
TAI LANGUAGES IN INDIA: THE ENDANGERED LANGUAGES NEED REVIVAL AND PROTECTION OF LAW

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ABSTRACT

Originally originated in Yunnan in South-West China, the Tai language entered in India during 13th century through Ahom invaders who mainly settled in Upper Assam districts and some parts of Arunachal Pradesh in India. Presently, the total population of 1,600,000 in India as per the Report, 2021. All total there are six Tai languages namely Tai Ahom, Tai Aiton, Tai-Khamyang, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamte, Tai-Turung which falls in Tai-Kadai language family. These languages were widely used during Ahomisation period in Assam between 13th to 17th century and Ahom being the language of court in the kingdom. However, during 17th century the Tai languages including Ahom vastly lost its significance with the adoption of Assamese language by Ahom kings. In today's date significant language like Ahom is extinct and other Kra-Dai family languages are on the verge of extinction in India as most of these population adopted Assamese language for communication while some are using bilingual language in daily practices. However, these ethnic group of people are aware about the moribund condition of their languages and revitalizing efforts are made by them but the result of such efforts are low. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Tai languages in India are classified as 'Severely Endangered' as total number of speakers of these languages are less than 10,000 worldwide. At national level along with the constitutional rights and acts available to protect minority languages, Schemes in India such as Schemes for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) was instituted by Ministry of Education (Government of India) in 2013 also recognizes minority languages such as the Tai languages such as Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung as endangered in India. The University Grant Commission (UGC) also decided to launch a scheme namely Financial Assistance for setting up Centers for preservation and promotion of endangered languages during XII plan period. Thus, legal protection, preservation and documentation of Tai languages are urgently required before it gets completely faded away.

Introduction:

Ahom is an ethnic group of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India. They ruled the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam for 600 long years from 1228-1826 CE.¹ The total population of Ahom in India as per the Report, 2021 is 1,600,000². Ahom people are mostly founded in Upper Assam districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Ahom Language originated in Yunnan in South-West China.³ In India Ahom maintained their Ahom Language and practiced their traditional religion till the 17th century, when the Ahom courts as well as commoners adopted the Assamese language.⁴ It was the state language of Ahom Kingdom. It has the written tradition dating back to 13th century. Ahom have script of their own as Tai Ahom script is an Abugida type of script that is used to write the Ahom language, a dormant Tai language.⁵ This language is going on under revival and mainly used in religious chants and literary materials.⁶ The World Atlas of Language (WAL) is an online platform which provides accurate, reliable, up-to-date and robust language data for the entire world. At present there are zero speakers of Tai Ahom language in India as stated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Atlas of Languages (UNESCO WAL).⁷

There are all total six Tai languages prevailing in Assam as well as some parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Each language is distinct from each other; however, it falls under the category of Tai languages.⁸ These languages are members of the Tai branch of the Kra-Dai/ Tai Kadai language family.⁹ The scripts of all these languages are different for example some used Abugida script

¹ The Rise of Ahom Dynasty: A Glorious Chapter in Assam's History, available at <https://assamboardexam.com/ahom-dynasty-part-1/> (last visited on 10/12/2024)

² JJM – Reports, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Jal Shakti (GOI), available at https://ejalshakti.gov.in/JJM/JJMReports/BasicInformation/JJMRep_RWS_RuralPopulation.aspx (last visited on 16/12/2024)

³ *supra*

⁴ D. Bradley, E.J.A. Henderson and M. Mazaudon 1988, 'Reading a Dead Language; Tai-Ahom and the Dictionaries', pg. 283-96, Canberra: Australian National University, 1988 [Pacific Linguistics, C-104. Also published in: Chow Nagen Hazarika (ed.), *Lik Tai Khwam Tai*, pp. 1-19, Guwahati, 1990].

⁵ Nilakshi Sharma, "Documentation of Tai Ahom Manuscripts: Digital Archiving of Dead Language", Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 286-291, DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology, 2020

⁶ Glimpses of the "Awareness Programme on Language Maintenance and Revitalization" (last visited on 18/12/2024)

⁷ UNESCO, "Tai-Ahom Language" 2021 available at <https://en.wal.unesco.org/index.php/languages/ahom> (last visited on 17/12/2024)

⁸ Stephen Morey, "The Tai Languages of Assam"

⁹ Soren Christian Egerod, "Sino-Tibetan languages", available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tai-language> (last visited on 24/12/2024)

while other used Burmese script or Latin script.¹⁰ However, in today's date these languages have lost its vitality especially Ahom language which got extinct in India between 18th to 19th century A.D. Similarly, apart from Ahom language there are other five Tai languages existing in India i.e. Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Tai-Phake, Tai Turung where still small number of people are trying to hold the integrity of their languages but most of them have turned bilingual into Assamese language, thus posing strong threat to the existence of these languages in future.¹¹ These people are aware of the status of their language that it is being endangered hence they made some revitalizing efforts which seems to be in vain in today's date.¹² Hence, in this paper we will observe the summary of each Tai language where some are ethnic while others are indigenous in nature, the state of it being morbid, governmental efforts and legal aspects to revive the languages and protect it from being defunct and extinct.

Revitalizing efforts:

The work of revival of this language is going on in educational institutions such as Dibrugarh University and Assam Higher Secondary Educational Council (AHSEC).¹³ Since, the late 1960's Ahom culture and traditions have witnessed revival. In 1981, the Eastern Tai Literary Organization has been founded in Dhemaji, which produced language text books and publications in Ahom, script.¹⁴ Schools in Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts started offering Tai language classes, teaching a mix of Tai Ahom, Phakey, Kahmti and Central Thai.¹⁵ The demand for translation into Tai-Ahom led to the creation of the first adequate modern dictionary by Nomal Chandra Gogoi in 1987, titled "The Assamese- English-Tai Dictionary".¹⁶ The Institution of Tai Studies and Research (ITSAR), is a Tai- Ahom language teaching institute in Moran, Shivasagar, Assam India established in 2001 offers a one-year Tai-Ahom language diploma course and a three- month certificate course in spoken Tai-Ahom.¹⁷ Initiative

¹⁰ David B. Solnit, Fang Kuei Li, "Tai languages", Aug 11, 2023, available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tai-language> (last visited on 26/12/2024)

¹¹ Mark W Post, "The Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India", In G. Thurgood and R. J. LaPolla, Eds. The Sino-Tibetan Languages. London, Routledge: 213-242 (2017) available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282662694_The_Tibeto-Burman_languages_of_Northeast_India (last visited on 29/12/2024)

¹² Glimpses of the "Awareness Programme on Language Maintenance and Revitalization"

¹³ Government of India, North Eastern Council Secretariat, Shillong, "Construction of TAI Educational Centre at Nizkadamoni, Dibrugarh, Assam", (2018)

¹⁴ B.J. TERWIEL, Recreating the Past Revivalism in Northeastern India, pg no. 279 available at https://www.academia.edu/10122759/Recreating_the_past_Revivalism_in_Northeastern_India_In_BTLV_152_1996_2_275_29 (last visited on 08/01/2025)

¹⁵ Supra pg no.277-279

¹⁶ Nang Nirada Gogoi, Nomal Chandra, The Assamese English Tai Dictionary, Tinsukia (Assam), 1987

¹⁷ supra

has also been taken to revive this language through workshops and language classes such as “Workshop on Tai-Ahom Language” organized at Doomdooma, Assam on 2nd August, 2018.¹⁸ In 2019, the Tai Ahom Yuva Chatra Sanmilan, Assam (TAYCSA) demanded the Tai Ahom language be included in the school curriculum of the state of Assam.¹⁹ The Centre for Endangered languages (CFEL) at Tezpur University in Assam, India is working on several endangered languages of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.²⁰ Since 2004, the Endangered Archives Programme of British Library: Documenting, Conserving and Archiving the Tai Ahom Manuscripts of Assam is digitizing over seven million images of rare printed sources, manuscripts, visual material and 25 thousand sound tracks.²¹ The Ahom Manuscript Project was awarded in 2010 under which they have digitized and documented the literary heritage of Ahom Kingdom.²² After archiving, these manuscripts are at present, digitally preserved at the British Library of United Kingdom, the Institute of Tai Studies and Research situated at Moran, Assam, Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University, the State Universities of Assam, India and the Grant holder of the project is Dr. Stephen Morey, La Trobe University.²³ The North Eastern Council Secretariat, Shillong, Meghalaya also provides General Guidelines in Annexure 1, 2020 for the protection of endangered languages in North-East India.

Apart from Ahom, other groups who also claims to be Tai ethnicity are Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung. Let us discuss in brief each of them.

Tai Aiton language:

The other name of Tai Aiton language is Aitonia, Sham Daoniya and is a Tai Kadai language family having Burmese script (Aiton variation called Lik-Tai) which is a part of the Southwestern branch of the Tai family of languages and is classified as severely endangered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as

¹⁸ Dr. Bidhan Barman, “Language and Politics In Assam: After Independence”, volume 5 December-November, EPRA International Journal of Economics, Business and Management Studies Inno Space, (2018-19)

¹⁹ “Assam To Set Up Tai Language Teaching Centre For Sustaining And Popularising The Language”, Sentinel Digital Desk, 27/9/ 2021, available at <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-to-set-up-tai-language-teaching-centre-for-sustaining-and-popularising-the-language-556617> (last visited 10/01/2025)

²⁰ Centre For Endangered Languages Tezpur University, CFEL Annual Technical Report 2016-2017, available at http://www.tezu.ernet.in/wmcfel/pdf/Centre_for_Endangered.pdf (last visited on 12/01/2025)

²¹ Endangered Archives Programme, available at <https://eap.bl.uk/> last visited on 15/01/2025)

²² Nilakshi Sharma, “Documentation of Tai Ahom Manuscripts: Digital Archiving of Dead Language”, Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 286-291, DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology, 2020

²³ Stephen D. Morey, “The Tai Languages of Assam”.

according to it there are only 2000 speakers of this language worldwide.²⁴ According to Ethnologue (18th ed., 2015) there are 1500 speakers of Aiton language worldwide.²⁵ Aiton is used as first language by Aiton ethnic community however, most of them turned bilingual and speak Assamese language in their daily life with others but the language is still being learned by their children. It is closely related to Northern Shan script of Myanmar which is a variant of the Burmese script.²⁶ As per the Endangered Languages Project (ELP), Supporting and Celebrating Global Linguistic Diversity the native speakers of Aiton language worldwide are 1500 and the total ethnic Aiton population is 8000 in 2006.²⁷ Their language is recognized by the Government of Assam as ‘Man- Tai’ and they have status of Schedule Tribe (Hill) by Government of India.²⁸ Other languages used by these communities apart from their own Tai language are English, Hindi and Assamese.²⁹ 85 to 90 percentage of their population are literate in other languages than Tai.³⁰ When it comes to their own vigilance towards their language protection, they speak it with their own family, friends and community members and generally Assamese with others.³¹ They are very conscious about their language and tries to pass it from one generation to another.³²

Tai Khamti:

Tai-Khamti is a Tai-Kadai, South-Western China Tai language spoken by Khamti people in Myanmar and India and it is sometimes considered as dialect of Shan.³³ In India, most of the Khamti people lives in the plains of Lohit, Changlang, Lower Subansiri and Tirup districts, as well as the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh and in Assam, there is one small Khamti village near Margherita in Tinsukia district and North Lakhimpur District.³⁴ As per 2001 census

²⁴ Deepmoni Kakoty, Peter K. Austin “Tai Aiton (Assam, India) – Language Snapshot”, Language Documentation and Description, vol 17, EL Publishing, July 2020

²⁵ Online release of Ethnologue's 18th edition—updated data, maps and more, (February 2015), available at <https://www.sil.org/about/news/online-release-ethnologues-18th-edition%E2%80%94updated-data-maps-and-more> (last visited on 19/01/2025)

²⁶ *supra*

²⁷ Tai Aiton aka Aitonia, Sham Doaniya, “Endangered Languages Project”, available at <https://endangeredlanguages.com/lang/1426?hl=en> (last visited on 20/01/2025)

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid*

³³ Douglas Inglis, “(2017) Myanmar-based Khamti Shan Orthography”, Issue: 1, Volume: 10, Page Numbers: xlvii-lxi, Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society, 2017, available at <https://www.academia.edu/34791306> (last visited on 21/01/2025)

³⁴ Joshua Project, “Khampti in India”, available at <https://joshuaproject.net/> (last visited on 22/01/2025)

data, total population of Tai Khamti in India is 12,890 and there are fewer than 600 speakers in Assam and between 5,000 to 10,000 in Namsai and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh.³⁵ Their writing system is Burmese script (Khamti variation called Lik Tai).³⁶ The situation of Khamti language in India is “endangered/unsafe” (vulnerable) and it is a recognized and unstandardized indigenous community language.³⁷ There is no written material on this language but it does have some video and audio available in digital form.³⁸ The Scheme For Protection And Preservation Of Endangered Languages (SPPEL), launched by the Ministry of Education in 2013, listed Khamti as endangered language of North East India.³⁹

Tai-Khamyang:

Tai-khamyang is a Tai-Kadai, South-Western China Tai language and it is close kin of Shan, which is recognized as unstandardized indigenous community language spoken by Khamyang people in the Pawoimukh village of the Margherita, sub district of Tinsukia district of Assam and Namsai and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁰ According to Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), Ethnologue, total population of Khamyang in India is 200 out of which only 50 are fluent speakers of this indigenous language and it has been assigned as ‘dying status’ on Ethnologue EGIDS scale.⁴¹ The ascendant language spoken at Pawoimukh village is Assamese. The SPPEL, India 2013 listed Khamyang as endangered language of North East India.⁴² The Tai Languages of Assam, Khamyang is recognized as “critically endangered” language of India⁴³ with no written materials on it but have some video and audio materials in digitalized form.⁴⁴

³⁵ About: Khamti people, available at https://dbpedia.org/page/Khamti_people (last visited on 23/01/2025)

³⁶ Ritwiz Sarma, “Language Endangerment and Culture Loss – A Case Study of Tai Khamti”, Social and Political Research Foundation, 2022

³⁷ UNESCO WAL, “Khamti in India” 2021, available at <https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/india/languages/khamti> (last visited on 25/01/2025)

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ North-Eastern Zone, SPPEL, available at <https://sppel.org/northeastzone.aspx> (last visited on 26/01/2025)

⁴⁰ Chandrica Barua, “The Tai Khamyang Community in Assam: Society, Culture and Religion”, 2024 available at <https://www.sahapedia.org/tai-khamyangs-assam-history-and-folk-traditions> (last visited on 27/01/2025)

⁴¹ Tai-Khamyang Language, Centre For Endangered Languages Tezpur University, available at <http://www.tezu.ernet.in/wmcfel/tai-khamyang.php#:~:text=Tai-Khamyang%20is%20a%20Tai-Kadai%20language%20spoken%20in%20the,only%2050%20are%20fluent%20speakers%20of%20the%20language.> (last visited on 29/01/2025)

⁴² *Supra*

⁴³ Stephen D. Morey, “The Tai Languages of Assam”, Endangered Language Project, 2005

⁴⁴ UNESCO WAL “Khamyang in India” 2021, available at <https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/india/languages/khamyang> (last visited on 01/02/2025)

Tai-Phake:

Tai-Phake which is also known as Phakial language is closely related to Tai-Kadai, South-Western China Tai language, linguistically, they belong to Tai-Chin group of Sino-Tibetan family spoken in eleven Phake villages in both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India and they have their own script which is Burmese and Tai and volumes of written literature in manuscript form in Tai and Pali language, its variation is called Lik-Tai.⁴⁵ They are mostly found in upper and upper middle Assam in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts and Namsai and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁶ The total population of Tai-Phake population in India is about 2,000 and this people are conscious about the protection of their endangered language, and hence it is still learned by their children as they have 4,000 handwritten manuscripts at monastery and their home.⁴⁷ There are large number of manuscripts in every village and a significant number of people can read and write Tai script as they have rich compendium of abundant themes ranging from history, religion, folktales, herbal medicines etc.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, no documentation is done yet on such materials. Presently, an attempt to document Tai-Phake grammar and to produce a Tai-Phake English Hindi dictionary and Tai Phake ethno linguistic profile is undergoing.⁴⁹⁵⁰ However, Tai-Phake language has been influenced largely by Assamese language, as this people often use Assamese as their primary language with the people outside their community.⁵¹ This language is recognized as “definitely endangered” as it is spoken by less than 9,999 people in India.⁵²⁵³

⁴⁵ Mousumi Devi, Violina Deka, Manab Jyoti Bora, “Tai Phake An Endangered Language An Analytical Study with Aspect Of Social Condition In Assam”, Vol 19 (Issue 4), Ilkogretim Online - Elementary Education Online, 2020, pp.2944-2947, 2020

⁴⁶ Zafri Mudasser Nofil, “The Tai Phake community of Assam”, available at <https://www.assam.org/node/2354#:~:text=Most%20ask%20for%20world%20peace,to%20maintain%20their%20glorious%20legacy> (last visited on 03/02/2025)

⁴⁷ Ethnologue 17th edition, 2013 “Tai Phake”, Bhasha Sanchika, Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2013 available at <https://sanchika.ciil.org/communities/d16b6fc2-ba0e-4089-9687-a4e6d12b5f7d> (last visited on 04/02/2025)

⁴⁸ supra

⁴⁹ supra

⁵⁰ Stephen D. Morey, “Phake Dictionary, in collection Tangsa, Tai, Singpho in North East India”, bundle India, The Language Archive. 2007 available at https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/islandora/object/tla:1839_00_0000_0000_0017_C6F7_7?asOfDateTime=2018-03-02T11:00:00.000Z (last visited on 04/02/2025)

⁵¹ NEC UC Portal Reports, “Tai Phake” available at <https://necucportal.nic.in/reports/pl12.php?id=2519> (last visited on 0/02/2025)

⁵² UNESCO WAL, “Phake Language” 2021 available at <https://en.wal.unesco.org/languages/phake>

⁵³ Tai Phake or Phakial Documentation, SPPEL, available at [https://sppel.org/taiphakedoc.aspx#:~:text=They%20have%20own%20script%20\(Burmese,language%20or%20the%20valuable%20manuscripts.&text=Theravada%20Buddhism%20is%20a%20common,festival%20of%20the](https://sppel.org/taiphakedoc.aspx#:~:text=They%20have%20own%20script%20(Burmese,language%20or%20the%20valuable%20manuscripts.&text=Theravada%20Buddhism%20is%20a%20common,festival%20of%20the)

Tai-Turung:

According to Endangered Language Archive, Depositor Stephen Morey, Turung, also known as Tailung, Tairong language is an endangered Sino-Tibetan language, having Latin script of its own, are closely kindred to Singpho spoken in seven villages of Central Assam such as Golaghat, Karbi Anglong and Jorhat districts of Assam, India with total speakers of 1000 as on 2006.⁵⁴ It is homologous to Jinghpaw language spoken in Burma and China. According to Stephen Morey, there are audio files and written texts available on Turung language which includes stories of Buddha, traditional songs, traditional customs etc.⁵⁵ As the number of speakers of this language is small and increasing shift of it in Assamese language, it has the status of being “highly endangered language” in India, therefore, documentation of their linguistic practice is urgent need.⁵⁶ Since Turung is closely related to Singpho language of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the Singpho language is included in SPPEL “endangered language” list though direct mention of Turung is not found.⁵⁷ Now this language is extinct as in Assam as most Turung people speaks Assamese language. Not much information is available as what is the status of this language in UNESCO WAL platform.

Legal Aspects for Protection of Endangered Languages:**International Perspective:**

Several Organizations are working at international level to protect the interest of Linguistic minorities especially those which falls under endangered languages. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 (ICCPR) protects the interest of linguistic minorities by stating that they will not be denied the use of their own culture, profess and practice their own religion and use their own languages⁵⁸. Inspired by the provision of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 the United Nations General Assembly by Resolution 47/135 of 18-

%20Tai%20Phakes.&text=Presently%2C%20an%20attempt%20to%20document,ethno%20linguistic%20profil
e%20is%20undergoing (last visited on 07/02/2025)

⁵⁴ Stephen Morey, “Singpho Language of North East India (including Turung)”, Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University, Endangered Languages Archive, 2015, available at <https://www.elararchive.org/dk0006/> (last visited on 10/02/2025)

⁵⁵ *ibid*

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ North East Zone, SPPEL, available at <https://sppeel.org/northeastzone.aspx> (last visited on 10/02/2025)

⁵⁸ Article 27 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> (last visited on 11/02/2025)

12-ts of persons belonging to national, religious and linguistic of the Declaration imposes liability on the state to promote and protect the linguistic identity of minorities and also mentions that state parties should make legislation in their own state and adopt other measures to promote and protect linguistic minorities.⁵⁹ Indigenous and Tribal People Convention (ITPC), 1989 deals with education and means of Communication as it lays focus on the development of indigenous languages by adopting necessary measures concerned such as taught to read and write in their own language, competent authority shall be appointed who can undertake consultations with these people with the view to the adoption of measures to achieve this objective.⁶⁰ India has not ratified this convention. The United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous People, 2007 states that indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop, transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems and literatures and establish their educational systems and media in their own languages and to have access to an education in their own language.⁶¹ The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFI) established by resolution 2000/22 on 28th June, 2000 has consistently draw attention to threat against indigenous languages and pushed for actions to promote and protect the languages.⁶² The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the General Assembly in 2015 aims to ensure equal access for the indigenous people to all level of education and vocational training under the Sustainable Development Goals target 4.5 thus, use of indigenous language in education has been strongly put forth as an approach to meet this target.⁶³ The term “Intangible Cultural Heritage” as used in the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003 includes oral traditions and expressions, including language and the performing arts and lays emphasizes that the state parties are supposed to take necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding if the intangible cultural

⁵⁹ United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly (on the report of the Third Committee (A/47/678/Add.2)] 47/135. Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities”, 1993 available at [file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/A_RES_47_135-EN%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/A_RES_47_135-EN%20(1).pdf) (last visited on 11/02/2025)

⁶⁰ Article 28, Part IV, Indigenous and Tribal People Convention (ITPC), 1989 (ILO) (C169), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/indigenous-and-tribal-peoples-convention-1989-no-169> (last visited on 12/02/2025)

⁶¹ Article 13, 14, 15 United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous People, 2007 available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wpcontent/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf (last visited on 13/02/2025)

⁶² United Nations, “A Guide for Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations, National Human Rights Institutions and Indigenous Members of Parliament”, available at <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/2016/Docs-updates/Information-on-the-Permanent-Forum.pdf> (last visited on 14/02/2025)

⁶³ United Nations, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development A/RES/70/1” available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf?ref> (last visited on 15/02/2025)

heritage present in its territory such as adoption of appropriate policies and promotion of education and so on.⁶⁴ United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) defines four levels of language endangerment between “safe” (not endangered) and “extinct”.⁶⁵ They are-

- i. Vulnerable;
- ii. Definitely endangered;
- iii. Severely endangered;
- iv. Critically endangered.

In India United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization classifies 197 languages as endangered and considers Tai language of Assam, as ‘Severely Endangered’ language as total number of speakers are less than 10,000 worldwide.⁶⁶ The World Atlas of Language (WAL) is an online platform which provides accurate, reliable, up-to-date and robust language data for the entire world.⁶⁷

As early as 2003, the Permanent Forum recommended that Government introduce indigenous languages in public administration of indigenous territories where feasible and in 2005, the Forum recommended that United Nations Country offices make efforts to disseminate in indigenous languages, also The Permanent Forum also encouraged the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to support the creation of indigenous language and cultural studies in universities.⁶⁸ The United Nation General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/74/135) proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as International Decade of Indigenous languages to draw the global attention on critical situation

⁶⁴ UNESCO, “Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” 2003, ratified on 20th April 2006 with 30 states, available at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (last visited on 16/02/2025)

⁶⁵ UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, “Language Vitality and Endangerment”, Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages Paris, 2003 available at <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf> (last visited on 17/02/2025)

⁶⁶ Tadahiko L.A. Shintani, UNESCO, “Research on the Tai cultural area” pg 185-188, *Memories of People*, 92-3-103891-5, UNESDOC Digital Library, 2003 available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000130985> (last visited on 18/02/2025)

⁶⁷ *supra*

⁶⁸ United Nations, “United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)”, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2000 available at <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/unpfii> (last visited on 19/02/2025)

of indigenous language and their preservation of same. Ethnologue is Not-profit Organization which was founded in 1951.⁶⁹ Tai languages of Assam, India has been classified as an endangered language by Ethnologue.⁷⁰ In Online Platform by United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the 2021 study revealed that 76.9% of online languages corresponds to the world's top ten most spoken languages. Recognizing this threat, United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization leads efforts to preserve and integrate indigenous languages into digital world, in line with the 2003 Open Educational Resources (OER) recommendation.⁷¹

National Perspective:

The Constitution of India authorizes the linguistic minority citizens of India to conserve their languages, scripts and culture. It merely enables a cultural or linguistic minority people to preserve their language as it does not impose any positive obligation on the state to take any action to conserve any culture or language. There is no special legislation in India to protect endangered languages.

The Constitution of India gives protection to all linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.⁷² It is to be noted that these rights are fundamental rights of the people of India, hence it is justiciable in the Supreme Court and High Court respectively.⁷³ The Constitution also makes provision to provide instruction to the students in their mother tongue⁷⁴ and provides for the appointment of a Special Officer for linguistic minorities by the President of India and such officer ensures effective implementation of safeguard provided to linguistic minorities, investigate all matters and report back to the President of India.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Indigenous Languages Decade (2022-2032), UNESCO Decades available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages?hub=981> (last visited on 20/02/2025)

⁷⁰ Ethnologue, "Languages of The World", available at <https://www.ethnologue.com/index.html>

⁷¹ UNESCO, "Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER)", Ref.:CL/4319, 2019 available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373755/PDF/373755eng.pdf.multi.page=3> (last visited on 22/02/2025)

⁷² The Constitution of India, Article 29, 30(1) available at <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/ConstitutionofIndia342pages.pdf> (last visited on 25/02/2025)

⁷³ The Constitution of India, Article 32, 226 available at <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/ConstitutionofIndia342pages.pdf> (last visited on 25/02/2025)

⁷⁴ The Constitution of India, Article 350 A available at <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/ConstitutionofIndia342pages.pdf> (last visited on 25/02/2025)

⁷⁵ The Constitution of India, Article 350 B, available at <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/sites/default/files/2023-07/ConstitutionofIndia342pages.pdf> (last visited on 25/02/2025)

The Assam Official Language Act, 1960 provided that Assamese shall be used for all or any official purpose of State of Assam provided that the English language so long as the use thereof is permissible under Article 343 of the Constitution of India and thereafter, Hindi in place of English shall also be used for such official purposes of the Secretariat and the offices of the Head of Departments of the State Government and in such manner as may be prescribed. The said Act speaks about the safeguards of the use in Autonomous district, but there is no section provided specifically for promotion and protection of languages of linguistic minorities groups of Assam. The said Act also speaks about the rights of the various linguistics groups such as right in respect of medium of instructions in educational institutions, however, the word “linguistic minorities” is missing, which is apart from autonomous districts. Similarly, the Assam Official Language Act, 1960 amended twice in 1964 and 2020 but not a single provision has been inserted for linguistic minorities except those languages belonging to Autonomous districts or regions.⁷⁶⁷⁷⁷⁸

Documentation support schemes in India:

In order to address the issue of preserving endangered languages, University Grant Commission (UGC) constituted an Expert Committee who inter-alia recommended providing financial support to the Central Universities for setting Centers for study and research related to endangered languages and the Commission accepted the recommendations of the Committee and decided to launch a scheme namely Financial Assistance for setting up Centers for preservation and promotion of endangered languages during XII plan period.⁷⁹ Schemes for Protection and preservation of endangered Languages (SPPEL) was instituted by Ministry of Education (Government of India) in 2013 with the aim of document and archive the country's languages that has become moribund or likely to be moribund in near future. North Eastern Zone is one of the six zones under SPPEL. Out of eight states included in it, Assam is one of them. Several Tai languages of Assam are also included under this scheme such as Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung. The Scheme is monitored by Central Institute of Indian

⁷⁶ The Assam Official Language Act, 1960 (Assam Act No. XXXIII of 1960), s. 3,4,7

⁷⁷ The Assam Official Language (Amendment) Act, 1964, (Assam Act XXII of 1964)

⁷⁸ The Assam Official Language (Amendment) Act, 2020, (Assam Act No. XI of 2020),

⁷⁹ Promotion of Indian Languages (Bhartiya Bhasha), University Grant Commission, available at https://www.ugc.gov.in/Bureaus/bureaus_details?EI011TDIMNBhKP5a8VsoMnSuXBMLuKMjBsAUhWq1EF TfYCZJq2jbecCSNHegY3GCexYuF6V8kAc3xyT0xaQXw%2fpgopahU50IbviKN4%2f8MbQ%3d (last visited on 28/02/2025)

Language (CIL) located in Mysuru, Karnataka, India. The Central Institute of Indian Language has collaborated with various Universities across India for this mission.⁸⁰

The Right of children to Free and compulsory Education Act, 2009 and National Education Policy, 2020:

India is a growing nation and is determined to be known as a source of knowledge globally. For the past few years, the Indian government has been working to transform the traditional education model into a modern ed-tech framework, intending to become the greatest knowledge source. In the process of making it happen, the importance of the mother tongue in education has been discovered. The discovery has led to the introduction of the mother tongue in foundational education under the Indian school curriculum. It has opened new doors for students and has enabled them to learn more effectively. It has also helped to bridge the gap between the traditional and modern education systems. The National Curriculum Framework 2022 recommends that children be instructed in their Matribhasha (mother tongue) until they are eight.⁸¹ The Right to Education Act, 2009 states that the "*medium of instructions shall, as far as practicable, be in child's mother tongue.*" The knowledge transformation in regional languages has enabled students to understand the subject matter better and improve their overall learning experience.⁸² The National Education Policy 2020 advocates that "wherever possible, the medium of education will be the mother tongue/local language/regional language until at least Grade 5, but preferably until Grade 8 and beyond," both in public and private schools.⁸³

Endangered Languages: how we can save them?

There is no platform in Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) to conserve the endangered languages. Only some kind of expressions, phrases, poems, etc. of a particular language are subject to copyright but not the language as a whole as language is general in nature and lacks

⁸⁰ Endangered Languages in India, SPPEL, available at <https://sppel.org/#:~:text=Galvanized%20by%20the%20grim%20situation%20of%20lesser%20known,Ministry%20of%20Education%20%28Government%20of%20India%29%20in%202013.> (last visited on 01/03/2025)

⁸¹ National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage 2022, School Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022, available at <https://www.education.gov.in/national-curriculum-framework-foundational-stage-2022> (last visited on 03/03/2025)

⁸² The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (ACT NO. 35 OF 2009) s. Section 29(f) of Chapter V, available at https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/13682/1/rte_act_2009.pdf (last visited on 05/03/2025)

⁸³ National Education Policy 2020, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, available at https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf (last visited on 06/03/2025)

any ownership of individual. In an article published in the anthropology magazine ‘Sapiens’ Anastasia Riehl, director of the Strathy Language Unit at Queen’s University, Canada mentioned that “Language is the cultural glue that bind communities together”.⁸⁴ Every ethnic and indigenous language has its own jargons and phrases that evidences a specific meaning and idea. All these things must be kept in mind while curating and recording language resources. Unfolding detailed documentation is one of the most crucial steps in conserving an endangered language. These resources create a powerful record and assist the new generations in culturally adapting to their respective native language without investing time and effort in decoding them. Due to dominating factors of standard language in an area, the linguistic minorities sometimes find no use of their native language which leads to extinction of such language. So as is the matter of Tai languages of Assam where Tai languages are standing on the verge of extinction due to the extensive use of Assamese language in all parts of Assam including those areas where Tai people majorly reside. Technology growth and advancement can also contribute to the safety for Tai languages as many people made their channels and pages on popular social media platforms to promote their content in their own language. The language learning sessions and classes can also boon the speakers of language and imbue the same. Tai languages speakers should build up a sense of self-motivation among themselves and carry-out their ancestral language with gratification, be wide-awaken towards their rights of protection and shielding measures provided by Government of India, capital and grants given to revitalize their language, programs and projects carried out to protect their endangered language so that their issue can be addressed at grassroot level. More research work is essential to be carried out by Scholars especially through empirical study by visiting Upper Assam districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India in order to understand profound causes of declining factor of Tai languages. Lacuna in “The Assam Official Language Act” must be addressed so that due importance can be given to diverse linguistic minorities of Assam similar to “The Meghalaya State Language Act”, Meghalaya, a neighbouring state of Assam where the rights of linguistic minorities to protect and preserve their language is recognised respectively.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Anastasia Riehl, Strathy Language Unit, Queen’s University, Canada, 2010 available at <https://www.queensu.ca/strathy/anastasia-riehl> (last visited on 10/03/2025)

⁸⁵ The Meghalaya State Language Act, 2005 (Act No 10 of 2005), Part IV, s.5 available at https://megpolice.gov.in/sites/default/files/Meghalaya_Language_Act_2005.pdf, (last visited on 15/03/2025)