

Issues of Language Contact and Shift in Tai Ahom

Dipima Buragohain, dipimab@gmail.com

Abstract: Tai Ahom, an endangered language from the Tai-Kadai family and once spoken in Assam, India is on the verge of total extinction now, the principle reason of its disappearance being the advent and strong influence of Assamese language. The present paper proposes to address 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), and (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. It is remarkable that Assamese language was the primary factor contributing to the gradual extinction of Tai Ahom among the speakers of its own community. Interestingly, the vocabulary of Assamese language is now rich with Tai Ahom words.

The present topic 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). The history of Assam is written and documented in this language. Although no longer being used as the spoken language among the Ahom community, the use of Tai Ahom language is now limited only to the religious ceremonies and prayer songs still performed by the Ahom priestly class.

While explaining the case of endangerment of Tai Ahom, the issues of language revival are also of essential significance. Current scenario observes various language revival plans being developed by the government of Assam as well as by its academic institutions. 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.

Key words: Tai Ahom, endangered language, language contact, language shift, Assamese language.

1.1 Introduction:

Starting with a general introduction of the language, the Tai Ahom language belongs to the Tai family of languages, which are largely spoken in South-east Asia. The Tai family of languages is considered to be one of the most important cultural mediums in this region. 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 border 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. 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.

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. In a sociolinguistic point of view, the issues of language shift and language change are of essential significance in Tai Ahom. In order to check the issue of language change in Tai

Ahom, we need to examine what happened in the history of this language and what exactly led to its shift and gradual extinction.

1.2 Data collection:

Tai Ahom is an endangered language once flourishing 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 these speakers belong to the priestly classes of the community who are now scattered in several districts in the Upper Assam area including



the districts of Sivasagar, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur. The data collected for this research is taken from the field trip conducted in the Sivasagar district, especially from the villages of Patsaku, Bokotha and Ramugaon.

1.3 Historical background of Tai Ahom:

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. 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. The migration of the Ahoms is shown in the map followed.

Map 1.1: *The migration of the Ahoms* (Source: www.mapsofindia.com)

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Among the most significant contributions the Ahoms made, two are strikingly remarkable – the tradition of writing history and the system of administration. The Ahoms sincerely maintained chronicles describing the reigns of different Ahom kings (or *swargadeu*) in terms of various historical manuscripts (or *buranji*) and different other literary works. Two types of historical manuscripts are generally found – (a) the genealogy of royal families and the regal affairs were documented in royal historical scripts (*raj buranji*), and (b) the chronological account of Ahom families was recorded in specific manuscripts called *bankhawali*, which are being written till present. Besides these records, there can be found other important books and documents on topics as varied as philosophy, technology, medicinal remedies etc. In order to get access of these significant books and records, proper knowledge and a graspable understanding of the language is certainly inevitable.

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 language also contributes to the vocabulary of the Assamese language. Grierson mentions about the writing systems of different Tai languages,

*“They have seven different forms of written character – the Ahom, the Cis-Salwin Shan, the Khamti, the Tai Man (all from Chinese Shan), the Lu and Khun (trans-Salwin Shans), the Lao, and the Siamese.”*¹

It is strongly assumed that the Tai Ahom contains, among the Northern Tai languages, many written forms that have been lost in the modern languages of the group. Same with Siamese, in case, where the Southern Tai group is concerned.²

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. But in its traditional form it is still used by the Ahom priestly class in their ancient religious ceremonies and in divination. 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 (16th century AD) and his Vaisnavite movement, Assamese came in the forefront while Tai Ahom took a backseat forever. Grierson comments very precisely on it –

*“The change of the speech of the Ahoms into Assamese can be very clearly traced. Their earlier Ahom Copperplate inscriptions were in the Ahom language and character. Next they appear in a bright form, and finally in Assamese or Sanskrit. When the kings began to take Hindu officials the court language at first continued to be Ahom, but it was gradually supplanted by Assamese, and now Ahom is known by only a few priests.”*⁴

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

¹ Grierson (1903), p. 59

² Ibid.

³ The forerunner of the Bhakti movement in Assam.

⁴ Grierson (1903), pp. 62-63

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.

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.

There are 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.

It is natural that the Assamese vocabulary is also full of many Ahom words that are used in the exchange of simple conversation. Some of those words are incorporated directly in Assamese and others either being some broken words or being compounded. For example, the names of places in Assam are mostly Ahom words – Namti, Nazira, Charaideu etc. Some important words are - *buranji* ‘history’, *rang* ‘colour’, *jan* ‘stream’, *rap* ‘interest’ etc. Surnames of the Ahoms and their kinship terms are still Ahom words.

2. Issues of language shift:

The Ahoms brought along with them their language and rich culture. The medium of communication as well as of literary works was Ahom since the reign of *Su-ka-pha*, the founding king of the Ahom dynasty. From the time of the fourth Ahom king, the language started fading away slowly (mid-15th century AD onwards). By the time of the fifth king, Assamese language came into being – functioning both as an official language and a layman’s common spoken form. By the advent of Srimanta Sankaradeva (16th century AD), the great Vaisnavite reformer, Assamese came into the forefront while Tai Ahom took a backseat forever. From the later part of the 16th century AD, Tai historians started writing their manuscripts in Assamese prose as well as in Tai Ahom. The commoners also preferred a relatively simple and toneless Assamese language to the complicated tonal Tai Ahom language.

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

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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. The writing of Ahom history in Assamese along with Tai Ahom language continued.

The process of language shift started taking place as soon as the Assamese language came into being. 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.

There is also a considerable amount of language variation seen in the language in the present scenario. Also, there are different varieties of the speech dialects (i.e., idiolects, which are one of the popular approaches linguists like to adopt in studying an 'exotic' language (Wardhaugh: 1986) now being practised and taught among these speakers and new learners. As the sense of language revival has grown recently, there is a lot of debate going on in order to determine the original speech and its rules. However, this has only given way to a possible study and exploration of the vast arena of sociolinguistic matters regarding the Tai Ahom language.

3. Tai Ahom – a case of language death:

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 multilingual communities. However, what makes the feature of multilingual ethnicity unique and distinguished among others is the fact that languages are maintained here with only a little amount of it being the victim of the case of language death.

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.

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.

4. Language contact and borrowings:

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 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. During the long period of their rule, the Ahoms used different terms for places, rivers, hills and lakes in their own language. The tradition of the naming of places started with the advent of the first Ahom king *Su-ka-pha*. The Tai Ahom historical documents abound in such names. The names of these places remain same till date. Instances of such names are given below with their meanings.

Namrup – It is a place in the district of Dibrugarh. The word ‘Namrup’ seems to have derived from the word *nam-ruk* (*nam* ‘water or river’, *ruk* ‘six’, meaning ‘the sixth river’). The word *rup* probably has been derived from the word *ruk*.

Namdang – It is a tributary of the river Brahmaputra in Sivasagar sub-division (*nam* ‘river’, *deng* ‘red’, meaning ‘muddy water’).

Nazira – A place in the district of Sivasagar (*na* ‘field’, *ji* ‘slanting’, *ra* ‘much’, meaning ‘a slanting rice field’).

Teok – A place in the district of Jorhat (*ti* ‘place’, *ak* ‘ghee’, meaning ‘a place where ghee is available’).

Sepon – A place in Sivasagar (*se* ‘town’, *pan* ‘cotton’, meaning ‘a place where cotton is available’).

Charaideo – A place in Sivasagar district (*se* ‘town’, *rai* ‘shining’, *doi* ‘hill’, meaning ‘a town shining on the hilltop’). It is regarded as a holy place by the Ahom people. Ahom kings and members of the royal families were buried here. Huge earth mounds of pyramidal type, known as *maidam* were raised over the graves. Every year in commemoration of their ancestral kings, the Ahom people assemble there to offer their prayers to their kings in the traditional way known as *me-dam-me-phi*.

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.

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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. For example, **Buragohain** – The chief adviser to the king, also acting as the Prime Minister in the Ahom court.

Deodhai Phukan – The chief Ahom priest who performed all major rituals.

Hazarika – Chief of the infantry of a thousand soldiers.

Saikia – Chief of the infantry of a hundred soldiers.

Changmai – The chief cook in the royal palace.

Konwer – From the royal clan, especially the crown prince.

Some kinship terms of Tai Ahom words are still in use among the Ahom people.

For example,

a-pa ‘father’s elder sister’

ni-sa ‘mother’s elder brother’

Other Tai Ahom words that are widely used in Assamese are; for instance, *buranji* ‘history’, *rang* ‘color’, *kareng* ‘palace’, *liksou* ‘servant’, *hai* ‘noise’, *jan* ‘stream’, *saudang* ‘hangman’, *pokha* ‘root’, etc. It is remarkable and worth mentioning that among the borrowed words in Assamese vocabulary, the Tai Ahom words fill the place plenty.

5. Language revival and planning:

Khubchandani (1997) states, “the notion of language development among many newly emergent nations implies the promotion of full-fledged or autonomous status for a language as an exclusive vehicle for full expression in different fields of knowledge and in all walks of life”. This is somewhat applicable to the Tai Ahom language too, as this language serves as the principal resource to the invaluable historical documents glorifying the ancient Assam including the social, economic, political and literary facets of life.

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 many a diploma course 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.

6. Conclusion:

While explaining the case of endangerment of Tai Ahom, the issues of language shift and language change are of essential significance. A thorough description of the historical background of Assam explains particularly what led to the shift and the eventual extinction of the 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'. It not only teaches the Ahom language, but also publishes academic journals, and preserves old Ahom manuscripts in its well-organized library. 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.

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