

Tai Phake

According to scholar Anthony Diller of the Australian National University, several thousand Tai Phake people live in the north-east Indian state of Assam.¹ They are concentrated in five villages on the banks of the Burdihing (also called Dihing) River in Dibrugarh District in the extreme north-east of the state. The Tai Phake people originally lived further to the east in Mogoung.²

Various researchers agree that the Tai Phake

language is a Southwestern Tai language, similar to Shan, which is spoken by more than three million people in north-east Myanmar, south-west China and northern Thailand. The name Tai Phake 'is derived from the term *pha*, meaning king or chief and *ke*, meaning an official,

as they claim they are descendants of the Tai Royal officials. They are also referred to as Phakial and use Gohain or Phake as surnames.³

Few people have ever heard of the Tai Phake because the Indian government has ignored their requests for official recognition. They have not been granted status either as a Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste in India, leaving them somewhat anonymous and politically powerless.

Undoubtedly the Tai Phake are a remnant from the days when the Tai-speaking Ahom ruled the area. The Ahom kings reigned from Sibsagar in Assam for more than 600 years before the arrival of the British.⁴ Most of the Ahom people were assimilated into Assamese culture and gradually lost the use of their mother tongue and now speak Assamese. Some small pockets of people, including the Tai Phake, appear to have

survived the assimilation process and retain their language and culture to this day.⁵ Other surviving Tai languages in north-east India include Khamti, Khamiyang, Aiton and Turung.

All Tai Phake people profess Theravada Buddhism as their religion. They brought Buddhism with them when they first migrated from Myanmar (Burma) and have retained their religion over the centuries,

although they are now influenced by Hinduism as well as animistic practices.

Every Tai Phake village has its own Buddhist temple. Their communities are divided into two categories: the secular

and the clergy. The villagers are hard workers who produce Sali paddy, mustard, arum and potatoes. The Buddhist monks, however, are exempt from farm work. 'The Tai Phake observe six festivals which are intimately related with the worship of Lord Buddha. They are *Poi Chang Ken*, *Luicheti*, *Poi Nen Hok*, *Meiko Chumfai*, *Poi Nen Chi* and *Poi Kathin*. . . . The [Tai Phake monks] accept cooked food and water from the neighboring non-Phake communities and visit their households. Intercommunity marriages especially with the Buddhist groups are not looked at with contempt.¹⁶

Christianity has failed to make much of an impact in this remote part of Assam. There are no known churches or Christians among the Tai Phake people. Their identity is bound up in their belief in Buddhism, so for an individual or family to break away from the status quo and believe in Christ is difficult.



Population:
4,600 (2000)
5,400 (2010)
6,350 (2020)
Countries: India
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: none known



Myanmar Faces and Places

Overview of the Tai Phake

Other Names: Phake, Phakial, Phahey, Faake, Palke

Population Sources:
'several thousand' in India (1990, A Diller)

Language: Tai-Kadai, Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Southwestern, East Central, Northwest

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 95%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

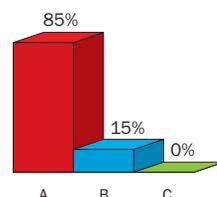
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: PHK

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity