

Identity Consciousness and Socio-Political Transformation of Tai Phake Community: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Role of All Assam Tai Phake National Council

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Abstract: The linguistic minority “Tai Phakes” are a hill tribe dwelling in plains like various other communities in Assam. At present, Tai-Phakes are consisting less than two thousand population mostly reside in the eastern areas of Assam. Despite less numerical strength, they have been able to maintain their traditional culture and ethnic identity. The consciousness for socio-economic development and constitutional protection of Tai Phakes can be traced back right after independence in a collective way. In the early 1950s, seven tribal chiefs including Tai Phakes had written a memorandum to the then Political Officer of Margherita and demanded the return of the land in the Tirap-Lekhapani area to the tribal people. Further, they have been demanding an Autonomous Council along with other tribal groups of Tirap area in a collective way. They all were close to getting an Autonomous Council in 2006 as the formal declaration of the Autonomous Council supposed to be announced by Chief Minister of Assam. But due to some turmoil situation, the Council has never come into existence and the whole campaign petered out gradually. The apex organization of Tai Phakes known as “All Assam Tai Phake National Council” (AATPNC) has been much concerned about the various problems of Tai Phake community and raising voices regarding various issues concerning Tai Phakes. This paper examines the socio-political problems and identity aspirations of Tai Phake community in Assam. It also traces the role of AATPNC in creating identity consciousness and giving voice to the cause of Tai Phakes.

Keywords: Assam, Autonomus, Ethnic group, Identity, Tribes, Tai Phake

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Assam is known for its rich cultural mosaic and ethnic heterogeneity in terms of presence of number of ethnic groups which possess distinct language, dialects, religion and culture. Since a long period, various ethnic groups exist and co-exist in Assam. However, after the colonization of the region, the British colonial regime created some artificial politico-administrative boundaries which were fixed in nature and total disregard of the actual distribution of people (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, 2018). The result of this kind of system was the complete mismatched between the cultural and political boundaries in states. In due course of time, these two factors- the heterogeneous nature of the society and artificial fixation of territory by the colonial regime have constituted a ground for ethnic disintegration and strife in society. In contemporary time, the assertion for distinct identity or demand for separate political entity has increased among the ethnic groups and Assam has been experiencing such kind of assertion over several decades. In fact, the aspirations for maintaining a distinct identity has occupied the whole political landscape of Assam. The diverse ethnic groups in the region have been pressing either for the creation of separate state or Autonomous Council for special constitutional protection of lingo-cultural identities and socio-economic development. Despite the formation of several territorially defined autonomous councils, many tribes continue to demand the creation of new autonomous councils in Assam. In Assam the Dimasas have been given autonomy under District Councils, the Karbis have been given an autonomous state council and Bodos have been granted Autonomous Council. The Rabhas, Hasong, Mising, Tiwa, SonowalKachari, ThangalKachari and Deuris have been given autonomous district councils. Furthermore, there are other demands from aboriginal Hills Tribal dominated areas to protect the Fundamental Rights of the tribal peoples living in Tirap Frontier area. The “Tirap Autonomous District Council Demand Committee”(TADCDC) was founded in 1995, which demanded for the creation of “Tirap Tribal Autonomous Council”(TTAC) comprising the Hills Tribal dominated areas and covered the three Mouzas-Tirap, Burhidihing and Makum and other adjoining tribal dominant areas under Sixth Schedule, article -244(2) of the constitution

of India for the immediate political protection of the Buddhist and Christian religion and linguistic minorities¹. It includes hill tribal groups like Singpho, Tangsa, Sema Naga, Khamti(now Khamti recognize as a plain tribe) and Man Tai speaking community like Tai Phake, Khamyang and Turung. The movements for Autonomous District Council by these aboriginal groups has been running continuously for a long time which is demanded under the constitutional provision of India. This paper has made an attempt to understand the identity assertion of a lesser known ethnic community of Assam that is Tai Phakes and analyse the role of All Assam Tai Phake National Council in the autonomy movement in Assam.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

2. To understand the socio-political problems and identity aspirations of the Tai-Phake community.
3. To analyse the role of All Assam Tai Phake National Council in giving voice to the cause of Tai Phakes and in the autonomy movement in Assam.

1.3 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The paper is based on analytical and descriptive method. The analytical approach helps to analyzing the different aspects of the issue and descriptive approach is adopted to have a clear vision in this study. For the purpose of this paper, both primary and secondary data are used. Primary data includes interviews and various memorandums submitted by Tai Phake National Council. The secondary sources were collected from the available related literature. The researcher began the research by collecting and reading the relevant secondary literature on Tai Phake community which helped in explorations of the present study. For desk research, the researcher visited a number of libraries and gathered materials pertinent to this study.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in the fact that a small ethnic community which maintained their distinct identity may provide deep insights into the various level of development of ethnic identity. The study of evolution and development of Tai Phake identity help to understand this phenomenon. Further, it is found that various study has been done on history, culture and other aspects of Tai Phake community, but ethno-political aspects of the Tai Phake community has been largely neglected. Thus, this study seeks to understand the unique identity assertion of the Tai Phake community and the role of its community-based organisation in the autonomy movement of Assam.

1.5 TAI PHAKES AND ITS ORGANIZATION: AN OVERVIEW

The Tai-Phakes, a small ethnic group, dwelling mainly in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district of upper Assam. They were migrated from Men Mau of South China, across Myanmar and Patkai Hills and entered Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in 1775 A.D.(Wonkyo et al, 2010). Ethnically, the Tai Phakes belong to Mongoloid group and linguistically they belong to Tibeto Chinese families(Phukan, 2005). Besides following Theravada Buddhism, Tai Phakes also follow pre-Buddhist animistic belief. When Tai Phakes entered Assam, it was ruled by the Ahom Kingdom and the king was Lakshmi Sinha (1769- 1780 A.D) (Bura Gohain, 2016). After their entry into Assam, they at first settled under their own chief Chow Ta Meng Khuen Meng at a place called Moongkongtat, near Ningroo(A village of present-day Arunachal Pradesh) on the bank of Buridihing(Gait, 1906). In the early part of Nineteenth Century, Ahom commander Chandra Gohain have brought the Tai Phakes from their previous habitat to Jorhat and settled them in various places on the river bank of Desoi. During the Burmese invasion in Assam in the early nineteenth century, the Tai Phakes were ordered by the Burmese officials to returned to their traditional land of Burma. Though they went up to Buridihing river, they stopped their journey midway due to various difficulties and stayed back at Namchik (located in present day Arunachal Pradesh). After the annexation of Assam by British in 1826 through Yandaboo Treaty, Tai Phakes shifted their previous habitats from Arunachal and started living in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of upper Assam. At present, Tai Phake inhabited villages of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts are- Namphake and Tipamphake on the bank of the river Buridihing of Dibrugarh district and BorPhake, Mounglang, Man Long or Long Phake, Man Mou, NingamPhake or Ningam, Phaneng and Nonglai in Tinsukia district.

The Tai Phakes of Assam has been facing various problems in different aspects. In the post-independence period, the socio-economic position of Tai Phakes has not improved considerably. In fact, the intrusion of new settlers after independence had brought lands and reserved forests under their occupation have significantly affected their economic condition.Immediately after independence, in 1950 government of Assam transferred the frontier area of Tinsukia district from the *North East Frontier Agency* (present-day Arunachal

1. An appeal to the public, made by Tirap Autonomous District Council Demand Committee and All Assam Man (Tai Speaking) Students' Union, dated: 28th April, 2007

Pradesh) and named as "Tirap Transferred Area" and formed Tirap Tribal Belt. But Tai Phakes claimed that tribal groups such as Tai Phake, Singpho, Tangsa and Sema Naga living in the area are not giving adequate protection². As a result, they are deprived of getting priority of education, jobs, culture and religion. The educated elite of Tai Phakes, therefore, come to realize that they had failed to reap the benefits of the nation-building process and has been deprived of their due share and other facilities in the region. As such, they start asserting and articulating their identity to bring the development of their community. Few educated elites of Tai Phakes take initiatives to develop their own organizational structure since the middle of the twentieth century which culminated in the formation of some socio-cultural organizations. Due to less numerical strength, Tai Phakes start articulating their demands for constitutional protection along with other neighbouring tribal communities to bargain with the state system to gain for their community. For instance, in 1950, Tai Phakes along with Singphos, Tangsas and SemaNagas formed "Tribal Peace Council" (*Janaajatiya Santi Parishad*). It could be considered as the first formal step towards their organizational form to address their socio-political problems.

The ethnic groups of Assam have been formed their own political or non-political organization to safeguard their ethnic identity and for their socio-political developments. History revealed that various movements of Assam had started initially through various organizations. The organizations ensuring for its people what they aspired or deserved-socially, economically and politically. In fact, organization is necessary for placing demands before the government or bargaining with the state. So, leaders of different communities formed their own organization to advance their demands. All Assam Tai Phake National Council(AATPNC) is the apex organization of Tai Phake community who has been concerned about the various issues of Tai Phake community. The AATPNC was formed on 7 April, 1994 in *Ninggam* village of Tinsukia district of Assam for all-round development of Tai Phakes. Its head office is located in the *Phaneng* Tai Phake village, Tinsukia. The 'Tai Phake Cultural and Literacy Society' also formed as cultural wing of 'All Assam Tai Phake National Council' which was established in 2012. The scope of this organization is extended to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The primary purpose of this organization is to develop, promote and protect Tai Phake language, literature and culture³. Thus, gradually the Tai Phakes became conscious about their distinct ethnic identity and start developing organizing structure as a measure of acquiring bargaining capacity to deal with the ruling elite of the state. In present time, Tai Phake National Council has been very much concerned about the various problems of Tai Phake community. The Council was earlier known as "All Assam Tai Phake Development Council" established in 1987, but renamed in 1994 in order to make it more inclusive and widen its scope. This is a non-political organization formed with an objective to protect and maintain socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects of the Tai Phake community.

The primary objectives of the All Assam Tai Phake National Council are as follow:

1. Overall development of socio-culture, folklore, language, scripts, dance and songs, food habits, attire, education etc. of Tai Phake community, development and growth of these aspects and work for safeguard as well.
2. To find out solutions for all problems in a non-political way by holding discussions with the government in the interest of society.
3. To take the initiative to include the name of Tai Phakes clearly in the Scheduled Tribes list of the government.
4. To give importance for providing a solution for education, employment etc. and communicate with the concerned authorities for tribal protection.
5. To take the initiative for social responsibility and active participation.
6. To make efforts to remove corruption from the society.
7. To establish a relationship with non-political organizations.
8. To stand against spoilage such as irregularity, corruption, objectionable activities, diminish indigenous tradition of Tai Phake society etc. and if necessary take the initiative to settle such cases.
9. To implement various work schedule for society's unity, strengthening of brotherhood and if necessary provide suggestions to various sections.
10. To take every possible step for socio-economic development of Tai Phake society and help those who want to go forward in this regard.
11. To provide one-time assistance to meritorious students of economically incapable parents.
12. To intervene the irregularities and misconduct in social and religious aspects of the Tai Phake community whenever required and provide fair judgments for a fair settlement.
13. To organize felicitation programs for meritorious students from various educational institutions.

2. Memorandum submitted to Chief Minister, Assam, Dispur, by All Assam Tai Phake National Council, dated 17/9/1996

3. Constitution, Tai Phake Cultural and Literacy Society, collected from Ai Maun Chakhap, Phaneng village

With the above objectives, Tai Phake National Council is striving to protect the interest of Tai Phake community. It is the only representative organization of Tai Phakes working on state basis which has been raising voice for various issues relating to Tai Phake community. It is also trying to negotiate with the state to fulfill their demands. Besides the issues related with Tai Phake community, it also raised the voice in various issues of the state for the larger interest of society. While struggling for the all-round development of the Tai Phake community, consciously or unconsciously the All Assam Tai Phake National Council has been raising political issues also and thus got engaged in the politics of the state despite being a non-political organization. For instance, the general secretary of AATPNC had signed a joint appeal along with nine other organizations of indigenous people of Assam in February 2018, seeking a stay on NRC (National Register of Citizens) update order in Assam due to the dilemma of cut-off date of NRC⁴. Since inception the AATPNC have raised a host of demands before the state as well as the central government which were both political and non-political in nature. Some of such demands were to include the Tai Phakes in the central list of Scheduled Tribes which is now given under state of Assam only, to create Legislative Council in Assam on the basis of equal representation of different communities. It further demanded for the creation of an Autonomous Council along with other neighbouring communities. Since a long time, Tai Phake National Council has been demanding to solve these problems of Tai Phake community. It is interesting to note that AATPNC has not staged a single protest to put forward their demands till date. While most of the organization has adopt strikes or protest as a strategy to put forward their demands or put pressure on government, AATPNC engaged through dialogues only by the way of submitting memorandum concerning their problems. AATPNC submitted various memorandum to the government representing the aspirations of the community and including other socio-political demands. Demanding the inclusion of Tai Phakes in the central ST list, the AATPNC submitted several memorandums to government. Tai Phakes are listed as Scheduled Tribes in Assam as per The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950 under the term "Man" (Tai speaking). The same statutory position has been maintained in the current list of "The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976"⁵. However, they are not satisfied with the present status because they are not accorded Schedule Tribes status on all India basis and the word "Tai Phake" is not included specifically in the present Schedule Tribes list of Assam. They are providing Schedule Tribes status under the term "Man (Tai speaking)" under state government of Assam. The AATPNC has been brought the matter to the notice of the government of Assam for proper clarification and submitted several memorandums to solve this problem⁶. They claim that they are the indigenous tribes like other tribals in the region who are maintaining distinct customs, language, culture, religion and tribal attires. Although they are getting benefit as Schedule Tribes hills under the state government, yet this kind of certificate is applicable only within the boundary of Assam, not applicable on all India basis. As a result, they are facing great difficulties in securing their due and rights in all India basis. Thus, they have been demanding to include their name in the central Schedule Tribes list. Moreover, they also consider it unfortunate that their actual term "Tai Phake" has not included in the Schedule Tribes list of government, rather giving a certificate under the name of Man (Tai speaking). They fear that it may lead to the extinction of the specific name of 'Tai Phake' in the future⁷. Thus, they are demanding the inclusion of the name "Tai Phake" specifically in the Scheduled Tribes list instead of Man (Tai speaking). Besides raising these issues, AATPNC have submitted various memorandums ever so often to ventilate their grievances.

1.6 The Demand for Tirap Autonomous District Council and Response of Government

1.6.1 Historical Background of The Tirap Area

The frontier hill tribes once along with a considerable tract (Singpho territory) now included in modern Arunachal Pradesh, which maintain during the British period as a special unit of administration were in those days entrusted to an office being the designation "Political Jamadar" with its headquarter at Margherita. The area and name were changes repeatedly, for instance, the then "Sadiya Frontier Tract" is transformed into "Lakhimpur Frontier Tract" and gradually to "Tirap Frontier Tract", "Tirap Frontier Division", and "Margherita Tirap Transferred Area". In the year 1951, the very status of the area was changed as it was divided into two unit- one included in the modern Arunachal Pradesh with the designation "Tirap District" and the other was

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4. see further-Indigenous bodies seek to stay on NRC order. (2018, February 7). Retrieved from <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=feb0718/at061>
 5. The Gazette of India, Extraordinary, New Delhi, The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Orders(Amendment) Act, 1976, part II, sec I, 1388.
 6. Memorandum submitted to Chief Minister, Assam, Dispur, by All Assam Tai Phake National Council, dated 17/9/1996
 7. Proposals of representative meeting, *HimantoJatiyaOvibartan*, held at Margherita, 9.4.1998

included in the state of Assam with a designation "Margherita-Tirap Transferred Area". At present, this hill tribal dominated area of Assam known as Tirap Tribal Belt(TTB) which is declared by a Government in 1951.

1.6.2 Tai Phakes and Tirap Autonomous District Council Demand Committee

Tirap Autonomous District Council Demand Committee(TADCDC) was founded in 1995, which demanded for the creation of "Tirap Tribal Autonomous Council"(TTAC) comprising of the aboriginal Hills Tribal dominated areas and covered the three Mouzas-Tirap, Burhidihing and Makum and other adjoining tribal dominant areas under Sixth Schedule, article -244(2) of the constitution of India for the immediate political protection of the Buddhist and Christian religion and linguistic minorities⁸. It includes hill tribal groups like Singpho, Tangsa, Sema Naga, Khamti(now Khamti recognize as a plain tribe) and Man Tai speaking community like Tai Phake, Khamyang and Turung. The movements for Autonomous District Council is running continuously for a long time which is demanded under the constitutional provision of India. The All Assam Tai Phake National Council has been engaging since beginning in this collective demands for an Autonomous Council.

The consciousness for socio-economic development and constitutional protection of Tai Phakes can be traced back to their aspirations right after independence in a collective way. The Tirap area which is inhabited by some minority tribal groups such as Tai Phakes, Tangsa, Singpho and Sema Naga, began to be maintained as a centrally administered territory with a Political Officer as its administrators soon after independence with its headquarters at Margherita. In the early 1950s, seven tribal chiefs including Tai Phakes had written a memorandum to the then Political Officer of Margherita and demanded the return of the land in the Tirap-Lekhapani area to the tribal people(Barkataki-Ruscheweyh,2018). Thus, it can be called the first vocal assertion of identity consciousness of the Tai Phakes which dates back to the memorandum of the seven tribal chiefs. Toward the end of the 1960s, a common platform was formed known as '*Janajatiya Santi Parishad*'(JSP) to meditate with the Assam government on this issue. Three community belonging to the Singpho, Tangsa and Tai Phake from Kharangkong, Ninggam, Bisa, Hasak, and Kumsaigaon formed this JSP. They demanded that either the non-tribals be deported from the tribal belt or the Tirap Transfer Area be transferred back to Arunachal Pradesh. But nothing of that sort happened and therefore, a delegation of tribal leaders submitted a memorandum after meeting Prime minister Indira Gandhi on 15 December 1980. However, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and turbulence situation of Assam due to Assam movement kept the matters hold for a long time. In 1995, again tribal groups came together to form the TADCDC. The primary purpose of such a Council was that it would protect the rights of the tribals living under the Tribal Belt and stoppage further non-tribals influx. Moreover, the TADCDC has demanded the reopening Stilwell Road, their socio-cultural and ethnic link to the people of Myanmar, Thailand and other South East Asian countries. They were close to getting an Autonomous Council in 2006 as the formal declaration of the Council supposed to be announced by Chief Minister of Assam. But due to some turmoil situation, the Council has never come into existence and the whole campaign petered out gradually (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, 2018).

1.6.3 Formation of "Singpho, Sema, Tangsa, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung, Tai Khamti and Tai Aiton Development Council"

After the continuous demand for Autonomous District Council, the tribal groups in the Tirap area including Tai Phakes were awarded a joint Development Council instead of Autonomous Council. In 2011, the government of Assam announced the Development Council jointly for eight ethnic communities, which include Singpho, Sema, Tangsha, Tai Phake, Tai Khamiang, Tai Turung, Tai Khamti and Tai Aiton for ensuring their socio-economic, educational, cultural as well as ethnic development. The formal announcement of this Council was made by government through a notification by the 'Welfare of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes Department'. Thus, in 2011, 'Singpho, Sema, Tangsa, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung, Tai Khamti and Tai Aiton Development Council' was formed. However, the Council has failed to satisfy the tribal leaders fully and they continuously demanding Autonomous District Council for inclusive development of the aboriginal groups living in the Tirap area. They believe that the creation of Development Council without political power, threatening the protection of identities of indigenous peoples of the area. For instance, immediately after independence, in 1950 government of Assam transferred the frontier area of Tinsukia district from the *North East Frontier Agency* (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) and named as "Tirap Transferred Area" and formed Tirap Tribal Belt. But Tai Phake National Council claimed that tribal groups such as Tai Phake, Singpho, Tangsa and Sema Naga living in the area has not giving adequate constitutional protection⁹. As a result, they are

8. An appeal to the public, made by Tirap Autonomous District Council Demand Committee and All Assam Man (Tai Speaking) Students' Union, dated: 28th April, 2007

9. Memorandum submitted to Chief Minister, Assam, Dispur, by All Assam Tai Phake National Council, dated 17/9/1996

deprived of getting priority of education, jobs, culture and religion. Since a long time, Tai Phake National Council has been demanding to solve these problems of Tai Phake community.

1.7 Concluding Remarks

The aforementioned developments have been emerged in Tai Phake society in recent years. The socio-economic backwardness and rapid changes of demographic pattern threatening the existence of indigenous tribal groups like Tai Phakes living in Tirap area which forced them to demand constitutional protection and other welfare activities. The common problems of Tai Phake community and apprehensions of being lost their culture have enforced them to consolidate their organizational strength to counter the challenges they are facing in contemporary time. The All Assam Tai Phake National Council being a community-based organization of Tai Phakes appeared to be concerned about all round development of the Tai Phakes. For the sake of Tai Phakes, they put forth a host of demands before government like inclusion of Tai Pai Phakes in the central government's Scheduled Tribes list, provide them caste certificates in their specific name 'Tai Phake' rather than Man (Tai speaking), demand proper constitutional protection for them and so on. Although most of their demands have remained unfulfilled, yet their efforts in this direction are still on. There witnessed a gradual consciousness for the protection of their rich culture and secure economic development, which is further manifested in the form of demands for an Autonomous Council for inclusive developments. Thus, AATPNC ha been actively representing the common problems of Tai Phake community.

The uniqueness of Tai Phake community lies in the fact that despite their detachment from active politics, they cannot be equated with marginalized groups in terms of maintaining ethno-cultural identity. However, it would be wrong to lebel them as ethnically dominant or economically very sound, but their survival strategies are unique to the current ethnic situation of Assam. They remain outside the equations of power politics, but they are maintaining and promoting their ethnic identity through their strong cultural roots and traditions. Contemporary ethnic and cultural representation of Tai Phake identity creatively draws upon the traditional values and memory of the past. They are trying hard to re-enact a Tai Phake pasts through maintaining their dialect, traditional attires, preserved manuscripts, the celebration of traditional festivals, publications of souvenirs and so on. Their quest for ethnic identity is not marked by political contestation and inter-ethnic conflicts. They have a history of peaceful past. The ethno-political history of Tai Phakes in an ethnically divided region is exceptional, which is marked by collective assertion and mutual co-existence with other ethnic groups. Of course, Tai Phake people also want to maintain their distinct ethnic identity and has been struggling for the survival of their age-old traditions and language. But what makes their identity unique is their attitudes towards mutual co-existence and shared values in an ethnically divided society. It is not about culture and tradition only which entirely defined their identity, but mutual co-existence and mature attitudes towards social reality. The identity narratives of Tai Phakes, thus, exhibits a kind of shared experience buttressed by shared values, harmony and cultural space in the region.

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