CHAPTER – 8
THE TIWA (LALUNG) CASE

I. A BACKGROUND NOTE:

In the previous chapter, while dealing with culture change among the Karbis we have noted that one of the most prominent aspects of the change is their shift of habitat from the hills to the plains. Basically the Karbis have been hill people and even when a section of them came down and settling in the plains, vestiges their hill past continued to constitute an important factor of their original habitat.

But in the case of the Tiwas, though their original habitat had been in the hills and a section of them still live in the hills and follow a hill-oriented pattern of life, the majority of the Tiwas are found spread over a wide plains area down below. In fact, as of today, the Tiwas are to be taken more as plains people than as hill people.

In the case of the bulk of the Tiwas of the plains, the processes of acculturation, integration and, in certain fields, assimilation vis-a-vis the dominant non-tribal Assamese Hindu society have been very prominent.

A few significant indexes of the working of the processes are as follows:

a) The religious beliefs and practices of these people have undergone drastic change and there have been various adaptations from Assamese Hindu modes and mores.
b) The language shift from Tiwa to Assamese has been almost complete (with limited exceptions).

c) Large sections of Tiwas have entered the Assamese caste fold and become ‘Koch’- providing a living example of tribe-caste continuum in the context of the Assamese Hindu society.

However, some isolated villages or village clusters in the plains have remained to a large extent free from the processes described above. For example:

a) They have retained the Tiwa language (although they speak Assamese with ease, and are thus bilingual).

b) Their shift from jhum cultivation to settled cultivation has been more recent and there are evidences of resorting to ‘interim’ techniques.

c) The youth dormitory, which has been abandoned by the other section almost completely, continues to function in their villages.

As a recent trend in the field of socio-cultural life, the concern for the re-establishment of tribal identity as well as of ethnic assertion are very much in evidence. Even the acculturated and integrated sections are trying to go back to the roots and a revivalist tendency is at work.

The villages that we have covered for our study are as follows: Lakhigog, Bahtola, Noagaon, Senabor, Bherakuchi of Kamrup district; Marjong, Sohori, Burharoja of Nagaon district; Dahali and Barapujia of Morigaon district.
II. Trends of Change:

i) In The Field of Socio-Economic Life:

It can be noted that the changes that have occurred in this field of the Tiwas are more or less similar to those of the Karbis of the plains and also of the Misings. Although a section of them still retain their jhuming tradition at a reduced scale, particularly those inhabiting the foot hill areas, the majority of the Tiwas in the plains have completely adopted the settled cultivation. Formerly, more specifically about 40 to 50 years back, large varieties of crops were produced in the jhum fields in addition to the *ahu* varieties of rice like makhane, tadase, boradhan etc. Cotton, sesame, millet, varieties of vegetables and fruits like egg plant, guord, ginger, turmeric, chillies, varieties of melons, taros etc. were common items. But at present farming by jhuming has come down and many of the older varieties of items have been given up.

However, as indicated above, the plains Tiwas have gone for settled cultivation and more importance is given to the *sali* varieties (wet cultivation). The traditional *sali* rice varieties common among the Tiwas are moinagiri, batiasara, koinasali, praadd bhog, joha, bora, suagmoni, dhusuro etc. Some quantities of mustard, pulses, occasionally jute, sugarcane etc. are also grown. As in the case of other communities, new varieties have become popular during the last 15 to 20 years, in place of the older varieties. These new varieties are aijong, parimol etc. and recent high yielding varieties like ranjeet, bahadur, T.T.P. etc.

In low-lying areas of Morigaon district *bao* variety is very popular- especially the *torabao*. *Bora* rice is also another popular variety
of this locality. Changes have occurred in the case of other crop items also. For example, sesame, and mustard are still produced but on a reduced scale. New varieties of vegetables have been introduced such as, cabbage, cauliflower, carrot, hybrid varieties of egg plant, tomato etc.

A speciality of the Tiwa farmers of Sonapur-Khetri area is the growing up of horticultural products, particularly oranges. They have been doing it for quite sometime, at least for 50 years. The new generation has been trying to improve production by using better techniques.

Apart from these, many of the families have plantation of betel leaf and areca nut. Rubber plantation has been introduced by the concerned government agencies and some local families have started to try it out.

The story of change in the field of agricultural implements is the same as in the case of the Karbis and the Mising. First, a shift from the jhuming technique to the settled one, which they have learned from the neighbouring non-tribal communities. Formerly the buffalo was mainly used for ploughing. Use of the cow is a comparatively later development. In some areas it came only 25 to 30 years back. (A case study is being presented in this connection at the end of the section). Cowdung had been the main fertilizer until the recent past. Some locally popular herbs have been used to control pests, etc. Crabs and jackfruits are still in use as traditional pesticide by some.

Secondly, a more recent phase of change is the use of modern technological aids and facilities—like power tiller, pump set, huller machine, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, etc.

Like all other aspects in the case of food habits also the Tiwas have undergone similar kinds of change as seen in the case of the Karbis.
Rice is the staple item. Earlier use of oil was almost absent and boiled, smoked and roasted items were the most common. Different varieties of locally available vegetables, roots, taros, shoots including bamboo shoots constitute a major portion of their food preparations. Pig and chicken are the most common items of meat along with large quantities of fish, eggs etc. Chicken baked inside a bamboo tube is a delicacy of the Tiwas. Other items are also prepared in the same process. Dry fish is another favourite food item. Nowadays the use of oil is very common. Changes have come in the cooking pattern and also food items; for example, the vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower, carrots etc. are new additions.

Various preparations from bora rice were mostly used as snacks – including puthas mostly roasted and boiled (not fried). Though they are still popular items of food, various market items have been gaining popularity day by day.

Zu, the home made rice-beer, is the popular beverage irrespective of age and sex. Zu also constitutes an indispensable item in the traditional rituals of the Tiwas. In recent years the consciousness about the bad effects of the consumption of liquor especially among the young generation has popularized tea as a substitute.

Earlier the production system was not related to the market economy as we have found in the case of other communities also. Barter was the prevalent mode of exchange of goods and commodities. A unique and living example of barter system is the Jonbil Mela held annually at Jonbil near Jagiroad at Magh Bihu. It is the meeting place of the hills and plains people, also of the tribals and the non-tribals, where they exchange not only commodities but also goodwill. However, Jonbil Mela now stands only for
a symbol. Market economy has completely gripped all sections. The Tiwa Rajas symbolically attend the Mela organized by a Committee.

A Case Study

We came across a very interesting case of an intermediate technique in connection with cultivation which is as follows:

During our stay at the Marjong village of Nagaon district, my local guide and host Shri Maheswar Pator gave me the following information.

When the Tiwas of this area, who did jhuming earlier, were yet to master the technique of ploughing, they used to make patches of flat land soft enough for cultivation by making it muddy and driving buffaloes vigorously all over the patch. Sometimes even groups of young men trod vigorously over the mud to make the land soft enough. Shri Pator’s paternal uncle was the first person to introduce cow for ploughing in their village about thirty years back and he was not at all appreciated by the co-villagers, and was even criticized.

i) In The Field of Social Institution:

Changes that are noticeable in the social institution of the Tiwas are comparable to those found among the plains Karbis.

The family is nowadays usually found in its nuclear form rather than joint form. Of course instances of joint families are still present. The Khuta and Borghar system plays a very important role in regulating clusters of cognate families within the clan.

All the clans of the Tiwas are not found among the villages under study. Some of the clans found commonly are Puma, Phamjong, Mathrong, etc. The significant points that we have noticed regarding clan during our field visits involving changes are as follows:
a) Originally the clans were matrilineal and descent used to be traced through the mother’s line. Since at 30 years from now they have been adopting features of the patrilineal system while retaining the earlier system in a limited degree. For example, one of the three most important offices wielding authority in socio-religious matters is a female called Harikuwari who has to officiate in pindadan ritual.

Secondly, the right to inheritance of property, once fully belonging to the females, continues to be enjoyed by them even now, although the present tendency is moving towards giving weightage to the male members.

Although we did not have the opportunity to verify whether the Tiwas once followed the matriarchal system, the gobhia rakha system of marriage, of which we found several cases, seems to be a pointer to that fact.

b) Clan exogamy is still maintained but with some relaxation.

So far as marriage is concerned, the significant changes that are visible can be listed as follows –

i) The popular types of marriages we found during our field visits in different villages happened to be paluai ana biya (marriage by elopement), joron biya (marriage by formal offering of presents) and gobhia rakha (marriage by service). The burbiya, which is still considered to be the most prestigious form of marriage, is avoided by most people because of the huge expenses involved.
ii) Although we found many families with the history of gobhia marriages we also noticed that very few recent gobhia marriages have taken place in recent years. The main reasons for this change seem to be three first, in the changed economic system marriage by service (gobhia rakha) has lost its former utility; secondly, the young men of today consider it below their dignity to serve the bride’s family by physical labour; thirdly, because of the growing importance of the patriarchal system, the need for retaining the female property by bringing in the son-in-law no longer exists.

c) M.B.D cross-cousin marriage, which was formerly the most favoured, is no longer preferred by the younger people. However, the system of clan exogamy is still adhered to.

d) In older days marriage between Tiwas and non-Tiwas rarely took place and such marriages were frowned upon. But having had other groups as their close neighbours, such inhibitions have been completely shed. Marriages of Tiwas with Bodos and Karbis not only take place freely but is now considered as normal. Even marriages with non-tiwals are not uncommon today. While marriages with the caste Hindu population is accepted without much hesitation, it is not so in the case of Muslims or Christians. Such marriages are considered as offences and may be accepted only after the imposition of penalty like payment of fine and prescription of purificatory rites.
While doing our fieldwork in Senabor village of Kamrup district we got the following information regarding such a prohibited marriage that had taken place only a few years back in the Dimoria area. A boy married a Muslim girl by elopement. First of all they were not allowed to enter the village. Then the village elders of several villages were invited for the trial and finally they gave their judgment to accept the couple by payment of a heavy sum to the village council, a grand feast and an elaborate purificatory ritual.

iii) In the Field of Socio-Religious Life:

The socio-religious life of the Tiwas presents a picture which is more or less similar to that of the Misings, the Deuris and the Karbis with some specificities. Here also we find a mixture of a number of elements of socio-religious life such as – a) the traditional Tiwa religious beliefs and practices, (b) elements of Hindu beliefs and customs coming through integration and acculturation with the neighbouring non tribal Hindu Assamese section, (c) An overall influence of neo-Vaishnavism.

The religion of the acculturated section of the Tiwas who constitute the majority is found to be akin to a kind of Saktism. Pha Mahadeo, the supreme deity is identified with Lord Siva of Hindu pantheon. Similarly many other deities are also identified and related with the Hindu religious system. The other important deities worshipped by them are Ganesh, -Maji, Porameswar, Garo-Garoni, Baghraja, Kuber, Ai Gosani, Lakhimi, Padumi, Kalika, Kamakhya, Jagatjuri, Kani-Andheri etc. Though the form of Tiwa religion is considered as an extension of the Hindu religion, their images and puja paraphernalia are not the same as those used by other non-Tiwa Saktas. The priestly classes who are entrusted to conduct the religious
ceremonies are Loro, Deuri and Changmajhi. However, all of them are not found equally active in all the areas. For example, in Dimoria area the Deuri enjoys a more prominent role. In some villages the Tela or Katharguru conducts the common village rituals. The individual household rituals related to Borghar have to be performed by the tela and the hari (or harikuwari).

Almost each of the villages or a cluster of villages has a shrine called than more recently Namghars where pujas or any kind of public worship are performed. Some of the rituals performed by the villagers under study, particularly of Dimoria area are as follows:-

The Senabor villagers perform an annual puja at three shrines with whom they affiliate themselves. Those are Mahadeo Than, Nowa goshai Than and Bamun Than. A Koch priest preside over the ritual called Pujari. Chicken, pig, rice beer are offered in the puja except at the Bamun Than.

Another annual ritual of this area performed by almost all the villages is Dinga Puja or Bhel Utua – i.e., the public expulsion of evil. In this puja both Bam Kathar (who is a Tiwa priest) and the Pani Kathar (who is a Karbi priest) conduct the proceedings.

A few other important rituals performed by them are Sanipuja, Malthakurpuja, Aisakam, Bhagabatipuja etc.

The above descriptions clearly exemplify the admixture of both Tiwa and Hindu elements in the rituals as well as the accommodation of other neighbouring tribal and caste Hindu agents in their performance.

As pointed out in Chapter – 4, the influence of neo-Vaishnava movement had not only touched but also transformed the tribal populations of the Brahmaputra valley by bringing integrating them into the wider Assamese society. This had happened also in the case of the Tiwas at different
times and in different ways. One of these ways was to embrace the tribals on equal terms and to bring them into the Hindu caste fold by a step by step prove of purification and elevation. The tribals themselves including the Tiwas responded with enthusiasm as it was considered that it gave them a higher status. This had resulted in a situation which has been described as the situation of tribe-caste continuum in the Assamese Hindu society.

The assimilation of tribal elements into the Assamese Hindu society has worked through a process of 'purification' and 'elevation' where the Vaishnava spiritual superior acts as the agent of initiation (saran). This process of imitation involves rather elaborate rules of purification and elevation into the caste fold. At the end of the process the tribals are admitted into the Assamese Koch caste. Most of the Koch population of the area under study are in fact of Tiwa origin assimilated through the above process.

An important feature of the religious belief and practices of the Tiwas found to be common, has been the institution of Bhakat Sewa also known by many other alternative names (Ratisewa, Rati khowa, Burhadangaria Sewa, etc.) which is practically an esoteric form of Vaishnavism. The significance of this institution is that without formal initiation and without entry into the caste fold, Vaishnavism had entered into their lives.

Sometime ago an interesting development took place. Groups of Tiwas came forward to accept the neo-Vaishnavism as propounded by Shankardeva while remaining Tiwa tribals - not becoming Koch through initiation. But the latest tendency seems to be disfavour that trend also. However, during our field visits we found that ordinary Tiwa villages still continue to have veneration for the teachings of Shankaradeva and other
Vaishnava Saints. At the same time some of them are turning for spiritual solace towards such cults as Sai Baba, Anukul Thakur and Prajapita Brahmakumari.

Formerly Christianity did not have significant influence on the Tiwas but in recent years more and more Tiwas have been accepting Christianity. At least two Christian Missions have been active in the Tiwa majority areas – One is the Baptist Mission located at Dahali Village, which have links with Nagaland. The other is a Catholic Mission located a few kins away near Silsang. It has an imposing Church building and also a high school called Christojyoti within its compound. Mainly because of the social service activities of the Missions more and more are being attracted towards Christianity. As in the case of the Karbis, the conversion process has led to clearage in the concerned villages of Tiwas and have given rise to tension between Christian and non Christians. Clearly this development also has important socio-political implications.

(iv) In The Field of Socio-Political Life:

Some relevant information on the traditional Tiwa system of social administration, both at the level of the village and that of an area, have been given in Chapter 3. We are now dealing with the changes in the scenario that has taken place in the socio-political field--taking the Tiwa community in a broader perspective.

The processes of acculturation, integration and assimilation of the Tiwas of the plains to the wider Assamese socio-cultural framework had been so smooth and natural that there was hardly any serious concern with the question of a separate and independent Tiwa identity until about 50 years back. After Independence, particularly with the incorporation of special
provisions for tribals in the Indian constitution, the consciousness about the enjoyment of the special privileges involved started gaining ground. To give concrete shape to this consciousness Tiwas took steps towards organizing themselves as a distinctive group. This resulted in the formation of the first common Tiwa-organization-- Sodou Asom Tiwa Sanmilan--about 30 years back. It provided a common platform on which the Tiwas discussed ways and means to identify the distinctive features of Tiwa culture and to encourage Tiwas to assert their Tiwaness. Gradually, the concern with Tiwa ethnicity became more and more insistent. With a view to canalizing the newly rising ethnic favour the Tiwa Sahitya Sabha was formed around 1980 on the model of Asam Sahitya Sabha which has been the biggest and most popular "national organization" in Assam. However, as with Asam Sahitya Sabha, programmes of Tiwa Sahitya Sabha have been by and large non political in character. But, very soon new generation Tiwas were inspired by the autonomy movements launched by many other tribal groups. New organization spearheaded mainly by students and youths came up with demands for autonomy for the Tiwas. With a rapid developments of events, these demands became more and more vocal and even violent at times, and because of the new policy adopted by the state government, such demands have been conceded. Thus, the Tiwa Autonomous Council has already come into existence.

Some significant developments taking place parallely are worth noting:

a) The attitude now is not to be ashamed of ‘tribalness’ as in the past, but to accept it with a sense of dignity and pride.
b) The tendency towards assimilation from the tribal fold into the non-tribal fold is now resented and a further shift in that direction is not favoured. An important reason for this is that such shifts may lead to the losing of the special privileges enjoyed by the tribals.

c) The fact that the acculturated Tiwas have lost their language has been a cause of resentment and embarrassment for the newly conscious section. As such the reinstitution of the Tiwa language has acquired a kind of heightened urgency. Interestingly, most of the leading Tiwa personalities who have been at the forefront of this ethnic assertion movement belong to the acculturated section are not Tiwa speakers. We shall have occasion to discuss some more details in the section covering change in the field of language.

(v) In The Field of Material Culture and Language:

(a) Material Culture:

The visible changes in the case of material culture that we have noticed during our field study are more or less similar to those found in the other communities. These can be summarized as follows:

House-type:

The traditional Tiwa house pattern is more or less similar to that of several other communities of the plains of Assam -- with mud plinth, bamboo posts and rafters, mud-plastered walls and thatch roof. In the chapter on ethnographic note about the five tribes under study we have described
the traditional house pattern of the Tiwas and its significance to Tiwa life. Such types of houses having *borghar*, *charaghar* and *pak ghar* is still the popular pattern with some modifications. However, changes have come gradually. As a first step the common Assam type pattern had been adopted by them and in more recent times the people who can afford go for R.C.C. constructions of the latest design. Such changes have significant impact on the *khuta* system of the Tiwa socio-religious life.

Textiles:

The traditional female attire consists of *kachong* (*mekhela*) - a loin cloth having long stripes at the back; *phaskai* - a wrapper to cover the upper portion of the body. In addition to that, for ceremonial purposes they use a decorated shawl (called *nona*). Usually the *kachong* is either in deep blue or maroon and the *phaskai* is in yellow or white with designs of different colours.

The ornaments include *chhablo* - a waist belt made of silver, *krenglo* - a kind of cross-belt made of silver used by both male and female, *mania* - a metal necklace, *lothar* - a necklace made of beads. The male attire consists of *tagla* (jacket) originally in black only. Nowadays there is no hard and fast rule regarding colours; a *dhoti* usually in white or green; *phaga* - a yellow scarf and *tongali* - waist-band usually in yellow or in green.

*Thenas* is used by both male and female, which consists of two pieces of cloth crossing through the upper portion of the body. It must be in white base with designs in gray colour.

However, most of the acculturated Tiwas of the plains both men and women have adopted, the non-tribal Assamese dresses, in certain cases
with some unique patterns of designs. But, as in the case of the Karbis, here also the waves of revivalism have made them conscious about their traditional dresses, especially for ceremonial purposes. And the latest trend is to wear all the modern dresses. The new generation girls today wear sari, salowar kurta, skirts etc. and the boys have adopted trousers, shirts etc.

Implements:

So far as changes in the agricultural and weaving implements are concerned, it is the same story as in the case of the Plains Karbis. They have taken up the settled cultivation from the non-tribal Assamese neighbours along with the implements used by the latter. Similarly, the weaving implements are also the same as that of the non-tribal Assamese neighbour as they have opted for the common throw-shuttle loom and also the fly-shuttle one.

And the latest trends of change due to the technological advances have touched the Tiwa villages also and many of them are of coming forward to go for the modern technological facilities.

In the case of transport and communication, a sea change has occurred in many of these villages because of the development of road conditions, public conveyance system, telecommunication facilities and electronic media. Electrification in the rural areas has become a strong facilitator for these developments.

(b) Language:

As we have mentioned in the section on socio-political life, most of the Tiwas of the plains today are Assamese-speaking. A small section of them, however, still have retained their own language, especially those living in the foothill regions. Of course they are also bilingual. Interestingly,
there are other Tiwa villages in close proximity where the language has been completely lost.

Until recently, the Tiwa students received education through the Assamese medium right from the primary level. Educated Tiwas with a literary flare always write in Assamese. Of course, small groups of people have started writing in the Tiwa language also.

But of late there has been a significant change in the linguistic situation.

As we have already noted, the acculturated Tiwas, as a result of the growing ethnic consciousness, seem to have developed a sense of shame and resentment about having lost the language. They have come to identify the language as an ethnicity marker.

The Tiwa organizations still use Assamese on all formal occasions to conduct the proceedings but incorporate as many Tiwa terms as they can manage to add a touch of “authentic Tiwaness”.

One of the major demands of the various Tiwa organizations is the recognition of the Tiwa language and its introduction as a language subject at the primary level. In fact, this demand has been already conceded by the state government. However, it appears that while preparing the textbooks the question of the choice of the script has thrown up certain knotty problems. So long the plains Tiwas had been in favour of using the Assamese script for writing in Tiwa. But in the Tiwa inhabited areas of the hill falling within Meghalaya, the teaching of Tiwa in primary schools through the Roman script has already made some headway. The Tiwas of the plains are facing a dilemma. If they have Tiwa textbooks in the Assamese script, Tiwa children of the hills and the plains will be learning the language through two different scripts – a peculiarly anomalous situation.
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