CHAPTER II

Religion, Identity and Gender: The Tribe and the Tribal Woman in Transition

2.1 Introduction

This chapter comes up as a necessity to historically locate tribe and the tribal women within the socio-religious transitions of communities in the state of Assam. It looks at the relevant socio-historical factors while searching for an explanation of the current state of religion and rituals within the Plains Tiwa tribe. The chapter critically engages with the relevant colonial as well as post colonial debates and discussions around the intersecting categories of religion, caste, tribe, ethnicity and gender to examine the tribal woman in transition in India. The chapter historicises the idea of 'Assamese' identity and juxtaposes it with the socio-religious philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism to argue how these two factors complicated the idea of 'tribe' in Assam. It uses the above lens to understand the contemporary question of revival of tribal identity among the Plains Tiwas, and posits the question- how may have the socio-religious transitions and subsequent socio-political responses from within the tribe impacted/shaped/re-shaped the tribal women in general? The chapter then juxtaposes the above questions with the identity of the *Haari*s, the female ritual specialists of the community.

2.2 Caste, religion, tribe, ethnicity: Revisiting colonial categories

Before diving into the specificity of this study, it is important to discuss the complex intersectional reality of social categories in the Indian context. The colonial freezing of these categories (Xaxa, 1999; Sharma, 2001, Ramirez, 2014) and its tacit subsequent internalisation in the academic discourses around post colonial societies have led to faulty and inadequate socio-political analysis of the periphery. In other words, the categories of caste, tribe, ethnicity and religion have to be seen in terms of overlapping realities when it comes to understanding post colonial societies residing in the geographical, cultural and political periphery. Many South Asian scholars later have highlighted this limitation of colonial classification and drawn attention to tribal societies of northeast India to show how these societies challenge the colonial idea of fixed social categories. In the context of

Assam too, the lived realities of these categories are found to be even more complicated, often challenging the marked boundaries as prescribed by religious as well as colonial texts.

2.3 Tribe, caste and the Hindu/tribal dichotomy: The problem of 'simplified' assumptions

As discussed, scholars, colonial administrators and ethnographers have since long debated the issue of transformation of tribes in the context of India, ranging from the questions of 'tribe' versus the 'indigenous' (Xaxa, 1999) to those of 'assimilation' or 'integration' of the tribes with the majoritarian culture including various forms of Brahmanical Hinduism (Bose, 1953, Ghurye, 1963, Oommen, 2011, Xaxa, 1999). There also have been questions on 'acculturation' of tribes (Oommen, 2011, Ramirez, 2014) into Hinduism and their 'transformation' into castes over a stretch of time (Sengupta, 2021). Virginius Xaxa (1999) writes how the initial discourse on tribal identity was shaped by those who advocated integration of tribals as citizens of a nation state and others who sought their assimilation into the Hindu fold. Prof. Xaxa makes an important point on the paradoxical relationship between religion and tribal identity in India. According to him, if tribes are to be regarded as Hindus then the whole historical process depicted by the historians to understand Indian civilisation is open to contest and even rejection. The same would be the case with the conceptual apparatus of Hinduisation, acculturation, assimilation, absorption that has been developed and used to understand the dynamics of Indian society. Even 'sanskritisation' is too simplified a tool to explain identity shifts taking place among all sections of the tribal population in India (Xaxa, 1999). Hinduism is intricately linked with the structure of caste and it is not so much against religion as against caste that the social organization of tribes has generally been posited in social science literature. Theoretically, this makes it impossible for a tribal to be Hindu and a member of a tribe at the same time (ibid). One can be Hindu only at the risk of losing the tribal status, and the two cannot go together. One can of course acquire a new status but that is of caste rather than that of tribe. That essentially has been the trajectory in which the majority of social scientists (Bose, 1953, Sinha, 1962, 1987, Kosambi, 1965) have viewed social change among the tribes (ibid, 66).

Xaxa's theory on Hindu/tribal dichotomy can be examined in comparison to David N. Gellner (1991)'s study of social organization of the Newar tribe of Nepal highlights the complications of gender norms and realities in present religious and cultural practices

within the tribe that identifies itself as Hindu. Gellner uses thick ethnographic data to argue that studying gender in the Newar tribe of Nepal may take into account their complex historical relationship with the neighboring Parbatiyas who are caste Hindus, but the complications of their religious, cultural and kinship relations has to be understood beyond a simple dichotomous Hindu/tribal one. Gellner's nuanced analysis of the Newars essentially points towards the fact that the practical and lived realities of the category 'tribe' around the subcontinent often dilute the theoretical demarcations to constantly intersect with other categories like religion, caste and gender.

In the context of Assam, scholars like Maheswar Neog (1986) have highlighted 'assimilation' and 'Assamisation' of the tribal communities and their absorption into a Hindu religious network. In his study of the religious practices prevalent in Assam, Neog documented how many of the indigenous communities of the region actually worshiped their adopted Hindu deities through rituals that were tribal and far from Brahmanical. For instance, the Koch Kacharis were documented to have worshiped Shiva with offerings of hens, goats, ducks, pigeons, buffaloes and alcohol. This was not unusual since cultural interpenetrations were common. In a region that otherwise was permeable and lacked rigidity in terms of demarcation, the so-called transformation occurred only when colonial scholars and administrators alike chose to read such ambiguities as 'Hindu' (Sengupta, 2021).

Along similar lines, Madhumita Sengupta (2021) writes how the use of labels such as 'isolation' or 'assimilation' to characterise tribal communities dwelling in the plains region of British Assam had a discursive history that took no notice of the region's prolonged tradition of vibrant interfaith transmissions and cultural exchanges. While census makers in Assam attributed an 'unusual' surge in the number of Hindus to proselytisation by Vaishnavite and Brahman priests, and to the erosion of tribal modes of worship, colonial enumerative practices were directly imbricated in producing the 'Hindu' in a way that was transformative of quotidian relations and processes of exchange characterising the region. (ibid). It is thus equally important to examine claims of 'Hinduisation' in regions like Assam since the studies propagating these claims were often colored by colonial bias. Thus, it may not have been the claims of the unifying qualities of Hinduism that served to induce identity shifts in the region but the admission of the ambiguous character of the religion that paved the way for its expansion as a politico-religious identity (ibid).

While looking at the dominant narratives of religious and cultural assimilation of tribes into the Hindu fold, it may be interesting to note how possible biases in the initial studies of tribe and caste may have influenced a whole discourse of tribe, caste and religion in Indian anthropology by overlooking any possibility of protest by the tribals against Brahminical imposition in any form. Critically engaging with the hindu methods of tribal absorption, Abhijit Guha (2018) highlights the contrasting arguments by the anthropological contemporaries N.K. Bose (1953) and Tarak Chandra Das (1922). Moving beyond Ghurye's ideological analysis of caste and providing an analysis of the caste system based on material relations, Bose had argued that tribals who had come into contact with their powerful caste Hindu neighbors gradually lost their own tribal identity and were given a low-caste status within the Hindu fold. Das on the other hand emphasised on his field findings to argue for the counter processes of de-Hinduisation and maintenance of ethnic identity by the economically and socially subjugated and marginalised tribals. The discussion about Tarak Chandra Das's work by Guha and his argument about scrutinising ideological biases that may have colored Bose's sociological study of the Hindu method of tribal absorption is relevant for critical academic engagement with the subsequent sociological theories on caste and tribe by noted Indian and Western scholars, most of which derived from Bose's initial theory of caste and tribe. It is sure to have implications in understanding the current revivalist tendencies involving an indigenous consciousness regarding religion, cultural and social systems among many tribes in the Indian subcontinent.

In the context of the Plains Tiwa tribe of Assam, it is along these lines that this research seeks to situate the lived realities of religion and religious practices within the tribe. How gender makes sense of and is in turn shaped by these realities is what this research seeks to explore. It also becomes important to note that, a critique of hegemonic Brahminical bias in analysis of the material relationship between 'dominant' Caste Hindus and the 'subordinate' tribals can be extended to a biased representation or misinterpretation of gender norms and gender relations within the tribes, with a possibility of negating or omitting any existing tribal practice that may challenge the patriarchal gender norms of Brahminical Hinduism. As a feminist study aimed towards documenting and analysing the ritual practices and life stories of women with ritual status in a tribe dwelling in the Plains of Assam, these possible theoretical and androcentric biases from early sociologists inform this research.

2.4 Indigeneity, ethnicity and tribe: Fluid categories and overlapping identities

In the present socio-political and cultural milieu of Assam, the Plains Tiwa tribe has historically identified itself as indigenous, similar to many other tribes residing in Assam. In such a context, it is important to clarify the terms 'tribe' and 'indigenous' as they have been perceived in different socio-historical and political contexts in India and in the world. The marks of differences in Indian society that have been acquired through long and protracted historical processes are primarily located around those of caste, language, religion and regions, and it was only during the colonial period that 'tribe' was added as a new marker to these differences (Xaxa 2005). As discussed above, the term 'tribe' as we know today is a colonial category constructed by the British administrators for administrative convenience. Colonial censuses greatly contributed to the freezing of categories (Ramirez, 2014). Whereas in the pre-British period these categories interacted with each other on their own terms either in the marketplace or in the battle-fields, the British introduced new terms of interaction through various politico-administrative and military measures.

In the context of India, the term 'indigeneity' can have conflicting interpretations. In colonial India, the term 'tribe' had often been used interchangeably with the term 'indigenous' by missionaries, early scholars of anthropology (Ghurye, 1963), colonial administrators, politicians and social workers alike who took to using the term 'indigenous' (Sengupta, 1988) as a general reference to the tribal people residing in the subcontinent. However, the idea of 'indigenous people' became an issue of considerable contention in India in the post-independence era.

Discussing the current understanding of the term 'indigenous' from within the tribes in Indian context, Prof. Xaxa writes,

> "The term 'indigenous' originally conceived by ILO in the late twentieth century and having the colonized aborigines of the Americas as a reference point, finds itself in multiple conflicting interpretations in the Indian context. However, the designation or description of tribes as indigenous people had not emerged from self-identification or description by the tribal people themselves. It was not a part of positive identification and evaluation by the tribes. On the contrary, it was imposed on the tribes by others from the outside. The identity that was forced from outside has now been internalised among the

tribes. Today, it is an important mark of identity and consciousness of the people, an identity that evokes a sense of self-esteem and pride rather than a sense of lowly and inferior society that often goes with terms like tribe or tribe. The term 'indigenous' has thus come to be closely related to the formation of identity consciousness among the tribal population of India who identify themselves as 'indigenous'. The declaration of the year 1993 as the international year of the indigenous people has only sharpened this sense of identity." (Xaxa, 1999)

In the context of northeast India, acknowledging the complexities surrounding ethnicity becomes important while studying tribe as a category. Philippe Ramirez (2014) has written about the complexities that surround the study of ethnicity in north east India and how contradictory subjective ethnic ascriptions are typical of ethnic politics in northeast India. Arguing how ethnic identities formed at the margins are rather ambiguous and fluid, Ramirez (2014) writes that the superimposition of clear-cut subjective ethnic ascriptions has only led to emergence of an ethnic landscape made up of margins where the assumed identities are not so clear-cut, with people assuming several ethnicities, uncertain ethnicities or no ethnicity at all (ibid, xxv). He borrows from Rosaldo (1989)'s idea of cultural borderlands to argue that margins are much more than mere spaces of transition, uncertainty and miscegenation, rather they are sites of creative cultural production; they are spaces where ethnicities are constantly built and reproduced (Barth, 1969)[1].

In the particular context of examining social systems of fringes in Assam, Ramirez (2007) argues that though ethnicism assumes a perfect correlation between language, territory and socio-political systems, such adequate correlations are rarely realized in Assam. While looking at the complex socio-political and ritual structures of the Tiwa, Karbi and Dimasa tribes of Assam, he further argues that it is not cultural homogeneity that makes an 'ethnic group' but a perception. They are representations through which people feel they belong to a coherent and perennial entity. By adhering to this position, Ramirez further complicates Frederik Barth (1969)'s concept of ethnic groups and boundaries. For Barth, ethnic identity becomes and is maintained through interactional processes of inclusion and exclusion. He argues that "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and

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[1] Philippe Ramirez, Politico-ritual variations on the Assamese fringes: do social systems exist? *In* F. Robinne & M. Sadan. Social dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia : Reconsidering political systems of Highland Burma, Brill, pp.91-107, 2007, 1281921467 9781281921468. <hal-00763959>

incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories." (Barth 1969, p.9) Ramirez draws from this understanding but further adds that categorical ethnic distinctions are not simple in the case of landscapes like Assam and yet, he argues, Assamese ethnic groups, or 'tribes', as they are called or call themselves, are real. Analyzing the 'reality' of the competing articulations of identity discourses then becomes a task for the anthropologist (Ramirez, 2007).

In the context of Assam, the concept of "Assamese" is pivotal in the understanding both indigenous discourses and the cultural processes at play in the region; "Assamese" in the restricted sense can be said to designate that socio-cultural complex shaped by the combination of caste principles and Ekasarana Vaishnavism (Ramirez, 2014). However, Assamese caste society differs significantly in its composition and principles from most caste societies in India.

Chandan Kumar Sharma (2009) argues how as a product of an age-old interaction among various cultures and groups in the Brahmaputra valley, the 'Assamese' identity can actually be seen as a textured identity. It is a product of a historical process in which both tribal and non-tribal groups played equally important roles. What is even more interesting is the fact that as opposed to the contention that posits a binary opposition between caste and tribe within the Assamese society, the latter in fact presents a classic case of tribe-caste continuum whereby a sizable section of people of the present caste Hindu Assamese society are of tribal origin (Sharma, 2009, 2006, 2001).

Along similar lines, reinstating that labeling of ethnic categories is a colonial phenomenon, Ramirez (2014) argues how field narratives from ethnic communities in post colonial North East India reveal that the social realities of ethnic tribes have always witnessed an incorporation of both worlds, occupying culturally plural spaces and challenging the dichotomies conceived earlier in colonial narratives on the region. He joins Sharma (2009) in the argument that besides the image of the tribal mosaic preconceived in colonial discourses, the classical oppositions between plains and hills and castes and tribes must be reconsidered in the context of northeast India.

In the context of the Plains Tiwa tribe, the above realities must inform a historical interpretation of the religious as well as socio-cultural assimilation and exchange that the

tribe must have undergone. As a corollary of the debates and discourses surrounding the historical processes of social transformation of tribes, particularly of those belonging to Assam, one then wonders about the section that did not feature enough in these discourses- the tribal woman. What became of these women in this process of transition? How were these women before and how were they affected by the changes in their socio-economic and religious structure of the tribe?

2.5 Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam: The porous wall between the 'Assamese' and the 'tribal'

The appearance of Srimanta Sankardeva alongwith his prime disciple and co-preacher Madhavdev in the middle of fifteenth century was a watershed moment in the socio-religious and cultural history of Assam. As the founder and proponent of Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankardeva attracted the majority of people across communities in Assam towards a simpler yet disciplined way of life. He found innovative ways of leading the philosophy of Bhakti into the lives of the local communities, creating a unique spiritual culture that was simultaneous to the ongoing Bhakti movement throughout the Indian subcontinent at the time but refreshingly local in its nature and implementation. He called it Neo-Vaishnavism- a cult with its uniquely local ingredients inspired by cultural institutions, symbols, instruments, art forms, etc of the nearby tribal communities. The four '*sanghatis*' (four sects that branched out from the original Vaishnav philosophy of Sankardeva) formed later by the disciples of Sankardeva after his demise were responsible for formation of numerous *satras* (residential monasteries set up with Neo-Vaishnavite religious principles) across the land of Assam. These *satras* or seats were the basis of the rapid spread of Neo-Vaishnavism in assam. As key physical manifestation of the Neo-Vaishnavite religious philosophy, the introduction of the *satra* and *naamghor* to the Assamese society eventually became an essential element in the formation of a hegemonic Assamese-Hindu identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Veteran historian Amalendu Guha (2011) notes-

> 'The well-organized as well as de-centralised satras and consequent naamghars are the chief characteristics of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism. The Satriya gurus of the 17th, 18th and 19th century were instrumental in Hinduization, or bringing the non-Hindu fold into the Hindu fold via a ritual/rite of passage called 'sharan'. As the number of believers/sharaniyas

increased, the number of satras both large and small crossed thousand. The places from where the preachers operated eventually became satras. Under the umbrella of a unifying satra culture, numerous naamghars or prayer halls were created across villages. The shape of the naamghar was inspired from the shape of the youth dormitory of the tribal people.' (Guha, 2011)

The youth dormitories served as the prime space of educating the tribal youth in tradition and culture. Dorms were spaces where the personhood of the tribal youth was shaped through different engagements and activities. Hence, it can be said that borrowing such a concept could only enrich the purpose of the Neo-Vaishnavite cult, i.e. bringing it closer to the tribal people.

It is important to note the relationship between religion and language here. Most of the tribal population of the plains in Assam, in this case the Tiwas, are primarily an agricultural society, and folk songs are an integral part of their everyday life activities. In many ways, these folk songs could present a clear cultural picture of what the indigenous tribe looked like (Dewri, 1991). However, the presence of words like 'goxaai', 'kaanaai', 'gopaal', etc. which refer to Lord Krishna, the sole God followed in the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition, hints towards a shift from the tribal folk towards the Vaishnav spirit.

Nonetheless, the scholars of Neo-Vaishnavism have argued that the affiliation to the Neo-Vaishnavite Satras ensured imposition of 'Assamese' cultural symbols on the tribal neophytes alongside introducing the process of sanskritization (Srinivas, 1996) and subsequent detribalization of the plains Tiwas. It has been argued that the apparent liberal and simple nature of the religion along with the absence of ritual complexities of Brahminical Hinduism (Sharma, 2011), and an apparent absence of caste hierarchy, lured a number of Tiwa folks into its fold, leading to significant detribalization of a large number of Tiwas. However, it has also been argued that the process of detribalization through the instrumentality of religion did not have an equal influence all over Assam (ibid).

How far could this detribalization ensure a successful and complete integration of the Tiwas into the Neo-vaishnavite Hindu fold and how the religious, social and cultural residues of this process have impacted and informed the subsequent revivalist tendencies of the plains Tiwas then needs to be critically examined.

2.6 Emergence of a modern Assamese nationalism: The ambiguity of the 'secular' Assamese and alienation of the tribal

What is interesting is how the above courses of history in the state of Assam created the modern, quintessential 'Assamese' man who was most likely a caste Hindu initiated into the Neo-Vaishnavite faith of casteless social unity. Simultaneously, a 'Assamese tribal man' was created who was also initiated as a Hindu Vaishnav and hence was made a part of the narrative of a greater Assamese national identity.

Arguing how religion is important for the creation of the public sphere, Peter van der Veer (2002) takes forward Habermas (1989)'s concept of the public sphere and writes how the notions of 'publicity', 'the public' and 'the public opinion' captured in latter's concept of public sphere can be used for comparative purposes while studying religion, nationalism and identity. Peter argues that religion produces the secular as much as the vice-versa, and this interaction can be understood in terms of the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century. In India, religious neutrality of the colonial state left the public sphere for religious activities of various faiths. The dialectic of aggressive missionization and Hindu resistance gave rise to a public sphere that was not at all secular. In this context, Thapar (1985) argues how the newly emergent elites used the British legal apparatus to create a new, corporate Hinduism that was fully modern, which in turn was immediately connected to political control. These elites also had a reformist agenda concerning religious education, ritual actions and customs that is relevant even today. Thus, religion and political consciousness have to be seen in relation to each other in order to attain a nuanced understanding of both.

In Assam, Neo Vaishnavism became an agency for the royal monarchy to legitimize its politico-economic objectives, and this continued under the British colonial regime, pushing the faith towards more orthodox nature (Sharma, 2011). Gohain (1987) has critically argued how although it might not have been a conscious effort on the part of the two preachers (Srimanta Sankardeva and Srimanta Madhavdeva), over time the flourishing of the tolerant and liberal spirituality introduced by Neo-Vaishnavism went on to act as a major ingredient in the formation of a modern Assamese national identity, large part of which was material and economic progress. This relationship between spiritual prosperity and material progress interpreted by Gohain easily reminds one of Weber (1958)'s theorization of Protestant ethics and the rise of capitalist economy in Europe. However,

Gohain also argues that the case of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam was different and in the long run it obviously could not liberate the larger sections of the society from the continually poor material conditions. D. Nath (2011) adds to the argument by writing about how most of the *satras* under Ahom patronage and later under British administration became instruments of exploitation of the masses, expanding the economic gap between the spiritual leaders and the common believers.

In the context of Assam, the Assamese national identity, a project of the Assamese middle class, reluctantly incorporated the tribal groups from the Brahmaputra valley by considering them as 'natural constituents' of the '*Brihattar Axomiya Jaati*' or the 'greater Assamese nation' (Sharma, 2006), nonetheless assigning the tribal groups a marginal state and an eventual alienation. The repressive character of the faith became visible whereby tribal neophytes had to go through purifying rituals which included prohibition on using their mother tongue which was considered impure (Sharma, 2011).

2.7 Neo-Vaishnavism, the Assamese society and the Plains Tiwas

Despite the similarities to how mainland Indian caste societies have historically interacted with tribes, the peculiarity of caste in Assamese society has to be understood in terms of historical integration of tribes and not assimilation of the latter. Several studies show that conversion of tribes to caste Hindu fold in Assam has never been simple. Although the prescriptions of conversion required them to formally undergo transition in terms of their indigenous culture, food habits and lifestyle, many of the tribes are historically known to have retained subtle markers of their identity in terms of food, lifestyle as well as ritual specificities.

A good amount of colonial and postcolonial literature have established the presence of a hierarchical relationship between religious converters and the tribal converts i.e. the neophytes, some of which have been discussed above. However, individuals are not passive receptors of norms and prescriptions of society. An empirical approach to critically understand this relationship would enable one to look beyond what is established and dissect it from within, and bring out the complexities and contradictions that are present.

Though scarce, post-independence literature on the Tiwas suggest that the appearance of Sankardeva and his preachings in the sixteenth century did not bring revolutionary changes

in the Tiwa social system. In their documentations, S.K. Bhuyan (1964) and State Gazetteer of India D.P. Barooah (1978) argued that the Tiwas have been found residing in the Brahmaputra valley well before the seventeenth century. In Deodhai Asom Buranji, S.K. Bhuyan has written that the two groups of Tiwas who escaped from the hills to reside in the plains in the seventeenth century had also at the time retained the ritual norms and values of their ancestors (Bhuyan, 1964, 132). Thus, the Bhakti movement of Sankardeva could barely influence the tribal societies of Assam in the sixteenth century.

A native Tiwa historian Dr. Dhanada Kakati Amphi writes-

> 'In fact, the hills Tiwas or the *hajowalis* did not convert at all. The dwellers of the foothills, i.e. the *datiyoliya* Tiwas though somewhat influenced, were also reluctant to completely give up their ancient norms and values. The Tiwas in the plains also began converting into Neo-Vaishnavism only in the next century, i.e. after the death of the Mahapurush when the sect got divided into four *sanghati*s- *Brahma*, *Nika*, *Kaal* and *Purush*. Multiple *satra*s under these *sanghati*s were established by the disciples. Subsequently, the *Puwali Roja*s or chiefteins of the Tiwas got converted into various *satra*s. For instance, the kings of Topakusi and Gobha took *xoron* (religious preaching) in Aauniaati Satra established under the *Brahma sanghati*. Likewise, of the five states (*paasu raaijyo*) of the Tiwas, the then states of Barapujia and Mikirgoya got influenced by Aai kanaklata, the granddaughter of Sankardeva and took *xoron* at the Borduwa Satra under *Purush sanghati*. (Kakati Amphi, 2018, 92)

However, it cannot be negated that the greater Assamese society, its culture and language has historically had immense influence on the socio-cultural consciousness of the Plains Tiwas. Bolairam Senapati (1980), another senior post-independence scholar from the tribe argued that the Plains Tiwas had been assimilated into the larger Assamese Hindu society centuries ago which led to the cohesive adoption of Assamese language and culture into the Tiwa society. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva saw a mass conversion of Plains Tiwa people from their indigenous religion into Neo-Vaishnavism. This integration came to see a unique fusion of language and culture of the Assamese and the Tiwas. However, this seemed to lead to the loss of some fundamental characteristics that defined the Tiwa society and its culture. The conversion to Hinduism, in this case Neo-Vaishnavism, has been held responsible for the introduction of many inequalities to the Tiwa society which was earlier not to be seen (ibid). The erosion of indigenous culture came to exist in forms of practice of untouchability and ritual impurity,

whereby the converted Tiwas began to stop social alliances with the non-converts. For the former, this was mainly an attempt of embracing assimilation into the greater Vaishnavite Assamese society. For the latter, however, this became a demonstration of disrespect, distrust and hence alienation for the tribe (Sharma, 2011).

To what extent then conversion into Neo-Vaishnavism influenced and transformed the religious, cultural and ritual lives of the plains Tiwas? While looking at the incorporation of spiritual elements in the language and content of folk and ritual songs one cannot negate the presence of a fear of alienation on the part of the neophytes, and attempts for assimilation leading to a near-complete loss of ethnic and cultural identity, and hence, to further alienation. The phenomenon of revival of a Tiwa identity is thus intrinsically related to and cannot be understood in isolation from a historical understanding of the role of religion and religious reforms in Tiwa social life.

The above questions presented themselves more firmly during the course of my fieldwork as I mapped the village and started interviewing the inhabitants who are members of the Plains Tiwa tribe. My fieldwork led me to discover the co-existence of Neo-vaishnavite and Tiwa religious beliefs and practices within the tribe which most of the times are overlapping. An important point to note is, Tiwa indigenous ritual practices are closer to Shakta ways of worship which involve sacrifices to multiple Gods and deities. Neo-vaishnavite believers on the other hand are strictly forbidden to worship multiple Gods or to indulge in animal sacrifices and consumption of liquor. This led me to draw from Ramirez's argument on Assamese ethnic groups and extend it to the context of religious and ritual practices. Observations from my field indicated that studying tribal communities, especially in Assam requires one to go beyond the mainland theories on tribe and caste and understand the life and belief systems of a fringe community in its own context, in its own situatedness.

One small but important example can be drawn from the field when the researcher was documenting the community rituals (to be elaborated in chapter five). One of the songs that was sung during an initiation ritual was-

> *Laali hilali bapa laai mur pitadeu/laali hilaali o' laai/laali laang ghorote baapa biraali*
> *xumaale/saang tol molongi jaai/lalungor lolitong baapa laali hilaali/dehaanor lolitong*
> *puthi/aauxi nejanong baapa moraahi nejanong/haaloku nokorong khoti/lalunge gaaye gol*

baapa laali hilaali/dehaane gaaye gol o pod/podore murote baapa kirili paarile/saak oi lalungoni mod

(Laali hilaali laai o' my father/laali hilaali laai/in my simple household the malice has entered/my house has now started to suffer/the lalung's sweet is laali hilaali/the *dehaan*'s sweet is books/I don't know their customs/I don't know their rituals/so I don't miss out on my farming/the lalung kept singing laali hilaali/the *dehaan* was singing 'pada' from his holy book/but immediately after he sang out loud/'hey lalungoni pour me some rice brew')

-song noted as sung by elderly men in the *monshwo* ritual dance

In the above song, the content has subtle hints towards an assertion of being a 'lalung' as opposed to the 'dehaan', who are referred to as certain members from the neighboring Kus community (Gait 1902). It has subtle hints towards the tensions between Neo-Vaishnav converts and non-converts among the Plains Tiwas.

Folk is the alternate space where history preserves itself through and despite changes in social systems. In the particular context of the invasion of religion in terms of conversion and assimilation, cultural history of indigenous people and communities makes itself flow through folk- usually in the form of lores and songs or tales and legends. In that sense, folk can be seen as a site of resistance, or rather a form of subversion whereby the act of telling these stories or singing these lores and songs, or their performance from time to time become a way of telling the story from the point of view of the tribe/subaltern. Through the acts and performances, folk then becomes a subtle yet constant reminder of identity. This resistance or reminder of identity can be understood both in terms of 'what was' and 'what still is'. To elaborate, in the particular context of the Plains Tiwas, the '*Laali Hilaali geet*' alludes to the ethnic and cultural distancing of the non-converted Tiwas from the '*dehaan*' or the converted Kus (what was). It is hinted in the verse- '*lalunge gaaye gol laali hilaali, dehaane gaai gol pod*'/'the lalung sang his origin song of laali hilaali while the *dehaan* sang written verses from his new holy book'. The '*laali hilaali geet*', however, also provides a subtle reminder of how the two communities are actually of the same origin and how a mere conversion cannot take away the inherent 'Tiwaness' from a *dehaan* or a Kus (what still is). It can be interpreted through the verse- '*podore murote kirili parile saak oi lalungoni mod*'/'after finishing the verses they both sought the lalung woman to fetch some rice liqour'. It is to be noted that in the song, 'Tiwaness' is defined through both the Tiwa and Kus man seeking the lalung woman to fetch the traditional rice liqour.

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This point seems to qualify as an important reading of how the community perceives its own identity and also how it perceives its women. Though heavily gendered in their meanings and always sung by male members of the tribe, the allusions in these songs accommodate the non-convert Tiwa woman (*lalungoni*) and offer her a presence in the alternate narrative of identity of the tribe, unlike the converted Kus woman whose ethnic identity and its specificities get merged with the larger religious identity of being an Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite woman.

2.8 Overlapping identities and revivalist tendencies: The Assamese-speaking 'Hindu Tiwa'

Unlike early post-independence, in recent times the tribal identity articulation has been a process directed from within the tribal community, spearheaded by a growing middle class (Xaxa 2016). Such articulation has not merely been in the form of demands for some degree of political economy but tribal communities have also become actively involved in initiatives to protect, revive as well as their language, custom and culture. As suggested by ground activities within the tribe as well as scholarly literature and documents written by members of the tribe, a shared Tiwa nationalist sentiment remains as the undertone of the rising identity consciousness of the tribe. Majority of the Tiwas still practice distinct religious and community rituals in the socio-religious sphere; actions have been taken to revive and systematically document the indigenous Tiwa language by the apex Tiwa literary body institutionalised as the Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra (TMT); over time various Tiwa political bodies like the Lalung Durbar (1967), Tiwa Sanmilan (1971), All Tiwa Students' Union (1989), All Tiwa Women Association (1989), Tiwa Autonomous Council (1995) have been formed to represent and talk about the indigenous rights of the Tiwa people. Thus, even if the boundaries of religious and cultural practices are not demarcated and adoption and exchanges between neighboring Assamese Hindu society are pronounced (as discussed above), the Plains Tiwas do assert an indigenous tribal identity in the current social milieu of Assam. However, the basis of this assertion can be identified as a complex overlapping of religious and ethnic affiliations.

During my pilot interactions with/in the field, I realised the complex nature in which the community perceives its own identity and practices its religious beliefs. Most of my field respondents referred to themselves both as Hindu and as Tiwa tribals. Many specifically used the term 'Tiwa Hindu'. Such clear assertions may have bearings from the

contemporary socio-political nature of Assam. The nuances of the interactions between religion, gender and identity formation among the Plains Tiwas also need to be situated in the contemporary socio-political state of Assam. Assam has undergone significant political and cultural changes since the later half of the last decade. Changes in the political regime have also seen immense ideological shifts in the region. It is argued that following the political shift in the state machinery, ideological, religious and cultural polarisation have manifested itself as a social reality in the region (Borgohain and Dodum, 2023). It has evidently impacted the various ethnic and tribal groups residing within the state. It is interesting to observe state initiatives operating towards the subtle, gradual formation of a mass consciousness that merges the historically complex sentiments of Assamese regional nationalism with that of an Indian nationalism which has essentially come to be identified as Hindu. Based on the empirical evidence from my field, the impact of these shifts on the Tiwas has been powerful. Two examples shall be discussed below.

2.8.1 Hindu Tiwa Kanthichuri Akurai Tokhra

The Hindu Tiwa Kanthuchuri Akurai Tokhra aka Hindu Tiwa Sanskriti Suraksha Parishad was founded on 6th July, 2012 in the premises of Sankardev Vidya Niketan, Jagiroad. The organisation claims to be the only apolitical organisation of the Tiwa tribe and that apart from protecting the Tiwa culture, it has also been working towards the protection of language and national duty. The social media profile of the organisation highlights the line 'loss of culture is loss of identity..save our Hindu culture.' The organisation has been holding meetings in numerous places of the plains and in the hills too meetings have been held with their cause validated by those in positions of ritual authority. As shared by a few members of the organisation, in a special meeting held in 2013 in the youth dormitory of Bormarjong village in West Karbi Anglong of Assam, the male ritual specialists and headmen of all the hill villages came together and shared their concerns and solidarity to the cause of the organisation.

Figure: 2.1. Logo of Hindu Tiwa Kanthichuri Akurai Tokhra

Figure: 2.2. Picture depicting the slogan of Hindu Tiwa Kanthichuri Akurai Tokhra.

It reads "Tiwa culture is a part of Hindu culture. Without Hindutva Tiwa culture is

incomplete."

2.8.2 'Ghar wapsi'

On 27th February 2023 in a religious event held in Tiwa Shong village in Jagiroad, Assam, around 143 Christian tribal families returned to Sanatan dharma. The event was organised by Goba Deoraja Raj Parishad, the royal committee of the customary king of the Tiwas. The Tiwa families returned to Hindu fold through a religious function and the ceremony was called 'Ghar Wapsi' (return to the fold or reconversion) in sync with the national narrative of the same name initiated by Indian Hindu nationalist organisations Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and their allies.

Figure: 2.3. Picture showing the 'ghar wapsi' ceremony of a few Tiwa families in Jagiroad,

Morigaon. The flex reads "Committee for protection of Tiwa traditional religion culture-Gobha Deuraja Raj Parishad" Source: Internet

2.9 The paradox of religion, caste and tribe: Ambiguity of identity among the Hill Tiwas

The pilot study for this research also revealed how hills are also shifting in terms of political ideology that is based on religious affiliation. In an interaction with the researcher, Dhansing Maslai, a farmer from Amsai Pinung (Tiwa model village in the hills of West

Karbi Anglong) who also contested as a BJP candidate for the elections shared that the hill people are coming closer to Hinduism because identifying as Hindu would enable them to stay closer to their original religion rather than Christianity. Explaining how Tiwa culture was inseparably linked to their indigenous religious practices, Dhansing gave the example of their village Amsai Pinung which was originally a cluster of 12 villages, each holding and protecting a ritual tradition or custom of the Tiwas. Conversion of one of these villages into Christianity some years ago resulted in death of one of their precious customs. As shared by Maslai, the village people feel that embracing Hinduism will help them retain and preserve their indigenous belief system, something that was also shared by the members of Hindu Tiwa Kanthuchuri Akurai Tokhra.

Thus, my field, like many other tribes in the Indian context, complicates Xaxa's argument about the contradictory relationship between tribe and caste in India as the latter is seen as intrinsically related to the religious structure of Hinduism. This further complicates the position of women, specifically the ones with ritual status within the tribe. The Plains Tiwa woman then becomes an intersection of multiple categories. The *Haari* or the female ritual specialist can also be examined as an Assamese-speaking Neo-Vaishnavite Tiwa Hindu woman. How does this identity shape her sense of self, agency and belongingness?

2.10 The tribal woman in transition

A lot of post colonial literature has engaged with the question of transition and transformation of tribes in Assam but there is a lack of substantial literature discussing the transition of the tribal woman (Xaxa, 2004). The transition faced by the tribal woman can be understood as multi-layered.

Citing the example of expanse of Chaitainyite vaishnavism in Bengal, Chakravarti and Sangari (2001) argued how the under-theorization of historical transitions has led to seeing gender roles as far more static and fully formed than they may have been in practice. According to them, locating the continuities and changes within a larger structure of relationships rather than simply interpreting them only as brahmins and anti-brahmin conflicts would enable one to analyze patriarchal structures across castes and the changing nature of inter-caste contradictions. For instance, brahminisation itself, with its introduction of new hierarchies and patriarchal norms, would have to be seen in relation to larger historical shifts (from nomadic or tribal to agrarian systems) and also as a

regionally and temporally heterogeneous process. Chakravarty argued how a closer look at historical shifts along these lines would show that upper caste norms did not spread only with Brahminization. Citing the example of Chaitainyite vaishnavism, she argued how it could also be a bearer of upper caste norms in the tribal regions of the sixteenth and seventeenth century northeast India and had radically different implications for tribal women than it was to have later for the higher caste middle class women of colonial Bengal.

Aparna Mahanta (2001) expanded the analysis of patriarchy and linked it to state formations in northeast India from the fifteenth century. In a historical analysis of detribalization of tribal communities, Mahanta looked at changes in modes of production brought in by state formations, and how introduction of wet rice cultivation by Ahoms shifted labor from involving women to primarily involving men, unlike tribal practice of cultivation which required active participation of women. The emerging state system and the subsequent change in modes of production was thus in a way responsible for the peripheral positioning of women in the new set up. The increasing productivity of wet rice cultivation minimized the importance of women's subsistence activities like livestock breeding, poultry keeping, etc. New modes of production also led to newer masculine bondings, leading to formation of new associated structures of hierarchy. Men thus became the mediator between state and women, through public-private and state-household asymmetries. A changed economy and a changed state ensured the rise of a feudal economy which was essentially patriarchal.

Mahanta (ibid.) also wrote how religion overlapped with state and economy to become an important factor in changing the status of women. She argued that the dominant religious ideology probably suited the existing feudal relationship. It has also been argued that the mode of domination/submission to a superior was ingrained among the neophytes. Conversion of the tribal people to Hinduism was usually accompanied by adoption of plough cultivation; tribal neophytes had to go through purifying rituals which included prohibition eating certain food like pork, poultry and wine and on using their mother tongue which was considered impure (Sharma, 2011). Religious changes thus played an important role in pushing women to the social periphery by limiting their earning powers.

Drawing from Mahanta (2001)'s argument, it is safe to argue that the historical changes in power relations in terms of state, economy, and religion may have had a role in changing

kinship structures of the converted tribal communities, in turn changing and complicating gender roles and gender relations among the tribal neophytes. Exploring the historical linkages of lineage structure among the Plains Tiwas, their correspondence to the ritual status ascribed to Tiwa women and their resultant agency then has to be done within the universe of simultaneously situated and interrelated cultural, economic and socio-religious exchanges experienced by the tribe.

In a more contemporary analysis, Hemjyoti Medhi (2023) writes how colonial bureaucracy in its meticulous entry of details has left behind traces of how gendered land revenue policies and colonial jurisprudence often cast males as inheritors/owners displacing females who customarily inherited/occupied land. Highlighting how judicial imposition of Hindu laws of inheritance on tribal customary practices by British colonisers and subsequent erosion of tribal women's customary land rights may very well have accentuated the penetration of Brahmanical Hinduisation on the tribals, Medhi argues that the link established by colonial judiciary between women's chastity to matters of inheritance, particularly in communities where definitions of conjugality, male-female relationship and rightful conduct in matters of sexuality were yet to be codified, could have far-reaching effects. The role of these historical shifts indicating a subtle and nuanced censorship of women's access to resources (Medhi, 2023) in re-shaping the 'tribal woman' hence cannot be negated.

2.10.1 The Assamese Hindu Tiwa Vaishnavite woman: An ambiguous corollary of the 'Aideu'

It has been extensively discussed by feminist scholars how one of the most important forms of incorporation of brahminical Hinduism in the lives of Hindu women has been the incorporation of hegemonic patriarchy whereby women themselves become the agents of its perpetuation (Chakravarti, 2001, Sangri, 1995, Dube, 1988, Kandiyoti, 1988). Apart from the visible historical shifts in land ownership (Medhi, 2023), economic autonomy and power over resources (Mahanta, 2001, Nongbri, 2000), the transition of the tribal woman also have to be understood in her relation to the hegemonic patriarchy of brahminical Hinduism that penetrated the tribal societies in different forms and phases.

Towards the later half of the twentieth century, the tribal middle class followed its Assamese counterpart in adopting the Neo-Vaishnavite ideals, specifically that of

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Srimanta Sankardev Sangha. The Tiwa woman who was coming into terms with the changes resulting from exchanges and influences brought in by the sanksritised Assamese Hindu society further transitioned to a sanksritised Hindu Tiwa Assamese Vaishnavite woman.

Hemjyoti Medhi (2023) writes how gender played a crucial role in imagining and reinforcing community identity in nineteenth and twentieth century Assam and how notions of gender and conjugal relations shifted during the mid-nineteenth century across diverse texts, such as writings of the Asamiya intelligentsia, colonial land records and judicial cases, and in women's life writing and memory work.

The idea of modern Assamese nationalism was materialised in the formation of an Assamese middle class society which in turn created an important product as well as agent to represent its ideals- the modern Assamese woman. This ideal Assamese middle class woman, often termed as 'Aideu', a vernacularised Assamese equivalent of the western sensibilities behind the addressal 'Madam', represented a sanskritised Hindu Assamese elite woman mostly belonging to the upper-caste and decorated with education and etiquette and a controlled sexuality. In other words, the Aaideu could be seen as the quintessential representation of the assamese middle class and its honor, thereby becoming a model of aspiration endorsed and sanctioned by the Assamese society. The idea of Aideu is also intrinsically related to the standardisation of an ideal woman through a nationalist discourse, essentially rendering the non-sanskritised, differently dressed tribal woman with customary rights and a comparative sexual autonomy as non-ideal.

In my M.Phil research that looked into the social experience of menstruation among Tribal Hindu women in Assam, I had argued how the adoption of '*Tuloni Biya*', the caste Hindu practice of observing menarche rituals by the Plains Tiwas society contributed in constructing a Hindu Tiwa woman who was sanskritised and socialised along the lines of purity and pollution. I had also argued how the newly constructed Hindu Tiwa woman had been doubly sanskritised through neo-vaishnavite ideals whereby the traditional Assamese songs of *tuloni biya* sung during the ritual bathing of the Tiwa girl were replaced by *'naam'* or chant songs from *Kirtan Ghuxa* (the quintessential religious text of every Assamese Hindu household and second only the Bhagvad Gita) written in Brajawali language by Srimanta Sankardeva. During my PhD fieldwork, speaking to the *haari*s of

Bohgaon, I found out the complicated ways in which the sanskritised caste Hindu idea of purity and pollution has penetrated the Plains Tiwa society.

Taking the above debates as a historical backdrop, this study tries to explore the ambiguities of the categories that the Tiwa woman endorses. It specifically explores how Tiwa women with ritual status exercise agency within the historically materialised structure of patriarchy.

Kinship is an important factor while discussing the issues pertaining to women, particularly those belonging to postcolonial indigenous societies. The complex interrelationship between lineage, and inheritance further complicates the study of women and authority in these societies. Since I located my field in the larger domain of women's ritual status, I sought to draw my argument on women's agency from the debates on changing status of women in the matrilineal societies of the global south.

2.11 Women's status in matrilineal societies

Most of the literature on the status of women in matrilineal societies has thrown light on the complex positioning of women in these societies in terms of economic status, land and property rights, political rights, sexual autonomy, etc. Scholars like Schneider and Gough (1961) have argued about the in-built conflicts in the nature of authority that make the matrilineal societies inherently unstable. Audrey Richards (1950) refers to this situation as a 'matrilineal puzzle' where there is conflict between a man's role as a father and that of a mother's brother. She mentions situations where women and children have to submit to two kinds of authority- that of the husband-father in the domestic group and that of matrilineal kin in the descent group, which often result in instability and subsequent change in these systems. However, studies by scholars like Schwede (1986) and Tanner (1974) on the Minangkabau had questioned the assumption that authority is always a male function. Leela Dube (1993) cited the example of the Lakshadweep island of Kalpeni to argue that authority need not be concentrated in one person and can be diffused. She argued that in some matrilineal societies there is no evidence of the concentration of authority in a single individual or only in males. Poewe (1978) and Weiner (1976, 1977) had also questioned the assumptions of anthropologists on matriliny in central Africa and the Trobriand islands respectively.

Scholars like G. Arunima have written about the changing position of women in matrilineal societies. G. Arunima (2003) examines the 1893 painting of Raja Ravi Verma named 'There Comes Papa' to point out the systematic disintegration of Kerala's matrilineal society. She asks what could be the significance of a painting called 'There Comes Papa', when the subject and the artist were both products of a matrilineal society. According to Arunima, the absent yet approaching Papa signifies the crisis in Nayar matriliny in the late nineteenth century. The fact that Ravi Varma chose to celebrate conjugal domesticity and the nuclear family at a time when these were comparatively unknown amongst large sections of the matrilineal population reveals his growing patrilineal sensibilities. 'There Comes Papa' thus becomes akin to a clarion call for the end of matriliny, she argues. Closer home, Nongbri (2000) examines the link between matriliny and gender in Khasi society and observes that while women have comparative security under matriliny, they are not entirely free from subordination. She argues that the egalitarian principle that underlies matrilineal descent has been subverted by man's lust for power and the hierarchical political structures from which women as a rule are excluded. According to Nongbri, the political modernization of the region and the role of the state machinery have been instrumental in distorting the matrilineal system of the community.

I intended to locate my field in the larger universe of matrilineal societies of the global south while examining women's agency in and through the practice of religion. Reading up the above literature and juxtaposing it with my field findings hinted that I would actually have to go beyond the discussed approaches and attempt to understand agency in the life and ritual status of the *haari*s in their own situatedness. This would be necessary in order to deal with the complexities associated with the very institution of *haari*- a matrilocal ritual tradition existing within a patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal social structure which in turn traces back its basic kinship pattern to a matrilineal form of descent.

While looking at the relationship between women and ritual authority, one certainly has to look at how the ritual status of women is being maintained or changed or negotiated in the changing times. It is in this scope that this study wants to situate its argument. It intends to understand the parameters along which agency manifests itself during the intersections between women and religious practices in contemporary times, in particular the context of a socially, culturally and politically peripheral community like the Plains Tiwas.

2.12 Towards an alternative framework

There are a multitude of lenses through which the presence and position of women has been analysed in traditional Hinduism of which a prominent one is, 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). In either case, the woman is not given any power in practice. Another approach which may be an extension of the first approach is, 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).

Through this study I aim to make a departure from these existing frameworks and suggest an alternative framework that can make sense of women's negotiation with power structure from positions of ritual authority. I argue about that an alternate framework 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 engages with these dominant discourses on women and religion in Hinduism and examines how the tribal woman of the Plains of Assam is confronting them in ambiguous ways. While the Assamese caste Hindu elite 'aideu' conforming and operating through norms of Hindu patriarchy is the socially expressed aspiration for women in Assam, the beauty and paradox of the periphery lies in these tribal women using both indigenous tribal ethnicity as well as the identity of a Hindu woman to exercise agency. The ambiguity of this agency challenges both indigenous and the Hindu established notion of women and gender. This study notes the available scholarships on the ambiguous processes of becoming Hindu (Sengupta 2021) and examines how tribal women in the cultural, ethnic and political periphery use ritual authority to exercise agency. As observed in the field, this agency is often exercised against patriarchal power structures outside the religious sphere.

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 *Haari*s as narrated and performed by the women themselves.

Highlighting the importance of reclaiming the vernacular by the vernacular, this study critically examines recent scholarships on vernacular politics of ethnic groups in northeast India (Wouters, 2022) and attempts to juxtapose it with the context of this study. By offering a vernacular re-evaluation of Wouter's take on ethnic group's claim to ethnic uniqueness, I highlight the absence of women as subjects of ethnic assertion at two levels- by those involved in the vernacular politics and by those examining it. I put 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 periphery? This study brings this 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.

This study thus 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 and 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 cultural representation of women. 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 unique despite operating within the normative patriarchal apparatus of religion and culture, and that offers her a certain ritual status, a possible sense of self and agency?

Based on empirical field findings to be discussed in the chapters to follow, 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?