CHAPTER I
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research is a study based on the Plains Tiwa tribe residing in Central Assam. In this study I have conducted primary field research in order to explore the dynamics of religion, women and identity among the Plains Tiwas residing in Central Assam. The study interrogates the complexities of ritual status and agency among the female ritual specialists of the Tiwas 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 Tiwa tribe of Assam, also known as the 'Lalungs' is an ethnic group listed as a scheduled tribe by the constitution of India. It is a part of the larger Tiwa tribe inhabiting parts of the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya The Tiwas have been primarily divided into two categories- the Hills Tiwas and the Plains Tiwas. The Hills Tiwas, also known as 'the highlanders' are known to inhabit the hills districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao in Assam and also parts of Ri-Bhoi district in Meghalaya. Majority of the Plains Tiwas are known to inhabit central Assam comprising the districts of Morigaon and Nagaon (Baruah, 1989). However, a significant Plains Tiwa population is found in parts of Kamrup, Dhemaji, Golaghat and Lakhimpur. The total Tiwa population was estimated to be around 3,71,000, according to the 2011 census of which the number of Hills Tiwas was estimated to be around 10,000. Though there exists some sociological as well as administrative documentation of the tribe in the post-independence literature, there is a dearth of proper written history about the tribe. The detailed history or historical account on the Lalungs has not been published yet. Approximately 34,800 people are estimated to be speakers of the Tiwa language (census, 2011). In Assam, Tiwa is spoken in north western Karbi Anglong and further north in parts of Morigaon and Nagaon Districts in the plains of Assam. Written literature and formal documentation on the Tiwa is not very old, and do not seem to provide a systematic study on the life and culture of the Tiwas living in both plains and hills of Assam, which could cater to the academic needs of anthropologists, researchers, administrators and general readers (Sharma Thakur, 1985).

The ancestral source of the Lalungs are Mongoloids and more specifically they originate from the Bodos (Baruah, 1989). According to Datta, Sarma and Das (2015), the Tiwas or the Lalungs constitute a tribal group of the Bodo family whose greater concentration is in the plains of Morigaon district and the adjoining tracts of Meghalaya. While one section of the Tiwas, mostly inhabiting the hills, has retained their traditional religion and language, another section has completely merged into Assamese society. A third section of Tiwas who have adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and also many Assamese-Hindu beliefs and customs, practice certain rites and rituals which are peculiar to them (Datta, Sarma & Das, 2015, 148).

Religious practices are intimately interwoven with the tribal way of life. They form a very important aspect of culture and have an important social role to play. Likewise, the socio-cultural institutions of the Tiwas are interwoven and interrelated with their religious practices, and as a traditional agrarian society, every sphere of life of the Tiwas is guided by rites and rituals and religious practices.

The religious structure of the Plains and the Hill Tiwas show significant diversity. Most of the Hills people still practice the ancient form of worship which involves animism and an associated ritual life. However, a sizable population is known to have come into contact with Christian missionaries in the early twentieth century leading to mass conversions. This is known to have complicated the prevailing religious as well kinship structure of the Highlanders. In the 21st century, religious politics has led a number of Hills dwellers to start practicing Hinduism, as found out in primary pilot research for this study. On the contrary, the physical and social geography of the Plains Tiwa community have historically enabled their extensive contact with the complex social dynamics of the neighboring Assamese Hindu society, making them an integral part of the larger socio-cultural and religious transformation and assimilation process of Assam. The religious life of the Plains Tiwas is thus further complicated by their physical and social geography, and ought to be seen in a historical relation to the larger religious spectrum of mainstream Assam. The current study critically examines these practices in the light of the transitioning social as well ritual patterns of the Plains Tiwa community and tries to situate the ritual status of Tiwa women in the process.

Sociologists like Patricia Oberoi (1994) have written about positing newer questions regarding the study of kinship in India, especially in relation to the structure of marriage

alliances and position of women in the conjugal relation and their value in the wider society. Sociological studies on the Tiwa tribe in the late twentieth century have documented the historically separate kinship structures of the Plains and the Hills Tiwas (Baruah, 1989). While the former practice patrilineal kinship structure with patrilocal residence, the latter is represented by a matrilineal kinship structure with adherence to both virilocal as well as uxorilocal patterns of residence. A general idea of kinship pattern followed by the tribe is important as this research shall highlight a unique pattern of kinship followed by the Plains Tiwa tribe and its direct relation to the religious structure and gender dynamics within the community. As shall be discussed in the chapters to follow, 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. No colonial or postcolonial literature particularly mentions the tradition of *haari* or its specificities. The term *haari* only finds scarce mention in some of the post-independence scholarly literature and documentation about the community (Dewri, 1991; Senapati, 2010) that has been done by a few scholars from within the tribe. These literature suggest that the *haari* follows a kinship pattern that is outside the regular parameters of kinship structure followed by the tribe. When married, the *haari* has to exercise uxorilocal residence, that is the residence pattern for a *haari* is matrilocal in an otherwise patrilocal and patrilineal kinship structure (Senapati, 2010).

This study thus aims to use religious practice as a methodological tool to understand the complex relationship between women, religion and kinship in the Plains Tiwa society and in doing so, critically examines the ritual status of the *haari*. Using the available secondary sociological literature on the socio-cultural and religious history of the Plains Tiwa tribe and through empirical field-based research, this study looks at how the *haari* navigates and negotiates through the coexisting religious practices and spaces. By keeping these women at the center of the research, this study uses a feminist lens to critically engage with the question of ritual status and agency among these women.

1.2 Statement of the problem: Contextualizing the study of religion and women

The relationship between religion and women has always been a curious one. Religion is known to have impacted women's lives, and their socio-cultural as well as historical position in the world in general. At the same time, religious practices across the world

have shaped and been shaped by women's active participation leading to complicated understanding of their self and agency.

This research locates women with ritual status as they navigate through the religious and ritual universe of the Plains Tiwas. It 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. In looking at the dynamic relationship between religion and women, this study draws from the available body of research literature on the ritual status of women in the global south, and argues that women constantly negotiate its boundaries through the structure of religion- sometimes reinforcing or negotiating its role, but most of the time using the ambiguities of religious and ritual practices to actualise its space within the structure of religion. The study examines the institution of *haari*, the female ritual specialist, to critically look at women's ritual status and examine their sense of agency. Through this it aims to understand how their agency is practiced in relation to the complexities of Tiwa society in postcolonial context- a matrilocal ritual position existing within a patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal social structure.

The study draws from the specific context of the global south and looks at the work of feminist scholars like Janice Boddy (1989), Saba Mahmood (2004), Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), Sylvia Marcos (2006), Orit Avishai (2008) who 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.

1.3 Conceptual framework and literature review

1.3.1 The critique of secularisation thesis

The world, as empirical evidence suggests, is as religious as it has ever been, and in some places is more religious than ever. There have been extremely powerful upsurges of religious movements in much of the world with some of them having far reaching social and political consequences (Berger, 2008). The nineteenth century social scientists believed that with the advent of an industrial society and subsequent modernity, religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant. It was postulated that theological superstitions, symbolic liturgical rituals, and sacred practices are the product of the past that will be outgrown in the modern era; the death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century. However, this thesis of the slow and steady death of religion has been increasingly criticized. The secularisation theory is seen to have experienced the most sustained challenge in its long history, as religion is still as present in society as it ever was, and perhaps more. Peter L. Berger, one of the foremost advocates of secularisation during the 1960s, recanted his earlier claims- "The world today, with some exceptions…is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularisation theory' is essentially mistaken" (ibid). Thus, considering what the social sciences scholars have argued and what shall be evident in the sections to follow, it is safe to say that religion has become more relevant than ever in contemporary times.

Berger posits the question, at a time when most of the world is bubbling with religious passion, where does secularity fit in? Berger further argues that religion has not disappeared in the places that have been marked secular, but have become more individualized, non-traditional with people practicing their religiosity in institutionally loose ways (ibid). It is these new forms of religiosity the sociologists need to look at, Berger argues. To explain further, he talks about 'patchwork religion'(ibid), a term given by Robert Wuthnow- where people put together an individualized religion, taking bits and pieces from different traditions, and coming up with a religious profile that does not fit easily into any of the organized denominations, with many of them asserting that they are not 'religious' at all but are just in quest of 'spirituality'. In patchwork religion, people sort of put together a religion of their own by picking and choosing from the available religious

material. Berger argues that sociology of religion needs to take into account a fuller understanding of the dynamics of pluralism and also that of the relation between pluralism and secularisation. He asserts that "modernity pluralizes the lifeworlds of the individuals and consequently undermines all taken-for-granted certainties, and this pluralization may or may not be secularizing, depending on other factors in a given situation."(ibid). Aiming for a feminist departure from Berger's secularisation thesis, this study seeks to extend his conceptualization of a modern religiosity which is essentially plural in nature to the context of gender in the contemporary Tiwa socio-religious sphere. The current study examines how gender navigates through co-existing spaces and symbols and languages of the socio-religious practices in the Plains Tiwa community. The study looks at the community as a contested site of religious pluralism and examines the actualisation of women's agency within the sphere of these religious practices.

1.3.2. Religion and gender in South Asia/Global South: A feminist approach

This study extends the anti-secularisation debate to the context of women and religion. Most Western feminists have paid minimal attention to religion as a category except for arguing either for religious freedom for women (Cornell, 1998) or by flagging it as a source of harmful cultural practices (Reilly, 2011). Even within South Asia, there has been a tendency among a section of Indian feminists to approach the relationship between religion and women with suspicion. Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti (2003) have written against a romantic presentation of Hindu traditions that does not engage with questions of caste, gender and State. Chakravarti argues how the hegemonic patriarchal structure of the caste system rooted deeply in the Hindu religion controls the sexuality of Hindu women in the pretext of purity. Others like Kumkum Sangri (1999), Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan (1993), Flavia Agnes (2001) have reiterated the need to stick to 'secular grounds', by expressing their concerns about the new emergence of the Hindu right in the Indian political sphere, and have argued how supporting multiculturalism might actually lead one to support majoritarianism.

However, in the specific context of the global south, a number of studies have joined the Western post-secularist feminist discourse in arguing that religion, including its conservative varieties, offers women viable paths for empowerment (Agadjanian and Yabiku, 2016). Looking beyond the western White feminist approach to religion, the works 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 in the global south. These feminist scholars from Global South 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.

When the focus on locating women's agency first emerged, it played a crucial role in complicating and expanding debates about gender in non-western societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy. In particular, the focus on women's agency provided a crucial corrective to scholarship on the Middle East that for decades had portrayed Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority. Feminist scholarships brought to light how women in Middle Eastern societies have been active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested- Paralleling it to a few other emergence like discussion of peasantry in New Left Scholarship and also to other projects like subaltern studies. 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.

Another important non-western feminist scholar Saba Mahmood (2004) through her ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt explores some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular, liberal thought in general. The normative liberal assumptions about human nature contains the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on. Mahmood's ethnographic account challenges the key analytical concepts in liberal thought. The pious subjects of the mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in

feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status. The dilemma that appeared before the feminist analysts was- on one hand the women were asserting their presence in previously male-defined spheres but on the other hand the very idioms they use to enter this space are grounded in discourses that have historically subordinated them under male authority. Mahmood takes on this dilemma and analyzes the conceptions of self, moral agency, and politics that undergird the practices of this non-liberal movement, in order to come to an understanding of the historical projects that animate it. She argues for the need to keep the meaning of agency open, and in doing so, quotes Asad (1993) that the meaning of agency needs to emerge from within the semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself (Mahmood, 2004, 34).

In its conceptual approach, Mahmood's work echoes that of Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) who writes how Bedouin women and their subtle exercise of agency has criticized some of the assumptions informing feminist scholarship, including those found in her own previous work. Insisting that subversion has to be seen differently in different cultures and in term of its situatedness, Abu-Lughod also joins the feminist scholars working on women in Global south to argue that acts of resistance need to be located within the fields of power and not outside it, and that it is not plausible to understand women's resistance by imposing upon them forms of feminist consciousness or feminist politics that are not part of their experiences.

Therefore, it can be said that there have been expansion of postmodern critiques of Enlightenment rationality encompassing the questions of religion and also a sustained critique of the 'secularisation thesis'. Across all major religions and across all regions, there has been evidence of innate tension between claims of women's equality and that of religion. The evident centrality of women and power relations in the interrelation of religion, culture and state suggests that there is a need to re-examine established ways of thinking about secularism and its relationship to feminism (Reilly, 2011).

Given this, taking into account the religious lives of tribal women, what would be the parameters along which one would look at the intersection between women and religion? Gender and identity constructed through the community ritual practices are influenced, empowered as well as negotiated, as much by the ritual fluidities as by the rituals

themselves. Power plays an important role here, whereby it becomes a medium through which gender interacts during the community practices. Sylvia Marcos (2006) has written how the indigenous women's initiatives to recover their ancestral religious legacy constitute a decolonizing effort and how they re-create a horizon of ancestrally inspired spirituality and seek recognition of and respect for their cosmological beliefs as an integral part of their feminist vision through a deconstruction of past captivities. Along similar lines, Judy Iseke (2013) has written how indigenous peoples engage oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledge, and cultural resources to examine current events and indigenous understandings in ways consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies. Question is- is it possible to attempt a study of ritual practices and women in the northeast in similar light? This study engages with empirical data to critically examine the ritual status of women, i.e., the *haari*, within the community ritual practices of the Plains Tiwas in Assam.

Echoing Boddy (1989), Mahmood (2004) and Abu-Lughod (2013), Reilly (2011) argues for positing a non-oppressive feminist response to the current challenges around the interplay of religion, culture, secularism and the prospects of women's equality and human rights- formal and substantive- in democratic polities. In context of this research, the attempt has been to situate religion in terms of the lived experience of South Asian indigenous women, viz-a-viz the interplay of formal and informal religiosity in the public as well as private sphere of these women's lives. The aim is to explore the scope of an indigenous feminist approach to understand women's ritual status and agency in the specific context of Northeast India, especially of the women belonging to the Plains Tiwa tribe in Assam.

In Indian context, studying gender and religion demands that the impact of sanskritisation on the gender relations and gender roles are taken into account. Leela Dube (1988) examines the process of socialization of Hindu girls through rituals and ceremonies, the use of language and practices within and in relation to the family. According to her, the structuring of women as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices is fundamentally implicated in the constitution and reproduction of a social system characterized by gender asymmetry and the overall subordination of women. However, this does not mean that women are passive and unquestioning victims of these practices; these practices set certain limits in terms of dispositions they inculcate among women and

the different kinship roles they assign to them within the family. According to Dube, it is within these limitations that women question their situation, express their resentment, use manipulative strategies and turn deprivation and self-denial into sources of power and attempt to carve out a living space. Along similar lines, Susan Wadley (1977) writes how Hindu women have considerable religious involvement, especially in folk practice, even though their role is not text sanctioned; women are essential to most yearly calendrical rituals and perform a large number of them alone in both rural and urban India. Wadley however argues that this religious involvement of Hindu women might actually be a religious division of labor in the sexually segregated purdah society of traditional India where women conduct rituals praying for the well being of their husbands, children and families in contrast to men conducting rituals for a good wheat crop, ridding the village of disease and so on. This segregation has resulted in women developing a religious body of folk, local and non-textual traditions (Wadley, 1977, 123). Keeping in mind the specificities of kinship and social organisation, this study extends Wadley's argument to critically examine the nature of participation of the female ritual specialist in the annual community rituals of the Plains Tiwa tribe.

Judith Butler (1990) has argued how performativity is an integral part of gender. How gender is conceived and carried on is determined by the performative practices that accompany it. The performative practices thus also play an important role in shaping gender and its sense of self. Saba Mahmood (2004) engages with Butler's theory on embodied performativity and argues for a shift in perspective while looking at women's embodiment of piety as a politics of resistance and subversion and in turn, agency. This study extends Mahmood and Dube's take on women's agency to explore the possibilities of subversion in the religious and performative practices of the Plains Tiwa women.

Avishai (2008) has discussed extensively on the ambiguities that surround agency in the religious lives of women from conservative religions. She examines how religious agency can be understood through three different approaches- a) through religious affiliation as solace for women, b) through subversion when women adapt religion to the reality of their life using strategic negotiations that are not ideologically driven, c) when religious women strategise religion to achieve extreme ends that are non-religious. She examines how the educated Israeli women practicing Judaism perceive religion in their lives. Their observation of 'nidaa' is analysed by Avishai as a 'mode of being', a situated approach

that goes beyond the binary feminist approaches to the relationship between women's agency and religion, i.e., either resistance/subversion of prescribed religious rules, or negotiations with religious rules to achieve non-religious ends.

Extending Avishai's analysis of women's agency, 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.

1.4 Research objectives and research questions

The primary objectives of this research are-

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 *haari*s in Tiwa religious institutions and practices.

Research questions

- What is the significance of the institution of *haari* in the religious world of the plains Tiwas?
- How is the institution of *haari* maintained in relation to the existing patterns of kinship, residence and inheritance among the Plains Tiwas?
- What are the sites of negotiations and contestation in the making of a *haari* with respect to marriage and familial role?
- What are the specificities of the religious institutions and practices among the plains Tiwas? Have there been any shifts or changes?

- What is the role of Haari in the performance of community rituals?
- How does a *haari* navigate through these rituals? Does she stick to a prescribed role or transform it through her engagement?
- What are the sources of authority that she draws on and how does she exercise it?

1.5 Research method and methodology

This study uses feminist research methodology to carry out a qualitative research on the dynamics of religion, gender and identity among the Plains Tiwa tribe. It is an ethnographic research conducted by using a feminist lens. The research method thus used is feminist ethnography in which observation of the community rituals, in-depth interviews, oral life story were used as tools of data collection. The research is feminist in the ways that it keeps women and their life stories narrated by themselves as one of the fundamental bases of looking at the dynamics of religion, gender and identity within the tribe.

The androcentric nature of early social science research as well as positive sciences had always created a discomfort among those who sought an alternative to the existing system of knowledge production. Apart from being positivist in approach, the androcentric methods of these knowledge systems inspired researchers to see only men as the central object of study. Social science research, thus, for long has been research conducted by men, on men. Androcentrism in social science research has now come to be recognised as a serious methodological issue. Patriarchy is so deeply embedded in research pedagogy that androcentrism has been found to be present even in most contemporary research methods. Patriarchy in research has always either dismissed or marginalized the social presence of the woman as an active member of the human society, or have assigned her passive social roles where she is seen as only complementing the primary object of research, i.e., man. In the history of sociology, the development of an approach to knowledge with the goal of control has contributed to a failure to study the situation of women, as well as to a conceptualization of women that is consistent with continuing male domination (Acker, 1993). Inadequacy of the predominant research methods to address women's world necessitates the formation of an alternative method. Thus, feminist research methodology essentially stems from the need for a knowledge system which is informed by an alternative approach to research which takes into account the women's

points of view, and which recognises and creates discourses based on women's experience of the social world.

1.5.1. Feminist research as a site of knowledge production

Feminist research methodology uses gender as a central theme in analyzing all social relations. It recognizes that every form of knowledge is situated knowledge and has to be interpreted only in the terms of specific contexts. Hence, though women are seen as active agents of their own lives, feminist methodology locates their life experiences within specific realms of historical and social relevance. The acknowledgment of the situated nature of knowledge also lets feminist methodology question the assumptions about an objective research free of value biases (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983).

Mainstream research methods in sociology and social anthropology have always been executed through a hierarchical relation between the researcher and the researched, in which the researcher is the penetrator and the researched is the penetrated; the later has hence been perceived as a passive, feminine receptor of the masculine dominance exercised by knowledge of the former. In other words, dominant research methods have always used a 'view from the above', or a sense of privilege, ensuring a coloring of the claims to objectivity by value biases. Feminist methodology rejects knowledge as a 'view from above' and attempts to replace it with a 'view from below' (Harding, 1987, Mies and Shiva, 1993). Introducing reflexivity within the research, it attempts to bridge the gap between the researcher and researcher. Viewing from below does not imply the finding of a universal social reality, but it acknowledges that knowledge is situated and social reality is contextual. If one is to understand how one's daily experience arrives in the form it does, one ought to critically examine the sources of social power (Harding, 1987, 9).

In her classic essay 'Is There a Feminist Method' Sandra Harding (1987) famously argues against a distinctive feminist method on the ground that preoccupation with method mystifies the most interesting aspects of feminist research processes. Keeping 'women's experience' as the new theoretical resource for scientific research, Harding argues that a distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates as well as informs its problems from the perspective of women's experiences (ibid, 7). While stressing the need for women to be able to be the first ones to reveal what women's experiences signify and for women to be able to be an equal part in the designing and administration of the institutions where

knowledge is produced and distributed for social justice, Harding also writes how gender experiences vary across the cultural categories and also often are in conflict in any one individual's experience. She closely follows Dorothy Smith (1974) while arguing that fragmented identities of women as well as women sociologists are rich sources of feminist insights. Thus, it is the above sense that this research aims to be a feminist one. Women's own experience has been kept as a core theme of this research; critical nature of gender relationships, women's world view and subsequent formation of identities constitute the basic premises of this research.

1.5.2. Orality as a methodological approach

This research seeks to expand from Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory to look towards methodological possibilities. Standpoint theory has given a direction to feminist research in social sciences. The idea is to move beyond the debate about limitations of social theory in feminist research and the complexities of empirical reality and try to find a middle path where the field gets the subjecthood it deserves. However, criticism of standpoint feminism has come from postmodern feminists, who argue that there is no concrete "women's experience" from which to construct knowledge. In other words, the lives of women across space and time are so diverse it is impossible to generalize about their experiences.

While discussing the religious and ritual aspects of gender among the women in Mesoamerica, Sylvia Marcos analyzes the healing rituals in contemporary Mexico and writes for a 're-functionalization' of ancient beliefs and practices. Marcos sources colonial documents of the contact period with European cultures as well as testimonies of the subjugated indigenous during the colonial period as well as contemporary ethnographic studies to put forward 'orality' as a methodological proposal for the study of indigenous religious traditions.

Colonization and patriarchy have historically twisted the cultural roles of the once powerful tribal women across communities (Gearon, 2021). Patriarchy gives men power and privilege at the expense of women and acts as the framework for the domination and oppression of gay, queer, and transgender people, as well as the stunted development of men. In Indigenous communities, it also erases and twists indigenous teachings and worldviews on gender and sexuality, namely the diversity and power of these aspects and

experiences. The imposition of patriarchy has transformed indigenous societies by diminishing indigenous women's power, status, and material circumstance (Suzack, 2017). Thus, as a methodological approach, orality among indigenous communities may be used to examine how it not only allows one to fulfill one's cultural roles but also to correct how those roles have been twisted by colonization and patriarchy.

Institutions like *haari* are not present when one focuses on the existing textual traditions. A study on indigenous women would therefore require one to rely on examining oral traditions that are usually passed on through generations. In the case of *haari*s, the absence of any written texts on the rituals and rules led me to look at the oral narratives in order to understand how the knowledge of the institution was surviving.

However, the confusion rose when the narratives of the women revealed influences and colors from Neo-Vaishnavite textual traditions. Despite this, the tone of assertion, however subtle, was present among these women and that posits my question for a possibility of seeing this field as a site of indigenous feminist approach. However, this research acknowledges the limitations within which it has to be seen- in its own uniqueness, in the current situation and not as a future possibility.

This study is informed by my reading of existing traditions but it leads me to challenge the binary itself- between agency and lack of it. Whose position does one hold on to amid the sea of positions? Resistance cannot be examined in isolation. One definitely needs to take into account the multiple structures of power while talking about resistance (Lughod 1986). This study thus is not a mere documentation of an institution but also a clarification of the position of the researcher. Fluidity is the one of the most important elements in this study. If there is a feminist space where there is no other space available in the larger spectrum of a visibly patriarchal structure, why to surrender that space?

The self-awareness of the Tiwa women, or in this context the *haari*s, may not be seen as a conscious approach to self-identity as they are evidently operating within the structure of patriarchy within the tribe. However, as a feminist researcher documenting their stories and life narrated by these women themselves, one ought to see these stories as possible sites of subversion.

1.6 Location of the Researcher

Reflexivity enables the research to critically engage with the research and makes one aware of one's own location as a researcher. Objectivity in feminist methodology thus enables an awareness on the part of the researcher of one's own position of privilege, helping to carry forward an emphatically engaging yet informed version of research.

The problem with studying one's own society is alleged to be the problem of gaining enough distance. The anthropologist is still defined as a being who must stand apart from the Other, even when she seeks explicitly to bridge the gap (Lughod, 1986). This also brings us to the issue of positionality or situated truths in research. However, the issue of positionality has to be dealt with keeping in mind the fact that all other anthropological works are also essentially partial, since most of these studies have only studied men, one of the most known examples being Malinowski's study of Trobriand islanders. The ethnographic representations have always been 'partial truths' and it is important to recognise that they are also 'positioned truths' (Geertz, 1986). Writing 'ethnographies of the particular' can thus itself be a powerful tool for unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of 'othering' (Lughod, 1986).

It is in the above light that I would like to clarify my position as a researcher studying my own community. As a woman identifying as a Assamese-speaking Plains Tiwa person having resided through multiple cosmopolitan cities and with a set of parents that identify as an Assamese-speaking Plains Tiwa Vaishnavite man and a caste Hindu Assamese Vaishnavite woman respectively, my location is that of an insider-outsider to the field of my research. Having been brought up in a neo-vaishnavite household in a social environment that is mostly urban makes me an outsider to the community. However, socially identifying as a Plains Tiwa person makes me an insider to the tribe. My Tiwa identity despite me having limited understanding and knowledge about the tribe prior to this study has influenced how my presence has been received within the tribe, both as a researcher working on the community ritual practices of the tribe and as an Assamese-speaking woman generally identifying as Tiwa. Further, me being a woman researcher intending to study the women of the tribe also granted me with some field benefits in terms of access. As the *haari*s welcomed me, let me follow them through the rituals and allowed me to sit inside the sacred space of the *borghor*, they also made it clear that it was because to them I was one of their own- both as a woman and as a Tiwa. My study thus

acknowledges the value position from which this research has been conducted and is informed by the research limitations as well as benefits that come with such a location.

1.7. A brief account of my visit to *Uwa Borot*: Field leading to field

Like most sociological research involving fieldwork, my entry to the field of this research was not direct. It involved a long process of clearing misconceptions related to the field, re-understanding the Tiwa ritual spaces and decoding the meanings of local terminologies towards determining the field of research and designing the research process.

On a winter morning of December 2017, I got a call from a friend from Morigaon. This friend who is an Assamese speaking Tiwa himself, a scholar and a keen enthusiast of the history and culture of the Tiwas invited me to *Uwa Borot*, one of the most awaited ritual festivals of the Plains Tiwa community that takes place every five years and which was going to take place in the next two weeks. By that time I was reading available literature about the Tiwa people. Most of the regional literature on the tribe that I could find comprised of articles on Tiwa life and culture by distinguished Tiwa individuals, pamphlets, booklets and souvenirs from annual as well as special meetings and gatherings of various Tiwa organisations and also mementos written on life and achievements of some of the respected individuals of the community. Most of these documents had almost no reference of gender. The ones that did mention anything about the Tiwa women only painted the ideal Tiwa woman with her ability to weave beautiful fabrics and the value of her labor in domestic life (shall add citations). However, some of these documents used a term that referred to a Tiwa female ritual specialist. The term, '*haari Kunwori*', mentioned in the 'rituals' section of these articles suggested that *haari Kunwori*, or female ritual specialists of the Tiwa community are known to be an indispensable part of community and clan rituals of the tribe. Bolairam Senapati (2018) wrote-

> 'The clan or *kul* names that are found among the present day Tiwas in the Plains suggest that these names must have been derived from their ancient mother or the original place they must have dwelled in. It is known that the Hill Tiwas are matrilineal. The present day Tiwas of the Plains are patrilineal. However, it is common for a Plains Tiwa girl to take a husband and stay in her natal home along with her husband. In such cases, property is divided equally. In such a case, the girl is most likely to be offered the sacred role of haari

kunwori to conduct the community rituals alongside the ghorbura in the borghor. There are three ritual specialists in the borghor- two males and a female. The senior male priest is called ghorbura, the assistant is called xoru bura or hatari, and the female ritual specialist is called haari kunwori. This female priest must be a daughter of a kul or clan which practices 'gobhia' i.e. matrilocal residence.'

-(Senapati 1988, 3; translated from original article written in Assamese)

The article thus mentioned a unique feature of the *haari kunwori*- if *haari kunwori* takes a husband, he will have to become a *gobhia,* meaning he has to reside in his bride's residence. The royal *haari* used to be the sister of the king or head of the tribe. Since the Tiwas were then known to practice matrilineage the haari and the king could not stay in one household. This is the reason that in present time also, though from the same *kul*, the *haari* and the headman or *ghorjela* or *ghorburha* of the *kul* cannot be from the same household (Senapati, 2018). This point shall come up again while discussing below the basic structure of kinship among the Plains Tiwas.

The above pieces of information constituted what I knew about the mysterious female ritual specialist of the Tiwa tribe- the *haari*, till then.

Nonetheless, my friend mentioned that the '*Uwa Borot*' ritual or the '*Borot Phuja*' is conducted by a female ritual specialist from the community and the ritual is going to take place in an open field on a full moon night. Hoping to finally meet a real *haari,* I accepted the friend's invitation and began to arrange for my travel to Teteliya, Morigaon. The visit later led to many revelations and subsequent modifications to my original assumptions regarding the field and site of my research. I shall discuss the same in the sections to follow.

Uwa Borot is a community ritual festival of the plains Tiwa Tribe, which bears a traditional religious-cultural character. It is celebrated on the full moon night of the Assamese month of *Puha,* usually paralleling the time between mid December and mid January, in Teteliya village of Morigaon district. Traditionally, the ritual festival is observed at an interval of five years and is believed to make the Tiwa society free from vices like pestilence, epidemic and also from social malices. The word *Borot* is thought to have originated from the Sanskrit word *Brata*. The meaning of the word *Brata* is penance observed to satisfy

God. The ritual of *Uwa Borot* is conducted by a female ritual specialist from within the tribe. Community members call this her *Borotaani* or 'the woman who observes the *borot'*.

It was during '*Uwa Borot*' that I met Mungsa Ratneshwar Bordoloi Phamjong, a senior resident of Teteliya village who had inherited from his grandparents extensive knowledge on the history and ritual practices of *Uwa Borot*. He explained to me that though both were female ritual specialists belonging to the Tiwa tribe, *Borotaani* and *haari Kunwori* are not the same. Both bear very different significance in the Tiwa society but the importance of *haari Kunwori* is central to the ritual practices of the Tiwa community. Unlike the *haari Kunwori*, the *Borotaani* is not required to stay unmarried or practice *gobhia*. She is also not bound by kinship ties with the patron. According to Mungsa Ratneshwar, though Teteliya village is known for the five-yearly *Uwa Borot* festival of the Plains Tiwa community, ritual practices involving the *haari* is not common in Teteliya for a multitude of reasons, of which assimilation into mainstream Assamese culture and consequent dissolving of customary Tiwa way of life is a major one. Upon learning about my research interest in Tiwa female ritual specialists, he suggested that I visit Barapujia, a much larger Tiwa majority village in Roha, Assam where the traditional ways of the Plains Tiwas are still practiced and ritual practices involving *haari* are common. However, as a researcher hoping to document the tradition of female ritual specialists of the Plains Tiwa community, I realised that documenting the ritual realities of the *Borotaani* would actually also fall within the scope of my research.

Therefore, as I decided to start my fieldwork in the summer of 2018, I called Mungsha Ratneshwar again to request a personal meeting with the *Borotaani*. Unfortunately, I was informed that the woman had passed away a month ago owing to prolonged illness. Further, documenting *Borot* with a different *Borotaani* for the purpose of this research seemed far-fetched as being an event that is observed only once in every five years, the time of the next ritual would be outside of my research tenure. I was hence forced to abandon the idea of looking at the tradition of female ritual specialists in the Plains Tiwas through the ritual festival of *Uwa Borot*.

Although I was forced to shift my field ethnography to a different site, witnessing the *Borot* festival enriched my experience in an overwhelming manner, both as an individual and a researcher. It also magically uplifted my relationship with the community members. During *Borot* I saw how the community members harmonise their life between spaces. I

observed the poetry of balance- the sacredness of a community ritual coming alive in the glow of thousands of earthen lamps held skyward by a field full of *chaak*s (wheel-shaped hey lamp-holders hand-made specially for the event) was balanced by a musical profanity among the community members under the full moon sky of *Puha*. As I listened to the informal conversations around the legends, stories of love and loss around *Borot* occurring simultaneously towards the periphery of the field and made vibrant by folk music and *Jyu-sa* (the Tiwa traditional rice beer) despite the chilling January cold, I realised how the 'event' of *Borot* brought out the many layers of the Tiwa feminine- the legend of the Tiwa queen of Teteliya who brought the ritual from her father's kingdom of Dimoriya to her conjugal home as a gift, the sacredness and sanctity attributed to the *Borotaani* of *Borot*, the profanity of groups of Tiwa women singing in the field under the full moon- '*aaji jaang borotot kaali jaang borotot borotor dhepela paat, borotot jaangte sorote daakile rihaa naai etiya gaat*'(today I go to borot tomorrow I go to *borot* o' these coarse leaves of *borot*, on my way to *borot* the *sorot* leaves stung me so how do I cover my bosom now). It was by witnessing these layers on the night of '*Borot*' that I fully understood the true meaning of this otherwise famous Bihu phrase sung in popular culture. The symbolism of *Borot* and the underlying sexuality in its songs can provide a deeper, gendered understanding of the Tiwa oral traditions. But that would require another direction of scholarly engagement.

1.8 Tools of Data Collection

Sampling techniques proved to be a useful tool of data collection in this research. Sampling is the process of drawing a smaller population or a sample from a larger population, and a sample is a part of the larger population that is being studied. A combination of two techniques of non-probability and non-random sampling, namely purposive sampling and snowball sampling has been used in this research. Purposive sampling is also known as judgemental sampling. It is a technique which the research uses to purposefully choose the people who possess characteristics that seem to be relevant to the research. In this process where some samples are given importance over others, prior judgment and discretion of the researcher leads to the selection of samples.

Purposive sampling was an efficient technique for this research as it enabled me to choose the relevant respondents from specific social locations. Keeping in mind the specificity of

the research, the sample included seven *haari*s of Bohgaon, Baakorikusi and Uzonikusi hamlet of Barapujia village.

Snowball sampling also proved very useful in this research as it enabled me to reach the exact people in a field that was otherwise entirely unknown. In snowball sampling, the researcher begins with a few respondents who are known and available to her, who then again recommend other respondents who fit into the criteria of the research, and so on. When the target population is unknown, snowball sampling proves to be an effective technique. Using snowball sampling also helped me to tap my purposive sample.

Another important tool of data collection in this research has been in-depth personal interviews. Since it is a qualitative research aimed at capturing women's life-experiences and perceptions of their own lives, the interview guides were kept somewhat openly structured and the mode of the interviews have been conversational. Most of the interviews began with me explaining the respondents the topic of research. Feminist research methods recognise the participants as active agents of a research who contribute and also shape the course of research at times, through their own interpretations and perceptions of reality. Throughout the process of interviewing the participants have shared the experiences of their lives and even tried to perceive the lives of people around them. Although conversational, most of the interviews have been free-flowing with the respondents interpreting the subject in their own ways and describing their own experiences related to it. These in-depth interviews enabled me to get an insight into the deep personal desires, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, challenges that these women experience in their personal as well as ritual lives and the negotiations that they carry on in order to enhance or avoid these experiences, in turn perceiving and living with an idea of their own self and their ritual life. The flow of the interviews thus had to be kept informal that appeared more conversational rather than a serious, formal interview, as the idea behind here was to capture the life stories of these special women that otherwise finds place neither in the claims to indigeneity and tribal identity from within the tribe, nor in the mainstream or tribal discourses that has shaped knowledge production around the tribe.

Documentation of the community rituals as part of ethnography was a difficult process as the unfortunate occurrence of Covid-19 complicated the phases of fieldwork where accessing the village became impossible. I was however lucky to be able to participate in two annual rituals in the hamlet in a span of two years with a Covid break in between.

These were annual events of gatherings that took place as per the convenience of the members of the tribe. Doing participant observation in the ceremonies enabled me to document the rituals first hand, besides providing me with a nuanced understanding of the performativities and embodiments involved in the ceremony. I accompanied and followed the *haari*s in their movements through the rituals, observed their activities inside and outside the *borghor,* sat with the women in the premises and helped them in the preparation of the community meals while informally conversing with them throughout. Befriending the *haari*s and the womenfolk in turn became a negotiation on my part as a researcher where I got access to fresh narrations of their experience. Becoming a part of these rituals, singing and dancing with the female members during the rituals also tended to blur my position as a researcher. What enriched my research was that through participant observation I could document the negotiations around rituals and gender that were taking place in the formal setting of the *borghor*.

While carrying out participant observation as a data collection method, I was constantly aware of the number of disadvantages attached to it. The dangers of being actively involved in the field, taking up roles that might be ethically contentious for a researcher, and getting research data colored by biases resulting from direct involvement with the reality of the participants are some of the issues that participant observation as a research method has always been confronted with. Yet, it was through participant observation that I got answers to questions that I would not have had the sense to ask otherwise. The general environment of a feast during the rituals also opened the atmosphere for me as a researcher to flexibly talk to other participants. People were uninhibited, and hence conversed with me in an environment where there was no pressure. The information and perspectives were free-flowing and uninhibited, and they enriched the quality of my data. This later formed a large part of how I as a feminist researcher understood the women's locations in terms of their own perspectives about themselves.

1.9 Research design and process

Data collection was carried out during the months of January, February and March, completed through two phases spanning across 2019 and 2022. The months had to be specific because these community rituals are observed in the Assamese months of *maagh-phagun*, spreading from mid January through the whole of February till mid March. The

said months in 2020 and 2021 had to be skipped as this was the time when covid outbreak was at its peak.

The study began with examining available academic, non-academic literature on the Plains Tiwa tribe and relevant theoretical as well as conceptual areas to situate the proposed research. This was carried out during the period of PhD coursework from July 2017 to June 2018. Following that, the first ground visit began with a pilot field study conducted in the summer of 2018 in the Morigaon district, specifically in the areas containing the Tiwa population. The places visited in Morigaon were Gobha, Palahguri, Silchang, Amsoi and Barapujia in the plains. The reason for choosing these areas was that these were culturally and politically significant places for the Plains Tiwas. Gobha is historically the seat of the Tiwa king while parts of Palahguri, Amsoi and Silchang border the foothills of West Karbi Anglong and contain a small amount of Tiwa speaking population. Barapujia is a Tiwa dominated area of immense cultural significance. It is the place that is home to most of the revivalist activities of the tribe in terms of ritual practices, culture and language, including the birth of Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra, the apex literary body of the Tiwas as well as one of the biggest cultural events of the Plains Tiwas, the famous *Tiwa Pisu*. The hill district of West Karbi Anglong was also visited in the areas surrounding Umswai, Marjong, Tarakhunji, Sikda Makha and Amsai Pinung. The visit to the hills was carried out to gain a general, overall idea about the social, cultural and religious universe of the Tiwa tribe, even though my specific interest was examining the interplay of religion, gender and identity among the Tiwas of the Plains. Eventually, Barapujia was chosen as the location of the field. The decision to do so was influenced by multiple factors that showed up during the pilot study. It became evident that Barapujia is a melting pot of sorts of the socio-religious practices of the Plains Tiwas. It was also the only place that has in practice maintained the formal tradition of the Tiwa *borghor* and the Tiwa female ritual specialist, i.e., the *haari*. Geographically, it is the closest to Nagaon, the birthplace of Neo-Vaishnavite religious cult in Assam. Simultaneous presence of both *borghor* and *naamghor* in the hamlets of Barapujia village, the only Tiwa area to hold such a religious duality made it an interesting site for my study.

Brief interviews with a few *haari*s from Bohgaon and Uzonikusi hamlets of Barapujia village were carried out during the pilot study. Later in the subsequent visits, in-depth interviews and life story methods were used as tools to gain thick data on self, agency and

ritual status of the *haaris*. My preliminary entry to the field was gained during the pilot study, followed by planned ethnographic field visits to the field during the early months of 2019. Owing to the Covid-19 outbreak through 2020 and 2021, the next phase of fieldwork could be resumed only in the first half of 2022. During the course of ethnography, detailed documentation of annual community rituals of *Korom* and *Monshwo* was carried out in the two *borghor*s of Bohgaon and Uzonikusi. Documentation was done by applying the method of participant observation. As a Tiwa woman, I was granted the access and hence opportunity to be actively involved in the rituals and the subsequent feasting and merrymaking. Like many other tribes, the members of the Plains Tiwa tribe are also strict in maintaining boundaries when it comes to letting an outsider observe or take part in their rituals from close proximity. Being a participant, which was possible because of the idea of being one of them for the respondents, eased doors of conversations and benefitted me with field observations that otherwise would not have been possible to document as a mere researcher.

The number of *haari*s in the village were seven, out of which six could be interviewed. Some of the in-depth interviews were carried out within the *borghor* premises during the days of the rituals while a few others were conducted at the respective residences of the respondents. The reason behind a small number of respondents is that these were the only *haari*s that could be traced and operating only in Barapujia among the Plains Tiwas. From the point of view of this study, I was aware of the positionality that can come with such a sample size. However, this study does not claim to arrive at a universal social pattern. Rather, it aims to document and critically analyse a social practice that is indigenous to a tribe. Examining situatedness is a known interest area of feminist research. The uniqueness of the institution of *haari* lies in the very fact that it exists and is surviving. The specificity of the research area thus explains the size of my sample size for this research.

1.10 Limitations of research

Introducing myself as a researcher interested in the life of the *haari*s and their role in community rituals was not easy. The immediate question from the field was- 'why?' This itself was an interesting observation for me as a researcher. The question mostly came from the male members of the tribe during the snowballing sessions. Thus, explaining to them that as a Tiwa woman I was interested in documenting the community rituals and their unique practice of *haari*s became a negotiation on my part. My identity as a Tiwa

woman helped me to gain access to the field. Even with that, like in the case of most female researchers visiting from the city and conducting ethnographic study, I experienced patronising behavior at different stages of research from male members in the field.

Another factor that may be considered as a limitation to this study is the sample size of the respondents, the justification to which is the context, specificity of position and situatedness that is attached to this research. The tradition of the haari is a dying tradition that is not practiced anymore in most of the Tiwa villages. Barapujia is the only area where it is still prevalent in practice. This fact has naturally impacted my sample size as I could only trace and interview the *haari*s from the Tiwa *kul*s within Barapujia. The process of identifying and interviewing the *haari*s was far from simple because of the field realities that showed up as I began my ethnography in the area. It has been discussed in detail in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis. However, this also highlights the situatedness and the specific nature of feminist contribution that this research aims to make in the area of gender and religious practices in sociology.

One of the major limitations in this study came forth in terms of fieldwork itself. The first leg of field visit was carried out in early 2019. However, the second leg of fieldwork got interrupted due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020. Access to the villages got severely limited as there was complete restriction on movement across districts. The village completely shut itself to outsiders and no community rituals were held for the years 2022 and 2021 due to administrative restrictions and fear of contamination. I kept my communication with a few respondents through cell phones but their availability was never guaranteed. Data was collected through informal telephonic conversations and interviews whenever possible. Fieldwork could be resumed only in 2022. In a way that also informed my fieldwork as I could observe and document the changes in the field. I have discussed those in the second chapter.

1.11 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis has been articulated across six chapters.

The first chapter introduces the research by contextualizing the study. It looks at the statement of problem, conceptual framework, literature review, objective of research, methodological concerns and limitations of the research.

The second chapter critically engages with the relevant colonial as well as postcolonial debates and discussions around the intersecting categories of religion, caste, tribe and gender to examine the tribal woman in transition in India. It historicises the impact of the preachings of Neo-Vaishnavism by Srimanta Shankardev, the most influential socio-religious and cultural reformer from Assam on the tribes of the region and uses it to understand the contemporary question of revival of tribal identity among the Plains Tiwas. The chapter then posits the question- where does one locate the indigenous woman in this historical process of socio-religious transitions? The chapter then juxtaposes the above questions with the identity of the *haari*s, the female ritual specialists of the Tiwa community to highlight the ambiguities of the categories that the Tiwa woman endorses, and argues that there is a need to explore in particular how Tiwa women with ritual status exercise agency within these historically materialised structures of patriarchy.

The third chapter introduces the field and attempts to critically engage with a few life-stories narrated by the *haari*s 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 empirically 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 field ethnography to empirically analyse the role of the *haari* through the community birth and death rituals in the *Borghor* premises. It examines the role of the *Haari*s through these rituals and explores how the gender division sanctioned by the community informs the ritual status of the *Haari*s, and shapes/colors/influences their agency as individual as well as female ritual specialists that

further gets exercised outside of the ritual sphere. The chapter looks at the songs sung in these rituals to explore the question of identity and gender within the community. It highlights the contemporary shifts and changes that the community has undergone in terms of ritual space and its possible impacts on gender, particularly on an indigenous practice like that of the *haari*.

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.