A Study on the Impact of Traditional Media on the Traditions of the Tiwas of Assam

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Abstract

In the present paper, we study the traditions of the Tiwas, an indigenous tribal community of Assam. The Tiwas are divided in two sub-groups; those residing in the hills and sustaining their old traditions and culture and others residing in the plains and embracing Hinduism. Moreover, it has been found that people of this Hill tribe have adopted practices of various religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, besides nature worship. The entry of Vaishnavism and the Tiwas' assimilation with the Assamese community has brought apparent changes in their traditional practices. It has been found that the Tiwas living in the plains are slowly adapting to the urban life and giving up their Tiwa traditions, especially after embracing Vaishnavism. But those living in the hills or areas adjacent to the hills are still sustaining the old traditions. Thus, the Tiwas residing in the hills give a window to document their traditions which have been preserved through the traditional media. The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data has been collected through personal and group level interactions and the secondary through various archival studies. For the study, two Tiwa tribe dominated villages of Morigaon district of Assam – Charaibahi (a Plain Tiwa dominated village) and Tetelia (a mixed population of both Plain and Hill Tiwas) have been selected. From the study it is found that traditions of the Tiwas have been preserved by the traditional media in the form of many elaborate festivals, fairs, rituals, music and even through the means of their livelihood.

Keywords : Culture, Continuity, Indigenous Community, Sub-culture.

1 Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary, 'Tradition is a long-established custom

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or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.' The word originates from the old French word '*tradicion*' which is again borrowed from the Latin word '*traditio'* or '*tradere* ' meaning to deliver or to give. Tradition is the skeleton of a tribe, as it supports the structure of a tribe. If tradition can be assumed as the skeleton, then the traditional media can be assumed as the back-bone of a tribe. The scholarly definition of traditional media is 'the non electronic mediums which works as part of our culture and as vehicles of transmitting tradition from one generation to another generation'. It can be anything such as traditional dance, drama, painting, sculpture, song, fairs and festivals, music, motifs and symbols etc.

An indigenous community with mythological traces, the Tiwas is a magnificent tribe of Assam. The Tiwas, a scheduled tribe is divided in two sub-groups- Hill Tiwas and Plain Tiwas. The Plain Tiwas inhabit the plains of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra valley, mostly in Morigaon and Nagaon districts of Assam while the Hill Tiwas reside in the westernmost areas of Karbi-Anglong, Assam as well as in the north-eastern corner of Ri-Bhoi district, Meghalaya. The Tiwas are the son of soil. The Tiwas of the Plain areas do not practice any of their traditional tribal profession. They practice agriculture and fishing for livelihood. They follow the indigenous methods of cultivation. Fishing is a fun as well as livelihood for the community, as their habitats are surrounded by many wetlands and marshes. Fishing is basically practiced for their own-consumption. Many men opt for working outside as construction labourers and other service holders. The women mainly get engaged in the paddy fields. The Tiwa women are good weavers too and almost every household has a loom from which the needs of the household are provided. Piggery and poultry are also popular in majority of the houses.

The Tiwas have originated from the great Bodo tribe of Assam which has Indo-Tibetan origin. Along with Tiwas, most of the tribes of Assam such as Kacharis, Koches, Chutias, Rabhas, Meches, Hajongs, Marans, Barahis etc. have evolved. In the Assamese society as well as within the tribe itself, the Tiwas are well-known as Lalungs. During the medieval period, the community marked their impact on the Assam history. The remains could still be seen in the form of some archeological relics, which could be found in the entire Assam. Some of them are the *Jungalbalahu garh*, *Shilchang*, stone and terracotta remains of *Mayong* etc. Apart from the archeological relics, the great culture of the Tiwas can be witnessed from their traditions and the traditional media used in their different aspects of life such as language, livelihood, birth rituals, music, fairs and festivals etc.

In this paper, some of the traditions of the Tiwas within the research areas and traditional media used in continuing the tribe's legacy are discussed.

2 Review of Literature

An eminent communication scholar Denis McQuail (2005) in his book '*McQuail's Mass communication Theory'* has put forward two theories which guide this study. According to McQuail a culture cannot survive without communication. 'Perhaps the most general and essential attribute of culture is communication, since cultures could not develop, survive, extend and generally succeed without communication'. (p.113) Further, McQuail discuss about the continuity function of media which means expressing the dominant culture and recognizing sub-cultures by the folk media.

The trends of both culture and society are constantly changing. In a research article by B. M. Das (2002), two specific modes of change of tribal culture and society have been mentioned i.e., detribalisation and re-tribalisation. The process of detribalisation is a spontaneous one according to B.M. Das and it starts with the communication of tribal people with their non-tribal neighbours. 'In this context we can refer to a process known as detribalisation. The process started long ago when the tribal people came in contact with their non-tribal neighbours of the valley. Gradually they accepted the Assamese Hindu way of life. Some sections of them abandoned their own language in favour of Assamese. The process was spontaneous and voluntary. There was no compulsion from any corner. Hence, the process was smooth and harmonious. Thereby in varied degrees they were losing their tribal identity and became part and parcel of the Assamese society. ' (p.14)

Detribalisation is a stage of change and it is substituted by another stage of change i.e., re-tribalisation. Das stated that the tribal people wanted to go back to their original tribal fold to regain their tribal identity. 'Cultural revivalism or socio-cultural aspiration to protect, preserve and to enrich cultural heritage according to their respective desires is appreciable.'(p.15)

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Problem

The Tiwas has very diverse socio-cultural traits. This diversity has been seen because of the geographical disparity of the hill and the plain areas. An interesting characteristic of the hill and plain Tiwas is that these two groups display much contrasted traditional features. While The Hill Tiwas still maintain most of their centuries old tradition and way of life, the plain Tiwas at the same time have withdrawn most of their traditions. The Plain Tiwa tribals have certain customs and rituals similar to those of Assamese Hindu society while half of the Hill

Tiwas tribals still practice nature worship and the other half follow Christianity and Buddhism. These differences in customs bring changes in the traditional fair, festivals, way of life and traditional media.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

At the background of the above research problem, an exploratory study on the traditions and the traditional media of the Tiwas had been conducted. The key objectives of the study were–

a) to explore the traditions and the traditional media of the Tiwa tribes
b) to know how far the Plain Tiwas assimilate with the plain Assamese people
c) to analyze whether the traditional media is playing an important function of continuity by retaining the traditional values of the tribe.

3.3 Research Questions

a) The study was exploratory in nature. Therefore, some research questions were prepared instead of hypothesis. The questions are-
b) What are the traditions of the Tiwas?
c) What are the traditional media found in the research area?
d) Whether the Plain Tiwas assimilate with the Assamese community? If yes, how far the assimilation is?
e) Whether the traditional media is playing an important function of continuity by retaining the traditional values of the tribe?

3.4 Data Collection

As very little data were available for the study, the researcher herself had to go to the field for data collection. For the study, schedule survey, observation and participant observation method had been employed. For identifying the research area, Census Report 2011 had been consulted. As major concentration of Tiwas is found in the Morigaon district, therefore, two Tiwa villages of Morigaon district had been selected for the study, namely- Charaibahi and Tetelia. The Tiwas in Charaibahi area follow Hinduism (also Vaishnvism) and tribal religion while in Tetelia area majority are nature worshipers.

3.5 Limitations

Every research study has its own limitations. The following are some of the problems faced by the researcher during the field work:

a) In the short period of the study, it is not possible to explore the each and every tradition and traditional media of the tribe.

b) Morigaon is a flood affected area. Therefore, the roads to the selected villages are in a very dilapidated condition.
c) The Tiwas are basically agriculture labourers and spend most of time in the field which created problem in the field study.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

The study was done in the light of the questions mentioned above. The study revealed that the Tiwas are traditionally very rich and they have various forms of traditional media. It is found that traditional media in the form of many elaborate festivals, fairs, rituals, music and even through the means of their livelihood helped in continuing the tribe's legacy.

a) *The impact of folk music on livelihood of the Tiwas:* It has been found from the research the Tiwas are passionate about music and dance. Lai-hilahi is the elegant folk song sung on many occasions. The lyrics (content) of the Lai-hilahi songs are diverse. Some songs are meant for birth rituals; some are love songs, some for agriculture and other means of livelihood while some even talk about Indian freedom movement and others about the days of the kings etc. Apart from Lai-hilali, the tribe is also a great lover of Bihu songs and dance.

The impact of folk music can be seen in their livelihood activities. The agricultural activities such as ploughing, weeding or harvesting are very tedious work which needs a lot of manpower and people's involvement. During the time of such activities, generally, families invite their neighbors and relatives for that purpose. The gathering automatically creates a festival like environment. The host family provides food and rice beer called '*Zu*' to the invited neighbors and relatives. The harvesting festival is known as *Nara-Kata Utsav*. After harvesting, a feast is arranged among the relatives and neighbors. While working in the fields and during the feast, the invited farmers try to lessen their tiredness by singing Lai-hilali songs. During the time of fishing, especially during the community fishing, the popular Bihu and Lai-hilahi songs are sung.

b) *Language as Traditional Media of the Tiwas: Language* is the lifeblood of any tradition. No society can attain civilisation without a language. As mentioned earlier, the Tiwas are traditionally rich and diverse. They have their own language although mostly communicate through Assamese language even within their community. The existence of the Tiwa language can only be found in some Hill Tiwas predominant areas. But in the the researched areas

both the group were found to be Assamese speaking. The Tiwa language is a branch of the Bodo-Garo languages of Tibeto-Burman languages which in turn are a part of the bigger Brahmaputran or Sal language. This signifies the Indo-Tibetan link of the Tiwa community. The mantras used in the Tiwa temples such as *Deoshal Temple* of Jagiroad, Morigaon and in other religious affairs are in Tiwa language.

c) *Social structure as Traditional media of the Tiwas:* The Tiwas are having a very close societal system. The Tiwas who still worship nature and follow Shaiva cult of Hinduism are clan oriented. There are twelve clans and each clan has a *Borghar* of their own. *Borghar* is the community hall and meeting point of the four key religious persons of the Tiwas i.e., *Laro, Gaunburha, Thakuriya and Faronga,* but now it is dying in most of the places and is replaced by temples and namghars[2]. Generally the tribe depends on Assamese calendar for the festival dates. The festival dates are discussed in the *Borghar* by the above mentioned four key persons and the news is then disseminated by *Faronga*, the messenger. Apart from the religious affairs, he also circulates the news of death within the community.

d) *The impact of traditional media on marriage and birth rituals of the Tiwas:* It has been observed that the members of the community prefer marrying within the community. The instances of eloping from home for marriage are very common within the Tiwa society and therefore the cases of child marriage are very high. Polygamy (i.e., keeping more than one wife) and divorce have been seen in some rare occurrences. Now-a-days, they follow the conventional marriage system by following the Vedic rites as other Hindu communities.

Among all Indian societies, many superstitions are observed related to the birth of a child. In the tribal societies, superstitions are more prevalent. The tribal Tiwa families celebrate the birth of a child with a feast on the seventh day of the newborn. On that day, a puja with a community feast is arranged and during the puja, a cock is scarified. There is a belief that if everything goes well during the custom of sacrifice, the future of the child will be bright. After the puja, the elderly women of the community, sing and dance by holding the newborn to their arms.

e) *Popular beliefs as traditional media of the Tiwas:* Every indigenous tribe like Tiwas has some undocumented stories. These undocumented stories are generally known as popular beliefs. These beliefs are mainly related to the origin of the community and customs followed by the community from time unknown. In his book, *The Lalungs (Tiwas),* Baruah (1989) has mentioned that a group of beliefs says that from the Saliva (*Lal*) of *Mahadeo,* i.e., Siva two persons male and female were born. They were said to be the original ancestral parents

of Lalungs. As they were supposed to be born out of the *Lal* of Lord Siva they are called as the Lalungs. They worship Lord Siva as their most adorned deity. *'Ti'* in Lalung dialect means water, *'Waa'* means great, noble, high, elevated.

For the Tiwas twelve is a sacred number as they have twelve gotras or clans. In their religious offerings, they strictly maintain this number. The belief behind this number is a legend of twelve sisters who were anxious about their marriage and decided to end their life by jumping into a river. But God had appeared with twelve grooms for them. As a result of their marriages with those god provided grooms, the twelve clans of the Tiwas evolved.

f) *The impact of religion on traditional media of the Tiwas:* In due course of time, the Tiwa community assimilated with the other communities of Assam to form the exquisite Assamese Community. Earlier, many people from this community hesitated to introduce themselves as a member of the community because of some social stigma like alcoholism, practicing of black magic etc. These are some of the reasons for their conversion to Vaishnavism from nature worshipping. The result of the penetration of Vaishnavism i.e., *Shankari dharma* of Assam within the community made their way of living much alike to the other Hindu communities. The group which did not embrace Vaishnavism still worship different tribal deities especially *Mahadeo* i.e., Lord Shiva. A distinct trend has been noticed between these two sects. The Vaishnavism followers who withdrew their traditional practices, rituals and language, have started exploring these again. At the same time, the other group is practicing but reluctant in promoting their traditions. Earlier, in their several pujas animal and even human sacrifices were made. The belief in black magic and witchcraft is very much common among the Tiwa community. This practice is however a forgotten thing now, mainly because of the impact of Vaishnavism on tribal religion. 'In the mid twentieth century, there had been a great deal of conversion of the Tiwas to Vaishnavism as they felt inferior to the Hindus. Many of them are proud to be called themselves as '*Na Koch'* after conversion to Hindu.' (Baruah, 1989).

g) *Festivals as Traditional media of the Tiwas:* The Tiwas are culturally very active and have many elaborated festivals. In fact many of their festivals and rituals, and music related to these got good media coverage in the mass media. Apart from their own festivals they also celebrate the festivals that other Assamese Hindus follow. Here, in this part some of the festivals, that is observed in the Charaibahi and Tetelia areas and the traditional media used during these festivals is documented.

Gushai-uliowa utsav and its allied traditional media: This festival is celebrated

in the land of the Tiwa Kings - *Pacho-Raja* (Five Kings) since 16th century AD. The territories of these Kings are scattered in the parts of Nagaon and Morigaon district of Assam. There are many sayings related to this Gushai-uliowa utsav. This ceremonial festival is always celebrated along with a fair. In this festival, the local diety called *Bura Gushai* who is none but Lord Krishna, is being worshiped. The idol of *Bura Gushai* is paraded from the *Bura-gushai Than*[3] to the place where the fair is being held. The first Sunday of *Bohag* month (Mid-April) of the Assamese calendar is the beginning day of the celebration. It is celebrated in Tapakuchi area of Raha of Nagaon district. The king of Topakuchi is the eldest king among the Pacho-Raja. From then onwards on every Sunday, chronologically at different locations the festival is observed. It is not only the tradition of the Tiwas. The pepole from Koch, Mikir (Karbi), Nath Yugi, Heera communities of Assam are also involved in this celebration. So, through it we can see the confluence of these communities and their harmony. Even in some places which do not have any history of this festival celebration, the festival is organized along with the fair.

Charaibahi is the home of the second king of the Pacho-Raja and here, the essence of the tradition is kept intake. Similar to the other four kings, the king of Charaibahi is also from Koch community while his officials are from Tiwa community. The Baithang is the armor keeper. He is well known as Barah-Baithang in Charaibahi area. Today his importance in the festival is more than the Commander General. The army is known as Baruwati. The main attraction of the festival is the dance and fight among the Baruwatis which can be observed only in Charabahi area. People from very distant places come to observe this fight. Another attraction of the Gushai -uliowa festival is the village fair observed along with it. The specialty of this fair is the selling and buying of sweet potatoes along with other things. The mentioning of the fair is important as people started calling this festival as Gushai-uliowa *'mela'* i.e., Gushai-uliowa fair rather than an *'utsav'* or festival. This fair centric nature of the people depicts the diversion of interest of human beings from their culture to earthly things.

Barot Puja / Usha Barot and Mask culture: It is held on the Full moon night of *Puh* month (December- January). It is observed only in Kumoi -Tetelia area of Marigaon district of Assam, as earlier it was given to their queen as a dowry by her father, the king of Dimoria. It is another form of Kumari puja, that is, worship of girl child. Four young girls from royal families (who do not attain puberty) can participate in this puja. The concept of Barot puja is derived from the word 'brato' means abstinence. Before the puja four young girls from the royal official's families start eating only vegetarian food on

every Wednesday from the *Kartik* month of Assamese calendar (September-October).On the celebration night, 360 earthen lamps are lit. The youth wear mask of different animals like pig, monkey, some water birds and Garood[4], and dance around the lamps. They also sing the song of 'Barat' by dancing wooden curved birds. Only in the Tetelia area, making of this mask and wooden birds have been seen.

4.2 Discussion

In the book, '*Tribes of Assam Part-I*', the authors (Bordoloi et al., 1987) stated that the Lalungs prefer to call themselves as Tiwa. This statement has found partially true in the researched area. In the Charaibahi area where the Tiwas are residing with their non-tribal neighbours, they still prefer to call themselves Lalungs. But in the in Tetelia area, the people from this community reported to this researcher that they are comfortable with the identity as Tiwas rather than the Lalungs. In the researched area, it is also found that the continuity function of media mentioned by McQuail (2005) had been performed by the traditional media. The traditional media found in the Chariabahi and Tetelia area confirm the popular beliefs, rituals, festivals of the Tiwas.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study on the traditions and traditional media of Tiwa tribe has shown that the tribe is culturally very vibrant. They have a long cultural legacy. Their mighty traditions have been preserved by the traditional media in the form of many elaborate festivals, fairs, rituals, music and even through the means of their livelihood. Language was not a barrier as all of them are Assamese speaking people. The study also unveil that the Hill Tiwa tribes are more traditional but the Plain Tiwas , especially the group which embraced Vaishnavism is less traditionally inclined to their traditions and also proved alarming for the entire community. Owing to such diversity within the community, from a couple of decades, especially after the media coverage of their folk culture, dance and rituals, they are now vary much popular among the research scholars and the other community members.

The Tiwas have their own autonomous council which has taken many steps to improve their socio-economic condition. But still they are deprived due to their geographical locations. They shall be provided with all weather road, education, medical facilities and better women conditions etc, so that no longer they remain as a backward community. For their development or to maintain their tradition, the Cultural Department of Govt. can give some grant. The kings should be given establishment. This may help to stop cultural clash because of identity crisis.

Glossary of Terms

Continuity: It means expressing the dominant culture and recognizing sub-cultures by the folk media.

Namghar: The cultural institutions and religious centers of Assamese Hindu society. In namghar only Vainavism can be followed. But along with the Assamese holy books Kirtan and Namghosha, in some namghars idol of Lord Krishna is also kept.

Than: Another religious institution of Assamese Hindus and usually established in memory of a religious saint.

Garood: A half bird and half human mythological creature.

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