

The Tiwa Community of Assam: A Historical and Cultural Study

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Abstract: *The Tiwa community, also known as Lalung, is an indigenous ethnic group primarily found in Assam and Meghalaya in Northeast India. They are known for their rich cultural heritage, including a distinct language, unique socio-religious practices, and a vibrant history. This article explores the origins, cultural evolution, socio-political structure, and current issues facing by the Tiwa community. This paper will provide a comprehensive understanding of the Tiwa Tribe's history, geographical settlement, religious belief, cultural practices, and the significance of their folk festival in strengthening social integrity in Assam.*

Keywords: Assam, Cultural Study, Festivals, Rituals, Scheduled Tribe, Tiwa Community

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1. Introduction

The Tiwa tribe, indigenous to parts of Assam in northeastern India and regions in the state of Meghalaya is an ethnic group with a rich cultural heritage. The Tiwa community's roots can be traced back to the Tibeto-Burman lineage, indicating ancestral connections with other ethnic groups in the area. Historical records and oral traditions indicate that the Tiwas migrated from the hills of present-day Meghalaya to the plains of Assam many centuries ago. This migration was likely motivated by the search for fertile land and better living conditions. They are known for their distinct language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, although many Tiwa's are also fluent in Assamese and Khasi. The Tiwa (Lalung) community is officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST). They typically follow a matrilineal system, similar to the Khasi and Garo communities. In the plains, the Tiwa's have integrated with Assamese culture and language, often adopting Hindu practices. Those residing in Meghalaya have been influenced by the Khasi culture and many have converted to Christianity. Similarly, Tiwas in Karbi Anglong have integrated with the Karbi community and also some of them converted to Christianity (Dewri, 2020). This assimilation poses a threat to the distinct identity, culture, language, and religion of the Tiwa community, potentially leading to their extinction in the future. The Tiwa society is predominantly agrarian, with rice being the staple crop, supplemented by fishing, hunting, and traditional crafts.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To study about the Demographic characteristics of the Tiwa tribe and their cultural practices.
- To study the Social Integration and cohesion among Tiwa community.
- To evaluate the efforts made by the Tiwa community in preservation and promotion of cultural Identity.

3. Significance of the study

The tradition and culture of the Tiwa community are being influenced by modernity and globalization. As a result, some Tiwa people are starting to neglect their own traditional practices and cultural heritage in favor of modern ways. Understanding and studying the historical and cultural aspects of the Tiwa community in Assam has become crucial for preserving their heritage, promoting socio-economic development, and fostering greater cultural understanding and unity in region.

4. Settlement and Geographical Distribution

In Assam, the Tiwas primarily inhabit the districts of Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup and Karbi Anglong. In Meghalaya, they are predominantly located in the Ri-Bhoi district. In addition, the Dhemaji areas of the Dhemaj subdivision in the Lakhimpur district are home to a small number of Lalung settlements. The

community is divided into Plains Tiwas and Hill Tiwa's, based on their geographical settlements, which correspond to variations in cultural practices and socio-economic activities. The Tiwa tribe primarily resides in these regions, which include both plains and hill areas. The cultural traditions and way of life of the Tiwa people differ based on their specific locations, influenced by neighboring communities and the dominant religions in those areas.

5. Language and Literature

The Tiwa language is part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Although it has been influenced by Assamese, particularly among the Plains Tiwas, the language continues to be a crucial aspect of their identity. Various endeavors to conserve and propagate the Tiwa language include educational initiatives, cultural festivals, and literary programs. The Tiwa language, spoken in North-East India, is facing endangerment as fewer people are passing it down to the next generation, largely due to the influence of more dominant languages in the region. It is crucial to enhance and preserve the language, and this requires effective planning and through documentation to ensure its survival (Dewri & Haokip, 2021). Tiwa language is linguistically distinct yet shares similarities with other languages in the region, reflecting the historical interactions between various ethnic groups. The Tiwa language is traditionally passed down orally, which underscores the importance of oral communication within the community. Although there is a limited written tradition, efforts have been made to develop a standardized script and promote literacy in Tiwa. The language incorporates elements of Assamese, the predominant language in Assam, due to the close interaction and bilingualism of the Tiwa people. This bilingualism has led to the integration of Assamese vocabulary and expressions into everyday Tiwa speech. The literature of the Tiwa community is primarily oral, encompassing a wide range of genres including folktales, myths, legends, songs, and proverbs. This oral literature is not only a repository of the community's historical memory but also a medium for imparting moral values, cultural norms, and collective wisdom.

6. Social Structure and Governance

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to document and promote Tiwa language and literature. Scholars, cultural activists, and community organizations are working to compile Tiwa folktales, songs, and proverbs into written anthologies. Educational initiatives aimed at teaching the Tiwa language in schools have also been introduced, with the goal of preserving linguistic heritage for future generations. The Tiwa society operates on a clan-based system, with each clan (khel) assigned specific roles and duties. Traditional governance is led by a village chief called "Loro" responsible for managing community affairs. Additionally, the Tiwas have adopted the modern panchayat system, introduced during British colonial rule, establishing a dual governance structure that harmonizes traditional authority with contemporary administrative frameworks.

7. Religious Beliefs

The Tiwas follow a syncretic religious system that combines animism and Hinduism. They worship natural elements, ancestral spirits, and Hindu deities. The population is split into two main cultural and social groups. Those who live in the plains speak Assamese, adhere to a patrilineal descent system, and use Assamese surnames. In contrast, those residing in the hills speak a Tibeto-Burmese language from the Bodo-Garo group, follow a primarily matrilineal system, and are organized into distinct clans for tracing their ancestry. The 'hill Tiwa' follow their traditional religion, while the 'plains Tiwa' are predominantly Hindu. The Tiwa religion revolves around the worship of natural forces, though since the 1950s, there has been an increasing number of converts to Christianity. Despite the differences, both the hill and plains Tiwa groups claim a common ancestry. They both assert a historical connection to the principality of Gobha, mentioned in the Buranjis since the early 18th century as a significant trade center between the Ahom and Jaintia kingdoms. It is believed that the Gobha raja belonged to a Tiwa clan and that his domain largely overlaps with Tiwa-populated areas, although detailed information about this principality is scarce. The veneration of the legendary Gobha Raja as a sacred figure remains significant and continues to have a profound socio-religious impact among the Tiwa (Patar, 2015). Their rituals often include offerings to these deities and spirits to seek blessings for prosperity and protection. At the core of Tiwa religious beliefs is animism, the belief that all elements of nature such as trees, rivers, mountains, and animals—possess a spirit or life force. This belief system underscores the Tiwas profound respect for nature and their environment. Rituals and

ceremonies are often conducted to honor these natural spirits, seeking their blessings for a bountiful harvest, protection from natural calamities, and overall well-being. The institutions known as “Kirtan Ghar” play a significant role in the religious and social life of the Tiwa community. Notable examples include “Borghar,” “Thaan Ghar”, and “Namghar”. Additionally, the communal work system, especially the involvement of Tiwa youth in “Chamadi” (a platform for young members of the community), and their social responsibilities are critical aspects of their culture (Senapati, 2020).

8. Festivals and Rituals

The Tiwa community commemorates various festivals that underscore their agrarian lifestyle and cultural diversity. The Tiwas follow a blend of traditional animistic beliefs and Hinduism, with a strong emphasis on ancestor worship and nature veneration. Their social organization is characterized by a clan-based system, which governs marriage alliances, inheritance, and communal activities. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and external influences, the Tiwa community has managed to preserve its identity through a strong sense of cultural pride and communal solidarity. Some of the key festivals are as follows:

Pisu (Bihu): Tiwas of different areas observe Bihu in different days of the week. Through there is similarity with other communities as the main agricultural festivals, in some dance form and rituals the Tiwas Bihu is distinctive. Some of the distinctive features of Tiwas are Boka Nach, Jora tola ceremony, Bheti karha ceremony, Gosai utiwa utsav etc.

Junbeel Mela: This annual fair in Morigaon facilitates barter trade between Tiwas and other communities, reflecting historical trade practices and fostering communal harmony. These days, the Junbeel mela welcomes visitors from all around the world, including international tourists. The promotion of the state of Assam’s tourist industry might benefit greatly from the inclusion of this fair as an appealing aspect of cultural tourism (Zaman & Medhi, 2023).

Wansuwa: A harvest festival featuring rituals expressing gratitude to deities for a bountiful harvest.

Sagra Misawa: A spring festival marking the beginning of the sowing season, characterized by traditional dances and songs.

Borot Utsav: It is celebrated in the full moon day called *pu rnima* of the month of puha. The festival is observed to make the society free from pestilence, epidemic or aggression of wild animals.

Langkhan Phuja: it is observed twice in a year. One is observed in Kati and the other is observed in fagun.

In these festival, Tiwas community sings two types of songs. These are:

- Lo Ho La Hai - songs of the ceremony of name giving, wedding, harvesting etc.
- Lali Hilali Lai - songs of marriage ceremony, Karam and such other festivals.

9. Arts and Crafts

Tiwa women are renowned for their expertise in weaving, creating intricate textiles using traditional handlooms. Basket weaving, pottery, and other crafts are essential to Tiwa culture, showcasing their artistic heritage and practical way of life. Weaving is one of the most significant and widespread crafts among the Tiwa people. Tiwa women are skilled weavers, creating intricate textiles using traditional handlooms. The fabrics, often made from cotton and sometimes silk, are adorned with vibrant colors and geometric patterns that are distinctive to the Tiwa community. These textiles are used to make traditional garments such as the Kasong (wrap-around skirt) and Phaskai (a breast cloth). The designs and motifs often have symbolic meanings and are passed down through generations, preserving cultural narratives and traditions. Bamboo and cane are abundant in the Tiwa-inhabited regions, and the community has developed sophisticated techniques to utilize these materials. Tiwa artisans create a variety of items, including baskets, mats, fishing traps, and household utensils. The craft of making Duli (bamboo baskets) and Sop (winnowing fans) is especially notable. These items are not only functional but also exhibit aesthetic appeal with their intricate patterns and sturdy construction. Bamboo and cane crafts play an essential role in the daily life and economy of the Tiwa people, showcasing their ingenuity and resourcefulness.

The Tiwa people adorn themselves with various traditional ornaments, such as Shap lo necklaces, Khaila and Khaidong ear pieces, Singli lo garlands, Pomola necklaces, Khuri lo garlands made from cowry shells, Sigi lo garlands crafted from old coins, and Yastam rings. They have a rich musical and dance culture, using instruments like Khram drums, Bamboo flutes, Kali pipes, Tandang (a type of indigenous violin), and Thogari string instruments. (Elahi & Mahanta, 2024).

10. Economic Activities

The Tiwa community primarily relies on agriculture, with wet-rice cultivation being predominant. In hilly regions, they practice jhum (shifting) cultivation. Additionally, the Tiwas engage in fishing, livestock rearing, and small-scale trade. They are also known for their expertise in herbal medicine and sustainable farming practices. Agriculture is the primary source of income for the plains Tiwas in Assam. However, their earnings are generally low due to the limited use of modern agricultural inputs like high-yield variety (HYV) seeds, necessary fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides. Additionally, there is a lack of knowledge among the farmers regarding the proper use of these inputs. Furthermore, frequent flooding, particularly in the districts of Morigaon, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Karbi Anglong and Nagaon, poses significant challenges to their farming activities (Payeng, 2019).

11. Contemporary Issues and Developments

The Tiwa community is grappling with several challenges, such as land alienation, cultural assimilation, and economic marginalization. Modernization and migration have contributed to the erosion of traditional practices and socio-cultural structures. The Tiwas efforts to promote education, sustainable agriculture, and cultural preservation reflect their dynamic adaptation to contemporary challenges while maintaining a profound respect for their heritage. Tiwa Autonomous Council was founded in 1995, the Tiwa Autonomous Council promotes the socio-economic development of Tiwa regions, preserves Tiwa culture, enhances education, and improves infrastructure. The Tiwa community actively participated in the 1979 Assam movement against illegal immigration but was dissatisfied with its outcomes. In response, the Lalung Youth Front formed the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC) in 1985 to demand autonomy. Despite submitting multiple memorandums, it wasn't until 1993 that Assam's Chief Minister considered autonomy for the Tiwas. The Tiwa Autonomous Council was officially established through the Lalung (Tiwa) Accord in 1995, despite some disagreements with other organizations. The Council's structure, based on the Sixth Schedule, consists of 40 members with executive powers over 34 subjects, including agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure (Chamsal, 2020). This establishment marked a significant milestone for the Tiwa community's self-governance.

12. Cultural Preservation Efforts

The development of Tiwa language and literature has fallen short of expectations due to inadequate efforts by their own Tiwa peoples. Several organizations and community initiatives are dedicated to preserving and promoting Tiwa heritage. Despite having rich folk cultures, Tiwa people are encouraged to abandon unscientific traditions while embracing those that are scientifically sound. Some Tiwas have fully adopted Krishnaguru's path, Srimanta Sankardev's religion and culture, while others have forsaken their culturally significant traditions (Dewri, 2020). By striking a balance between preserving valuable cultural practices and adopting progressive ones, the Tiwa community can advance on the path of development. These efforts include cultural festivals, educational programs, and documentation projects, all aimed at ensuring the survival of Tiwa traditions and language. The Tiwa community is renowned for its rich traditions in music and dance, which play a central role in their social and religious life. These art forms reflect the community's values, stories, and heritage. Tiwa folk songs cover various themes, including love, nature, daily life, and historical events. These songs are performed during festivals, rituals, weddings, and community gatherings. Traditional musical instruments include the Khram, a drum used in many ceremonies and dances; the Siphung, a bamboo flute essential for creating melodic tunes; the Doba, another type of drum providing rhythm in performances; and the Gogona, a jaw harp used to create unique sounds, often in conjunction with other instruments. Specific song styles include Wanshuwa songs, sung during the Wanshuwa festival to celebrate the harvest and express gratitude to the deities, and Yangli songs, performed during the Yangli festival, focusing on agricultural themes and community unity. The Tiwa have a variety of traditional dances. Langkhon is performed during festivals, featuring rhythmic movements and vibrant attire. Dain Niam is a

ritual dance performed during religious ceremonies to seek blessings from the deities. These dances are usually accompanied by traditional music, creating a lively and engaging cultural experience. Music and dance are vital to Tiwa cultural identity, helping to preserve their heritage and strengthen community bonds.

Now a days, various Tiwa organizations like All Tiwa Students' Union (ATSU), Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra (TMT), The all Tiwa Protection Committee (ATPC), Tiwa Womas Council (TWC) and many other organizations seem to be trying for promoting Tiwa language, folklore and rich culture of their own. Promoting cultural tourism and participation in cultural exchange events helps to showcase Tiwa culture to a wider audience, fostering appreciation and support for their preservation efforts.

13. Conclusion

The Tiwa community of Assam and Meghalaya is a vibrant and integral part of Northeast India's cultural landscape. Their history, cultural practices, and social structures showcase their significant contribution to the region's diversity. Despite contemporary challenges, the Tiwas are dedicated to preserving and promoting their heritage, ensuring their unique identity and legacy persist for future generations. Through ongoing efforts in cultural preservation and socio-economic development, the Tiwa community remains a dynamic and essential component of India's diverse ethnic mosaic. The hill peoples of the Tiwa community have a unique socio-cultural and material lifestyle that distinguishes them from the Plain Tiwas. Despite being rich in culture, the hill Tiwas face challenges due to a lack of basic amenities and infrastructure, which keeps them relatively isolated. Traditional taboos, beliefs, and customs contribute to some of these issues. Additionally, a lack of awareness, education, training, agricultural facilities, and access to markets are common problems that hinder the development of the Tiwas communities (Bordoloi, 2020).

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