

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND AGENCY: A STUDY OF  
THE FEMALE RITUAL SPECIALISTS IN THE TIWA  
SOCIETY OF CENTRAL ASSAM**

*A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of*

*Doctor of Philosophy*

**Maitrayee Patar**

**Registration No.: TZ189877 of 2018**



**School of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Department of Sociology**

**Tezpur University, Tezpur-784028**

**Assam, India**

**December, 2023**

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the particular context of northeast India, especially that of Assam, the identity of the indigenous woman is not a singular, separated one. It is a confluence of a multitude of historically constructed identities that have been formed by non-linear, religious, political, cultural and ethnic influences and exchanges occurring throughout the region at different points of time in history. This study engages with the dominant discourses on women and religion viz-a-viz mainstream as well as vernacular Hinduism and examines how the tribal woman of the Plains of Assam is confronting these discourses through ambiguous ways of practice. While the Assamese caste Hindu elite 'aideu' (Medhi, 2023) conforming and operating through norms of Hindu patriarchy is the socially expressed aspiration for women in Assam, the beauty and paradox of the socio-political, ethnic and religious periphery lies in these tribal women using both indigenous tribal ethnicity as well as the identity of being a Hindu woman to exercise agency. In its own situatedness, the ambiguity of this agency challenges both indigenous and the Hindu established notion of women and gender.

Documenting an institution like that of the *haari* can give one a methodological entrypoint to understand the contemporary nature of religion and ritual practices among tribal groups, something that could not be achieved while engaging with the existing literature at hand. To draw a theoretical framework of the research and to contextualise it within the larger universe of the studies on women and religion, this study engaged with a range of existing literature- from classical sociological literature (Durkheim, 1902, Weber, 1905, Eliade 1912) on religion to feminist critiques on religion and society (Christ, 1991, Juschka, 2001), from debates on the secularisation thesis (Berger, 2007) to religion in modern public sphere (Habermas, 1962, van der Veer, 2002), from postcolonial and post-secular feminist literature on women and religion in global south (Boddy, 1989, Abu Lughod, 1986, Mahmood, 2004, Avishai, 2018) to specific scholarships on religion, public sphere and women in India (Wadley, 1977, Dube, 1988, Bell, 1997, Narayanan, 2005, Pintchman, 2007, Doniger, 2009) and from writings on indigenous feminism (Marcos, 2006, Wilkerson, 2007, Iseke, 2013) to the debates on the categories 'caste', 'tribe', 'indigenous' and 'the tribal woman' (Gohain, 1987, Xaxa, 1999, 2004, 2005, Nongbri, 2000, Sharma, 2006, 2011, Mahanta, 2001, Ramirez, 2014, Sengupta, 2021) in context of

India. While the majority of these literature suggest the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere of religion, some of them do highlight how women claim their space in the public sphere through strategic actualisation of their religious identities. In the context of the global south, women have been documented as ‘doing’ religion (Avishai, 2008) and henceforth exercising agency not by challenging traditional religious norms but rather by living up to them. In a post secular feminist approach, women have been documented as using the ‘politics of piety’ (Mahmood, 2004) to claim visibility in the public sphere of conservative religion. In an indigenous feminist approach, women have been documented as recovering their ancestral knowledge, traditions and cosmological belief systems (Marcos, 2006) as a way towards reclaiming their indigenous identities. Indigenous women have also been documented as using their knowledge, experience and wisdom of indigenous rituals to actualise themselves in the public sphere among the masses (Wilkinson, 2007), in the face of patriarchal invasions of world religions. Using the lens of gender and religion, all of these studies respond to the contemporary changes that are happening within conservative world religions and in doing so, paint the contemporary picture of specific societies and their changing dynamics with religion.

This study aims to contribute to the above line of scholarship by using the lens of women in ritual positions in tribal societies of northeast India. Using the institution of *haari* as a methodological entrypoint, the study examines the contemporary nature of religion and religious practices among the Plains Tiwas of Assam in northeast India. In the historically overlapping and gradually changing characteristics of religion in the region, how does one locate gender, more specifically, the tribal woman? This study uses ethnographic field materials to explore how these intricate and ambiguous complications inform the relationship between women and religion in postcolonial tribal societies in northeast India, and attempts to trace the nature of agency that these women express through positions of ritual authority.

In a pan-Indian context, there are a multitude of lenses through which the presence and position of women have been analysed in traditional Hinduism. On one hand, Hinduism dwells on the paradox of the Goddess, the mother and the common woman, and appropriates the position of women either as benevolent nurturers or conforming wives (Wadley, 1977). On the other hand, Hinduism like all other world religions makes women invisible in the formal or public sphere. It doesn’t offer women formal positions of

authority in the public sphere. This has been understood as true even in the approach towards the tribal woman (Xaxa, 2004). According to these approaches, the Hindu women are not given any power in practice, nor are they given any visibility or authority in the formal sphere of religion.

Through this study I make a departure from these existing frameworks and suggest an alternative framework that can make sense of women's negotiation with power structure from formal positions of ritual authority. I argue about an alternate framework that may help overcome the approaches that are stuck between colonised accounts of tribes that project a myth of empowered women viz-a-viz caste-Hindu society (which of course has been questioned by feminist scholars) and Eurocentric depictions of the powerlessness of the third-world women.

This study extends the available scholarships on the ambiguous processes of becoming Hindu (Sengupta, 2021) to examine how tribal women in the cultural, ethnic and political periphery use ritual authority to exercise power in community life. As observed in the field, the ritual authority enjoyed by the *haaris* dynamically interacted with the difficult choices they had to exercise in taking up their ritual role. These interactions often involved constant negotiations outside the ritual sphere, mostly in the spheres of family and marriage.

Thus, as observed in the field, the sense of power the *haaris* is often exercised a) through ritual status and not always viz-a-viz it, b) as a tool for negotiation with patriarchal power structures outside the religious sphere.

The study examines the institution of *borghor* among the Tiwas to understand the intertwined universe of religion and kinship among the Tiwas. It examines the ritual hierarchies present in the *borghor*, the gender demarcations prescribed through the dichotomy of the public and the private, and then locates the prescribed ritual position of the *haari* within the same. The study looks at the annual community rituals conducted within the *borghor* premises to interrogate how within a formal setting of prescribed ritual boundaries the *haari* uses her knowledge and wisdom to transgress the hierarchies of domain, thereby actualising her role as the female ritual specialist of her *kul*.

This study uses ritual and community practices as an entry point to critically engage with the ambiguities and complexities associated with the Tiwa tribe in transition. While doing so it tries to locate gender which seems to feature the least in the debates on religion and identity surrounding the tribe. Where does a community practice like that of the female ritual specialist or the *Haari* find itself in the transition of the Plains Tiwa tribe or in its claims to an 'indigenous' tribal identity? In an attempt to analyse from within, this study explores the social practices and life-realities pertaining to the ritual status of the *Haaris* as narrated by these women themselves.

The study follows the life narratives of the *haaris*, the female ritual specialists of the Plains Tiwa tribe to understand how they interpret their assigned ritual position in the context of their own life realities. By documenting their own perceptions about their ritual role, this study draws attention to how while negotiating with structures of power outside the religious sphere, women's agency is expressed through the ritual status formally assigned to them by the tribe.

Excluding or writing off the indigenous women in the contemporary socio-political analysis of the region would mean writing off a part of history itself. By proposing an alternative framework to examine indigenous women's negotiations with power through positions of ritual authority, this study also argues for a responsible scholarship on the indigenous that is accountable to indigenous women and their overlapping and contrasting socio-political, ethnic and religious identities.

Thus, through an ethnographic exploration of an indigenous ritual practice, this study argues for the importance of decolonising the study of the indigenous and a reclaiming of the indigenous by the indigenous. Situating the relevance of such surviving practices in addressing the larger question of socio-political and ethnic identity of tribes in the region, this study argues for a need to critically re-assess the recent scholarships on vernacular politics of ethnic groups in northeast India. By examining women with ritual status of the Plains Tiwa tribe, this study seeks to highlight the conspicuous absence of women as subjects of ethnic assertion at two levels- by those involved in the vernacular politics of the region and by those examining it. This study puts forward the question, in what ways, if at all, are women considered as political subjects by the indigenous and by those examining indigeneity in the vernacular? This study brings the argument to the sphere of indigeneity and religion. With particular reference to the Tiwas of Central Assam, it

highlights the presence of women's ritual authority and in that sense their formal presence in the religious and ethnic consciousness of the tribe and argues that it is important for vernacular scholarships and scholarships on the vernacular to take into account the complex nuances of gender while examining vernacular politics, for politics of the vernacular in the northeast is a melting pot of dynamics of the social, the religious, the cultural and the ethnic, of which gender is an inescapable variable.

Again, within this assertion of collective identities, contextual understanding of the agency of women is equally important. By empirically locating the contemporary dynamics of the Plains Tiwa women with their formally assigned ritual status and ritual authority, this study offers a feminist viewpoint to the existing social realities of the tribe as against the androcentrism that surrounds the debates on tribal identity formation within the tribe. By doing so, the study thereby posits the question- at the onset of a rising Tiwa nationalist sentiment that is followed by revivalist tendencies within the community, where does one place the Tiwa woman? By definition, any form of nationalism is patriarchal as it glorifies the idea of a nation and hence authority over a territory- physical or imagined. Nationalism thus also invades the space for gender equity as it claims ownership of the representation of women in all formal spheres. All forms of nationalism thus advocate the standardization of culture and an idealization of its women. Given that, where does one locate the institution of *Haari*, a practice that is surviving despite operating within the normative patriarchal apparatus of religion and culture, and that offers the Tiwa women a certain ritual status, a possible sense of self and agency? Based on empirical field findings discussed in the chapters, this study sets up a preliminary context to the question- will an institution as that of the *Haari* survive the religious and cultural 'pitching' that is bound to follow as the grand roads to a religious nation building are in the making?