

The Tai - Ahom Community in the Era of Modernization: Cultural Changes in Post - Colonial Assam

Jyotipriya Gogoi¹, Kaushik Dutta MA²; Hemeswari Bhuyan³

¹PhD Scholar MSSV Assam, India
Email: jangkijyotipriya@gmail.com
Mob: 9394146150

²UGC NET Qualified
Email: kaushikduttaheckler@gmail.com
Mob: 8638245080

³Professor, PhD
Corresponding Author Email: hemamunukunu@gmail.com
Mob: 9638231994

Abstract: ***Introduction:** The Tai - Ahom community is an ethnic group and integral part of Assamese society. They have a rich historical and cultural heritage and their contributions have played a significant role in shaping the history and culture of the region. Under the leadership of Sukapha, Ahom migrants from Upper Burma crossed the Patkai Range and established a kingdom, known as the Ahom Kingdom. Sukapha was successful in establishing his "land of a dream". The reign of Ahom lasted for 600 years as a sovereign state until it was annexed by the British in 1826. **Objective:** This review work aims to explore the cultural changes experienced by the Tai - Ahom community in post - colonial Assam and observe the impact of modernity on their way of life. **Materials and methods:** Primary data were collected by interviewing randomly selected adult individuals from Ahom community and fieldwork to observe the cultural practices of the subjects. Secondary data sources were review of books, journals, articles on Culture and its changing process of the Tai - Ahom community. **Findings:** The investigator observed the cultural changes experienced by the Tai - Ahom community in post - colonial Assam and the impact of modernity on their way of life in respect of their cultural practices, religious beliefs, language usage, and traditional food habits. While modernity is not inherently a negative thing, when it is applied to the Tai societies without an awareness of its negative effects, much damage is done to the community. **Conclusion:** This Research would encourage people to give the Tai Ahom groups more dignity and power to defend their cultural identities and maintain the balance of their community orientation. But in the Colonial and post - colonial eras, the Tai Ahom community has undergone significant socio - cultural changes, primarily due to the impact of modernity.*

Keywords: Tai - Ahom community, modernity, culture, modernization, post colonial Assam

1. Introduction

The thirteenth century was the turning point in the history of Assam and also the beginning of a new era. Sukapha, the leader of the Tai group, laid the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. Under his leadership, Ahom migrants from upper Burma successfully crossed the Patkai Range and founded a kingdom. During their journey and subsequent settlements, they encountered numerous tribal communities and engaged in conflicts to establish their dominance. The advent of Ahom contributed largely towards the social and political formation of a unique society. The process of assimilation and adoption of people belonging to various tribes and communities took place under the initiative of the Ahom rulers for different purposes. Some historians said that it was a process of "Ahomization". As a result we can see the formation of a composite society over time and gradually, with the help of many policies, Sukapha was successful in establishing his "land of a dream". This was lasted for 600 years as a sovereign state until it was annexed by the British in 1826. But in the Colonial and post - colonial eras, the Tai Ahom community has undergone significant socio - cultural changes, primarily due to the impact of modernity. Modernization refers to a model of a

progressive transition from a "pre modern" or "traditional" to a "modern" society. But at the same time, not all are for progress. There are also create some other issues like the identity issue and also, they have led to the erosion of traditional cultural practices and values.

Objective of the study

To explore the cultural practices of the Tai - Ahom community in post - colonial Assam and how they have been impacted by modernity.

2. Methodology

The information incorporated in this paper is based on primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected by interviewing with randomly selected adult individuals from Ahom community and fieldwork to observe the cultural practices of the subjects. Secondary sources were review of books, journals, articles on Culture and its changing process of the Tai - Ahom community. Culture can be considered as a mirror of society. Culture acts as a repository of traditions and customs that have been passed through generations. Culture is not static but evolves over time. As society undergoes transformations, cultural expressions, and

practices may change to reflect new realities. For instance, advancement in technology, globalization, modernization, and social movements can influence cultural norms and values, resulting in shifts in societal attitudes and behaviors. The Tai - Ahom community has also undergone significant cultural changes, due to the impact of modernity, colonialism, and many more.

3. Findings and Discussion

The Ahom culture in India has sparked a scholarly debate, with two schools of thought emerging. These schools can be broadly categorized as Anti - TAI and Pro - tai schools. The first group may be identified as those who believe in the historical linkage of Tai - Ahom but they also believe in non - identity or lack of original identity among the Tai - Ahoms. Great historian Edward Gait's primary object was to write history of Assam not of the Ahoms, and German scholar Eric Seidenfaden comment that the Ahoms are completely Hinduized. Other historians like S. K. Bhuyan, Maheswar Neog, Saitendranath Sharma, and the latest Assamese scholar Yasmin Saikia belong to this school. The second group of historians is known as the Pro - Tai school, who believe that Ahom's history is separate or different from the history of Assam and India. They believe that the Tai culture and language is distinct from Hindu culture and Assamese language. Proponent of this school were Padmeswar Gogoi, Nagen Hazarika, Swarna Lata Boruah, Romesh Buragohain, etc. (Ghosh)

In the 13th century, the Ahoms left their original inhabitant and organized themselves politically in Assam. Acculturation took place during that period. Many tribes like Naga, Borahi, Kachari, and Moran, were widely assimilated with the ahoms. That's why we can hear some terms like "Borahi - Ahom", "Kachari - Ahom", "Moran - Ahom", "Naga - Bailung" etc. (Gogoi, 2006). This process is commonly termed "Ahomization" by Phukan (1968) and Guha (1987). Hinduization was another reason for cultural changes in the Tai - ahom community. It began under King Sui - dang - pha and gained momentum during the period of Suhungmung. Historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan said about the domination of Hindu culture. To Yasmin Saikia Ahom as a dead subject. On the other hand, Historian Padmeswar Gogoi shows that in his work Tai Ahom Religion and Custom (1976), The Ahom had their own religion and culture. Another work of his, Tai of Northeast India (1996) shows that although most of them adopted Aryan culture and language they have not yet lost their Tai culture and language.

So, to put it in short, it can be inferred that for two hundred years after the Ahoms settled in the Brahmaputra valley, their culture remained mostly unchanged. However, in due course of time with different political and social factors, the Ahom culture started to undergo modifications. This process continued until the final days of the Ahom kingdom.

During the post - colonial era, the Tai Ahom has undergone many socio - cultural changes due to the impact of colonialism. The adoption of new technologies, social structures, and cultural practices altered the traditional ways of life for the Tai Ahom people. During the Colonial period,

the Tai - Ahom community had started tea plantations, and development of infrastructure. In 1826, the British introduced modern education, administration, and communication systems, which had a profound impact on the community. The introduction of the new British administration after annexation had a great impact on this community. This system was very new to them. Tai Ahoms main economic base was agriculture based on barter system. But colonial rule established the system of money as their economy was monetized. The spread of western education led to the emergence of a new class, known as the middle class who made the people aware of their grievances, and they started looking at their society from a different perspective. We can also see that the impact of the British administration was also felt in other activities like food habits, Dress, Customs, sports, language, even after India gained independence in 1947.

Language: The Ahoms are the most popular group in Assam. They speak in Tai language which is part of Tai kadai language. But their language, Tai - Ahom, has diminished to the point of extinction. While very few Tai Ahoms speaks Tai languages in Assam. The influence of the dominant Assamese language, many Tai Ahom people switched to speaking the Assamese language. However, the traditional form of Tai - Ahom is still used by the Ahom priestly class for religious ceremonies and divination. Ahom served as the medium of communication and literary works since the reign of Su - ka - pha, but it gradually declined with the arrival of Sankardeva and his Vaishnavite movement in the 16th century and the Assamese language came into the forefront. During the colonial period, the Ahoms came under the influence of Britshers, which promoted the English language and culture. And this led to the end of the Tai language.

Language choice often depends on practicality and utility. In the case of Tai Ahom, as it became less spoken and marginalized over time, its practicality and utility diminished. The majority of educational, professional, and administrative opportunities in post - colonial Assam revolved around the Assamese language and, later, English. Hence, the Ahom people found it more practical to use these languages for education, employment, and other daily activities, leading to a decline in the use of Tai Ahom.

Language preservation heavily relies on the intergenerational transmission of language. If parents do not pass on their native language to their children, the language faces the risk of extinction. In the case of Tai Ahom, as the language was no longer the mother tongue of the Ahom people, it became less likely to be passed on to subsequent generations. This further contributed to the decline and loss of the language. To sum up, the decline of the Tai Ahom Language in post - colonial Assam can be attributed to language shift, assimilation and integration, practicality and utility considerations, as well as the lack of intergenerational transmission.

Food Habit: Every community has its own food habits. Historically, Tai Ahom has had a unique food culture with a strong emphasis on rice - based dishes and the use of local ingredients. However, in recent years, there has been a

significant change in their food habits. The process started since the colonial period as the Britishers introduced to the cultivation of new crops like potato, tomato, and many more. The British quit the land notably their influence did not come to an end. They also introduced baked food items like bread, biscuits, and cake which led to less emphasis on homemade sweets and “pithas”.

Another one example the use of sea salt gradually became more popular than “khar” because of the import process has become cheaper transportation easier. This has also led to the decrease consumption of traditional food.

Dress: It also affected their dresses. However, with the influence of Western fashion, many Tai - Ahom people now wear Western - style clothing. They have undergone significant changes in their traditional dress patterns in the post - colonial era. Before the arrival of the British, Tai Ahom had a distinct dress style that was primarily based on locally available materials and reflected their socio - cultural beliefs. But with the arrival of the British coupled with westernization and modernization, Tai Ahom community’s dress gradually started to change. The adoption of western clothing became a symbol of modernity and status. Another significant change was the introduction of synthetic materials, which replaced traditional materials like silk and cotton because of their lower cost and availability.

It also has a good impact. With the spread of education in post - colonial Assam, many Tai Ahom people have gained access to education and have entered various professions. This has led to socio - economic mobility and increased opportunities for the community. Tai Ahom community in Assam, basically upper Assam is adapting to the process of modernization and it had aggravated this community. The Tai Ahom community had a rich cultural heritage and traditional ways of life, which have been affected by westernization and modernization to a great extent.

The influence of British colonial rule, Modernization Westernization, cultural interactions, socioeconomic transformations, and political shifts all played a role in shaping the evolving nature of Tai Ahom traditions and practices. These changes resulted in a gradual departure from traditional customs and a shift towards adopting elements of the dominant colonial and modern influences. The post - colonial era marked a transformative phase for the Tai Ahom culture, highlighting the impact of historical and societal factors on the evolution of a community's way of life.

Tai Ahom individuals have a responsibility to preserve and promote their cultural heritage. In the era of modernization, the Tai Ahom community faces the challenge of balancing the preservation of their rich cultural heritage with the opportunities and influences of the modern world. Many Tai Ahom individuals and organizations actively work towards preserving their cultural traditions, raising awareness, and maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity amidst the ongoing cultural shifts.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Tai Ahom community in post colonial Assam underwent significant cultural changes. Modernization, Westernization, Colonialism, and assimilation were the influential factors. However, the Tai Ahom community demonstrates a strong commitment in preserving their cultural heritage through language revitalization, revival of traditional practices, and community engagement. Balancing tradition and modernity, along with collaboration and awareness, are essential for sustaining the unique Tai Ahom culture in the face of evolving societal dynamics.

References

- [1] Barbaruah, H. (1981). Ahomor Din (Assamese). Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- [2] Barua, G. (1972). Ahom Buranji. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board. Baruah, S. L. (1992). Comprehension History of Assam. Guwahati
- [3] Barua B. K. (1951). A cultural history of Assam, Guwahati
- [4] Bhuyan, S. K. (ed.). (1962). Deodhai Asam Buranj. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- [5] Buragohain R. (ed). (1994). The Lost Trails (vol.1). Dhemaji, Assam: Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai.
- [6] Chetia, U. (2013). Ahom Buranji Aru Sanskriti. Ratanpur, Dhemaji: Kiran Prakashan.
- [7] Gait, Edward. (1905). A History of Assam
- [8] Ghosh, L. Ethnicity, Cross - Bor Ghosh, L. (n. d.). Tai - Ahom Historical Linkage: Notion of Shared Culture and Their Significance of Modern - Day Interaction of Northeast India into Chinese & Southeast Asian Panorama. Academia. edu. der Migration vs. Identity & Cultural Matrix study of Tai - Ahoms in North - East India (Academia. edu).
- [9] Ghosh, L. (n. d.). Tai - Ahom Historical Linkage: Notion of Shared Culture and Their Significance of Modern - Day Interaction of Northeast India into Chinese & Southeast Asian Panorama. Academia. edu.
- [10] Gogoi, N. K. (2006). *Continuity and Change Among the Ahom*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- [11] Gogoi, P. (1976). TAI - AHOM RELIGION AND CUSTOM. Gauhati, Assam: Publication Board.
- [12] Gogoi, P. (1996). Tai of Northeast India. Dhemaji, Assam: Chumphra Printers and Publishers.
- [13] Gogoi, P. (1968). The Tai and The Tai Kingdoms. Guwahati, Assam: Gauhati University Press.
- [14] Phukan, G. (2019). Tais of Northwest India and Southeast Asia: A Study of Ethno – Cultural Linkage. Guwahati: DVS Publisher.
- [15] Rajkumar, S (1980). Ithase Soara Chasata Bachar
- [16] Saikia, Y: 2006; Religion, Nostalgia, and Memory: Making an Ancient and Recent Tai - Ahom Identity in Assam and Thailand, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.65, No.1, pp.33 - 60 (Association for Asian Studies).
- [17] Terwiel, B. J. (1980 - 1981). The Tai of Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual (Vols.1 - 2). Gaya, Bihar: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies.