

Understanding Lifestyle, Health and Leisure in Assam

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This is an empirical study related to Lifestyle, Leisure and Health issues in Assam, with a special reference to the Tai Phake tribe. Leisure is a cultural concept and a structural aspect of Tai Phake society. The Tai Phakes started residing in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of Assam since 1830 and 1850 respectively, on the banks of river Buridihing. Altogether there are nine villages of Tai Phakes, two in Dibrugarh and seven in Tinsukia District. Overall population of Tai Phake is around 2000.

[Key Words: Lifestyle, Health, Leisure and Social structure]

I

Tumin (1992: 99) writes that ‘Lifestyles refer to those patterns of conduct over which people have options or choices, even if at the same level of resources. These include modes of dressing, eating, using leisure time, decorating the home, spending vacations, and joining groups.’

Rao (2005: 305) mentioned that “Life-styles” reflect the specialty in preferences, tastes and values of a class.’

Tumin further made a distinction between life chances, institutional patterns and ideologies, beliefs and attitudes. He says ‘By life chances we refer to such things as the chance to survive the first year of life; to stay healthy, both physically and mentally; to get a good education; to find a proper occupation; to live a normal span of years. These are, in general, the occurrences and experiences in life, the favourable versions of which we enjoy if we are fortunate and the undesirable versions of which we suffer if unfortunate.’ On the other hand Tumin writes ‘Institutional patterns are the ways in which people perform their major institutional roles: how they work, relate as spouses, raise their children, and participate in political and religious affairs.’ Similarly Tumin mentioned that ‘Ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes refer to both general and specific ideas about such things as whether the society is fair, whether people can be trusted, whether welfare benefits are justified, and whether politics is worth participating in.’

Another issue of interest in this paper is health. Now scholars are giving attention to the relation between health and lifestyle. Exercise, slimming and controlled eating and so on are practiced to follow a healthy lifestyle. Hunt and

Lightly (2004: 97) write that 'Health care today seems to have reached an important crossroads. At the time when orthodox medical services in western societies have expanded and medical science has advanced in many areas, the number of healing methods, practitioners and people interested in what is frequently referred to as 'alternative medicine' has continued to grow. Indeed, the expansion of such 'alternatives' has been so great that a whole commercial industry has emerged around them. Increasingly, the populations of advanced industrial societies appear to be becoming health 'consumers', who want more and more information and new choices in health care. Moreover, it seems that many people are increasingly open to the idea of balancing the use of orthodox medicine with choices in complementary medicine; in short, taking resources from what both have to offer.'

Borah (2007: 39) states that 'Health is the primary requisite of individual and social development. Improvement in health status of the population has been one of the major thrust areas in social development programmes of the country. Health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely absence of disease and infirmity...'

The agricultural society of the Tai Phakes of Assam has a large portion of leisure time than modern societies, based on the seasonal nature of agricultural work. Kraus (1971: 266) has defined Leisure, Recreation and Play in the following manner:

'Leisure' is that portion of an individual's time which is not devoted to work or work-connected responsibilities or to other forms of maintenance activity and which therefore may be regarded as discretionary or unobligated time.

'Recreation' consists of activities or experiences carried on within leisure, usually chosen voluntarily by the participant, either because of the satisfaction or pleasure, he gains from them or because he perceives certain personal or social values to be derived from them. Like leisure, recreation does not have work connotations. When it is carried on as part of organized Community or voluntary agency programs, it is designed to meet constructive and socially acceptable goals of the individual participant, the group, and the society at large.

'Play' customarily is also regarded as an activity carried on within leisure for purposes of pleasure and self-expression. It tends to be active and has to be carried on in a spirit of competition, exploration, or make-believe. Customarily, play is regarded as a child's activity, although an adult may also engage in play and under some circumstances may find play in his work.

Modi (2012:387) has put four theoretical perspectives in regard to the development of leisure which are i) Metaphysical, ii) Cultural, iii) Socio-psychological and iv) Sociological.

The metaphysical perspective is focus On contemplative and esoteric nature of leisure. Plato, Aristotle and Pieper advocated this particular view. Durkheim emphasizes the religious dimension which in the cultural concept of

leisure. On the other hand Evans-Pritchard, Brightbill and Meyer, Bohannan, Mead, Huges, Riesman and Linder draws attention to the existence of radical discrepancies in the conception of time among different cultures.

Modi (2012:388) writes ‘... Finally, from a sociological point of view, leisure is a structural aspect of any society and its nature is determined largely by the structure and nature of that society, as I believe. Social structure influences the nature and form of leisure and its activities. In a given society, at a particular time, it allows, dictates, or is conducive to a particular mode of leisure. Not only does it determine the form and nature of leisure, but also the extent and limit of participation. Who participates in what, with whom, when, where, and to what extent is determined by the structure of a society according to its nature and organization.

So far we have dealt with the major keywords outlined in this paper. The main objectives of this work is to –

- 1) Trace the origin of Tai Phakes of Assam.
- 2) Depict the social structure of the Tai Phakes of Assam and its changes
- 3) Highlight the Lifestyles, Health Status and Leisure activities of Tai Phakes of Assam.

II

The ‘Tai’ represent a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. India is a home of more than two million people of Tai origin. In Assam they consist of six groups namely, Ahom, Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton, Phake and Turung. The Tai Ahom race entered Assam early in the thirteenth century. Ahoms were the first group who entered Assam and ruled for about six hundred years (A.D. 1228-1826). Tai community have spread into four major areas of East Asia, namely, Burma, Thailand (Siam), French Indo-China and Yun-nan which were locally known respectively as the Shan, Siamese, Lao and Pai.

At present, the Tai-Phake is a small community of 2000 people and lives in nine villages of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam. In Dibrugarh district there are two villages which are Nam-Phake and Tipam Phake which is situated 60 kms in South-East direction and 65 kms from Dibrugarh Town respectively. Nam-Phake village is actually 5 km away from Naharkatia and Tipam Phake village is 3 km away from Joypur in the eastern side. Both of these villages are situated on the bank of river Buridihing of Naharkatia area of Dibrugarh district of Assam.

Other seven villages of Tai Phakes of Assam are located in Tinsukia district. These are Bor Phake, Man Mou, Man long or long Phake, Ningam Phake or Nigam, Nonglai, Phaneng and Mounlong. Moreover a few Phake families are settled in the Namsai (Lohit District) and Lalung (Bordumsa, Changlang district) areas in Arunachal Pradesh. As for instance wagun and Lung kung villages are there in Arunachal Pradesh.

In this study we will only take Nam Phake and Tipam Phake villages as the sample village of Dibrugarh district as being the two largest populated villages of the Tai Phakes. The study is based mainly on the data collected both

from the primary and secondary sources. The primary data are gathered through survey, interview method and observation. The secondary data were based on books, journals, official documents, magazines, newspapers and other published materials.

The respondents of this study were the villagers specially the head of the household (in case not available, then any other number is taken), the monks, senior citizens of the surrounding locality and the village headman. A total of 85 respondents were interviewed with purposive sampling method. We also tried to give representations of different strata of the villagers while using purposive sampling method. Thus the category wise distributions of the respondents were as follows:

Table 1.1 Category wise selection of respondents

Sr. No.	Respondents	Numbers
1	Headman	2 nos. (one from each village)
2	Senior citizens	13 Nos.
3	Villages	60 Nos. (30 from each village)
4	Monks	10 nos.
Total		85 nos. of respondents

III

Both the sample villages of Tai Phakes, Nam Phake and Tipam Phake are built on the bank of the river Buridihing and are surrounded by paddy fields, other non Phake villages and jungles. Both the villages are situated 3 kms away from either side of the river. The cremation ground is located at the far end of the village and is surrounded by trees. They speak the Tai language (which is another Thai branch of Thai-China group of Tibbeto-Chinese language) among themselves and with the Assamese they speak Assamese. Apart from that, with the contact of Hindi speaking, Bengali and Tea Garden community they are learning these languages as well. The monks from the villages and few elders have sound knowledge of Pali language. Pali language is actually taught in the Buddhist monastery of the villages.

The economy of the Tai – Phakes are primarily agricultural. Out of the sixty respondents of villagers' category, 47 numbers (78.33%) of them were mainly farmers and 13 numbers (21.66%) of them are engaged in ONGC, Oil India Ltd., and other offices of the state Government as Doctor, Nurse, Pharmacist, Engineer / Jr. Engineer, Police personnel, Forest employees, Bank Employees, Teachers, contractor, daily labourer and so on. In this there are four female service personnel.. 55 numbers (91.66%) of the respondents of villagers category informed that they have monthly income between Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000, whereas 2 numbers (3.33%) of the respondents of villages category have monthly income level between Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 30,000 and 3 numbers (5%) of the respondents of villagers category opined that they have monthly income between Rs.15,000 to Rs.20,000. They have a self-sufficient economy.

It is found that a new trend is emerging in case of their family structure, as Tai Phake families are lineal joint families in Nature. But 17 numbers (28.33%) of the respondents of villagers' category stays in nuclear families and rest 43 numbers (71.66%) stays in lineal joint families with parents, married son and unmarried sons and daughters and grandparents. Though there are nuclear families now, but they maintain a cordial relationship even after separation. The average family is found as consisting 6 to 7 members. Their houses are of platform type and made of indigenous material, such as, wood, bamboo, cane and tokou leaves. Houses are of rectangular shape and known as Changghars or 'stilt house', rested on wooden poles (now even concrete beams). They are constructed in such a way that there is sufficient land for vegetable cultivation and flower gardens. The floor of the platform house is made up of bamboo. The majority of the respondents of villagers' category (58.33%) of the Tai Phakes are still living in Kutcha house, though 41.66% are having semi pucca houses. It was observed that except 5-6 houses which are Assam type in structure, rest of the houses in the two villages are traditional in type. 3 numbers (3.52%) of the senior citizens of the surrounding areas of the two villages informed us that about 4-5 families have come out of their respective villages and build Assam type Pucca houses which are more durable in nature.

In the study only three numbers (5%) of respondents of the villagers category, one from Namphake and two from Tipam Phake gone for marriage with non phakes. All the respondents of the study informed that the age for boys and girls for marriage is increased by at least 5-7 years. Earlier the age of marriage of boys was 20-25 years and for girls it was 16-20 years. Widow Remarriage is acceptable and divorce is not a common phenomenon among Tai Phakes. Extra marital relations are not tolerated by the Phake society. There is no instance of child marriage.

It was found in the study that 11 numbers (18.33%) of the respondents of villagers' category were illiterate, while 35 numbers (58.33%) were matriculate, 9 numbers (15%) were higher secondary passed and rest 5 numbers (8.33%) were graduates. Out of the total 49 literate persons of the sample villages, 12 numbers (20%) of them were females. The main reason for the high rate of literacy is because of close proximity of educational institutes like LP schools, ME schools, high schools, higher secondary schools and colleges. Also due to their sound economy they can afford their educational carrier. Other respondents of the study, the headmen, the senior citizens and the monks also opined that they have a high literacy rate and also reflects about the services of the monasteries of the respective villages in their regards.

The villagers of Tai Phake community follow Hinayana (Therawada) sect of Buddhism. There are monasteries in each village. The villagers took care of those monasteries. The villagers provide food and clothes to the monks and they keep the monastery clean and during the time of festivals they decorate the monasteries. It was reported by the village headmen of Namphake and Tipam Phake that police have never entered in their villages for any crime as

such. All the respondents of senior citizens category of the surrounding villages opined that Tai Phakes are peace loving community and there is very less conflict and crime records in the two villages of the sample.

IV

There are relationships between Leisure activities, life style and health status of any community. We will focus on the living condition, life style and health status of Tai Phake families of the Nam phake and Tipam Phake village in brief.

The geographical location of Nam Phake village is on the bank of river Buridihing surrounded by paddy fields, foothills and jungles and the location of Tipam Phake village is also in the bank of river Buridihing surrounded by paddy fields, jungles, other villages and Tipam mountain. It has a unique natural bio-diversity which provides the basic essentialities to the people of the villages, namely food, shelter, fuel, medicine and household commodities, dress and other items. The roads are well connected to both the villages.

The Phake people take rice as their main food. Steamed rice, leafy vegetables, edible roots, mushrooms, bamboo and cane shoots, fish, meat and eggs are favourite items. They prefer boiled vegetables with indigenous spices which are collected from the forest. Dry fish, dry meat and sour fish items are prepared in their different socio-religious occasions. They take fruits like banana, guava, mango, Jack fruits, pineapple, black berry and other seasonal fruits. Tea is a popular beverage among the Phakes and elderly people prefer black tea without sugar. Milk finds a place in the daily menu of the Phakes. While asking the respondents about the intake of intoxic substances like bidis, cigarettes, opium, Drugs, alcohol and other tobacco products, only 17 numbers (28.33%) of the men folk and elderly women who are the respondents of the villagers category smoke bidis and cigarettes and uses other tobacco items and occasionally they take alcohol and beer, rest 43 (71.66%) of the respondents of the villagers category do not consume such items. In their society young people are not encouraged to take such intoxicants.

In their agricultural practices they use cowdung as manure for their fields and fertilizers and pesticides are rarely used. Only 25 numbers (29.41%) of the total respondents confirmed that fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid seeds etc. are being used in their fields recently. Sugar occasionally used and wheat products are not used by the Phakes.

14 numbers (23.33%) of the respondents of the villagers category follow the either principles and Buddhism (asta sheel) which are (1) right understanding (belief), (2) right thought(3) right action-abstaining from sexual relation with other's wife, (4) right speech, (5) right means of lively hood (6) right exertion (7) right remembrance and (8) right Meditation and concentration (mindfulness). The ordinary villagers follow five principles of Buddhism (pancha sheel). Sraman and Vikshoo follow the ten principles (Dasa sheel) with utmost care which are non-violence, non-stealing, not having sexual relation with other's wife, not telling lies, not taking any intoxicated liquors, not taking

the night meals, non-indulgence in scented flowers or garlands or colorful dress or cozy beds, non-attendances in any theatrical performances, non-interest in gold or silver ornaments. All the 10 numbers of monks in the monasteries of Nam Phake and Tipam Phake confirmed that they follow these ten principles. Rest 46 numbers (76.66%) follow the Pancha sheel who were the respondents of villagers' category. The five principles of Buddhism (Pancha sheel) are – 1) Not to kill, 2) not to steal 3) not to be impure 4) not to be untruthful and 5) not to use alcohol or evil drugs.

The daily lives of the Phakes have a busy routine of work. People get up from bed at about 4 to 4.30 am except the children and the elderly. The women have to clean everything and have to prepare the meals which have to be completed by 6 am and before serving it to their family they have to provide first portion of the food to the Buddhist monastery. Every household of the village provide their first portion of the food to the monastery. It is given by the oldest women member of the family. Daughters and other women folk help her for cleaning and food preparation process. The male person and domestic servants (if any) go to the field after cleaning their face and come back at around 8 am and take bath in the river. Then they have their meal and tea and by that time their children have already taken their meals. Usually they take evening meals at about 8 pm in summer and 6.30 pm in winter and then they go to bed. Now-a-days listening to music and watching TV programmes is also reported by the respondents. Morning and evening prayers are regularly performed in the monasteries and villagers attend those prayers. Villagers also attend monasteries during different festivals as well.

Phakes are fond of colourful dresses which are possible due to the efforts of women folk who are experts in weaving. Every household have their own hand looms. They are also known for using fascinating colours in their cloths by indigenous use of variety of herbs and creepers for dyeing. They discuss several issues and gossip while getting free time in the weaving process. The men folk specially the elders are expert in cane and bamboo basketry works and they know how to construct their houses traditionally. The front room of their house is kept open on one side and is used as a sitting room where usually the elderly women folk sit and discuss their issues and help their daughters-in-law in various household works like preparation of meals and keeping small children etc. The elder male persons in the village guard their paddy fields and other cultivation from birds, monkeys etc. and sometime take the small children (who do not go to school) to the river side and spend time with them and also pass time with other villagers by discussing religious matters, welfare of the village and other topics. They also sit for discussion with the monks in the monastery. On the other hand some children go to school for studies. After coming from schools they help their parents in their Leisure hours in carrying the meals and tea for their fathers and servants who are working in the fields. Some of them spend the time in playing different games like high jumps, long jumps, to make bride and groom with pieces of clothes and marriage is

performed between doll bride and bridegroom, chi mai tang tin (Tank Guti), wrestling, kodi khel, hide and seek, to put one over the one's shoulder and to run to the destinations, to run with one foot, handkerchief dropping game played in groups, the left leg of one is tied with the right leg of another and have to run to a destination.

25 numbers (41.66%) of the respondents of villagers' category reflect that they play cards during different functions in the villages. Music, traditional songs and dances are also part of their culture. 60 numbers (100%) of the respondents of the villagers' category informed that they know swimming and they prefer to take bath in the river though they have tube-wells in their respective houses. They use tube well for drinking water.

Though, Phakes lives on hunting in their earlier days, but now due to impact of Buddhism, 15 numbers (25%) of the respondents of villages' category opined that there are still people in the villages who go for hunting of birds, squirrels, monkeys and other animals. Rest 41 numbers (68.33%) of the respondents of villagers' category talk about the damages of their cultivation by monkeys. Fishing is another popular activity of Phakes but those who have taken the 'asta sheel' do not go for that. Different techniques like by Bare hand, by constructing artificial barrier and then by using bamboo spikes and by traps and nets are used to catch fishes as informed by the respondents. They catch fish for their own consumption and group fishing is resorted when a marriage ceremony is solemnized as fish in one of the main item in their marriages. 38 numbers (63.33%) confirmed that they were engaged in such activities.

Phakes get some leisure time in between transplantation and harvesting. This is the time when people visit different villages, women purchase yarn for their clothes and also engage in other works like removing the weeds and fencing the fields and stray cattle or the monkeys. Such jobs are performed by almost all members of the family including their children. Cutting the leaves of the Takau trees and storing them in pools of water for becoming stronger, constructing and repairing their houses are other activities during the slack period.

So far the diseases are concerned, only 7 numbers (11.66%) of the respondents of villagers' category opined that they have high blood pressure and 3 numbers (5%) of the respondents of villagers' category informed that they are suffering from diabetes. Only 3 cases of road accidents are reported. 45 numbers (75%) of the respondents of villagers' category and all the 10 monks have heard about HIV and AIDS but they do not have adequate knowledge about the diseases.

13 numbers (21.66%) of the respondents of villagers' category informed that they have pucca bathroom, 47 numbers (78.33%) have kutchha bathroom. Regarding the toilet facility only 16 numbers (26.66%) of the respondents of villagers category have sanitary latrine in their household while the rest 44 numbers (73.33%) have pit-type latrine. 14 numbers (23.33%) of the respondents of the villagers category reported that they do not have electricity in

their household and only 8 numbers (13.33%) do not have tube well in their household. All the 10 monks interviewed in the study informed us that both pucca bathrooms and sanitary facilities are available in their monastery.

V

To conclude, one can say that Tai Phake is a little community of around 2,000 souls. They have successfully kept their unique identity with their own language, customs and traditions with an elaborate social structure. They are the branch of the great Tai race and had a principality of their own in Hukawng Valley in then Burma. In the latter half of the 18th century they entered then undivided Assam by crossing the Patkai Hills Range. Agriculture is their prime occupation and Buddhism is the cementing force of Tai Phake society that brings happiness and peace to their society. Of late social changes are noticed in Tai Phake society. Their healthy habits and life styles provide them a good mental and health status in their society. They have a lot of healthy leisure and recreational activities in their society. Over all their religious beliefs and practices, healthy life style and their Leisure activities has created a healthy and simple society with minimum conflict.

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