Arunachal Pradesh.

Study Area

For the sake of present study four villages namely Ningam, Long Phake, Phaneng and Bor Phake of Tinsukia district, Assam were chosen. The villages were purposively selected keeping in view the operational feasibility. Sample sizes are as follows:

Name of the village	Number of families studied
1. Ningam	27
2. Long Phake	23
3. Phaneneg	26
4. Bor Phake	23
Total	99

Methodology

In the present study Tai-Phake adults were classified in four generations on the basis of their present age. For this purpose the classification as proposed by Ule (2017) was followed, which is as follows:

1. Generation – 1: 65+ years old
2. Generation – 2: 46-64 years old
3. Generation – 2.5: 31-45 years old
4. Generation – 3: <31 years old

Following Ule (2017) place of birth, growing up and current residence of the subjects were found out. Side by side, language self-assessment by generation and patterns of language use of proficient speakers were found out. A door to door survey was conducted in the above mentioned four villages during August- October, 2020. Structured schedules were filled up during survey. Data of four villages were clubbed for the convenience of analysis.

Findings

Distribution of subjects according to generations

It is seen from Table 1 that number of subjects gradually decreases from generations 3 to 1. A total of 405 adult Tai-Phake was studied. Out of which 209 were males and 196 were females. Therefore, the males outnumber the females. When these data

were distributed in different generations it was seen that the males outnumber the females in each generation excepting generation 3. In this generation females (81) outnumber the males (65). For a clear view of the situation these were presented graphically in Figure1.

Generations	Male	Female	Total
Generation – 3 (<31 years old)	65	81	146
Generation – 2.5 (31-45 years old)	66	51	117
Generation – 2 (46-64 years old)	49	39	88
Generation – 1 (65+ years old)	29	25	54

Table 1: Distribution of subjects according to generations

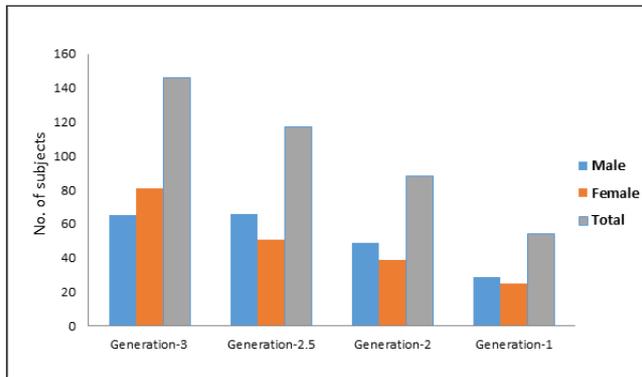


Figure 1: Distribution of subjects

Place of birth, growing up and current residence

It is evident from Table 2 that in generation 3 (below 31 years old) 91.78% respondents were born in own village and the rest i.e. 8.22% born in other places. More than 80% (80.82) of the respondents grew up in own village and 19.18% grew up in other places. 79.03% currently live in own village and 23.97% live elsewhere.

In generation 2.5 (31-45 years old) one fourth (25.64%) respondents born in other places and 74.36% born in own village, 52.14% of the respondents grew up in own village, whereas 47.86% respondents grew up elsewhere. More than 77% respondents currently live in other places. Respondents of generation 2 show 64.77% respondents born in own village and 35.23% of them born in other places. 54.55% respondents grew up in own village and the rest i.e. 45.45% live in other places. All the respondents in this generation currently live in own village. In generation 1 near about 50% of the respondents born in own village as well as other places. Side by side, near about 50% of the respondents grew up in own village and other places. It is interesting to note that like generation 2 in this generation also all the

respondents currently live in own village.

When all the respondents were taken into consideration it is found that 75.56% of the respondents born in own village and 24.44% born in other places. 62.47% respondents grew up in own village and 37.53% grew up in other places. Majority of the respondents (84.94%) currently live in own village and the rest (15.06%) currently live in other places. For a clear view of the situation the same has been shown graphically in Figure 2.

Generations	Born in		Grew up		Currently live	
	Own village	Other place	Own village	Other place	Own village	Other Place
Generation – 3 (<31 years old)	134 (91.78)	12 (8.22)	118 (80.82)	28 (19.18)	111 (76.03)	35 (23.97)
Generation – 2.5 (31-45 years old)	87 (74.36)	30 (25.64)	61 (52.14)	56 (47.86)	91 (77.78)	26 (22.22)
Generation – 2 (46-64 years old)	57 (64.77)	31 (35.23)	48 (54.55)	40 (45.45)	88 (100.00)	-
Generation – 1 (65+ years old)	28 (51.85)	26 (48.15)	26 (48.15)	28 (51.85)	54 (100.00)	-
All respondents	306 (75.56)	99 (24.44)	253 (62.47)	152 (37.53)	344 (84.94)	61 (15.06)

Table 2: Place of birth, growing up and current residence

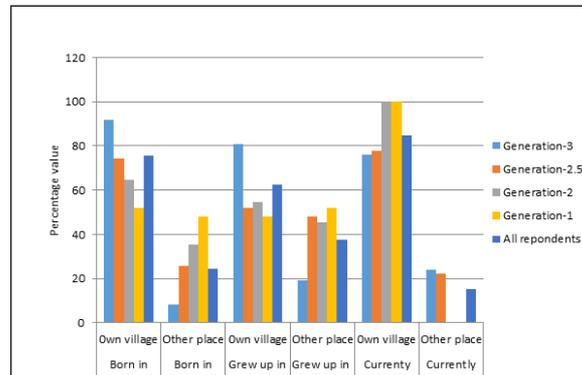


Figure 2: Place of birth, growing up and current residence

Language self-assessment by generation

In Table 3 language self-assessment of the respondents were presented by generation. It reveals that language self-assessment diminishes from generation 1 to 3. While, in generation 1, 14.81% of them speak little or no Tai-Phake language, 13% of them

understand little or no Tai-Phake language, 7.41% of them have little to no reading ability in Tai-Phake language and 13% of them have little to no writing ability in Tai-Phake language in generation 3, 26.71% of the respondents speak little or no Tai-Phake language, 19.18% of them understand little or no Tai-Phake language and little to no reading ability in Tai-Phake language. However, more than 34% of the respondents have little to no writing ability in Tai-Phake language in this category.

Generations	Speak little or no Tai-Phake language	Understand little or no Tai-Phake language	Little to no reading ability in Tai-Phake language	Little to no writing ability in Tai-Phake language
Generation – 3 (<31 years old)	39 (26.71)	28 (19.18)	28 (19.18)	51 (34.93)
Generation – 2.5 (31-45 years old)	24 (20.51)	18 (15.38)	19 (16.23)	35 (29.91)
Generation – 2 (46-64 years old)	15 (17.04)	13 (14.77)	9 (10.23)	13 (14.77)
Generation – 1 (65+ years old)	8 (14.81)	7 (13.00)	4 (7.41)	7 (13.00)

Table 3: Language self-assessment by generation

It appears from Table 4 that there is no mainly or only Assamese speaker among Tai-Phake friends, siblings, older relatives and grandparents. This is true for generation 3, 2.5, 2 and 1. It also appears that presence of proficient speaker on mainly or only Tai-Phake language is more among the older relatives and grandparents than that of the Tai-Phake friends and Tai-Phake siblings. The same is true for the respondents of generation 2.5. But in generation 2 and 1 no such definite trend emerges.

When speaking to	Language	Generation – 3 (<31 years old)	Generation – 2.5 (31-45 years old)	Generation – 2 (46-64 years old)	Generation – 1 (65+ years old)
Tai-Phake friends	Mainly or only Assamese	-	-	-	-
	Mainly or only Tai-Phake	29 (19.86)	20 (17.09)	24 (27.27)	12 (22.22)
Siblings	Mainly or only Assamese	-	-	-	-
	Mainly or only Tai-Phake	33 (22.60)	26 (22.22)	19 (18.18)	14 (25.93)

Older relatives	Mainly or only Assamese	-	-	-	-
	Mainly or only Tai-Phake	42 (28.77)	39 (33.33)	24 (27.27)	13 (24.07)
Grandparents	Mainly or only Assamese	-	-	-	-
	Mainly or only Tai-Phake	42 (28.77)	32 (27.35)	24 (27.27)	15 (27.78)

Table 4: Patterns of language use of proficient speakers

Acculturation with Greater Assamese Society

The studied four Tai-Phake villages are surrounded by the Assamese speaking people. They have assimilated nicely with surrounding society. Side by side, the Tai-Phake has also preserved their customs and beliefs. They exchange information, goods, grains etc. with their neighbouring people, the Assamese. They have learnt different Assamese dishes in due course of time. Some cases of inter community marriages have also been noticed. These kinds of incidences have been accepted by the people of both the sides. Therefore, one can notice the process of acculturation among the Tai-Phake.

Discussion

The people of India are by and large bilingual, except for the few isolated communities like Jarawa, Sentinelese and Shompen of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. A monolingual community need not be cent per cent monolingual; there may be a few people who know another language or other languages. Even in cases involving bilingualism, it has been reported that only some people of a community may be conversant with language besides their mother tongue (Singh and Manoharan 1993).

Linguistic heterogeneity might be the result of two factors: i) culturally homogeneous communities becoming heterolingual in different linguistic setups, preferring the language of the present habitat in place of their original and ii) linguistically heterogeneous communities coming together within one cultural fold. No State/Union Territory in India is monolingual or unilingual, because not only are there linguistic minorities, but there are also immigrants and others who speak different languages. With growing social mobility and movements of people across region, this trend towards multilingualism is likely to grow (Singh and Manoharan 1993).

Language spoken by the studied population, the Tai-Phake is designated as endangered (https://on.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_endangered_languages_in_India). This language is at a risk of falling out of use because it has few surviving speakers. This Tai language is of the Sino-Tibetan family (Chinese-Thai group). Apart from the Tai-Phake other two communities of Assam who speak Tai language are the Khamyang and Turung. Present study shows a drastic fall of exclusive Tai speakers from older generation to younger generation. If this process continues there will be few speakers of this language near future.

If we compare the life style, food and traditional practices of older and new generation the process of modernization in this population can be observed. Like others, the Tai-Phake peoples are also influenced by various economic, political and cultural aspects from the neighbouring Assamese community.

As the process of modernization is in progression the older generation fear that the Tai-Phake language is likely to become extinct near future. Keeping this in view they have started arranging night classes mainly for the children to learn this language, though this process of preservation is in initial stage. Therefore, the local people must play an important role to ensure that the Tai-Phake language does not become extinct.

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