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The Status of Tiwa Women through a Study of Their Roles in Their Rituals and Customs- A Study in Morigaon District

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Abstract

The Tiwas are an ethnic group of people inhabiting many pockets of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam of North East India. They are basically an agrarian community having their own traditions, customs, rituals and beliefs. The Tiwa society is generally patriarchal in nature though certain matrilineal traces are found in their traditions and customs. In present times, as in all other societies, education and new technology have influenced contemporary Tiwa society also by exposing them more easily to the outside world. As a result, the traditions and customs have also undergone changes and no longer found in their original forms. The investigators intend to study the present day social organization of the Tiwas and the societal roles played by the men and the women. The original roles and responsibilities have changed over time and it would be interesting to find out the actual status of women in

present times by studying the nature of their participation in their important rituals and ceremonies.

Both primary and secondary sources are used to conduct this study.

Key words: Tiwa, ritual, ceremonies, Morigaon.

1. Introduction

The Tiwas are an ethnic group of people inhabiting many pockets of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam of North East India. They are found both in the north and south banks as well as in some hill regions. The plain Tiwas are found scattered among many districts of Assam including Nagaon, Morigaon, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Kamrup, Jorhat and Sivasagar. They are basically an agrarian community having their own traditions, customs, rituals and beliefs.

The Tiwa society is generally patriarchal in nature though certain matrilineal traces are found in their traditions and customs. In present times, as in all other societies, Tiwa society has also undergone many changes with the coming of modern education. The 2011 Census Report has shown that the overall literacy rate among the Tiwas is 63.5% of their total population. The literacy rate among the males is 54.5% and that of the females is only 45.4%. (Source: Census Report 2011, Office of the Director of Census Operation, Assam). Education and new technology have influenced contemporary Tiwa society by exposing them more easily to the outside world. As a result, the traditions and customs have also undergone changes and no longer found in their original forms. The investigators intend to study the present day social organization of the Tiwas and the societal roles played by the men and the women. The original roles and responsibilities have changed over time and it would be interesting to find out the actual status of women in present times by studying the nature of their participation in their important rituals and ceremonies.

1.1 Review of related literature:-

In the book entitled *Tiwa-Sama*, the writer Moneswar Deuri (1983) discusses in detail the clan organization and different domestic and societal duties traditionally performed by the Tiwa women.

Gonesh Senapoti (1995), in his work *Tiwa Sanjkritir Prankendra Nubar (Borghar)*, discusses in detail the clan organization of the Tiwas and the importance of *Nubar (Borghar)*, in the Tiwa society. Gonesh Senapoti (1997), in his book *Rohar Rahial Barua Aru Panch Roja Puwali* discusses the various aspects of social life of the

Tiwas particularly from Roha area, along with the history of Rohial Barua of Roha and the five Kings of Roha.

Prof. Sradhananda Dowrah(2008) in his article *Ekhan Tiwa Gaon Samaj-Byahasthar Eti Dikh* has made a detail discussion about the life style of the people of a Tiwa village.

In the book entitled *Tiwa Sanskritir Abhash* author Dhiraj Patar (2013) points out that the Tiwa women play a more active and important role both in the domestic and public fronts than the men. They are experts in taking care of the other family members, working in agricultural fields, managing the kitchen, taking lead roles in social and religious activities.

1.2 Objective of the study:-

- (i) To study the social structure and clan organization of the plain Tiwas.
- (ii) To study the customs relating to birth, death and marriage of the plain Tiwas and thereby determining the position of women.

1.3 Significance of the study: -

A general observation of the social structure of the plain Tiwas shows that in Tiwa society, women seem to enjoy a prestigious position in their clan organisation. This is determined by the significant role played by *Hari Kuwaris* and female *giyatis* in their society. Again, matrilineal traces are found in their appointment as well as the preservation of the office of the *Hari Kuwari* which seems to accord to her a position of respect and power. But a review of related literature has revealed that though the office of the *Hari Kuwari* is important, yet it is only secondary to the male head. The actual position of women seems to be confusing.

Hence the investigators decided to study the exact position and status of women in contemporary Tiwa society by looking deeply into their social structure and the nature of work assigned to them by their society. Herein lies the significance of the study.

2. Methodology :-

2.1. **Source** - Both primary and secondary sources were used to conduct this study. Reviews of books written both in English and Assamese were being used as secondary sources.

2.2. **Area of study** – Th study was conducted in 5 villages adjoining Jagiroad town of Morigaon district, Assam. The 2 villages Bangthai Gaon and Nij Tetelia are located at a distance of seven km from Jagiroad whereas Markankuchi, Konabori and Paschim Nagaon

are located close to Jagiroad.

2.3. Sample - This is a qualitative study for which an in depth analysis is required. Hence, the main aim was to interview those people who were thought to be capable of providing information. Only 10 people were taken as informants out of which two are highly educated college teachers, two are government employees and the rest six are elderly villagers, three male and three female.

2.4. Tool - In this study the interview method was used. The type of interview was unstructured. The informants were approached in a casual manner and engaged in normal and informal conversation to extract information.

2.5. Delimitation of the study: Due to time constraint, it was not possible to study the entire lifestyle of the Tiwas which would be a vast area. The investigators have narrowed their study by

- limiting to study only the roles played by different people in ceremonies and rituals relating to birth, death and marriage.
- Again, spatially also, only 5 villages were taken under consideration which are near to Jagiroad town.

3. Findings:

After the study the following findings are deduced.

A. Clan organization:

The social structure of the Tiwas can be ascertained through a study of their clan organisation. Tiwa clan system can be categorised into different units:

- (i) **Mahari** - The smallest unit of Tiwa society is the family which can be either of nuclear or joint family type. The family is commonly known as *Mahari* meaning matrilineal (Ganesh Senapati, 1995). The head of the *Mahari* is always the male head. Every *Mahari* has a *Nubar* (*nu* - house, *bar* - big) which is a place of worship, the focal point of Tiwa life. All the activities of Tiwa people centred around the *Nubar* as the Tiwas are invariably religio-centric. However, the *Nubar* is not placed in common village spaces but within the household premises of the main family. The *Mahari* having the *Nubar* is considered the main family. All rituals and functions are performed in the *Nubar*. It occupies a place of distinctive significance in the life of the Tiwas.
- (ii) **Khuta** - A number of *Maharis* belonging to the same clan or *kul* constitute a *Khuta*. Every *Khuta* has its own *Nubar*.

- (iii) **Khel** - The *Khel* is comprised of a number of *Khutas*, either belonging to the same *kul* or of different *kuls*. Different *Khutas* of the same geographical area come together to form a *Khel*. The *Khel* is an important unit of Tiwa society as all functions and ceremonies relating to rites of passage are conducted under the supervision of the *Khel*.
- (iv) **Bar Khel or Tora Khel** - Again, a *Bar Khel* is a combination of *Khels*.

The smooth functioning of these different social units is ensured by a number of people having specific portfolios and accompanying duties. All the positions are hereditary and the functionaries are selected from the same respective families.

Some of these **important functionaries** are as follows :-

- (i) **Zela** - The *Zela* is the head of the *Nubar* in a *Kul*. He is also known as *Ghoror Burha* and plays the main role in all the religious activities of the *Kul*. He performs the *pujas* and also sacrifices animals as part of rituals. He also has the right to act as judge in case of small disputes within the *Kul*. At the time of harvest, the *Zela* is the one who takes the first step in cutting the grains. It is again he who offers the newly cut grains for worship in the *Nubar*. In all rites of passage ceremonies the *Khuta* has to request for permission and participation from the *Khel*, and in such ceremonies the presence of the *Zela* is necessary.
- (ii) **Hetari** - The second in rank to the *Zela* in a *Kul* is *Sokha Zela* or *Soru Ghoror Burha* or *Hetari*. He is an assistant to the *Zela*.
- (iii) **Hari Kuwari** - The *Hari Kuwari* is a female office bearer in a *Kul*. Her main duty is to keep the *Nubar* clean, as well as to provide all kinds of service to the *Zela* as an assistant. It is she who provides all necessities in the rituals and prepares food in functions. In the absence of the *Zela* and the *Hetari*, the *Hari Kuwari* has the right to offer *puja* and also conduct the sacrificial rituals.
- The *Hari Kuwari* enjoys a prestigious position in Tiwa society. Usually, she is an unmarried daughter of her *Kul*. She is never given in marriage to a different *Kul* through the process of *Kulsinga* i.e. severing ties with the original *Kul*. She can only marry if her would be husband is willing

to join her *Kul* and become a *Ghor Juwai* or *Gobhia*.

If there is no unmarried daughter in a *Kul*, then the *Hari Kuwari* can also be a married woman who had joined her husband's *Kul* through the *Kulsinga* process. She is made a member of her husband's *Kul* and made a *Hari Kuwari*.

(iv) **Bar Zela** - He is the head of the *Khel*.

(v) **Lor** - He is the head of the *Bar Khel*. The *Lor* has the right to solve disputes arising out of major issues.

(vi) **Giyati** - *Giyati* refers to priests. There are both male and female *giyatis* having different responsibilities. The *giyatis* are kind of supervisors in the conduct of the rituals relating to rites of passage.

B. Property Inheritance

In Tiwa society, land is divided among the sons after the death of the father. The daughters do not get share of parental property unless they are unmarried or have married but have their husbands staying with them as *Ghor Juwai*. The children of such families take their surnames after their mother. So, it is seen that Tiwa society is basically patrilineal though matrilineal traces are also found. However, the latter is in decline in present times. [S.Dowrah, 2008].

There is another system prevalent in certain *Kuls* called *Jon Tona* where the eldest nephew can join the *Kul* of his maternal uncle and enjoy property rights in that family.

C. Rituals relating to birth

In Tiwa society it has been found that unlike any other Hindu community, there are no rituals to be followed by the pregnant woman in the pre birth period of the child (Dhiraj Patar, 2013). A female *giyati* acts as a type of midwife who assists at the time of delivery. Usually on the seventh day of birth after the stump of the umbilical cord gets detached, the *Hari Kuwari* sacrifices a cock and by looking at its intestines predicts the future of the child. The father or other male member of the family shaves off the head of the child on the same day. After that, the *Hari Kuwari* uses a pair of bow and arrow and sends eight arrows in the eight directions. If the child is male he is made to touch the pair of bow and arrow. If the child is female she is made to touch a sickle and other weaving tools. After that the *Hari Kuwari* offers *puja* for the child.

There is another ceremony relating to birth which is called *Monosro* or *Ousgara* ceremony. This is the public naming ceremony.

Here the *Bor Zela* and the *Zela* visit the household where the child is born. A *pandal* is arranged since this is a social ceremony where people from other houses are invited as guests. The *Hari Kuwari* cleans a space with white soil where the *Zela* and the *Hetari* set up the altar for the *puja*. A male *giyati* is appointed to conduct the occasion and he is called the *Sojati*. Sometimes other children born in different households are also brought for their naming ceremony which is conducted collectively. Each family having a new born child offers a cock. These cocks are sacrificed and the intestines are exposed and predictions are made. The meat is then sent for food preparation. After lunch the naming of the child is done.

D. Marriage types

In Tiwa society four types of marriages are seen to be prevailing. They are *Bor Biya*, *Gobhia Rakha*, *Joron Biya* and *Paluai Ana*. (G. C. Sarma Thakur, 1985).

In *Bor Biya*, the marriage is arranged by the families of both the boy and the girl and the *Zela* acts as a go between.

Joron Biya is also a kind of arranged marriage without the details of a *Bor Biya* where the boy's party visits the girl's house with clothes and ornaments and returns with the bride.

In *Paluai Ana Biya*, the love affair between the boy and the girl becomes accepted as marriage when the bride elopes with her lover.

There is also a kind of forced marriage where the boy forcibly carries off the girl and marries her without her consent. This is known as *Dhori Rakha* or *Bolpurbok Biya*. (Moneswar Dewri, 1983)

Another system is *Dhum Biya* or *Hothat Pota Biya*. In this type of marriage, if a girl is found to have an affair with another boy, she is not given any choice and immediately given in marriage with a boy arranged by the family without the knowledge of the girl. In some cases, if there is an unmarried girl and the family finds a match, she is immediately given in marriage. In this case, there is no question of taking the girl's consent. (Moneswar Dewri, 1983).

In Tiwa society, no marriage is allowed within the *Kul*. At the time of marriage, the girl can join her husband's *Kul* through the *Kulsinga* process.

In the *Gobhia Rakha* system, *Kulsinga* of the *Gobhia* or *Ghor Juwai* may or may not be performed. A *Gobhia* stays in his wife's household as a member of that family.

E. Funeral Rites

The place where the dead body is cremated is called the *hatham*. Every *Kul* has its own separate *hatham*. However, there are differences in rituals regarding funerals in *hathams* among different *Kuls*.

There are strict rules as to who are allowed to be placed in *hathams*. A girl who has not severed ties with her original family through the process of *Kulsinga* at the time of her marriage retains the claim to be placed in the *hatham* of her own family after her death. For such a girl, the right to *Shraddha* rests only with her original family. On the other hand, if a girl has severed ties through the *Kulsinga* process but dies in her parental house, then her own family should take permission from the husband's family to place the body on their *hatham*.

If a *Gobhia* has severed ties through *Kulsinga* process, he is to be cremated in his wife's *Kul's hatham*. Otherwise, he will be placed in his own *Kul's hatham*.

After the death of a person, both the male and the female *giyatis* have their respective roles to play in the rituals relating to the funeral. When a person dies, the body is not immediately taken out of the house. The female *giyati* prepares the body by washing it and trying to feed it with food cooked by her. The leftover food is taken to the cremation ground along with the body.

The responsibility of the cremation ritual in the cremation ground lies with the male *giyati*. It is the *Zela* under whose supervision the entire ceremony of the *Shraddha* is conducted.

Conclusion

From the above study certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the position of women through an examination of their roles and the extent of their participation in the rituals and customs. It is seen that the head of the family is always a male. The head of the *Nubar* in a *Mahari* is also a male. The *Khuta* and the *Khel* are also headed by men. Since the *Nubar* occupies a central place in Tiwa social and religious life, therefore, the position of the man is superior. The *Hari Kuwari*, though seems to be enjoying a prestigious position in society, her duty is limited to only keeping the *Nubar* clean and to provide supplies needed for the activities in the *Nubar*. Her position therefore is secondary to that of the *Zela* or the *Hetari*. In public ceremonies like *Monosro*, her role is secondary to the *Zela*. However, in the absence of the *Zela* and *Hetari*, the *Hari Kuwari* has absolute right to perform sacrifices and offer *puja* in the *Nubar*.

In the rituals after the birth of a newborn baby, the *Hari Kuwari* plays a pivotal role where she sacrifices a cock, predicts the future of the child and even offers *puja*. This is an occasion where she has sole responsibility. From this it can be ascertained that the *Hari Kuwari* plays a significant role in the social life of the Tiwas.

Matrilineal traces are found in Tiwa society in more than one aspect. The very word *Mahari* means belonging to the 'mother'. In marriages, a girl is given away to her husband's family either through the *Kulsinga* process or even without it. Unlike other Hindus, *Kulsinga* is not mandatory for the girl at the time of marriage. The fact that a girl has claim over her parental property if not married through the *Kulsinga* process shows that she enjoys equal rights like her male siblings. Again, in the case of a girl married without the *Kulsinga* process, if she dies, the husband has to take permission from his wife's family to place the body of his deceased wife in his *Kul's hatham*. This shows that the girl's family retains certain rights over her even after her marriage. But nowadays it is seen that in most cases, even after death the *Kulsinga* ritual is performed and the body is handed over to the husband.

In the three systems of marriage, namely, *Bor Biya*, *Joron Biya* and *Paluai Ana Biya*, the consent of the girl is taken into consideration. This shows that the girl enjoys the freedom of choice in selecting her husband.

But in the other two forms of marriage, namely, *Dhori Rakha* or *Bolpurbok Biya* and *Dhum Biya* or *Hothat Pota Biya*, the consent of the girl is totally ignored. These are forced marriages where the existence of patriarchy is strongly discernible.

The children born to parents where the father is a *Gobhia*, have the right to use the surname of the mother's family and has claim to property of the mother's side. This shows that the female enjoys equal position to her male brethren in society.

The *Gobhia Rakha* system where the husband joins the wife's family is, however, on the decline in present day Tiwa society because a *Gobhia* is not considered worthy of respect in both the families. This is a sign of inclination towards patriarchy which is not favourable for the position of women because it disregards equality of status of men and women. The decline of this system of marriage has seriously affected the appointment of the *Hari Kuwari* as she was usually married through this process. The absence of unmarried women or women not having a *Gobhia* as a husband has necessitated to the assigning of the role of the *Hari Kuwari* to the daughters-in-law.

It can be thus concluded that though the original patterns of lifestyle accorded respect to the position of women, the changes over time brought by the impact of modernity and exposure to other societies have disturbed the system by making it more homogeneous and thus losing its distinctiveness. It is ironical that when the influence of patriarchy should be reducing because of modern education, the opposite is seen to be happening as their society is increasingly moving more towards patriarchal modes and imbibing them.

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