

# ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND ITS VITALITY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TAI-AHOM

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In simple words an endangered language is a language that is almost on the verge of extinction or is so rarely used that it could be hardly heard. Such languages may be either falling out of use or being replaced by some another language that is perhaps more convenient.*

*One of the most amazing facts about languages is that there are more than 6000 languages spoken in the world. However, at the same time, it is disappointing to note that languages are dying every day. It is estimated that*

*Our country is not an exception to this scenario as according to a recent survey carried out by a Vadodara based research centre, India has lost around 20 per cent of its languages in the past five decades. Nearly 400 of India's 850 odd languages face the threat of extinction.*

*Amongst the hundreds of endangered languages, my paper proposes to address are the main issues of language contact and language shift with regard to the Tai Ahom language and the causes for its current status and the However, the Tai language did not totally or suddenly die out, it continued to be used until the 19th century but only in limited areas. The Ahom priests or "sang bun" were one keeping the Tai-Ahom language alive. But once because these priests lost their influence in the royal courts, the Tai language was gradually neglected and was no longer used in society. And then the Ahoms leaned more towards Hinduism and the Assamese language.*

**Key Words:** Ahom, Assamese Language, Endangered Language, Language, Tai-Ahom Language.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Language is a constituent element of civilization. In fact, language is the valuable possession which has elevated man from the level of a savage to the plane of the 'Lord of Creation'. It raised man from a savage state to the plane which he was capable of reaching. Man could not become man if there were no languages. An essential point in which man differs from animals is that man alone is the sole possessor of language, no doubt animals also exhibit certain degree of power of communication but that is not only inferior in degree to human language, but also radically diverse in kind from it. Language is one of the most marked, conspicuous, as well as fundamentally characteristic of the faculties of man. The importance of language for man and society can never minimize. It has led man from mere clumsy animal to a human being in the real sense of the word. It has

simplified the conveyance of ideas, smoothed social contacts, conserved our culture and transmitted its posterity.

However according to recent survey carried out by a Vadodara based research centre, India has lost around 20 per cent of its languages in the past five decades. And this just shows how much some indigenous languages have suffered because of urbanization. The present situation for some indigenous languages in the northeast is not that comforting as well. Nearly 400 of India's 850 odd languages face the threat of extinction because of an erosion of traditional jobs that has been fuelling migration to cities.

One of the most amazing facts about languages is that there are more than 6000 languages spoken in the world. However, at the same time, it is disappointing to note that languages are dying every day. It is estimated that about one half of these 6000 languages may be extinct by the end of this century. It is unfortunate to see languages disappearing every moment. It is remarkable that the death of languages is most noticeable in parts of the world where large numbers of languages are concentrated in a few small geographical regions. India is a perfect example of multilinguistic communities.

## II. OBJECTIVE

amongst the hundreds of endangered languages, what my paper proposes to address are the main issues of language contact and language shift with regard to the *Tai Ahom* language and its endangerment. The paper will focus on the following points-

- (a) A brief historical background of the language.
- (b) Factors influencing its shift and gradual extinction which will be discussed in the context of a sociolinguistic description of the language.
- (c) The issue of cultural assimilation in the context of language contact and borrowings, which will be discussed with regard to the strong influence of Assamese on Tai Ahom and vice versa.

What I have seen is that there has been very little research on what happens when a language begins to die. There can several reasons attributed to the language death. The process of language death depends on how long there has been contact between the users of the language and their more powerful neighbors. In the case of Tai Ahom, it was the development of Assamese language that resulted in the disappearance of the Ahom language from its daily usage in the royal court as well as the common household to become a language merely used by a few hundreds of Ahom people from its priestly community. However, there is still hope of a revival of the Tai Ahom language due to its historical importance.

When an endangered language is spoken in a culture whose historical significance is widely appreciated, it most possibly provokes widespread concern. The revival of the Ahom language is a good example of it. Being the

language of the royal court of Assam during the Ahom reign, the Tai Ahom language was widely used as the written medium of all historical texts and manuscripts of ancient Assam. Therefore, revival of the language is more important as well as relevant for historians in order to explore the golden era of the Ahom kings.

My topic for today that is based on the linguistic analysis conducted in field work in the Sivasagar district of Assam, which is considered to be the epicenter of Tai Ahom culture.

The Ahoms ruled Assam for a glorious 600 long years (1228 AD-1826 AD) But sadly the use of historic Tai Ahom language is now limited only to the religious ceremonies and prayer songs still performed by the Ahom priestly class. From 16th century onwards, the development of Assamese language started dominating the Ahom court as well as the common household of Assamese people. This has significantly resulted in the issues of language shift and language change. Again one more possible factor was when people migrated out of their language zones in search of livelihood, they travelled to different places and picked up the local language there and thus their children got delinked from their parents' language.

The Tai people are scattered widely over a large area. This area has its northern extreme in southeastern China, its southern in the Malaysian peninsula, and reaches from Hainan Island in the east to Assam State and Arunachal in India, in the west . and the Tai Ahom language belongs to the Tai family of languages, which are largely spoken in South-east Asia. Its numerous speakers are spread in a considerably vast area - extending from Assam to Kwangsi and Kwangtung, to the island of Hainan, from Laos and Thailand to the borders of Tibet, including the Yun-nan province of China. The significance of the Tai Ahom language lies mainly in the fact that the history of Assam's glorious past is recorded in this language.

The word 'Tai' is a common name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. The Tai people are now mainly concentrated in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Even though the fertile valley of China is the original habitat of the Tai people, the Chinese culture has the least influence on the Tai language and culture. When the kings of different clans and dynasties started establishing their own kingdoms in China, migration of the Tai people in search of new regions began and by 5th-6th century AD, they settled in Yun-nan (of Southern China) along with their own language, culture and system of administration. By the time, the Tai people were divided into several other groups and subgroups, and scattered in Southeast Asia. One of those groups, under the leadership of *Su-ka-pha*, crossed the Patkai hills in Eastern India, entered Assam and after successfully overpowering the local aborigines, established a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. This group was later known as the Tai Ahom people, as being called by the locals. They ruled Assam for about six hundred years (1228AD-1826AD). Indeed, the name 'Assam' was called after the Ahoms. According the legends and oral folk literature there was the kingdom of Tai, called "**Mung-Mao**" or "**Mung-Mao-Lung**" in Yun-Nan, province of China. There were four princes of Mung-Mao where *Chao Sukapha* was the eldest, These four princes wanted to expand their kingdom and desired to have a kingdom of their own. They set out on a journey taking along with them a group of nobles, soldiers and a large group of people. The eldest prince *Sukapha* proceeded westwards, For the prince Suakapha, the eldest prince, who crossed the **Patkai** ranges and came down to **Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham**, the golden land (the magnificent kingdom of (Assam) in 1228 A.D. (13th century) and

established a great Tai Kingdom in Assam. From this narrative, the kingdom established by king *Sukapha* is supposed to be the first kingdom of the Tai-Ahom in Assam . In 1251 A.D. the Tai-Ahoms established their first capital at “**Che-Rai-Doi**”(che=city, rai=shine, doi=hill), *the shining city on the hill*, which is now in Sibsagar district of Assam state.

Regarding the origin of the Tai people there are a number of theories popular in the form of legends and folk tales. It is believed that at first the Tai people settled in numerous small upland and river valleys in the portion of Yunnan in southwestern China, the area of the Shan state of Myanmar, Laos, and northern part of Thailand. Their movement was along the major rivers and their tributaries, of Maekhong into Thailand and Laos, Salwin and Irawadi into Myanmar and the Black and Red rivers into Vietnam. The other theory states that original homeland of the Tai people was Southwestern China and from that area, they moved into the upper part of Myanmar.

Tai-Ahom is a least known and almost an extinct language as it is no more a spoken language and in fact found nowhere except in manuscript form called *Buranji*. This is an endangered language from the Tai-Kadai family which was once spoken in Assam but in the verge of total extinction now due to the advent and strong influence of Assamese language. Although some dialects of Tai have their own scripts yet, they are mostly mutually intelligible. All the Tai scripts are written in the same way i.e., horizontally from left to right; it is monosyllabic and have distinctive tones. The script used for Tai is phonetic, systematic and consistent with regard to letters and their pronunciations, the vowels, consonants have distinct pronunciation. When Tai-Ahoms first came to Brahmaputra valley they brought with them their own language and manuscripts. Tai-Ahom has their own language, script, literature, culture, religion and the chronicle, which is called **Buranji** . According to J.N. Phukan (2004), the Tai Mao had adopted their script probably from the Mons before the 13th century.

As early as the 17th century A.D. the Ahom began to adopt Hinduism. Though the Ahom were converted, they refused to give up all their cultural heritages and further more they still believe in their own religion.

From 16th century onwards, the development of Assamese language started dominating the Ahom court as well as the common household of Assamese people. This has significantly resulted in the issues of language shift and language change. Besides, there has been noticed remarkable features of language contact and borrowings exchanged between Tai Ahom and Assamese.

However, the Tai language did not totally or suddenly die out, it continued to be used until the 19th century but only in limited areas. The Ahom priests or “**sang bun**” were one keeping the Tai-Ahom language alive .But once because these priests lost their influence in the royal courts, the Tai language was gradually neglected and was no longer used in society. And then the Ahoms leaned more towards Hinduism and the Assamese language. Focusing more particularly on the issues of language shift and language change, the Tai Ahom language is on the verge of extinction now, the principle reason of its disappearance being the advent and strong influence of Assamese language.

What we can say is that now, Tai Ahom is an endangered language which once flourished during the reign of the Ahom Dynasty in the Brahmaputra Valley and now is on the verge of extinction with its few hundred

speakers left. Ironically, even these speakers do not use the language in their daily life but only in the context of religious functions and rituals celebrated occasionally by the Ahom community most of whom belong to the priestly classes. And these few being scattered over in several districts in the Upper Assam area including the districts of Sivasagar, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur.

The Ahoms brought along the Tai language to Assam with them and used it as the spoken language here. The language has its own writing system, and it is rich in the historical account of ancient Assam, which forms the grandeur of Assamese literature. The Ahoms are the most populous among all Tai groups of Assam. But their linguistic practice has declined to the extent of its extinction, although other Tai languages in Assam are still in use. Tai Ahom is no longer the mother tongue of the Ahoms who speak the Assamese language now. The primary cause for its extinction is the strong influence of the Assamese language.

*The medium of communication and of literary works was Ahom since the reign of Su-ka-pha. From the time of the fourth Ahom king, the language started fading away slowly. By the time of the fifth Ahom king, Assamese language came into being – functioning both as an official language and a layman's common spoken form. By the advent of Shankardev3 (16<sup>th</sup> century AD) and his Vaisnavite movement, Assamese came in the forefront while Tai Ahom took a backseat forever.*

The Ahoms ruled Assam, but they never tried to impose their language on the local people. Instead, they themselves accepted the Assamese language and tried their best for the improvement of it. The Ahom language continued among the Ahoms till 15th century AD. However, the language continued to prevail even after the sunset of the Ahom supremacy concerning history writing and other religious affairs. In today's date the language in its written form is found only in manuscripts limited to chronicles only. These manuscripts are available with some priests as their valuable heritage. It was also used on some copper plates and coins but the use of Ahom as spoken language gradually become obsolete in Assam and perhaps it became more convenient to use the local language, Assamese as the medium of daily communication

Gradually, the Ahoms became bilinguals with the constant influence of the local languages, mainly the Assamese language. There are several reasons that can be attributed to the bilingual status of the Ahoms. The Ahoms knew it very well that by depending on the few limited people brought along with them, they could not think of a big empire. Hence, the Ahom administrators accomplished with perfect administrative diplomacy gave the local people their stately esteem and grade by employing them in different regal affairs. The influence was far-sighted; the Ahom king won the hearts of the local people by showing high esteem to the local language with its practice in royal interactions. The Assamese language started spreading its influence gradually. 17th century AD onwards, the Ahoms started writing their history in Assamese as well as in their own Ahom language. And for that reason, the Ahoms without doubt began to study Assamese deeply in order to accumulate knowledge of the language. And because of such reasons, finally the Assamese language rooted firmly in place of the Ahom language.

Apart from this there were two more reasons for the disappearance of the Ahom language--

According to historical accounts, the founding Ahom king *Su-ka-pha* brought along a very few Tai women with him. That is why several Ahoms wedded many local girls. Their children hardly knew the language or not at all. Naturally, the influence of the Ahom language began declining among the next generation.

Secondly, the complexity of the Ahom language. It is tonal and monosyllabic in nature. Besides, the phonetic system of the language is difficult. Hence, the Ahoms became interested in a comparatively simple and toneless Assamese language. And with time, the Ahom language is now on the verge of extinction.

However apart from the numerous reasons what I feel is the Hinduization of the Ahoms is one of the principal reasons behind their inclination towards the Assamese language. The process of Hinduization started during the reign of the Ahom king *Rudra Singha* (beginning of the 17th century AD).

During this period, the Assamese language also managed to get an equal status to that of Tai Ahom in the royal court. It consequently resulted in the increasing importance of Assamese language and thus ruling out Tai Ahom language. Such was the influence of the Hinduization process that from now onwards the Ahom rulers started acquiring Hindu names (e.g., *Rudra Singha*, *Rajeshwar Singha* etc.) besides their Tai Ahom names. During the reign of Ahom king, Rudra Singh (1696-1714) Hinduism became the dominant religion. At that time the Ahom who did not accept Hinduism were looked upon as a degraded class. The influence of the **Deodhais** (Assamese word) the priests of the old Ahom religion, revived for a time about 1775. Similarly, Assamese, as a language, began to oust Ahom about the beginning of the eighteenth century and from about 1720 it was no longer necessary for Hindu office-seekers to learn the latter language.

The Ahoms accepted the Assamese language and tried their best for the enhancement of it. This further helped Assamese language root firmly. Gradually, the influence of the Tai Ahom language began declining. The succeeding generations embraced Assamese language, thus paving the way for the decaying status of Tai Ahom, to the extent that the Tai Ahom language became inconceivable to the young people. Now the language is accessible only to a few hundreds of them. Ever since the Tai Ahoms established themselves in Assam, they came in contact with the multifarious races with their diverse languages, for instance, Kachari, Chutiya, Moran, Miri, Lalung, and so on. The first Ahom king *Su-ka-pha* successfully assimilated all these local aborigines together in order to build his vast kingdom. But interestingly, the Ahoms did not impose their language on these people. Instead, they acknowledged the local language and culture with great fervor. The most remarkable outcome of this linguistic and cultural assimilation is the development of the Assamese language. The Ahoms too, like other locals, gave in to the effort of the growth and progress of the Assamese language, by granting an equally significant status to it as that of the Tai Ahom

language in the royal court. It efficiently paved the way for the strong influence of Assamese, resulting in the gradual disappearance of the Tai Ahom language.

The historical records that show changes in the names of the Ahom kings provide further information about the evolution of the Ahom language. It is clear trace of the change of the Ahom speaking language into Assamese language by observing the change of their inscriptions. Initially the inscriptions of Ahom were in Ahom language. Later they appear in a bigot form, and finally in Assamese or Sanskrit. After adopting Hinduism by

the king, the official language which was used in the Ahom court at first continued to be Ahom. The use of Ahom language was gradually supplanted by Assamese and slowly the Ahom language was known to only a few priest.

However the Tai-Ahom became bilinguals in due course and not just so easily, when they adopted Assamese for day to day discourse. At first stage perhaps the sentence structure of Ahom language was simple. In the second stage, a definite grammar was to be seen and sentence pattern was seen being changed. This change may have happened due to the contact of Assamese language and some sentences of Assamese form that were seen in this stage. The third stage, around the middle of eighteenth century to the last part of Ahom rule in the first period of nineteenth century, the use of Assamese words and sentences have been seen widely in historical literature, hymns, medicinal treatise, even in the procedures of worship.

The Ahoms ruled Assam for six hundred years, gave Assamese the equal status of the Tai Ahom language and wrote their history in both languages. Therefore, it is quite natural that Tai Ahom words and expressions found their way into Assamese prose to the extent that the enormous vocabulary of current Assamese language is abundant with numerous Tai Ahom words .

Hence it could be said that in case of Ahom people, the change in their language was not due to only the process of language contact but there had been other factors, namely the political and social factors. These factors were due to the rulers who came from outside with different culture and language. The best way to govern the local people peacefully was learning their language and customs so that the subject population becomes friendlier. In the early period of Ahom rule in this area, the purpose of using Assamese

language by the Ahoms was to make friends with the local people. It was however,

necessary to make the local inhabitants feel like that the rulers were not the others but they were one with them.

The Ahoms assimilated with the existing culture of the local people in many aspects. The conqueror accepted the culture, religion and language of the conquered people. The Tai language, the Ahom religion, rituals, dress, food habits and socio-cultural institutions gradually passed into oblivion. The Hindu religion, culture, life style and Assamese language were imbibed replacing the ones of original Tai.

During the long period of their rule, the Ahoms used different terms for places, rivers, hills and lakes in their own language. The surnames of Ahom people are also derived from the Tai Ahom words. During the time of the Ahom kings, these surnames were assigned to the people with the same designation in the order of different ranks in the Ahom administrative system. Such titles were followed by a particular clan through generations, which finally led to the records of different genealogical documentations (*bonkhawali* in Assamese language) by these clans and even though most of the Tai Ahom words, in the course of time and due to the Assamese influence, got replaced by Assamese words. But the etymological sources remained same. The greatest contribution of the Ahom to the culture of the Assamese was the compiling of chronicles, which were first written in the Ahom language and after that in both Ahom and Assamese. All of the important political events were recorded in the chronicles of Buranjis.

In fact it is not only Tai Ahom but many languages in different parts of the world are disappearing. In the UNESCO list, the category of 'definitely endangered' languages considers only those that are no longer learnt by

children at homes. There is, thus, an urgent need for creating awareness about these languages. Infact if we do not pay heed to their warning these languages are soon going to be extinct and the region might lose its rich cultural heritage and diversity in the long run. What we have seen is that, the languages that are threatened with extinction are those that are not mediums of instructions and the knowledge of which does not qualify for any livelihood because they are not taught or researched .Henceforth the Union Government of India has initiated a Scheme known as “**Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India**” as an attempt to protect and preserve the so called endangered languages in our country. Again ten central Universities in our country under the UGC scheme have opened centres specially focusing studies and protection of these language. As far as the developments are concerned, the process of the revival of Tai Ahom is already on its way. The prestigious universities of Assam, especially *Dibrugarh University*, have come forward with diploma courses in the endangered language keeping in view the learning of this old language so as to uncover the important but unknown historical facts of Assam, and also in a view to revive the once dominant language. There are already many publications on the spelling and grammar manuals and dictionaries of the language. Besides, some learning institutes sponsored by the government of Assam are already on the run with immense response from people. Various seminars and conferences are being held in regard to the research of the language. The old historical manuals and other books originally written in Tai Ahom are being encouraged to be translated into the state official language (Assamese) as well as in English and other languages in order to help readers get a reflective insight into the different facets of the Tai Ahom language.

It is evident that the role of Assamese language is crucial in the endangerment of Tai Ahom. While Assamese gradually replaced Tai Ahom both in the royal court as well as in common Assamese households, another significant factor of observation is the issue of language contact exchanged between Assamese and Tai Ahom. Even though Tai Ahom does not exist today in spoken form, there still has been its presence intact at least to some extent in the form of borrowing words found in Assamese language. In other words, the vocabulary of Assamese language has a significant contribution from the Tai Ahom. For instance, a large number of Ahom words can be found in Assamese language including different terms for places, rivers, hills and lakes. With regard to the present day scenario, the most important point in focus is that of language revival plans made by the government of Assam. There has been various language training programmes being taken up by the academic institutions of the state in their sincere attempts to revive the ancient language. Recently, a Tai institute has been established in the Sivasagar district, named as ‘*The Institute of Tai Studies and Research*’.

### III. CONCLUSION

It not only teaches the Ahom language, but also publishes academic journals, and preserves old Ahom manuscripts in its well-organized library. Today, there is a movement among Tai-Ahom people for reviving the old Ahom language. They are now seriously learning about their own history and language for the purpose of maintaining their identity.

Some of them are trying to use Tai-Ahom language in their day-to-day communication as a spoken form. In general, it is a responsible step initiated by the government to revive the old language. On a personal front, being a member from the Ahom community, it is a very special feeling to see the endangered language revive slowly but steadily. Preserving an endangered language is to preserve a culture as a language represents the cultural identity of an individual, or a community. Language loss is equivalent to knowledge loss, which is irretrievable. Therefore, any sincere attempt to preserve our endangered language(s) is our fundamental responsibility as well as duty towards developing integrity of our linguistic community.

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