

## Abstract

The androcentric bias in the studies conducted by early social scientists (Christ, 1991) has also resulted in a biased documentation of the relationship between women and religion. However, recent studies have indicated how women through their interpretations and practices of religion have altered its given meanings. This includes work of feminist scholars who focused on the engagement of women with religion as well as critiques of mainstream religious interpretations. Despite the changes in framing and advancement in methodological and theoretical work on women and religion, empirical studies of ritual practices in postcolonial societies have often overlooked women's involvement in authority positions within religion. One such position is that of the female ritual specialists which has been reported but not been examined.

This study interrogates the complexities of ritual status and agency among the female ritual specialists of the Tiwa society in Central Assam. It draws from the available body of research in the global south and examines empirical data to understand how Tiwa women with ritual status exercise agency through their role prescribed by the community.

The Plains Tiwa tribe, also known as the 'Lalungs' is an ethnic group listed as a scheduled tribe by the Constitution of India. Majority of the Plains Tiwas are known to inhabit central Assam comprising the districts of Morigaon and Nagaon (Baruah, 1989). This research highlights a unique pattern of kinship followed by the Plains Tiwa tribe and its direct relation to the religious and social structure of the community. The Plains Tiwas tribe follows a tradition of a female ritual specialist. These women are called *Haari* by the tribe. Though the exact meaning of the term is not known, it refers to a female ritual specialist who is considered as indispensable in all the ritual ceremonies and practices of the tribe. The term *Haari* only finds scarce mention in some of the post-independence scholarly literature and documentation about the community (Bolairam Senapati 2018; Moneshwor Dewri 2018) that has been done by a few scholars from within the tribe. These literatures suggest that the *Haari* follows a kinship pattern that is outside the regular parameters of patrilineal kinship structure followed by the tribe. When married, the *Haari* has to exercise uxorilocal (matrilocal) residence, in an otherwise patrilocal and patrilineal kinship structure (Senapati, 2018). Drawing broadly from debates around questions of agency of women with reference to religious practice, this study examines the institution and practice

of *Haari*. Through this it aims to understand how agency of the *Haari* is practiced in relation to the complexities of Tiwa society in postcolonial context- a matrilineal ritual position existing within a patrilineal, patrilineal and patriarchal social structure.

In the specific context of the global south, the work of feminist scholars like Janice Boddy (1989), Saba Mahmood (2004), Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), Sylvia Marcos (2006), Orit Avishai (2008) throw a different light on the relationship between women and religion. These scholars seem to vary in their standpoints regarding the relationship between women and religion and some even make an indigenous feminist departure from the Western feminist argument about religion as a threat to women's agency and their socio-economic freedom.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature on women's ritual status and agency in two ways- firstly, it uses a feminist lens to document the female ritual specialists of the Plains Tiwa tribe. Secondly, it uses feminist standpoint to understand how these women perceive their own ritual status and how they use it to exercise agency within the many ambiguities of a patriarchal structure.

This study draws from existing debates around concepts of tribe, indigeneity, assimilation, nation-building and national identity formation (Gohain, 1987; Neog, 1986, Xaxa, 1999, Baruah, 1999, Sharma, 2011, Sengupta, 2021) and uses community specific ritual practices as an entry point to critically engage with the complexities associated with the Tiwa tribe in transition. While doing so it tries to locate gender which seems to feature the least in the contemporary debates on religion and ethnic 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 and performed by the women themselves. This study thus offers a feminist viewpoint to the existing social realities of the tribe that surrounds the debates on ethnic tribal identity formation within the tribe.

**Objectives:** The present research has been done with the following objectives:

1. To examine the interrelation between women's ritual status and agency through the institution of *haari*, the female ritual specialists of the Plains Tiwas.

2. To examine the significance of the role of *haari* in relation to the institutions of family and marriage among the Plains Tiwas.
3. To examine the nature and extent of participation of the *haaris* in Tiwa religious institutions and practices.

**Literature review:** I have drawn from varied positions on the question of religion, women and agency. Many of these positions have emerged from scholars working on the global south that have challenged the western idea about religion and women's agency.

Feminist anthropologist Janice Boddy (1989)'s work on the Muslim women of northern Sudan is an important analysis of the subaltern gendered agency. Boddy writes how the northern Sudanese women assert their value both collectively through the ritual ceremonies they organise and stage and how the means of their assertion are often what the West might consider as the very instruments of their oppression. What is interesting in these ritual practices and ceremonies is that the assertion of value may or may not be conscious or strategic, but in no way conform to the liberal norms of assertion.

Saba Mahmood (2004) through her ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, argues for the need to keep the meaning of agency open. Abu-Lughod (1986) joins the feminist scholars working on women in the Global south to argue that subversion has to be seen differently in different cultures and in terms of its situatedness. Avishai (2008) has discussed extensively on the ambiguities that surround agency in the religious lives of women from conservative religions.

In the specific context of the situating the unique kinship pattern of the *Haaris* in the larger domain of women's ritual status in matrilineal societies of the global south, works of Schneider and Gough (1961), Audrey Richards (1950), Schwede (1986), Tanner (1974), Poewe (1979), Weiner (1979, 1980), Dube (1997) were reviewed. These scholars have thrown varied light on the complex positioning of women in these societies in terms of economic status, land and property rights, political rights, sexual autonomy, etc.

Further, scholars like G. Arunima (2003) have written about the changing position of women in matrilineal societies. In northeast Indian context, scholars like Nongbri (2000) examine the link between matriliney and gender in Khasi society and observe that while

women have comparative security under matriliney, they are not entirely free from subordination.

Reviewing the above body of scholarship helped me in formulating the arguments of the current work.

**Field setting and methods:** This study was carried out in Bohgaon neighborhood of Barapujia village in the Raha district of Assam. The reason for choosing was, Barapujia is a Tiwa majority area with an active Tiwa ritual life and one of the few villages where the practice of *Haari* is still prevalent.

This study is an ethnographic research that uses feminist research methodology to examine the ritual status and agency among the female ritual specialists. To gain entry to the field, preliminary interviews were carried out with people from different positions in the community including senior members of the community, council members, TMT members and so on. I have observed and documented Tiwa community life through rituals, feasts and other ceremonial activities. Interviews were conducted with ritual specialists and community members to get a general idea about their kinship structure, community life and religious practices. Finally, in-depth interviews were carried out with the Haaris to gain a sense about their life history, their own perception about their ritual status and exercise of agency. The research is feminist in the ways that it keeps women and their life stories narrated by themselves at the center. Data collection was carried out during the months of January, February and March, completed through two phases spanning across 2019 and 2022. The said months in 2020 and 2021 had to be skipped as this was the time when covid pandemic was at its peak.

**Organisation of Thesis:** This thesis has been articulated across six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research, the statement of problem, conceptual framework, literature review, objective of research, methodological concerns and limitations of the research. It also introduces the field of research.

The second chapter critically engages with the relevant colonial as well as post-colonial debates and discussions around the intersecting categories of religion, caste, tribe and gender to examine the tribal woman in transition in India. By historicising the impact of Srimanta Shankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism on the tribes of Assam and using it to understand the contemporary question of revival of tribal identity among the Plains Tiwas,

the chapter posits the question- how have the socio-religious transitions impacted/shaped/re-shaped the women in general? The chapter then juxtaposes the above questions with the dual identity of the *Haaris*, the female ritual specialists of the community.

The third chapter maps the field and engages with the question of who is a *haari*. It examines a few life-stories narrated by the *Haaris* themselves to arrive at a situated understanding of their ritual status and agency. Drawing from the field narratives, the chapter argues that self, agency and belongingness of these women with ritual status have to be understood in their ambiguities and not through the binary approach of submission and subversion.

The fourth chapter examines the centrality of *Nobaro* or the *Borghor* (a Tiwa structure used as a worship space) in the socio-religious and kinship universe of the Tiwas. Using ethnographic field data, it examines the role of the *Haari* or the female ritual specialist within the *borghor* to argue for possible past matrilineal linkages of the Plains Tiwa tribe which is otherwise patrilineal. The chapter examines the prescribed ritual hierarchies, the boundaries and dichotomies of public and private domain within the structure of the *borghor* to analyse how the ritual authority of the *haari* gets actualised through ambiguities of practice. The chapter also deals with the question of overlapping religious and ethnic identities, and how it complicates the idea of self and agency for the female ritual specialist who has to function through subsequent overlapping patriarchies.

The fifth chapter extends the previous chapter and uses ethnographic field data to analyse how gender division within the tribe is pronounced through the community birth and death rituals in the *Borghor* premises. It examines the role of the *Haaris* through these rituals and explores how the gender division sanctioned by the community informs the ritual status of the *Haaris*, and shapes/colors/influences their agency as individual as well as female ritual specialists that further gets exercised outside of the ritual sphere. This chapter documents and highlights the nuances of a tribal practice around women that otherwise had not found a place in the larger documentation of the tribe.

The last chapter summarises the key findings of the thesis and highlights the major insights gained from the study. It hopes to contribute to the existing knowledge on women's agency in and through ritual practices, particularly in the context of tribal societies of northeast India.

