



TRADITION, POWER, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF WOMEN IN TIWA SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT :

The Tiwa (Lalung) community of Assam represents one of the culturally vibrant indigenous groups distinguished by its unique social organization, traditional institutions, and rich heritage. This paper examines the role and status of women in Tiwa society, with special reference to their contributions to household management, indigenous knowledge systems, ritual practices, and traditional governance. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis of published sources, review of relevant scholarly literature, and field-based data collected through interviews and interactions with community informants. Both primary and secondary sources have been utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The paper comparatively analyzes the Hill and Plains Tiwa communities, highlighting the matrilineal foundation of the Hill Tiwas and the patrilineal yet women-respecting structure of the Plains Tiwas. It reveals that Tiwa women serve as custodians of cultural continuity through their expertise in traditional food practices, ethno-medicine, weaving, natural dyeing, rice-beer preparation, and ritual performance. Furthermore, their institutional presence in governance—particularly through the office of the Hari Kuwari—demonstrates a distinctive model of female authority within a tribal administrative system. In the context of globalization and socio-cultural change, the study argues that the resilience and continuity of Tiwa identity are deeply sustained by the agency, responsibility, and leadership of its women.

Keywords: *Tiwa (Lalung) Society; Tiwa Women; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Hari Kuwari; Cultural Preservation.*

I. Introduction:

Assam is home to a rich mosaic of folk cultures shaped by numerous ethnic communities, among which the Tiwa (Lalung) community occupies a significant position. The Tiwas, belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid stock and linguistically affiliated with the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, are recognized as one of the indigenous communities of Assam (Deka, 2015; Deuri,



1983). They possess a distinct cultural heritage reflected in their language, oral traditions, customs, and social institutions.

Traditionally, the Tiwa community has been divided into two major groups based on geographical habitation; Hill Tiwas and Plains Tiwas. The Hill Tiwas have largely retained their indigenous language, customary practices, and traditional institutions, whereas the Plains Tiwas have experienced considerable assimilation into the Assamese linguistic and socio-cultural milieu (Patar, 2015). Geographically, Tiwa settlements are concentrated in districts such as Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, and Kamrup, with additional populations found in Dhemaji, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Titabor, and parts of Meghalaya (Deka, 2015).

A distinctive feature of Tiwa society is its dual social structure. Hill Tiwa society follows a matrilineal system, where descent and inheritance are traced through the female line, and daughters inherit ancestral property. In contrast, Plains Tiwa society follows a patrilineal system; however, women continue to enjoy a respected and influential position within the family and community (Deuri, 1983; Patar, 2019). In both systems, women actively participate in household management, social rituals, and religious observances, thereby playing a central role in sustaining the social and cultural life of the community.

II. Review of Literature:

The Tiwas constitute a significant ethnic community belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Scholarly engagement with Tiwa language and culture began relatively late, largely due to the absence of an indigenous script. Early documentation of the Tiwa (Lalung) language was carried out using the Roman script. A pioneering contribution in this regard was made by George Abraham Grierson in *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, Part III (1903), where he presented twelve specimens of the Tiwa language. Grierson's work marked the first systematic linguistic documentation of Tiwa and laid the foundation for subsequent academic inquiry into the language and its structural features (Grierson, 1903).

Following Grierson's efforts, further linguistic research was undertaken by Father Michael Borrane, a French linguist and missionary who made substantial contributions to the study and documentation of the Tiwa language. Borrane not only analyzed the grammatical and lexical structure of the language but also translated the Bible into Tiwa, thereby expanding its literary corpus and facilitating



literacy through Roman script usage. His works significantly strengthened the early written tradition of the Tiwa language and contributed to its preservation during a period of cultural transition (Deka, 2015).

The growth of Tiwa literature and intellectual consciousness gained momentum with the emergence of community-based publications. Journals such as Lalung Darbar and Sadau Asay Tiwa (Lalung) Sanmilan's mouthpiece Ningsang Alochani played an important role in fostering literary awareness and cultural revival among the Tiwas. These periodicals provided a platform for the articulation of social concerns, folklore, historical narratives, and linguistic development. They also marked the beginning of a self-conscious effort to preserve and promote Tiwa identity through written expression (Patar, 2015).

A major institutional milestone in the development of Tiwa literature was the establishment of the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha in 1981. Alongside it, the formation of the Tiwa Mathonlai Tantra created an organized framework for publishing books and promoting research on Tiwa society and culture. The Tiwa Mathonlai Tantra published several important works in Assamese, employing a revised Roman script and a modified Assamese script for Tiwa language representation. This dual-script approach reflects an adaptive strategy aimed at balancing linguistic preservation with broader regional accessibility (Deka, 2015). These institutional initiatives significantly strengthened the academic and literary foundations of Tiwa studies.

Among the notable scholarly contributions is the edited volume *Tiwa Janagosthir Bhasha-Sahitya-Sanskriti (Language, Literature, and Culture of the Tiwa Community)* edited by Pankaj Kumar Deka (2015). This comprehensive work includes contributions from nearly thirty scholars, including Maneswar Deuri, Upend Barta Hazarika, Muralidhar Das, Jyotirekha Hazarika, Balainme Senapati, Hatem Ali, and Binaj Gator. The volume provides an interdisciplinary exploration of Tiwa language, folklore, history, customs, governance, and socio-cultural practices. It offers valuable insights into traditional institutions, ritual systems, and the transformation of Tiwa society under modern influences. Particularly significant is its discussion of women's roles within the social and administrative structure, including the institution of the Hari Kuwari (Deka, 2015).

Earlier foundational works such as Deuri's *Tiwa Society* (1983) provide detailed ethnographic accounts of social organization, kinship patterns, customary laws, and religious practices. Deuri's study remains a key reference for understanding the structural features of Tiwa society, including its matrilineal and patrilineal dimensions. Similarly, Patar's *Society and Culture of the Tiwa Tribe* (2015) and *Glimpses of Tiwa Folk Culture* (2019) expand upon themes of folklore, traditional governance, weaving, food



habits, and ritual life. These works collectively highlight the centrality of women in sustaining domestic, economic, and ceremonial functions within the community.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the earlier scholarship has focused primarily on language documentation, folklore, and general socio-cultural description. While women's participation is acknowledged in discussions of household management, weaving, ritual roles, and the office of the Hari Kuwari, there remains scope for a more focused gender-based analysis. Existing literature recognizes women's respected status within Tiwa governance and ritual institutions; however, systematic exploration of their agency, authority, and role in cultural continuity remains limited.

Therefore, the present study builds upon earlier linguistic, ethnographic, and cultural scholarship while specifically foregrounding the role and status of Tiwa women. By integrating textual sources with field-based observations, it seeks to contribute to the growing body of Tiwa studies through a gender-centered perspective, situating women not merely as cultural participants but as active agents of preservation, governance, and identity formation.

III. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives in this study are to

- 1) To examine the socio-cultural status and role of women in Tiwa (Lalung) society.
- 2) To analyze the institutional and administrative role of women in Tiwa governance.

IV. Methodology:

The present study is based on a qualitative research methodology designed to examine the role and status of women in Tiwa (Lalung) society within its socio-cultural framework. Both primary and secondary sources of data have been utilized to ensure a comprehensive and balanced analysis.

Primary data were collected through fieldwork conducted in selected Tiwa-inhabited areas. Informal interviews and personal interactions were carried out with knowledgeable members of the community, including elderly informants and women actively involved in social and ritual practices. These interactions helped in understanding lived experiences, customary norms, traditional knowledge systems, and the functioning of institutions such as the Hari Kuwari within Tiwa society.

Secondary data were gathered through an extensive review of books, edited volumes, and scholarly works related to Tiwa society, culture, language, and social organization. Relevant texts by researchers such as Deka (2015), Deuri (1983), and Patar (2015, 2019) were consulted to contextualize field findings within existing academic discourse.



The collected data were systematically analyzed using descriptive and interpretative methods, with particular attention to gender roles, cultural practices, and institutional structures in both Hill and Plains Tiwa communities.

V. Results and Discussion:

The Tiwa (Lalung) community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily inhabiting the plains and hills of Assam and Meghalaya, possesses a distinct socio-cultural fabric characterized by a transition between matrilineal traditions and patriarchal influences. Examining the socio-cultural status and role of women in Tiwa society reveals a structure where women are not merely domestic figures but are central to the preservation of kinship, ritual, and economic stability.

The Matrilineal Foundation and Kinship Status

The socio-cultural identity of Tiwa women is fundamentally rooted in their matrilineal heritage, particularly among the Hill Tiwas. Unlike the broader patriarchal structures of South Asia, the Tiwa community traditionally traces descent through the female line, where the mother's lineage determines the clan (*khul*) of the children. In this system, women serve as the "guardians of the lineage," and the practice of matrilocal residence where the husband moves to the wife's household remains a significant marker of female social standing. This matrilineal framework grants women a high degree of social security and autonomy within the family unit, as they are the primary links in the chain of ancestral inheritance and kinship identity (Deori, 2002).

Economic Roles and the Jhum Economy

Economically, Tiwa women are the backbone of the traditional agrarian society. Their role in *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation and plains agriculture is exhaustive, involving activities from sowing seeds to harvesting and managing granaries. Beyond the fields, Tiwa women are renowned for their expertise in traditional weaving and sericulture, which are not only cultural markers but also vital subsistence activities. This economic participation translates into a form of "household sovereignty," where women exercise significant control over domestic resources and the distribution of agricultural produce. Their labor is not viewed as secondary; rather, it is recognized as a vital contribution to the survival and prosperity of the community (Sharma & Kar, 2013).



Ritualistic and Religious Significance

In the religious and ritualistic sphere, the status of Tiwa women is characterized by a "sacred centrality." While the formal village administration (*Samadi*) is often male-dominated, women play indispensable roles in domestic rituals and festivals like *Sagra Misawa* and *Wanchuwa*. Among certain Tiwa groups, the eldest female of the household holds the responsibility of maintaining the "sacred hearth," acting as a mediator between the living and the ancestral spirits. This ritualistic role reinforces their status as the moral and spiritual anchors of the family, ensuring the continuity of Tiwa customs and indigenous beliefs in the face of modern cultural shifts (Bordoloi, 1987).

Social Challenges and Modern Transitions

Despite their traditionally high status, the role of Tiwa women is currently undergoing a complex transition due to "Sanskritization" and the influence of neighboring patriarchal societies. In the plains, there is an increasing shift toward patrilineal descent and virilocal residence, which has slightly diminished the absolute ancestral authority women once held. Furthermore, while Tiwa women enjoy social freedom—including the right to choose their partners and the absence of a dowry system they remain underrepresented in the higher tiers of political decision-making and formal village councils. The contemporary challenge for Tiwa society lies in balancing modern educational and political empowerment for women while preserving the matrilineal values that have historically defined their high social standing (Patiri, 2011).

B. The Institutional and Administrative Role of Women in Tiwa Governance

In the traditional governance of the Tiwa (Lalung) community, the institutional role of women presents a fascinating paradox between formal exclusion and functional authority. The primary administrative body in a Tiwa village is the *Samadi* (the bachelor's dormitory or village council), which serves as the seat of judicial and executive power. Historically, formal administrative titles such as the *Loro* (priest-chief) or *Gaonburha* (village head) are reserved for men, creating a male-dominated public face of governance (Bordoloi, 1987). However, because



the Tiwa society particularly the Hill Tiwas is rooted in a matrilineal kinship structure, the *Samadi* cannot function in a vacuum. Administrative decisions regarding clan disputes, marriage laws, and ancestral land distribution require the validation of matrilineal descent, where women serve as the ultimate "institutional archives" of clan history (Deori, 2002).

Beyond the public council, women hold a distinct administrative role within the *Barghar* (the sacred ancestral house of the clan). The eldest female member, often referred to as the *Zalaba*, acts as the institutional head of the domestic and spiritual sphere. Her role is administrative in nature as she manages the "moral economy" of the clan, overseeing rituals that regulate social behavior and maintain communal harmony. According to Patiri (2011), the *Zalaba*'s authority ensures that the clan adheres to traditional codes of conduct; if a social taboo is violated, the formal male village council typically bases its judicial response on the findings and spiritual mandates provided by these female elders. This indicates that while men occupy the legislative seats, women provide the "moral and genealogical constitution" that guides their decisions.

The administrative influence of Tiwa women is also deeply embedded in the management of communal assets, specifically *Jhum* (shifting cultivation) lands. In the Tiwa matrilineal tradition, property and clan identity pass through the female line, making women the de facto custodians of ancestral estates. Consequently, any institutional decision involving the alienation or allocation of land requires the tacit consent of the female household heads. As noted by Sharma and Kar (2013), this "household sovereignty" creates a dual-governance model where women exercise significant administrative control over the community's primary economic resource and land; even if they do not hold formal titles within the village council.

In the contemporary era, the transition from traditional customs to modern statutory governance has further redefined the role of Tiwa women. With the establishment of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) and the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, Tiwa women have moved from "informal influence" to "formal administrative office." Constitutional mandates for women's reservation have enabled them to serve as elected Members of the Council (MDCs) and Panchayat presidents (Mallick, 2014). This shift represents a significant



institutional evolution, though it often creates a tension between the traditional matrilineal status they hold at home and the patriarchal political culture of modern state machinery.

VI. Conclusion:

the socio-cultural and administrative status of women in Tiwa (Lalung) society reflects a complex yet resilient matrilineal heritage that distinguishes them from many neighboring patriarchal communities. The study indicates that Tiwa women are not merely passive participants in their culture but are the foundational pillars of kinship, ritual, and the agrarian economy. While formal institutional roles within traditional councils like the *Samadi* have historically been male-dominated, the "informal" authority wielded by women particularly as custodians of clan lineage and managers of ancestral land reveals a dual-power structure where female influence is both pervasive and essential (Deori, 2002).

The transition from traditional matrilineal customs to modern administrative frameworks like the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of their roles. While "Sanskritization" and external patriarchal pressures have led to a shift toward patriliney in certain plains areas, the constitutional empowerment of women through reserved political seats has provided a new avenue for formal leadership (Mallick, 2014). This evolution suggests that the future of Tiwa society depends on the successful synthesis of traditional matrilineal values with modern democratic governance. Ultimately, the high social standing and institutional influence of Tiwa women remain a testament to a culture that, at its core, recognizes the female as the primary link between the ancestral past and the communal future (Patiri, 2011).

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