Chapter 1.

Introduction

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Change is a universal phenomenon in all societies. It is so in the case of culture too. The process of regular addition and subtraction of cultural traits result in culture change. However, the rate of change and aspects of culture that change varies from society to society. Moreover, the factors and process of culture change too are different from culture to culture. That is why scholars have studied culture change in different times in different frameworks. The present study is based on anthropological perspectives. Since anthropology is the holistic study of mankind, it takes into consideration the various aspects of life like social, political, religious, economic, etc. of a society. The present study also deals with the social, political, religious and economic life and folklore of the Tiwas of Assam. This study tries to explore the changes and continuities that have taken place in the culture of the plain Tiwas of Assam. The Tiwas formerly known as the Lalungs are one of the prominent tribes living in both plain and hill areas of Assam. The Tiwas living in the hill areas are known as Hill Tiwas and those who are living in the plain areas are known as Plain Tiwas. They are to be found in the districts of Nagaon and Morigaon of central Assam, although a very small group of them are also to be found in the hills and plains of Karbi Anglong, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Jorhat districts. Elaborate discussions on the concept of culture change and the tribe under study have been undertaken in the second and third chapters respectively.

1.1. Background and Context of the Study:

Assam is the homeland of various ethnic groups having diverse racial, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Different groups of people had migrated
into this geographical location known as Assam in different centuries of its history. They came through different routes in different times, thus making this region a meeting point of various races and cultures. Gradually under the shastric influence from the Hindu heartland, the erstwhile ruling dynasties of ancient Assam embraced Hinduism and thus attained the status of Kshatriyas. They in turn also took measures for the propagation of Hinduism amongst the various tribes in their vicinity. However, traces of their pre-Hindu ritualistic practices still survive in the practice of the Hindu faith in Assam, thus making the Assam-Hinduism distinctive from other places of India. After this first phase of Hinduization, the Neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam propagated by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the 15th-16th centuries consolidated the process to a large extent. The egalitarian tenets of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva attracted many tribal people to the Vaisnavite fold. Thus, a condition was created for the emergence of a wider society in Assam, which later on came to be identified as the Assamese society. The acceptance of Vaisnavism and Assamese identity by the tribes of Assam has undergone a radical revision amongst the various tribes of Assam in contemporary times. Ethnic assertion and identity politics based on tribal language and cultural practices that can be traced from the later half of the twentieth century amongst the tribes of Assam and the Tiwas are also no exception. A tendency of self assertion from this period can be seen amongst the Tiwas too.

The Tiwas have been recognized as a 'Scheduled Tribe' in Indian constitution. It is a different issue that the Tiwas and many other such 'Scheduled Tribes' of India do not conform to the anthropological definition of a tribe. Anthropologists have tried to define a tribe and a few of definitions are as follows:

Anthropologist D. N. Majumdar defined tribe as:

A tribe is a collection of families or groups of families, bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak
the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutually of obligation.  

Marshall Sahlins, a social anthropologist defined tribe as:

A tribe is of the order of a large collection of bands but it is not simply a collection of bands ... there is kingdom also which coordinates economic, social and religious activities and redistributed a large part of the production of local community.

Sociologists R. N. Sharma and R. K. Sharma defined tribe as:

.....the tribe is a group of persons having a common definite territory, common dialect, common name, common religion, and a common culture, in which there is blood relationship and consequently a feeling of unit, who have a peculiar political organization and who generally marry within their own group.

The definitions of tribe given by early anthropologists bear different connotations. ‘Backward’, ‘primitive’, ‘living in isolated area’, ‘sharing common religion and common language’ are some of the common attributes given by the former anthropologists to distinguish tribe from the non tribes. But the definitions containing these attributes are not beyond criticism. For example, it is not proper to say that all the tribal communities of the world are ‘backward’ or ‘primitive’ in present day context. That is why the use of the term at present has been challenged by several anthropologists. Chris Lowe writes:

Tribe is used for groups who trace their heritage to great kingdoms. It is applied to Nigeria’s Igbo and other peoples who organized orderly societies composed of hundreds of local communities and highly developed trade networks without recourse to elaborate states. Tribe is also used for all sorts of smaller units of such larger nations, peoples or ethnic groups. The followers of a particular local leader may be called a tribe. Members of an extended kin-group may be called a tribe. People who live in a particular area may be called a tribe. We find tribes within tribes, and cutting across other tribes. Offering no useful distinctions, tribe obscures many. As a description of a group, tribe means almost anything, so it really means nothing. If by tribe we mean a social group that shares a single territory, a single language, a single political unit, a shared religious tradition, a similar economic system, and common cultural practices, such a group is rarely found in the real world. These characteristics almost never correspond precisely with each other today, nor did they at any time in the past.
It was Edmund Leach who first challenged the meaning of the term ‘tribe’. He was followed by Neira, Julian Steward, Swartz, Turner and Toden etc. Julian Steward calls the concept of tribe as a ‘Holdall’ concept. He said, ‘it includes everything, and excludes nothing.’ Hence, it can be said that the concept of tribe is nothing but a creation of the colonial period. Maurice Godlier, a Marxist anthropologist, tried to find a way out and defined tribe from the Marxist point of view. He defined ‘tribe’ as a social organization, characterized by special mode of production. ⁶

In India, before independence, the term ‘tribe’ was frequently used by the British rulers. They used this term to distinguish the tribes from the non-tribes. Now, in India, the term ‘tribe’ is used in two different senses: according to the definitions provided by the anthropologists and the other is according to the recognition provided by the Indian constitution. The tribes recognized by the Indian constitution are known as ‘Scheduled Tribe’ (ST). The Constitution of India has specified the “Scheduled Tribes” in Article 366(25) as:

...such tribes or tribal communities or parts or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled tribes for the purpose of this constitution”.⁷

In the Article 342 it is stated:

(1) The President may, after consultation with the Governor or Rajpramukh of a State, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State.
(2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.⁸

S. L. Dosi and P. C. Jain state that:

...by the Scheduled tribe order, 1950, issued by the President in exercise of the powers conferred by Clause (1) of Article 232 of the
Constitution of the India, 312 tribes have been declared to be Scheduled tribes. Later, by an Act of Parliament, some other groups were also included in the schedule.  

Later on, 414 ethnic groups were included in the “Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List modification Order” of 1956. The total number of tribal communities in India as identified by the People of India project conducted under the auspices of the Anthropological Survey of India is 461, of which about 172 are identified as subgroups. According to the census report of 2001 the total scheduled tribe population of India is 84,326,240; which constitute 8.2% of the total population. These “Scheduled tribes” get special protective and developmental safeguards and legal privileges in the Indian Constitution.

It is quite evident that the term tribe acquires different connotations in different time and place. That is why most of the scholars are reluctant to use this term in academic purpose. Rather they prefer terms such as ‘ethnic group’, ‘ethnic community’, ‘nationality’, ‘people’ etc. depending on the context. The term tribe is basically an administrative category today. Though the term ‘tribe’ has no consistent meaning in the present context, yet this term is used in the present study for these reasons: Firstly, this particular ethnic community, the Tiwas, are recognized as ‘Scheduled tribe’ by the Indian Constitution. Secondly, ‘tribal status’ is a desirable attribute for the ethnic communities of India, particularly for the Other Backward Classes (OBC) because this recognition brings constitutional safeguard to the scheduled tribes. In Assam, presently the communities who have been demanding ‘tribal status’ are- the Adivasis, (formerly known as tea garden and ex-tea garden communities), the Koch Rajbongshis, the Morans, the Motoks and the Chutias. Thirdly, the term ‘tribe’ is used here to distinguish the tribes from the non-tribal communities living in Assam.
1.1.1. The Tribes of Assam:

There are several racial and linguistic groups in India. Generally, four main races and cultures that are found in India are blended together into one people, the Indian. These racial groups are:

(i) the Austro-Asiatics- represented by the Kols or the Mundas, the Khasis and the Nicobarese;

(ii) the Mongoloid people who are found largely along the sub-Himalayan regions - represented by the Nagas, the Bodos, the Kuki-Chins, etc;

(iii) the Dravidians - represented by the Malers, the Oraons, the Gonds and the Khonds, etc. and

(iv) the Aryans who are supposed to be the last to come to India.\textsuperscript{13}

The inhabitants of Assam constitute the following racial groups: (i) The Mongoloid, (ii) The Austroloid, (iii) The Mediterraneans, i.e. Dravidians, and (iv) The Nordic. The majority of the tribal population of Assam belongs to Mongoloid and Austroloid groups. Except the Khasis and Jayantias, other tribal groups such as the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Karbis, the Misinges, the Dimasas, the Tiwas, the Deuri-Chutiyas, and the Hazongs are the descendents of Mongoloid stock. In ancient Indian scriptures they were referred to as Kiratas.\textsuperscript{14} The tribal population of North-East India in general and Assam in particular can be divided into two broad categories: hill tribes and plain tribes. Majority of the hill- tribes inhabit in Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya and also scattered in the hilly districts of Manipur, Tripura and Assam. The plain tribes inhabit in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and they have been living with the non tribal communities since the time of their migration. Hence, the plain tribes have differences in cultural characteristics as compared to the tribes living in the hills.

According to the Census Report of 2001 the total population of Assam is 26,655,528 and the total Scheduled Tribe population is 3,308,570 which
constitute 12.4% of the total population. The Scheduled Tribes are spreading over all the districts of Assam. The highest concentration of the Scheduled Tribe population can be found in North Cachar Hills district with 68.3%. Karbi Anglong and Dhemaji districts follow with 55.7% and 47.3% respectively. The Bodos are the largest of all scheduled tribe communities consisting of 40.9% of total population. To be arranged according to percentage of population in a succeeding way, the list of other major communities is like this: the Misings, the Karbis, the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the Tiwas, and the Dimasas. There are other minor tribes with small population size. Fig. 1: shows the population size of the major Scheduled Tribes of Assam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL No</th>
<th>Name of the Scheduled Tribe</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Proportion to the total ST population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>All Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>3,308,570</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bodo</td>
<td>1,352,771</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Miri(Mising)</td>
<td>587,310</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mikir(Karbi)</td>
<td>353,513</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>277,517</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>235,881</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lalung(Tiwa)</td>
<td>170,622</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dimasa</td>
<td>110,976</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1: Table of Census figures in connection to the Population Size of the Major ST's of Assam (Source: Census of India 2001)

These tribal groups have been living in this part of the country with other non tribal groups since time immemorial. The Brahmins, the Kayasthas, the Kalitas, the Keots, the Ahoms, the Koches, the Hiras, the Kaiborttas and the Namashudras are some of the non tribal groups of Assam with whom the Plain Tiwas are living in close proximity. The Muslims, the Nepalis, the Sikhs and the Marwaris are some of the non-tribal groups living in Assam.
Assam bears a great deal of geographical, linguistic, racial, religious, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity. Diversities of ecological, historical, linguistic and racial factors have characterized the region. As this region is a meeting place of different communities and cultures, there has been great amount of culture contact among the ethnic groups living in this region. Hence, this area can provide an interesting case for research.

1.2. The Scope and Objectives of the Study:

Researches on the dynamics of culture are not new. In India many scholars have studied the change in the culture of different tribal groups. Scholars like J. P. Mills (1931), Robins Burling (1965), D. N. Majumdar (1980), J. K. Bose (1985), A. M. Kurup (1986), K. S. Singh (1986) and Yogendra Singh (2000) etc. have studied on the dynamic aspects of culture on different ethnic groups of India. But much of these studies are based on the hill tribes. Birendra Kumar Gohain had studied the changes and continuity that had taken place in the life and culture of the hill Tiwas (1994). In Assam, it is a common assumption among the people that plain tribes have been vastly assimilated with the Assamese caste Hindus. It is not always acceptable in all spheres of their culture. The majority of the tribal population inhibits in the valleys of Assam. Along with the tremendous trend of culture change, they are now experiencing the trends of revivalism for their separate identity. Plain Tiwas are one of such groups. The culture change and resurrection of culture are operating simultaneously in their society. They have been living in this part of the country along with the non-tribal communities as well as other tribal communities throughout the evolution of Assamese nationality. Therefore, different sphere of their culture have been influenced by the neighboring communities in different ways and different factors are responsible for that.

The present research project is an endeavour to make a comparative study on the changes that have taken place in different spheres of their culture and factors responsible for that. The study aims to explore the changes and
continuities in the life and culture of the plain Tiwas. The following parameters were taken into consideration for the accomplishment of the project:

(i) Social Institution
(ii) Socio-Political life
(iii) Socio-Religious life
(iv) Socio-Economic life
(v) Socio-Cultural life as Reflected in Folklore

The study might help in understanding the tribe in question, as well as their problems, tribal non-tribal relations and also will help in formulating policies like economic and political etc. for the Tiwas in particular and the tribes in general.

1.3. Methodology:

This research work was undertaken by following a multi-disciplinary approach. Ethnicity, culture and consolidation and redefining of ethnic identities have been the focal point of disciplines like Anthropology, Folklore, Cultural Studies and Sociology. Thus it is not possible to use exclusivist methods that deny the approaches of other disciplines in favour of a particular one. One has to acknowledge that diverse approaches exist in addressing issues pertaining to subjects like identity and ethnicity. Thus the work seeks to revisit sites of multiple engagements with such ideas. Moreover, disciplines like Anthropology in its pre-independent and the immediate aftermath of independence carried in its understanding of 'tribal' customs and culture, colonial prejudices involving notions of 'progress' and 'civilisation' as opposed to notions of being 'primitive' and 'uncultured'.

Data generated on the Tiwas from the annals of secondary sources will be interfaced with fresh data from the field that will interrogate the discursive notions on the Tiwas from the approaches of various disciplines. Hence, the
study is a field based one. The field study was carried out in select villages of Nagaon (spelled by the British as Nowgong) and Morigaon districts. According to the census of 2001, these two districts constitute 92.79% of total Tiwa population of Assam. Individually the Nagaon district bears the 32.97% and Morigaon District bears 59.82% of total Tiwa population of Assam. Moreover, the ancient Tiwa kingdoms were situated in these districts. Gait’s A History of Assam (1963) bears evidence of this fact:

In Sahari Mauza in Nowgaong are the remains of and old fort with high embankments known as the Jungalgarh. This alleged to have been the capital of Jungal Balahu, another son of Arimatta, who was defeated by the Kacharis and drowned himself in Kallang river. These two districts are situated in the middle of Assam. The district of Nagaon is one of the largest districts of Assam. It covers almost four thousand square kilometers of fertile alluvial plains and thickly forested hills. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows along the northern periphery of the district. Other major tributaries meandering through the district are Kolong and Kopili. Lying at a distance of 123 kilometers away from Guwahati, Nagaon town constitutes a vital corridor linking the Upper Assam districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and the North Assam districts of Sonitpur and North Lakhimpur. The Kaziranga National Park, home of the one-horned rhinoceros, is situated adjacent to the district of Nagaon. The district of Nagaon is famous for the Bordowa Thaan, the birth place of Sankardeva. Sankardeva propounded Neo-Vaisnavism of Assam and made a great contribution to the formation of greater Assamese society.

Morigaon is basically an agrarian district. It is the second smallest district of Assam. Morigaon Town, the headquarters of the district, is situated 78 Kms away from Dispur, the state capital. The present Morigaon district was a sub-division of Nagaon district. This was upgraded to a district in 1989. The Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in this district. Moreover, the famous Jonbil Mela of the Tiwas, a living institution of barter, is held every
year on the bank of a lake called Jonbil of Morigaon district. The Jonbil lake is at a distance of 3 km. from Jagiroad.\textsuperscript{19}

The Tiwas of this region have been living peacefully with other tribal and non-tribal communities. Now, the Tiwas of this region are experiencing the trend of cultural change, though their traditional practices have not totally gone out of place. Hence, the area provides an interesting case for field study in ‘culture change’.

The study draws on both primary and secondary data. For collection of primary data, the methods generally followed in social sciences such as non-participant observation, individual and group interview, case study, questionnaire, photographic documentation etc. were used. Interviews were held with persons of different age groups. For collection of secondary data - books, journals, websites, magazines, news papers and archival materials were used with due acknowledgement. Secondary data are used in theoretical part. The Chicago Style Sheet is used for referencing and bibliography. This work has been organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 is an introductory note. Chapter 2 is dealing with the theoretical interpretation of the concept of culture change and literature review. Chapter 3 is explanatory note on the tribe under study. Chapter 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 are dealing with the issues like changes in social institutions, socio-political life, socio-religious life, socio-economic life and representation of socio-cultural life in folklore respectively. Chapter 9 is the conclusion.
Notes:


2 D. N. Majumdar, Races and Cultures of India (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 367.


7 The Constitution of India (New Delhi: Secretary to the Government of India, 2000) 165.

8 Ibid. 148.


14 N. C. Sarma, Oral Songs of Tribal Communities of Assam (Guwahati: Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, 2006), 11-12.

16 Ibid.


19 See http://www.dmoz.org/Regional/Asia/India/Assam/Districts/desc.html (accessed May 04, 2008).
Fig. 2: Map of India showing the location of Assam
(Source: http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Fig. 3: Districts of Assam (Source: http://www.mapsofindia.com)
Fig. 4: Map of Nagaon District (Source: http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Fig. 5: Map of Marigaon District (Source: http://www.mapsofindia.com)