



Negotiating Tradition & Modernity: Structural Challenges to Cultural Continuity among the Tai – Phake community of Assam

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Abstract

The Tai-Phake community of Assam is a small Tai-speaking Buddhist indigenous group known for its distinct language, religious traditions, festivals, weaving practices, and monastery-centred social life. For generations, these cultural traditions were sustained through close community interaction and active participation in collective practices. However, contemporary social changes associated with education, technological development, occupational mobility, media influence, and increasing interaction with wider social networks have transformed the conditions under which cultural traditions are maintained. Drawing upon Anthony Giddens' theory of modernity, this paper examines the changing relationship between tradition and modernity within the Tai-Phake community. The study argues that the challenges faced by the community should not be understood simply as cultural decline, but as part of a broader process through which traditional practices are continuously negotiated, adapted, and reinterpreted in response to changing social realities. The paper further explores how intergenerational knowledge gaps, changing perceptions of traditional practices, limited institutional representation, and leadership challenges influence cultural continuity within the community. It also highlights the importance of institutional support, youth participation, and cultural adaptation in sustaining cultural traditions in contemporary society. By focusing on the interaction between tradition and modernity, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how small indigenous communities navigate social change while maintaining cultural continuity.

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Introduction

The relationship between tradition and modernity has become an important area of discussion in contemporary societies, particularly among indigenous communities whose cultural practices have historically been sustained through close community interaction, shared customs, and collective participation. Processes such as formal education, technological development, urbanisation, migration, and expanding communication networks have transformed social life across the world. While these changes have created new opportunities for education, employment, and social mobility, they have also altered the conditions through which cultural traditions are practised and transmitted. Consequently, many indigenous communities today find themselves balancing the preservation of traditional cultural practices with the demands of an increasingly modern and interconnected society.

The Tai-Phake community represents one such indigenous group negotiating these changing social realities. The Tai-Phake are a small Tai-speaking Buddhist community belonging to the larger Tai ethnic family of Northeast India. Historically, the community traces its origins to the Tai people who migrated from the region of Moung-Mao in present-day South China through Myanmar before entering Assam during the late eighteenth century (WeingkenNyi Yot, 2004). Following their migration, they gradually settled in the fertile valleys of Upper Assam, particularly along the banks of the BurhiDihing River, where they established village communities centred on agriculture, Theravada Buddhism, and collective social life (Lahkar & Chakhap, 2019). Over time, the community developed a distinct socio-cultural identity while maintaining historical and cultural connections with other Tai groups of the region.

The Tai ethnic family of Northeast India comprises several groups, including the Tai-Ahom, Tai-Khamti, Tai-Aiton, Tai-Turung, Tai-Khamyang, and Tai-Phake. Although these communities share common historical origins and certain cultural similarities, each has developed its own language varieties, customs, traditions, and social institutions. Among these groups, the Tai-Phake are particularly known for their strong association with Theravada Buddhism and monastery-centred community life, both of which continue to play a significant role in shaping their social and cultural identity.

Today, the Tai-Phake are primarily concentrated in the districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in Upper Assam, particularly in villages located along the BurhiDihing River. Smaller populations are also found in parts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, especially in Namsai district and adjoining areas, owing to historical migration patterns and long-standing interactions among Tai Buddhist communities of the region. Despite their relatively small population size, the Tai-Phake possess a rich and vibrant cultural heritage reflected in their language and script, traditional attire, weaving practices, food habits, festivals, oral traditions, and religious customs (Das, 2022).

Theravada Buddhism occupies a central place within Tai-Phake society. Buddhist monasteries have historically functioned not only as places of worship but also as centres of education, cultural transmission, and community interaction. Festivals such as Poi Sangken, Buddha Purnima, and Poi Okwa continue to play an important role in strengthening social bonds and preserving cultural traditions across generations (Barman, 2020). Traditional weaving, agricultural practices, oral traditions, and ritual participation have similarly served as important markers of cultural identity and collective belonging. For generations, these traditions were sustained through everyday participation in family life, religious activities, and community institutions.

However, contemporary social changes have altered patterns of participation and knowledge transmission. Younger generations, influenced by modern education and expanding opportunities, increasingly navigate between traditional responsibilities and new aspirations.

2. Objective of the Study

The present study aims to examine the relationship between tradition and modernity within the Tai-Phake community of Assam and to understand how contemporary social transformations influence cultural continuity, traditional practices, and community life. The study further seeks to identify the challenges affecting cultural continuity and explore possible ways of sustaining cultural traditions in a changing social environment.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach and is primarily based on secondary sources. Data were collected from books, journal articles, research papers, government reports, and other relevant published materials.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs Anthony Giddens' theory of modernity as its primary analytical framework. Giddens conceptualises modernity as a set of transformative processes including industrialisation, urbanisation, formal education, technological development, and global communication that fundamentally alter social relations and institutions (Giddens, 1991).

In traditional societies, cultural practices were largely reproduced through routine participation in community life, guided by religion, customs, and kinship networks. Modernity, however, detaches social practices from their local contexts and subjects them to constant reflection and revision. Traditions do not simply disappear; rather, they become open to questioning, adaptation, and selective reinterpretation as individuals gain access to alternative ideas, lifestyles, and opportunities.

Giddens emphasises that modernity expands the "time-space distancing" of social life, connecting local communities to broader national and global influences (Giddens, 1990). For indigenous groups like the Tai-Phake, this creates a dynamic environment where cultural

continuity depends not on rigid preservation but on the community's capacity to negotiate and adapt traditions within changing social realities.

This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the Tai-Phake experience, where modern institutions and opportunities coexist with longstanding cultural practices, requiring continuous renegotiation of identity and heritage.

5. Negotiating Tradition and Modernity : Structural Challenges to Cultural Continuity

Modern social transformations present both opportunities and challenges for the Tai-Phake community. While expanding access to education and employment has broadened individual horizons, it has also disrupted traditional mechanisms of cultural transmission. Applying Giddens' perspective, these shifts reflect not the inevitable erosion of tradition, but its reconfiguration within new social conditions.

5.1 Intergenerational Knowledge Gap and Declining Youth Participation

One of the most significant challenges is the growing gap between generations in the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. Traditionally, Tai-Phake cultural values, language, religious rituals, and customary practices were transmitted through active participation in community life. However, changing educational aspirations, occupational mobility, and exposure to modern lifestyles have altered the priorities of younger generations.

Many young people pursue higher education and employment opportunities outside their villages, reducing their direct engagement with community activities and cultural institutions. Consequently, participation in traditional festivals, rituals, and collective events has declined. This reduced involvement limits opportunities for cultural learning and weakens the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. Although many youth retain pride in their heritage, their engagement has become more selective, weakening the organic transmission of cultural knowledge.

5.2 Changing Perceptions of Traditional Practices

The symbolic devaluation of traditional cultural practices represents another important challenge. In many modern societies, dominant notions of development, progress, and success are often associated with urban lifestyles, formal education, professional occupations, and global cultural influences. Within such contexts, traditional practices may be perceived as less relevant to contemporary life.

Among some members of the younger generation, activities such as traditional weaving, participation in community rituals, and the use of indigenous language may be viewed as less relevant or prestigious. Consequently, individuals may distance themselves from these practices in an attempt to achieve social mobility and acceptance within broader society. This does not necessarily indicate a rejection of culture; rather, it reflects changing priorities

within a society where individuals increasingly balance traditional responsibilities with modern opportunities. Nevertheless, when traditional practices are perceived as having limited relevance to contemporary life, participation may gradually decline, creating challenges for cultural continuity.

5.3 Limited Representation in Political, Administrative, and Cultural Institutions

The Tai-Phake community also faces challenges arising from its relatively small population size and limited representation within political, administrative, and cultural institutions. In multicultural societies, institutional recognition plays an important role in supporting cultural preservation and promoting public awareness of minority communities.

Due to their limited demographic and political visibility, the cultural concerns of the Tai-Phake community often receive less attention within broader policy frameworks. This can affect access to resources for language preservation, cultural documentation, heritage promotion, and community development. The absence of strong institutional support places greater responsibility on community members to sustain cultural traditions through local initiatives and voluntary participation.

5.4 Leadership Deficit and Institutional Weakness

Effective leadership plays a crucial role in safeguarding cultural heritage and mobilizing collective action. However, the Tai-Phake community faces challenges related to strong and visionary leadership among the younger generations often limiting the community's ability to formulate long-term cultural preservation strategies and engage effectively with governmental and non-governmental institutions. Internal competition, fragmented community initiatives, and limited exposure further weaken efforts to promote cultural continuity. As a result, cultural preservation often depends on individual commitment and voluntary participation rather than structured institutional mechanisms. Without effective leadership, community-based initiatives may struggle to sustain momentum and respond to emerging cultural challenges.

Taken together, these challenges demonstrate that the future of cultural continuity within the Tai-Phake community is shaped not only by individual choices but also by broader social and institutional conditions. The interaction between modern opportunities and traditional cultural responsibilities creates a complex environment in which cultural practices are continuously negotiated and redefined. Understanding these challenges is essential for identifying pathways through which cultural continuity can be sustained within changing social realities.

6. Pathways for Sustaining Cultural Continuity

The challenges discussed above do not suggest that the future of Tai-Phake culture is predetermined or that traditional practices are destined to disappear. Rather, they highlight the need for strategies that enable cultural traditions to remain meaningful within changing

social conditions. Cultural continuity is most sustainable when communities are able to adapt to social change while maintaining important aspects of their cultural heritage. From this perspective, the relationship between tradition and modernity should not be viewed as a choice between preservation and change, but as an ongoing process of adjustment and renewal.

6.1 Strengthening Institutional Support for Cultural Transmission

One of the most important requirements for sustaining cultural continuity is the creation of stronger institutional mechanisms for cultural transmission. Traditionally, cultural knowledge was transmitted through family, monasteries, and community participation. However, changing educational patterns and occupational mobility have weakened these informal mechanisms. As a result, there is a growing need to institutionalise cultural education through community organisations, cultural centres, and educational programmes that promote language preservation, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices.

Education can play a transformative role in this process. The inclusion of indigenous history, language, and cultural knowledge within formal educational frameworks can enhance cultural awareness and strengthen community identity and decision making. When indigenous knowledge receives formal recognition, younger generations are more likely to view cultural competence as a valuable social and intellectual asset rather than as an obstacle to modern aspirations. Such initiatives can help bridge the gap between formal education and community-based cultural learning.

6.2 Enhancing Institutional Recognition and Policy Support

Sustained governmental support remains essential for the long-term preservation of minority cultural communities such as the Tai-Phake. Due to their limited demographic size and political visibility, smaller indigenous groups often remain underrepresented within broader cultural policy frameworks. Consequently, cultural preservation efforts frequently rely on voluntary community initiatives that may require adequate resources and institutional support.

Formal recognition of cultural heritage, financial assistance for cultural preservation projects, support for language documentation, and the promotion of indigenous cultural festivals can provide the institutional foundation necessary for cultural continuity. State intervention should therefore be viewed not as a substitute for community participation but as a complementary mechanism that strengthens local preservation efforts and ensures their sustainability.

6.3 Encouraging Youth Participation in Cultural Reconstruction

The future of cultural continuity largely depends upon the participation of younger generations. However, cultural preservation should not be approached through rigid expectations of maintaining traditions in their original form. Cultural practices must remain

open to reinterpretation and adaptation in response to changing social realities. Younger generations are more likely to engage with cultural traditions when they are presented as relevant to contemporary life rather than as obligations imposed by the past. Encouraging creative expressions of traditional attire, music, language, and artistic practices can transform culture into a site of innovation and self-expression. Such adaptation does not necessarily weaken cultural authenticity; rather, it enables cultural traditions to remain meaningful within changing social contexts.

6.4 Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and Community Confidence

Interaction with wider society need not be viewed solely as a threat to cultural continuity. Constructive engagement with other communities can create opportunities for cultural recognition, public awareness, and mutual understanding. Cultural festivals, educational exchanges, and public heritage programmes can increase the visibility of Tai-Phake traditions and encourage broader appreciation of indigenous cultures. Equally important is the development of community confidence in cultural heritage. When cultural practices are recognised as valuable sources of knowledge, history, and identity, individuals are more likely to participate in their preservation. Strengthening pride in language, traditions, and community achievements can therefore encourage greater participation in cultural activities and reinforce collective commitment to cultural continuity.

Ultimately, the sustainability of Tai-Phake culture depends upon a balanced approach that combines preservation with adaptation. Cultural traditions are most likely to endure when they remain capable of responding to contemporary social realities while continuing to provide a meaningful sense of community, belonging, and cultural distinctiveness. By strengthening institutional support, encouraging youth engagement, and promoting broader recognition of indigenous heritage, the Tai-Phake community can continue to sustain its cultural traditions within an increasingly interconnected world.

7. Conclusion

The Tai-Phake community exemplifies how small indigenous groups navigate the complexities of tradition and modernity. While social transformations have disrupted traditional patterns of cultural transmission, they have also created possibilities for reflection, adaptation, and renewal. Drawing on Giddens' theory, this study has shown that cultural continuity is not a static condition but an active process of negotiation shaped by intergenerational dynamics, institutional conditions, and community agency.

The identified challenges; intergenerational gaps, shifting perceptions, limited representation, and leadership constraints highlight the structural dimensions of cultural change. However, through strengthened institutions, policy support, youth engagement, and intercultural dialogue, the Tai-Phake can sustain a vibrant cultural identity that remains responsive to contemporary realities.

Ultimately, tradition and modernity are not opposing forces but interdependent elements in a dynamic relationship. By embracing adaptation while preserving core elements of their heritage, the Tai-Phake community can continue to thrive as both custodians of a rich cultural legacy and active participants in modern society.

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