



## Indigenous knowledge and practices of the Phakeyals: a study in Barphake village of Margherita.

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### Abstract

Assam is a melting pot of various communities with their own cultural tradition and nature-linked practices. The Phakeyals, or the Tai Phakes, believed to be an offshoot of the great Tai race, which entered Assam in the latter half of the 18th century, now inhabiting in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of the state, are attributed with a sound indigenous knowledge of environment and practices based on it. They resort to a number of herbal treatments or folk medicines, which are collected from the environment. This paper aims at examining the beliefs and rituals prevalent among the Phakeyals of the Barphake Village of Tinsukia district that have helped in conserving nature by judicious use of bio-resources and maintaining the ecological balance in nature.

**Keywords:** Phakeyals, Indigenous knowledge, folk medicine

### 1. Introduction

The term Indigenous Knowledge (IK) refers to the knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous groups in matters related to agriculture and environmental management, medicine and health and art and language. These have been passed from one generation to another (orally or by tradition) and are an integral part of a culture's identity and heritage. Indigenous knowledge has been recognized to make significant contributions to sustainable development of local communities, as it is seen as a set of perceptions, information, and behaviour that guides local community members to use the land and natural resources. The proper utilization of indigenous knowledge may provide the right information to the right people at the right time.

The *Phakeyals*, belonging to the *Tai Phakeraces* are the relatively lesser-known inhabitants of Assam with rich tradition and cultural history. The traditional practices of these people have great significance from the point of conservation,

consumption and management of biodiversity. They have evolved various practices in conserving and sustaining the bio-resources. The people of this community have played a key role in sustainable use of bio-resources through various practices and knowledge systems that have been transmitted through generations.

### 2. Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are:

- To understand the tradition and preservation of indigenous knowledge of the Phakeyals in Barphake village of Margherita
- To learn the ways and means to application of indigenous knowledge in day-to-day life of the people in this village
- To share information about the traditional knowledge of the community, its importance and use in modern society and support research and learning about this knowledge.

### 3. Data source and methodology

The study has been carried out mainly on the basis of primary data. Information was collected from the inhabitants of the village with the help of a pre-tested questionnaire. Simple analysis of the data has been carried out to have a fair assessment of the study area. Secondary data have been used to have an idea about the background of the study area and the Phakeyal community.

### 4. Findings

The Phakeyal, also called Tai Phake, is a lesser-known tribe of Assam inhabiting in Namphake village and Tipam Phake of Dibrugarh District and Faneng, Ninggam, Barphake, Maan Moo and Longphake of Tinsukia District. They are believed to be an offshoot of the great Tai race, which entered Assam in the latter half of the 18th century. The name Phake derives from the Tai words 'Pha' meaning wall and 'Ke' meaning old antiquity. The Phakeyals worship Lord Buddha and have a separate place for worship known as Bauddha Vihar. The main festivals celebrated by this community are the water splashing festival Poi-Chang Ken (songkran in Thai), Poi-Nun-Hok, Pai-Kathin and Poi-Nen-Chi festival.

The present study was carried out in the Barphake village, situated on the bank of the river Burhi Dihing in the Margherita area of Tinsukia district. The village is surrounded mostly by paddy fields and jungle on three sides. The remaining part is the beautiful landscape of the riverbank. The other bank of the river is adorned by a series of beautiful rolling green hills. The houses are built along the banks of the Burhi Dihing River. The Phakeyals worship Lord Buddha and have a separate place for worship known as Bauddha Vihar. In the Barphake village we witnessed a Buddhist temple or Bauddha Vihar (monastery) situated at the centre of the village. Each homestead generally has a fairly small compound with various kinds of trees like areca nut, banana, mango, plum tree, jackfruit and a large number of bamboos. The main occupation of the village is agriculture. The only crop cultivated by the community is *Salipaddy*.

There are about 60 families in the village, most of which are of nuclear type. Patriarchal family system prevails in the village. There is a head man in the village, who is helped by a group of elderly persons in taking decisions related to the social issues of the village. The village priest has a respectable position in their society.

The Phakeyals have an intimate relationship with

nature and have evolved various rituals and *taboos* in harvesting and consumptions of produce from their paddy field and the backyard gardens. These have implications in sustainable use of resources.

The women of the community have developed a sustained interaction with the nature through their daily household chores. They depend on land and water for food and nutritional security, medicines, fuel wood, and other products that are used for household subsistence. Such sustained interaction with ecological systems has enabled the women to acquire knowledge both about the environment and about the natural resource base and its uses. These knowledge and information about natural and biological resources and about the use of sustained practices and conservation techniques are nurtured and disseminated.

The Phakeyals believe in the existence of spirit and they observe certain rituals to appease the malevolent spirits. They strongly believe the effectiveness of mantras and also practice the sympathetic magic. For the ordinary personal ailments the Phakeyals have their indigenous supernatural treatment. Occasionally, traditional prescription in respect of sickness and cure are followed when the worship of the Lord has no effect.

#### 4.1 Folk medicine

The Phakeyals resort to a number of herbal treatments, the medicines for which are collected from the environment. They depend upon the adjoining forests as well as their kitchen gardens for collecting these herbal medicines. Some indigenous ways of treatment using herbs as medicine for a few diseases are given below:

**Cold fever:** The Phakeyals use a special kind of juice prepared from elephant apple (*Outenga*), for quick relief of the patient. The juice is a unique kind of preparation. The boil the fruit and bring out the juice from it and then mix *laishak*, a vegetable plant, lemon juice, salt, chilli and onion. Finally they keep the prepared juice in a bamboo tube to make it sour before use. They also massage the whole body of the patient with a mixture of hot mustard oil with garlic for quick relief.

**Cough:** The Phakeyals use various kinds of herbs for treatment cough. Depending on the nature of cough the types of herbs also vary.

**In normal cough:** To get relief from cough they take a mixture prepared from black pepper and salt.

**In whooping cough:** To get relief from whooping cough they take a juice prepared from black *tulsi*

leaves and honey.

**Jaundice :** The Phakeyals have some herbal treatments for jaundice too. They believe that only by the herbal treatment a patient of jaundice can be cured. They prescribe a juice prepared with roots and leaves of various plants like *malce*, camphor and mulberry plants. They also perform some magical practice for quick cure.

**Gastric pain:** According to the beliefs of the Phakeyals, there are various types of gastric pains in human beings. Each of the forms has a specific treatment. In general they resort to some kind of massage of the belly with mustard oil. The massage is done with the help of hands in a specific way.

**Cancer:** The Phakeyals use some special kind of herbal preparation to cure cancer. To prepare the medicine, they use the roots of *homtul* plants, the stems of *kamkhain* plant, bark of *shimolu* plant, the leaves, roots and stems of *tanntau* plant and mix them in a particular ratio. They make small portions of the entire mix and dry them. Finally they make fine powder from these and give to the patient.

**Diabetes:** To cure diabetes, the Phakeyals use yeast found in stems of various wild trees. They have different types of herbal preparations for diabetes patients.

#### 4.2 Essential plants, birds and animals protected by the Phakeyals :

**Plants:** The Phakeyals worship and protect certain plants and trees and it has helped in a long way in maintaining the ecological balance. Peepul (*Anhat*) is one of the sacred plants among the Phakeyal community. As Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under this tree, they consider it as sacred. They never burn or cut this tree. During the time of Bohag Bihu they clean the surroundings of the tree and light earthen lamps along with incense stick and worship the tree.

Another essential plant among the Phakeyals is the bamboo. It is not considered a sacred plant, but it is an essential plant of their day-to-day life. A number of species of bamboo are found in the village. The sprout of bamboo called *manai* is used in preparation of different dishes.

The *tulsiplant* is used as medicinal herb and its leaves are used in cooking. The other essential plants reared by the Phakeyals are ginger, turmeric, lemon,

banana, garlic, pumpkin, etc. They grow a number of vegetables in their kitchen garden and on the river bank, which are used as herbal medicine. They also collect various herbs from the forest.

**Birds:** The Phakeyals consider Ikhanko as a sacred bird. They never kill the bird and also do not allow others to do so. If the bird sits on the roof of their house, they believe something good would happen very soon. Consider vulture as an unholy bird. Rather they place vulture in a very good position as this bird helps to keep the environment clean by consuming the dead animals.

**Animals:** There are a number of essential animals among the Phakeyals that are taken care of. They do not go on hunting nor do they kill any bird or animals. Many respondents during our study said that these animals and birds maintain the environment and hence we should protect them

#### 5. Conclusion

The people of Barphakeyal village have maintained their indigenous mode of living. They have their own value judgement, ethos and the world view, through which they construct their social norms. They follow the traditional practices and each and every person of the village tries to follow it. Anyone violating the social norms has to face a series of punishments depending on the nature of the fault.

The people are self-reliant in every aspect of life. They construct their own house; make their agricultural and fishing equipment and utensils of day to day use.

The Phakeyals have a very sound knowledge about maintaining a balanced relationship with the surrounding environment. They are mostly dependent on environment but very much aware about the impact of human activities on environment. As they are very closely attached with environment for their day-to-day needs, they have gathered a utilitarian concept from environment and applied environmental or natural objects for their every aspect of life. Their beliefs, customs, rituals and values, etc., have been developed surrounding their environment. They use a large number of herbs to cure various diseases, which is the result of life long experience and observation of the earlier generations. They believe in herbal medicine because it fits in with their culture and they have kept their life well balanced applying the indigenous knowledge of the environment.

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