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Keeping the Khamyang Tongue Alive in Upper Assam through Documentation and Community Revival

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Abstract

Khamyang is a Southwestern Tai language spoken by a small Buddhist community in Upper Assam in North East India. Although the Khamyang people number roughly one thousand or slightly more, only a handful of elderly villagers in Pawoimukh near Margherita in Tinsukia district still use the language with full command, and recent field reports suggest that only one person remains fully proficient in speaking, reading and writing it. The historical background of the Khamyang community, the linguistic character of the language and the social forces that have pushed it to the edge of extinction is written. It then reviews the major efforts to document the language, from the colonial Linguistic Survey of India to the detailed grammatical and textual work of Stephen Morey, the oral literature collection supported by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme and the digital archiving initiative completed in 2026. Finally, it discusses community led revitalisation measures such as evening language classes, script workshops and textbook production, and it evaluates their prospects against established frameworks of language vitality. The article argues that documentation has secured a valuable record of Khamyang, but that the survival of the language as a living medium depends on sustained intergenerational transmission, institutional support and the continued commitment of the community itself.

Keywords: Khamyang, Tai, Assam, Endangerment, Documentation, Revitalisation, Pawoimukh, Manuscripts

Introduction

Languages are not merely tools for communication. They carry memory, ritual, ecological knowledge and a particular way of seeing the world. When a language disappears, much of the knowledge encoded in it disappears as well. Krauss (1992) warned that a large share of the world's languages would cease to be spoken within the twenty first century unless deliberate action was taken, and his warning launched a global movement for the documentation and revival of threatened languages. North East India, with its extraordinary concentration of Tibeto Burman, Austroasiatic and Tai languages, has become one of the most important regions in this movement.

Among the Tai languages of Assam, Khamyang occupies a particularly fragile position. It is listed as critically endangered in international inventories of threatened languages (Moseley, 2010), and Ethnologue reported only about fifty native speakers in an ethnic population of around eight hundred (Eberhard et al., 2022). More recent reports describe an even more serious situation. A documentation project completed in early 2026 found that only one elderly man in the world could still speak, read, write and fully understand the language (Press Trust of India, 2026; The Assam Tribune, 2026).

This article brings together the available scholarly and documentary evidence on Khamyang in order to address three questions. First, how did Khamyang reach its present endangered condition? Second, what has been done to record the language and its literature? Third, what revitalisation efforts are under way and how realistic are their chances of success? In answering these questions, the article draws on descriptive linguistic work, archival records, community reports and widely used theoretical frameworks on language endangerment and revival.

The Khamyang People and Their Historical Journey

Ahom, Aiton, Khamti, Phake and Turung. The community is also known by the name Shyam, a term widely used for Tai groups in Assam, and the language has been recorded under the alternative names Khamjang and Khamiyang (Endangered Languages Project, n.d.). Like the Phake, Aiton and Khamti, the Khamyang follow Theravada Buddhism, and the village monastery has long served as the centre of religious, social and educational life.

Community tradition holds that the ancestors of the Khamyang came from the upper Chindwin and Patkai region on the borderlands of present day Myanmar and moved into the Brahmaputra valley in several waves. Morey (2005) records that the Khamyang settled in Assam in the late eighteenth century and that the community became scattered during the turbulent final years of the Ahom kingdom, when civil conflict and Burmese invasions disrupted the region. As a result, Khamyang families came to live in several dispersed settlements across what are now Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Golaghat and Jorhat districts.

Today the community is estimated at between 1,000 and 1,400 people (The Assam Tribune, 2026). However, Morey (2005) observes that identifying as Khamyang does not necessarily mean speaking the language. In most Khamyang villages the ancestral tongue has already been replaced by Assamese, and only Pawoimukh, a village of a few dozen households located about seven miles downstream of Margherita, has retained a group of native speakers. The Khamyang name for the village translates as the village of the Pawai river, and a Buddhist temple with a small sand pagoda stands at its centre (Morey, 2005).

Linguistic Profile of Khamyang

Khamyang belongs to the Southwestern branch of the Tai languages within the larger Kra Dai or Tai Kadai family. It is closely related to Phake, Aiton, Khamti and Turung, and these varieties share a large part of their vocabulary and grammar (Morey, 2008). Because the Tai languages of Assam are so close to one another, some scholars have treated them as dialects of a single language, while community members generally regard them as separate languages tied to distinct group identities. Morey (2005) notes a further complication regarding the name Nora, which appears in older sources and is sometimes said to be identical to Khamyang, although he did not hear surviving speakers describe themselves by that name.

Like its sister languages, Khamyang is a tonal and largely monosyllabic language with a word order of subject, object and verb, a pattern that sets the Assam Tai languages apart from Thai and Lao. Comparative work by Morey (2005a) on tonal change across the Tai languages of North East India shows that the tone systems of these languages developed differently from one another, which makes each variety valuable for the historical reconstruction of Tai. Khamyang therefore holds importance not only for its speakers but also for comparative Tai linguistics.

Khamyang has a literary tradition written in a script of the Lik Tai type, which derives ultimately from the Burmese writing system and is shared in modified forms by the Phake, Aiton and Khamti. One notable feature of the Khamyang writing tradition is its use of tone marks, which helps distinguish its orthography from that of related Tai communities in Assam (Morey, 2005). Manuscripts written in this script include Buddhist scriptures, chronicles, astrological texts and ritual works, and they have long been preserved in monasteries and households. Post (2006) describes Morey's treatment of scripts and literary traditions as one of the most comprehensive features of his study, highlighting how closely the written heritage is tied to religious practice.

Dimensions of Endangerment

The endangerment of Khamyang can be understood through the framework proposed by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003), which identifies intergenerational transmission as the most important factor in language vitality. By this measure Khamyang is in a very weak position. Information collected for the Endangered Languages Project indicates that fluent speakers are mostly above fifty five or sixty years of age, that all speakers are bilingual in Assamese and that very few can read or write the language (Endangered Languages Project, n.d.). Children in Pawoimukh have some passive knowledge, and Morey (2005) identifies a middle generation of semi speakers whose abilities have not yet been fully studied.

Several social forces have contributed to this decline. The first is the dispersal of the community after its arrival in Assam, which separated Khamyang families into small settlements surrounded by speakers of Assamese and other languages. The second is the dominant position of Assamese in education, administration, trade and media. As in many other parts of the world, economic opportunity and social mobility have been linked to proficiency in the regional language and in English, which encourages parents to speak

those languages with their children. The third factor is intermarriage with other communities, which often leads households to adopt a common language other than Khamyang. Finally, the absence of Khamyang from the formal school curriculum has meant that young people have had few chances to read or write their ancestral language.

Fishman (1991) argued that a language survives as a living medium only when it is transmitted naturally within the family and the neighbourhood. On his Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, a language spoken mainly by elderly people who are socially isolated from younger generations sits near the most severe end. Lewis and Simons (2010) later expanded this scale into a more detailed instrument, and on that scale Khamyang would be placed among languages whose remaining fluent users belong to the grandparent generation and older. The situation of Khamyang therefore fits a familiar global pattern in which language shift occurs gradually over several generations until only a small group of elders remains.

History of Documentation

Khamyang has attracted scholarly attention for more than a century, although for much of that period it was recorded only briefly. Grierson (1904) included the Tai languages of Assam in the Linguistic Survey of India, which provided some of the earliest systematic notes on these communities. Later studies by Diller and others in the late twentieth century added observations on the Assam Tai varieties, including Khamyang (Morey, 2008).

The most detailed modern work was carried out by Stephen Morey, who conducted fieldwork among the Tai communities of Assam from 2001 onwards. His book The Tai Languages of Assam presents a grammar and annotated texts of Aiton and Phake together with a substantial account of Khamyang, including its history, its speakers, its writing system and its revitalisation efforts (Morey, 2005). The work was published with a linked digital collection in which language examples are connected to sound files and full transcriptions, an approach that reflects the principles of documentary linguistics outlined by Himmelmann (1998). Himmelmann argued that language documentation should create a lasting, multipurpose record of a language in use rather than only an abstract grammatical description, and Morey's work is often cited as an early example of this approach in North East India (Post, 2006). Morey later extended his documentation through a wider project on the Tangsa, Tai and Singpho communities of the Margherita area, and recordings from this work have been made available through the Endangered Languages Project.

A second major contribution came through the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, which funded the project Documentation of the oral literature of the Tai Khamyang community in Upper Assam, India, led by Palash Kumar Nath. The project recorded histories, traditional stories, songs and other forms of oral literature narrated by older members of the community (Nath, n.d.). According to the archive description, the collection was created with the explicit aim of producing textbooks and other learning materials for the Tai Khamyang mother tongue school, and it estimated that only twenty to twenty five fluent native speakers remained. The Endangered Languages Archive (2019) also noted that the documentation process itself generated new curiosity and interest in the language among community members, which shows how recording work can feed directly into revival.

The most recent initiative was the Endangered Language Programme carried out under the Digitising Assam archive led by the Nanda Talukdar Foundation, with support from the All Assam Students' Union. Over eight months, the project digitised about 650 Khamyang manuscript leaves, curated around 250 photographs of cultural life and recorded about 540 frequently used words and phrases, and the material was made publicly available online (Press Trust of India, 2026). The project relied heavily on Bhogeswar Thomung of Pawoimukh, an elderly resident described as the only person fully proficient in all aspects of the language (The Assam Tribune, 2026). This initiative followed UNESCO aligned documentation guidelines and placed written texts, speech, songs, prayers and cultural practices together in a single archive (India Today NE, 2026).

Revitalisation Initiatives

Efforts to revive Khamyang began within the community before most outside projects arrived. Morey (2005) describes a revitalisation programme that started in 2002, when Chaw Mihingta began teaching the language to primary school children in Pawoimukh. The classes were held in the late afternoon after regular school, and the lessons involved writing numbers, learning everyday vocabulary, practising short dialogues and copying Tai characters. Although modest in scale, these classes represented a crucial shift, because they placed the language back into the hands of children rather than leaving it only with elders.

In the years since, the community has organised language workshops in several Khamyang villages, published souvenir volumes and prepared textbooks to support the teaching of the script and the spoken language. Community leaders have pointed out, however, that these efforts depend largely on volunteers and private funding, which makes it difficult to maintain them over long periods. Similar experiences have been reported among other small communities of the region, including the Singpho and the Tai Phake, where scholars and community workers have combined digital documentation with after school classes and locally produced storybooks (Outlook, n.d.).

Hinton and Hale (2001) emphasise that successful revitalisation usually combines several strategies, such as language nests for young children, master and apprentice programmes that pair fluent elders with motivated learners, school based instruction and the use of the language in public and religious life. Several of these elements are already present in the Khamyang case. The Buddhist monastery offers a natural setting for the use of the written language, the evening classes provide early literacy and the recordings produced by documentation projects can serve as listening material when fluent elders are no longer available. What remains limited is the regular use of Khamyang in the home, which Fishman (1991) regards as the decisive step in reversing language shift.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed above allows several analytical observations that extend beyond a descriptive account of Khamyang. The first concerns the classification of its vitality. On the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, a language whose only remaining speakers belong to the grandparent generation and have few opportunities to use it falls at level 8b, described as nearly extinct (Lewis & Simons, 2010). Khamyang fits this description closely, and it corresponds to the critically endangered category in the UNESCO framework (Moseley, 2010; UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). Lewis and Simons (2010) also note that the scale can be applied to languages under revitalisation. This is important for Khamyang, because it means that success need not be measured only by a return to full household use. A movement from level 8b to a stage where a body of younger learners uses the language for limited purposes would already represent measurable progress.

A second observation concerns the gap between ethnic identity and language use. Morey (2005) shows that people continue to identify as Khamyang in villages where the language is no longer spoken, and the community today is estimated at more than a thousand people while the fluent speakers can be counted on one hand (The Assam Tribune, 2026). Grenoble and Whaley (2006) argue that revitalisation planning must begin with an honest assessment of such conditions and must set goals that match the resources and motivations of the community. In the Khamyang case, the persistence of a strong ethnic and religious identity is a genuine resource, because it provides a reason to learn the language. Yet the same separation of identity from language also means that the community can remain culturally intact without the language, which reduces the everyday pressure to transmit it.

A third observation relates to the changing purposes of documentation. Himmelmann (1998) proposed that language documentation should be treated as a field in its own right, aimed at a lasting and multipurpose record of language in use, and he later described the response of linguistics to endangerment as both the preservation and the reproduction of linguistic knowledge (Himmelmann, 2008). The Khamyang record illustrates three distinct phases of this agenda. Morey's work was primarily descriptive and comparative and placed Khamyang within the history of Southwestern Tai (Morey, 2005, 2008). Nath's project was oriented toward oral literature and toward producing teaching materials for the community (Nath, n.d.). The 2026 digitisation initiative focused on heritage preservation, especially manuscripts and photographs (Press Trust of India, 2026). Each phase generated different kinds of data, and these materials are now held in different archives. The literature on endangered language archiving stresses that access, interoperability and the return of materials to communities are as important as collection itself (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). A consolidated catalogue of Khamyang resources, written in Assamese and accessible to the community, would therefore make the existing record far more useful for revival.

The value of audio documentation deserves particular emphasis for a tonal language. Although the Khamyang script marks tones, written texts cannot capture how tones are actually realised in speech. Morey (2014) argues that tones in the languages of North East India are categories that may involve a bundle of features beyond pitch alone, and that their analysis depends heavily on recorded speech and comparative evidence. Recordings of the

last fluent speakers are therefore irreplaceable. Once these speakers are gone, learners will depend on archived audio to acquire tonal distinctions correctly, which strengthens the case for continued recording of natural conversation rather than word lists alone.

A fourth observation concerns the role of literacy in revitalisation. Community classes in Pawoimukh have focused strongly on the Tai script, which carries religious prestige and links learners to the monastic tradition (Morey, 2005). Grenoble and Whaley (2006) caution, however, that literacy programmes alone rarely restore spoken use, and that a community may produce readers of religious texts without producing conversational speakers. The Khamyang movement would therefore benefit from balancing script instruction with oral methods, such as the pairing of elders and learners recommended by Hinton and Hale (2001).

Finally, the varying estimates of speaker numbers raise a methodological point. Ethnologue reported about fifty speakers (Eberhard et al., 2022), the oral literature project estimated twenty to twenty five fluent speakers (Nath, n.d.) and the 2026 reports identify only one person with complete proficiency (Press Trust of India, 2026). These figures are not necessarily contradictory. They reflect different points in time and, more importantly, different definitions of proficiency, ranging from conversational ability to full command of reading, writing and ritual language. Such differences show why semi speakers, whom Morey (2005) identified but did not fully study, deserve careful attention. Their partial competence may be the most practical foundation for revival, and a narrow focus on a single last speaker risks overlooking the wider pool of knowledge that still exists in the community. Nath has also pointed to negative attitudes toward the mother tongue as a major cause of language loss in the region and has stressed the need to train community linguists who can continue the work locally (Outlook, n.d.). Addressing these attitudes and building local expertise may matter as much as any external documentation project.

Challenges and the Way Forward

The Khamyang case illustrates both the achievements and the limits of documentation. Thanks to the work of Morey, Nath and the Digitising Assam team, future generations will have access to grammatical descriptions, recordings, manuscripts and photographs that would otherwise have been lost. Yet documentation alone does not keep a language alive. As one community observer remarked in a regional report, foreign researchers had studied the area for many years, but such research by itself would not guarantee the revival of the language (India Today NE, 2020).

Several measures could strengthen the prospects of Khamyang. First, a master and apprentice programme pairing the remaining fluent and semi fluent speakers with younger adults could transfer spoken competence while it is still possible. Second, the materials archived by documentation projects should be adapted into simple learning resources such as illustrated readers, audio lessons and mobile applications, so that the archive becomes a tool for learners rather than only a record for researchers. Third, the state government and educational institutions could recognise Khamyang as a subject in local schools and support trained teachers, in line with the emphasis on mother tongue education in national policy. Fourth, cooperation with closely related Tai communities, especially the Phake and Aiton, could provide shared teaching resources, script fonts and cultural events that create real contexts for language use. Finally, the community itself must continue to value the language as a marker of identity and spiritual heritage, because external support can encourage revival but cannot replace the commitment of speakers and learners.

It is also important to be realistic about outcomes. In situations where only a few elders remain, revitalisation may not restore Khamyang to its former role as an everyday household language within a single generation. Even so, partial revival can still be meaningful. A generation of young people who can read Khamyang manuscripts, recite prayers, sing traditional songs and hold simple conversations would preserve a living link with the past and could form the basis for further growth in the future.

Conclusion

Khamyang stands today at a decisive moment. Its community remains strong in identity and faith, but the language that once united it is now spoken fluently by only a very small number of elders in Pawoimukh. Over the past two decades, scholars and community members have built an impressive record of the language, from Morey's grammar and texts to the oral literature archive supported by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme and the large digital collection completed in 2026. Alongside these efforts, local teachers and volunteers have kept the script and the spoken

language visible to children through classes, workshops and textbooks.

The experience of Khamyang shows that documentation and revitalisation must go together. Documentation preserves what exists, while revitalisation determines whether the language will continue to be used. If the existing records are transformed into accessible teaching materials, if institutions provide steady support and if families and monasteries create daily spaces for the language, Khamyang may yet survive as a living voice rather than only as an archived memory. Its story is a reminder that every endangered language represents a unique part of human heritage and that timely action can still make a difference.

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