

Evolution of Tai Linguistic Scholarship in Assam: A Critical Review

Dr. Khanikar Maut

Assistant Professor, Barbhag College, Assam, India

Email: [khanikarmaut\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:khanikarmaut[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: Assam serves as a vibrant crossroads for a wide array of ethnic groups, cultural practices, and social structures. Located in Northeast India, the state is globally recognised as an incredibly diverse linguistic landscape. Among its inhabitants are several Tai ethnic communities who have resided in the region for centuries, including the Ahom, Phake, Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton, and Turung. These communities possess rich literary traditions, having produced a vast body of historical and cultural manuscripts in their respective scripts. Linguists classify these tongues under the Sino-Tibetan and Tai-Kadai language families. Regrettably, these languages are currently classified as endangered. This paper provides a concise overview of the documentation and academic study of Assam's endangered Tai languages, focusing on the dictionaries, grammatical analyses, and research projects produced to date.

Keywords: Tai, Ahom, Phake, endangered languages, Khamti, Turung

1. Introduction

The origin of modern linguistic research in Assam is closely tied to Christian missionaries. These pioneers laid the groundwork for language studies across Northeast India, initiating systematic linguistic surveys of various indigenous tribes starting in the early 19th century.

From a historical perspective, the earliest formal recording of the local Tai language dates back to the 18th century, sponsored by the Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha (1780–1795). During his reign, scholars Tangain Mohan and Ramakanta Molaigharia Boruah compiled two foundational Tai Ahom glossaries: Bar Ammra and Lati Ammra. These manuscripts established a foundation for Tai Ahom linguistic studies that continues to this day.

While a substantial volume of grammars, lexicons, and academic papers on Tai Ahom exists, UNESCO still classifies it as an endangered language. The other Tai languages spoken in Assam share this critical status. In total, six distinct Tai languages are spoken in the state: Tai Ahom, Tai Khamti, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung, and Tai Aiton. This study offers a comprehensive and well-documented synthesis of the academic work surrounding this language family.

2. Methodology

This research employs a descriptive research methodology. The framework for this analysis was developed by surveying rare Tai-language texts and conducting extensive archival research across various academic libraries in Assam.

While this study relies primarily on first-hand primary sources, relevant secondary literature has also been utilised to provide broader context.

3. Research Objectives

- Document and summarise the published books, grammatical works, and academic research concerning the Tai language family of Assam.

- Analyse the methodologies scholars use to investigate these languages.
- Assess how these academic and research efforts have contributed to preserving these endangered tongues.
- Evaluate the overall depth and effectiveness of the existing literature on the Tai linguistic family in this region.

Scope of Study

This investigation traces the chronological evolution of Tai linguistic studies in Assam from its early beginnings through the 21st century. The scope is specifically limited to reference grammars, dictionaries, and academic research papers; creative literature has been excluded from this analysis. To facilitate a structured assessment, the reviewed literature is categorised into three core domains: Grammars, Dictionaries, and Academic Research.

Historical Development of Tai Language Studies

The academic study of Tai languages features various historical phases and research approaches. For the purpose of this paper, the reviewed literature is organised chronologically within its specific category, rather than being separated by individual languages.

Grammars

Linguistic documentation of this family began with J.F. Needham's Outline Grammar of the Khamti Language (1898), which stands as the inaugural grammatical work on Assam's Tai languages. This study was compiled by surveying Khamti speakers living near the Sadiya region. Decades later, Ghanakanta Boruah authored the Ahom Primer (1936), published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam, focusing on the Tai Ahom language.

In 1974, Bimalakant Boruah published Tai Bhasa, which explored the structural relationships among the different Tai languages. This was followed by Alfons Weidert's Tai-Khamti Phonology and Vocabulary (1977), which provided the first phonological and vocabulary-focused analysis of the Khamti dialect.

The late 20th century saw a rise in instructional and grammatical resources, including:

Volume 15 Issue 7, July 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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- **Tai Kathopakathan (1988)** by Puspa Gogoi
- **Tai Ahom Primer (1989)** by Priyabar Konwar
- **Tai Bhasar Byakaran (1990)** by Nomalchandra Gogoi (which featured a comparative look at Ahom, Khamti, and Shan)
- **A two-part Tai Ahom Primer (1989 & 1990)** co-authored by Ratneswar Buragohain and Tilu Hatiboruah
- **Tai Bhasar Prathamik Path (1992)** by Aimeyangkheng Gohain, which was later integrated into the language curriculum at Dibrugarh University to introduce students to the structural components of Tai.

To help revitalise these vulnerable languages, several practical learning aids were developed during the 1990s. Notable works include Puspa Gogoi's *Tai Path* (1994), Jimi Pulu's *Khamti Phrase Book* (1997), and Stephen Morey's *Tai Phake Primer* (1997) and *Tai Aiton Primer* (1997). Additionally, Ratneswar Buragohain published *Pung Kham Tai* (1994), a text focusing on the fundamental grammar and morphological elements of the Ahom language. Though primarily pedagogical, these primers have served as essential tools for documenting endangered structures.

This momentum carried into the 21st century with publications designed to meet the growing need for structured grammars, such as:

- **Dauk Nyae Lik Tai (2000)** by Chandra Konwar
- **Kankhom Tai (2000)** by Tilu Hatiboruah
- **Lik Tai Ahom (2001)** by Jonaram Changbon Phukan

These modern texts offered detailed insights into the phonetics and word formation of the languages. Over the last two decades, academic interest from both domestic and international scholars has grown. Additional notable contributions include:

- **An Introductory Primer and Grammar of Ahom (Tai) Language** (Jugendranath Phukan, 2004)
- **Lik Kham Tai** (Bipul Chandra Gogoi & Umesh Gohain, 2008)
- **Ti Bhashar Siksha** (Lathon Mauk, 2008)
- **Tai Bhasha Sikhu Aha** (Biswa Changbon Phukan, 2009)
- **Tai Bhashar Parichai** (Babul Phukan, 2009)
- **Lit Pung Kham Tai** (Babul Phukan, 2010)
- **Tai Barnar Parichai** (Babul Phukan, 2011)
- **Tai Bhashar Sikshar Puthi** (Medani Madhab Mohan, 2011)
- **Tai Primer, Byakaranar Hoite** (Chandra Konwar, 2013)
- **Pap San Lik Tai** (Ai Seng Kyo Buragohain, 2013)
- **Tai Bhashar Hahaj Kathopakathan** (Medani Madhab Mohan, 2014)
- **Ma San Kham Tai** (Dharitree Gogoi Phukan, 2017)
- **Tai Khamti Easy English Translation** (P.S. Bhikkhu)
- **Tai Khamti Primer** (C.K. Monnoi)

While these works have successfully mapped out the core grammatical frameworks of the Tai languages, they are not without limitations. Some publications show heavy reliance on earlier texts rather than purely independent field research. Nevertheless, they represent an invaluable collective resource for the preservation of these languages.

Dictionaries and Lexicons

Assam has a long and distinguished history of lexicography, which actually began with the documentation of the Tai Ahom language in the 18th century. Under the patronage of King Gaurinath Singha, compilers Tangai Mohan and Ramakanta Malaigharia Baruah drafted the *Bar Ammra* and *Lati Ammra* on traditional Sanchi (*Aquilaria agallocha*) bark. These historic manuscripts were later compiled and published as the *Ahom Lexicon* (1964) by Bimalakanta Baruah and Nandanath Daodhai Phukan, under the auspices of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

During the modern era, the American Baptist Missionaries pioneered lexicography in the region. Prior to the publication of older manuscripts, Rai Sahib Gopal Chandra Boruah compiled the comprehensive *Ahom-Assamese-English Dictionary* (1920). From the 1970s onward, a wave of dedicated scholars began compiling new Tai dictionaries, including:

- **Banchob Bandhumdha's Aiton-Thai-English Dictionary (1970)** and *Phake-Thai-English Dictionary* (1987)
- **The Assamese-English-Tai-Dictionary** by Nomal Chandra Gogoi (1987)
- **Tai Ahom Sabdakosh** (1998)
- **Lati Ammra ba Tai Ahom Sabdakosh** by Girin Mohung Boruah

The 21st century brought major milestones in lexicography. Puspa Gogoi's *Tai-Assamese-English Dictionary* (2007) stands out as a massive comparative work compiling vocabulary from Ahom, Khamti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, and Turung, alongside related terms from Shan and Thai. Other essential contemporary publications include:

- **Taiphake Assamiya Sabdakosh** (Biju Moran, 2009)
- **Lik cham to Kham Tai Poi Ka Na** (Phanidhar Chongbung Phukan, 2011)
- **Tai Ahom Paribhasha** (Madini Madhab Mohan, 2013)
- **Comparative Tai Vocabulary** (Bhim Kanta Boruah, 2014)
- **Prathamik Tai Ahom Sabdakosh** (Sonaram Mohan Phukan, 2017)
- **Assamiya Ahom Enragi Assamiya Sabdakosh** (Madini Madhab Mohan, 2017)

While only a portion of these dictionaries strictly adhere to modern scientific lexicographical standards, they collectively serve as a vital defence against vocabulary loss in these communities.

Academic Research

Rigorous linguistic research into the languages of Northeast India began in the early 19th century under Christian missionaries, followed by Sir George Abraham Grierson's monumental *Linguistic Survey of India*. The second and third volumes of Grierson's survey contain dedicated sections on Northeastern languages, with Part 19 of the second volume offering a detailed look at Ahom, Khamti, Khamyang, and Aiton. This pioneering work documented their scripts, tonal patterns, and morphological traits.

A major milestone was reached in 1988 with the publication of Satyandra Narayan Goswami's *Studies in Sino-Tibetan*

Languages, which introduced modern analytical rigour to the study of Phake, Khamti, and Ahom. Over the years, several key texts have advanced the scientific study of these languages, mapping out their phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics:

- **Assamar Bhasa** by Bhim Kanta Boruah (1990)
- **Bhasa Sahityar Bibidh Sinta** by Arpana Konwar (2005)
- **Assamiya aru Assamar Bhasa Upabhasa** by Upen Rabha Hakacham (2009)
- **Assamiya aru Assamar Bhasa** by Biswajit Das & P.C. Basumatary (2010)

The turn of the 21st century also saw a surge in university-level research. The academic lineage of doctoral and master's research in this area includes:

- **Prabin Saikia's pioneering PhD thesis**, Khamti Janagusti aru Bhasa: Eti Addhyayan (1980)
- **Anjana Kakoti's MPhil thesis**, Namphkaehakalar Bhasa Sahitya aru Sanskritit Abhumuki (1981)
- **Ranjita Sharma's study**, Phakiyalhakar Bhasa aru Sanskriti (1988)
- **Numal Chandra Gogoi's PhD thesis**, A Morphological Study on The Tai-Phake Language (1995)
- **Anjali Chutia's doctoral work**, Turung Bhasar Rupatattik Addhyayan (2000) and her comparative study, Turung aru Sinpho Bhasa: Eti Tulanamulak Addhyayan (2009)
- **Stephen Morey's highly regarded doctoral work**, The Tai Language of Assam: A Grammar and Texts (2002)
- **Bolin Handique's dissertation**, Tai Turung Bhasa: Ek Barnanatmak Addhyayan (2002)
- **Biju Moran's descriptive study**, Tai Phake Bhasa: Barnanatmak Addhyayan (2007)
- **Arunima Saikia's cultural-linguistic study**, Margerita Mohkumar Tai Khamyanghakar Samaj-Sanskriti (2007)
- **Rungkarn Duanthi's comparative work**, Tai-Ahom and Standard Thai: A Descriptive Comparative Study (2012)
- **Nabami Gogoi's morphological analysis**, Turung aru Aiton Bhasar Ruptatta (2014)
- **Madhumita Chetia's PhD thesis**, Tai Khamyan Bhasa: Bornanatmak Addhyayan (2014)
- **Bhaskarjit Bora's dissertation**, Tai Aiton Bhasa (2015)

Recently, the field has transitioned from general descriptive morphology to laboratory-based acoustic and phonetic analysis. Key structural and phonetic studies based on controlled fieldwork include:

- **Tai Khamyang Bhasar Dhwanitatta: Sanbohanik Bishlesan** (Darpanjit Konwar, MPhil, 2014)
- **Tai Ahom Bhasar Sabda: Gathonik Bishlesan** (Lakhajit Boragohain, MPhil, 2014)
- **Tai Aiton Bhasar Dhwanitatta: Sanbohanik Bishlesan** (Pankajyoti Bora, MPhil, 2015)
- **Daori aru Tai Turung Bhasar Rupatattwa: Ek Boeparitwamulak Addhyayan** (Aparajita Gogoi, PhD, 2016)
- **A Critical Analysis of the Morphology of the Khamti Language** (Sunil Handique, PhD, 2017)
- **Taishakar Sambandhabasak Sabdawali: Ek Samaj-Bhasaboigyanik Addhyayan** (Junmoni Gogoi, PhD, 2017)

4. Findings and Observations

- **Uneven Academic Focus:** Researchers have dedicated significantly more attention and resources to the Tai Ahom language compared to the other five Tai languages of Assam.
- **Resource Scarcity for Revitalisation:** The existing literature, grammars, and primers are insufficient on their own to ensure the survival of these endangered tongues. Systematic, state-supported policies are required.
- **Lack of Broader Family Context:** Very few studies analyse these local languages within the wider comparative framework of the broader Tai-Kadai language family.
- **Lack of Internal Comparative Studies:** There is a noticeable absence of systematic comparative or contrastive research conducted directly among the six local Tai languages of Assam.

5. Conclusion

Implementing robust and sustained language preservation programs is vital for supporting these minority speech communities. Achieving this requires extensive linguistic field research, alongside the development of modern, accessible learning curricula and instructional materials. Despite the challenges highlighted in this review, the Tai languages of Assam offer a rich and fertile ground for future linguistic scholarship.

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