

CHAPTER IV

The Institution of *Borghor*: Hierarchies and Ambiguities of the Ritual Practice of the *Haari*

4.1 Introduction

In the larger spectrum of Hinduism, women's engagement with religion has been varied. Even though the documentation of the same has been mostly absent from the mainstream historiographies of their religion, Hindu women have played important roles in moulding the meaning of religion itself among different communities under different social settings. They have been crucial in terms of translating sanskritic values of Hinduism into the local fold, also termed as 'deshification' (Doniger, 2009, Urban, 2011). It has been a social process occurring simultaneously, as opposed to the widely accepted anthropological idea of tribal absorption into the Hindu fold (Bose, 1953) or bland assimilation of vernacular faiths into the larger mainstream version of Hinduism popularly termed as 'sanskritisation' (Srinivas, 1952). Keeping in mind this 'cross-fertilisation' (Doniger, 2009) of the two processes would help one understand the tangential nature of Hinduism as a religion in India. This cross-fertilisation of the vernacular and the mainstream is what wraps the entire spectrum of Hinduism in a cloak of ambiguity, and it is within the ambit of this religious ambiguity that women's ritual positions or authorities are usually actualised.

As an extension of the argument put forward in chapter II about existence of tribal practices that may challenge the patriarchal gender norms of Brahminical Hinduism, this chapter discusses the ritual role of the *haaris*, the female Tiwa tribal ritual specialists and the ambiguities associated with it, through the Tiwa religious institution of *borghor* (a Tiwa religious structure used for community worship as well as clan meetings). Understanding women's interaction with religion cannot be a linear one and has to be understood in terms of complex experiences influenced by ambiguous layers of power and hierarchies. In the context of Assam, the overlapping interactions among the sanskritic, vernacular and indigenous Hinduism make the ritual experience of women (and their ritual status) even more complicated. Extending from what was discussed in the previous chapter, understanding the nature of agency among the *haaris*, the female ritual specialists of the Tiwas would then have to take into account the interactions and experiences they have

with the multiple religious institutions present in their religious universe viz-a-viz the *borghor*, the *namghar* (an Assamese prayer hall of Vaishnavite faith), and with the religious values influenced by Sanskritic Hinduism. The chapter discusses these complexities in an attempt to understand the lives of the *haaris* and the ritual role they take on in the *borghor* within their *kul*.

The chapter uses empirical data to highlight the ambiguities of private and public sphere within the *borghor* premises and how the *haaris* navigate through these ambiguities to actualise their role. It explores how the ritual life of the tribe comes into life somewhere between the 'private' sacred guided by the *haari* or the female ritual specialist and the 'public' sacred guided by the *borjela* in the courtyard and how the *haari* actualises herself through the fluid boundary between these two spheres.

In doing so, the chapter critically examines the centrality of *nobaro* or the *borghor* 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 presently patrilineal in practice. It uses the *borghor* both as an anthropological site and as a site of sociological tensions to critically examine the institution of the *Haari*. By linking the tradition of the *Haari* to the possible matrilineal past of the tribe and trying to historically contextualise the position of ritual authority conferred to her within the tribe, the chapter further examines her overlapping identities as a *Haari* and as an Assamese Hindu Vaishnavite Tiwa woman to arrive at a nuanced understanding of gender and how it is impacted by the contemporary religious character of the tribe.

4.2. *Borghor* and the matrilineal linkages

As discussed in the previous chapter, the basic unit of Tiwa kinship is *maahari*, which means children following descent from the same mother/(matri)lineage, and the people belonging to the same *maahari* are directly related through blood, usually born from the same mother. A number of *maaharis* get together to form a *kul*, and each *kul* has a *borghor* of its own. The *borghor* must be built from scratch by the members of a *kul* in the courtyard of one of the household units.

An argument towards possible matrilineal linkages of the tribe can be made based on the following observations made while looking at the relationship between Tiwa kinship structure and the institution of *borghor*-

a) The foundational principle of constructing a *borghor* is a shared blood link that is traced back to a common ancestor- the mother. *Maahari* is an important term as it suggests that the Plains Tiwas who practice patrilineal descent could be matrilineal in principle. Such a term also suggests that the Plains Tiwas may actually had once upon a time traced lineage from the mother. It also then assigns an important position to the power of the female, more specifically the mother in their kinship structure, a characteristic that is typical of matrilineal societies.

b) As a legitimate structural representation of the Plains Tiwa kinship that traces lineage through the mother even if in principle, the presence of the *borghor* also explains the presence of the institution of *Haari* to this date within the Plains Tiwa tribe. As a ritual role derived from and intrinsically related to kinship ties, the practice of *haari* could simply be a residual practice of a matrilineal social system that offered women positions of authority in the ritual universe of the tribe. Alternatively, it could also be a way of holding on to the matrilineal linkages of the past and in turn hold on to a specific identity as a tribe.

c) The fact that the *haari* and the *jela* cannot be from the same household is significant from the point of view of residence. It refers to an important point about matrilocal societies where the brother has to move out of his natal home to wife's residence after marriage while the sister stays back and takes in a husband. A ritual legitimacy offered to the institution of *haari* and *jela* also in a way legitimises the principle of matrilocality in the social imagination of the community.

Should one juxtapose the above observations with Wadley (1977)'s analysis of the mother (goddess) in Hinduism and the postcolonial scholarship on religion, tribe, caste, gender in India, particularly in the context of Assam, one would probably arrive at a historically sound sociological understanding of the location of the *Haaris*, the female ritual specialists in the discourse of religion in postcolonial tribal societies and also in the larger discourse surrounding women and religion in global south. This shall be elaborated in later sections to follow.

4.3. The institution of *Borghor*: A critical representation of Tiwa community life

Each *kul* has a separate *borghor* (in Assamese) or *nobaro* (in Tiwa), signifying their original clan. For the ease of reference, this study has adopted the term ‘*borghor*’ as it is used by the Plains Tiwa tribe. The *borghor* must be built from scratch by the members of a *kul* in the courtyard of one of the household units. During the fieldwork conducted, the *borghor* was found to be the central structure in kinship organisation and community life of the residents of the village.

Ideally, the members of a *kul* reside together in a *chuburi* or a neighborhood. Even if sometimes a family goes on to reside in a different place, the members come back to the original *chuburi* and hence to the original *borghor* for all kinds of rituals involving the family and *kul*. However, if a few families of the same *kul* together move a bit far from the original *chuburi*, they sometimes form a new *borghor* in their new *chuburi*, with formal permission from the ritual authorities at the original *borghor* and from the other *kul* members. The ritual process involved in this separation is called ‘*khuta singa*’. It alludes to the main sacred object of the *borghor*, the ‘*thuna khuta*’. It sometimes also means the birth of a new *kul*. However, these *kuls* are still considered as related by blood and marriage alliance between such *kuls* is prohibited. Even with regards to the original *borghor* and the new, the ritual authorities, particularly the *Haari* of the *borghor* can perform the rituals of the new *borghor* in the absence of a *Haari* in the latter. It is the norm for *Haaris* from all the *borghors* and hence *kuls* to come together for carrying out the rituals involving birth and death in any *kul*.

For the Tiwas, the *borghor* is a place of supreme sacredness where they are known to offer prayers and sacrifices to their prime divine ‘*Mindaipha*’ or ‘*Pha Mahadeo*’ since “time immemorial” (Patar Mithi, 2019). ‘*Mindai*’ in Tiwa means God and ‘*Pha*’ in Tiwa means father. ‘*Mindaipha*’ therefore denotes ‘the eternal father’ of the tribe, also thought to be a divine being similar to Lord Shiva of Hindu mythology. However, it is important that the *borghor* is not an exclusive space of worship of *Mindaipha*.

It is also a place for worship of the numerous *kul* gods and goddesses of the community as well as the ancestors of the concerned clan or *kul*. Apart from *Mindaipha*, the Tiwas worship goddesses like *Bhagawati*, *Kalika*, *Kesaikhati*, *Kamakhya* inside the *Borghor*. These goddesses are addressed by various local names by the clans (ibid).

4.3.1. The physical structure of the *borghor*: Construction rules and belief systems

The sacredness attributed to the institution of *borghor* is well-demonstrated through the process of building its physical structure from scratch. Examining the physical structure of *borghor* becomes important in understanding it as an institution because a) construction of the *borghor* spells out the foundational principles of kinship organisation within the tribe, b) the physical process of its construction provides a direct insight to the ritual belief systems of the Plains Tiwa community, c) it bears witness to the specificities of the gendered ritual roles that make themselves seen through the ritual process of construction.

The *borghor* is a rectangular space covered with a roof and walls on all four sides, much like a two-room house. From what could be gathered through multiple field interviews, the first task of constructing a *borghor* for a *kul* is choosing the piece of land within the boundary of the host household where it would stand. This is accomplished through a specific set of rituals. The *haari* or the female ritual specialist again plays an initial role in the same. The *haari* of the source lineage prepares rice brew and summons the *ghorjela* or the male ritual specialist of the host *kul* and another person from the concerned *khel*. The *ghorjela* along with the representative from the *khel* takes a few basil leaves, some rice grains and an egg. They then turn east of the courtyard and pray to the *kul* God. The egg is then dropped by the *ghorjela* on the area chosen for building the structure. The Tiwas believe that the egg cracks only in a space that is approved by the *kul* God or goddess. Once the said area is chosen, the male members of the host household start gathering the necessary hay, bamboo, wood, etc. and invite the relatives from their *kul* and *khel*. Offering a meal and rice brew prepared by the female members of the host household along with the invite is customary. The chosen area is then used to build a structure of two large, adjacent rooms, facing east and west respectively. The east facing room is called ‘*nu-maji*’ or ‘*baahir mojiya*’ and the west facing counterpart is called ‘*nu-kathi*’ or the ‘*bhitor mojiya*’.

The room called ‘*Nu-maji*’, also denoted as ‘*bahir mojiya*’ or the outer room is where the ‘*thuna khuta*’ or the ‘*thunda phang*’ is placed. The *thuna khuta* or *thunda phang* is the symbolic version of the main deity of the *borghor* i.e. *Mindaipha*. It is therefore also called ‘*Mindaine thuna*’ (dwelling of the god). It is the *thuna khuta* in front of which the sacred weapon for offering ritual sacrifice of poultry, goat, pig, etc is kept. The sacred weapon,

an iron spear of medium size, is called the *jaala*. The *jaala* of a *borghor* is usually many generations old, in most times as old as the *borghor* itself.

It is important to note that the ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ denoting the two sacred rooms do not necessarily imply a physical meaning of inner and outer. Though they were called ‘*bahir mojiya*’ or outer room and ‘*bhitor mojiya*’ or inner room, the physical placing of the two rooms was seen to be carried out according to the directions, i.e., east and west respectively. Most *borghors* were observed to be having two entrance doors that faced each other and were carved on a sacred room each. It was thus difficult to determine if the two rooms were designed as outer and inner in terms of their symbolic meaning.

The worship of other *kul* gods and goddesses is also conducted in this outer room, i.e. the ‘*baahir mojiya*’ by the *haari* and the *ghorjela*, along with members from the larger family. The west facing room i.e. the *nu-kathi* or *bhitor mojiya* is used to worship the ancestors of the *kul*. The *nu-kathi* or the *bhitor mojiya* is not to be used to offer prayers to *Mindaipha* and the *kul* gods and goddesses. During the annual ritual known as *khordeng xewa*, *nu-kathi* is used by the *Haari* to cook and offer special meals and rice brews for the ancestors (ibid).

4.3.2. The *thuna khuta* or the *thunda phang*

As mentioned above, the ‘*thuna khuta*’ is the symbol of the prime deity, i.e. *Mindaipha*. It is actually the trunk of a tree that is specially cut through a ritual process. The *haari* of the *kul* prepares an offering of betelnut and *jyu-sa* (local rice brew) which is carried to the forest by the *ghorjela* and offered to a wild Gamhar tree. He then prays to the supreme lord and cuts the trunk of the tree at its source. The trunk is then brought in by the *ghorjela* with the help of other *kul* members and placed towards the eastern side of the *na-maji* (the outer room) inside the *borghor*. After this the *haari* of the host *kul* prepares meal and rice brew and the *ghorjela* again invites the *borjela*, the *haaris* and *jelas* of the other *kuls* and another important member from the *khel*. After the construction of the new *borghor* is complete, no other important objects can be placed inside it until the *kul* gods have been worshiped. Any important object is temporarily kept in the courtyard. The Tiwas consider Mondays and Tuesdays as auspicious days for all kinds of religious ceremonies. On a Monday evening, the *borjela* along with the *kul* members lights a fire in the center of the courtyard. This fire has to be lit in a special way by creating friction between two fine

pieces of an indigenous breed of bamboo known as the *kaak* bamboo. The fire thus born is considered sacred by the members of the host *kul*. They surround it along with the *haari* and *jela* and chant the name of their *kul* gods and goddesses. The *haari* and *jela* then gather a plantain leaf and offer basil leaves to the fire, before formally entering the *borghor*. Three ‘*deu laau*’ or sacred gourds and a handful of rice paddy wrapped in plantain leaves are hung from the *thuna khuta* (ibid).

Thus, the *Borghor* is also a physical anchor through which the Tiwas connect to their Gods and their kins, both dead and alive. The *borghor* observes a type of worship that has been discussed by scholars as indigenous mode of worship. The absence of idols and presence of indigenous names for *kul* gods, the elaborate ritual process of organically building a *borghor* hints towards reminisces of a shared relationship of co-dependency with nature. Objects and elements like tree and fire are considered sacred and are integral to building the *borghor*. These objects and elements are perceived as connecting links to Gods and ancestors. The inner structure of the *borghor* demonstrates a physical demarcation of the sacred world from the common world, where access is restricted to ritual specialists.

As observed during fieldwork, the *borghor* of the Maadur *kul* was established in the household premises of one of the member families. It is a traditional semi-kachha structure constructed adjacent to the main house of the host family. The inside of the *borghor* was where the two Goddesses of the *kul*, *Sonbola* and *Pachimbola* were seated. As mentioned previously, the Tiwas have a tradition of no idol, a tradition that is to be followed the most inside the *borghor*. These two seats of the two goddesses were two plain square-shaped clay heaps each decorated with only a lit earthen lamp in front. Both were separated by a short wall and both had their premises regularly cleaned by Podumi, *haari* of Maadur *kul*. The two goddesses are believed to be sisters with *Sonbola* being the elder one. Her seat was bigger and had the sacred *jaalaa* (a very sacred weapon made of iron, used to sacrifice the animal to the goddesses and the ancestors of the respective *kul* during community rituals) placed at her feet. That the Tiwas do not worship idols is perhaps the reason why the arrangements of the seats as observed in all the *borghors* visited during fieldwork were really simple- usually empty and decorated with an earthen lamp and the ritual offerings during a ritual. Contrary to what was written in the scarce textual documentations of the *borghor* (Patar Mithi, 2019, Bordoloi, 2014), the observation of rituals in practice were found to be quite arbitrary. For instance, as opposed to the prescribed rule of using the *nu-*

kathi or *bhitor mojiya* for for the cooking sacred meal for ancestors, it was observed during fieldwork that it is beside the goddess Sonbola's seat that the ritual of cooking the sacred meal for the dead members was carried out during the community death ritual or '*korom*'. I observed Podumi *haari* as she collected and prepared all the ingredients for cooking. The cooking was however carried out by a female relative who was termed as '*giyaati*'. The other *Haaris* who were invited also helped with the preparation of ingredients. It was interesting to see how all things sacred inside the *borghor* was handled by Podumi *Haari* but she refrained from cooking the ritual meal for the dead. This point along with a detailed analysis of the '*giyaati*' shall be carried out in the fifth chapter on observing and examining the annual community rituals.

As reflected in field data, the *borghor* represents the core structural organisation of Tiwa kinship. Any given Tiwa *kul* or clan cannot exist without a *borghor*. It is the center of the socio-religious universe of the Tiwas. The tribe members perceive it as a space of coming together, a binding that keeps them connected to their Gods and Goddesses, their kins, both living and dead and to the tribe as a whole. In other words, to the Tiwas, the *borghor* defines who they were and who they are, in the larger spectrum of spiritual existence. This is what makes the *borghor* a fertile site of religious and cultural manifestations and hence, of contentions. It is a fertile site of gender dynamics, ritual roles and practices, and negotiations.

4.3.3. The ritual universe of the *Borghor*: Complex interaction of gods, goddesses and cults

When one notes the coexistence of the indigenous God '*Mindaipha*', the pan-Indian incarnations of the Mother Goddess '*Bhagawati*' and '*Kalika*' and her Axomiya vernacular forms '*Kesaikhati*' and '*Kamakhya*' in the religious imagination of the tribe, one understands how this can be interpreted as a complex historical consequence of the long period of interactions of the indigenous with the local Axomiya vernacular form of Hinduism as well as its pan-Indian form. Though the outcomes are varied, the nature of these interactions can be compared to similar events of social (and hence sociological) importance arising in other regions of the country at various points of time in history. For instance, David Hardiman (1987)'s historical account of the Devi movement of the Adivasi peasants in Southern Gujarat in the 1920s documents the complex nature of using religiosity as resistance, where the religious structure was maintained by the indigenous

adivasis but emulations of non-adivasi values and habits followed by the brahmins and the banias entered the former's way of life both as an internal social reform of the community and as a process of democratising the otherwise exclusiveness of brahminical values.

Despite being a pioneering work, like most historical accounts documenting subaltern structures/events of sociological relevance, Hardiman's account skipped any documentation of the adivasi women's accounts in the movement and how their participation in such a movement impacted the patriarchy present in the adivasi society, even though the movement itself often involved women and girls embodying the goddess. The lack of proper documentation of the *haaris* in particular context of this research or the scarce presence of women's accounts in general in most of the historical and sociological texts documenting and examining religion seem to be only a corollary of the bias that has long plagued the works of male historians and social scientists, both from the mainstream and vernacular alike.

Nonetheless, in the context of the *borghor*, the layers of interaction among the various forms of Hinduism seemed to be even more complex. One could observe the indigenous ritual life of the Tiwas in constant interaction with the various cults of Shaivism, Mother Goddess worship and Vaishnavism. For instance, the members believed their prime deity *Mindaipha* to be an incarnation of Hindu God Shiva. Further, within the *borghor* premises as observed during fieldwork, the common terms of addressal for women and men were 'aai' and 'baap' respectively, an addressal typical of the followers of neo-Vaishnavite sect introduced in Assam by Srimanta Sankardeva. Most of the members were dressed in white and the chanting of 'ow hori, ow raam' by the tribe members at the beginning and end of the ritual blessings was also observed, two other characteristics typical of the neo-Vaishnavite sect. At the same time, animal sacrifice, a ritual act entirely in contrast to the beliefs of neo-vaishnavite Hinduism was seen to be carried out as a sacred offering to *Mindaipha* and the *kul* gods and goddesses, who were, as discussed previously, indigenous and vernacular forms of the divine figures of pan-Indian Hinduism. Wendy Doniger (2009)'s concept of 'deshification' suggested as against the concept of 'sanskritisation' can be used to understand this complex spread of religious symbols and their interpretation among the tribe members, whereby they are holding on to their indigeneity through and despite these layered interactions.

How these interactions have impacted the ritual universe of the members and that of the *haari* shall be discussed later in this chapter.

4.4. '*Haariye gaari*': Ritual hierarchy and the ambiguity of authority

The *ghorjela* and the *Haari* are responsible for the maintenance of *borghor*. As discussed previously, every *borghor* has a different set of *ghorjela* and *Haari*. As shared by Podumi Patar, the responsibility of the *Haari* with regard to the *borghor* is more than that of the *ghorjela* in terms of seriousness and involvement with the tasks. It is she who has to be physically involved- from performing prayers and rituals inside the *borghor* to cooking and offering sacred food to the clan goddesses, gods and the ancestors to keeping the place clean to regularly lighting the earthen lamps. She used the term '*Haariye gaari*', a phrase that according to her is widely used in this context. The literal meaning of '*gaari*' in Assamese is body, more generally referred to as '*ga-gaari*' (body/physique/physical form). Upon being asked about the relevance of such a term in this context, Podumi Patar, *Haari* of Madur kul said,

"Gaari maane gaa. Haariye gaari buli kole bujibi aaru xiye sob koribaa laagibo. Taar maane haari ekebare mul. Ghorburhaku xudhiba laage baaru, xiu xudhe. Kintu mosa kaasa, saaki joluwa, tuti kora, aagbohuwa eibilaak moi koribaa laage. Ako amar bhogobaankitaku saaki dibaa laage. Maayeki-baapekiku xewa dhoriba laage"

(*Gaari* means body. When said *haariye gaari* you understand that it is she who will have to do everything. That means *haari* is elementary. Of course, I ask the *ghorburha*, he also asks. But cleaning, lighting lamps, praying, offering, etc. is done by me. And then I have to light lamps for our gods-goddesses also. The ancestors also need to be prayed to.)

-Podumi Patar, 60, *haari* of Madur kul; interview taken at respondent's residence on June 2018

'*Haariye gaari*' thus suggests the centrality of the role of *Haari* in the *borghor*. Podumi's response hints that the presence of *Haari* is elementary to any ritual conducted and that her role is significant in the Tiwa religious and social life. However, one wonders, could it also mean that the *Haari* is to take care only of the physical aspects pertaining to the *borghor*? Tasks such as cleaning the premises, lighting the sacred earthen lamp, offering prayers, preparing rice brew and so on could lead one to interpret her ritual position as

deriving more from an understanding of division of labor with the *jela* rather than from a position of feminine divinity or ritual authority.

Podumi maintained that it is customary for her and the *ghorjela* to seek approval from each other before carrying out the prayers and rituals at the *borghor*. As field data would later prove, the tribe demonstrated a traditionally sanctioned divide in terms of assigning gender roles to its members- both through assigning gender-specific ritual positions to members and through introducing newly born members to general gender roles in formal ritual initiation ceremonies. The *borghor* and the community rituals were spaces where these roles got pronounced.

Nonetheless, observing Podumi, the *jela* and the *borjela* along with the community members later in the *borghor* during their community rituals provided me with a fair idea of their ritual and social position within the clan. It led me to understand the ambiguities associated with the ritual role of the *Haari* and the general ritual ambiguities that constitute the life of the clan members and hence the tribe.

4.5. The notion of the mythical woman versus the actual woman: Contextualising the ritual practice of the *Haari*

With its associated ambiguities, the term '*Haariye gaari*' leads one to further reflect on the complex role of women in world religions, more specifically on the (symbolically absent) role of Hindu women in Indian religious traditions. In orthodox, textually sanctioned Hinduism, women are active practitioners but have little religious authority (Wadley, 1977). Though they are often known to have significant roles as both specialists and nonspecialists, these roles are not ritually prescribed or socially sanctioned and hence are far from being documented.

In a further complex perception of the mythical Hindu woman, Wadley (1977) discusses a number of scholarships on the notion of women in Hindu ideology that stresses on an essential duality of the female- the benevolent i.e. the bestower and the malevolent i.e. the destroyer. On one hand she is perceived as *shakti*, and is the energising power or the original energy of the Universe. The woman is also seen as *prakriti* or Nature, the undifferentiated Matter of the Universe and the active female counterpart of the Cosmic person *purusha*, the inactive male. According to this notion of duality, the *prakriti* and the

purusha combined underlie all forms of life wherein the male contributes the bones and nerves while the female contributes the flesh, skin and blood (Wadley 1977). Further, most of the written texts, vernacular writings and oral traditions follow the footsteps of classical Hindu texts in assigning women a receptive role of the wife with controlled sexuality and to be always seen in relation to the husband. The woman as wife is assigned no place in the hierarchy of religious authority, and the said duality of the female thus sprouts only from the differentiated notion of the mother who sometimes transforms into the Goddess-depicting both prosperity and danger. Mythically, the woman who is capable of childbirth is revered as the mother goddess and a benevolent nurturer (as *shakti*); she is also to be feared as an angry destroyer (as *kaali*) when disrespected. Even though their power is recognised and appreciated, both are feared as they cannot be controlled- something most world religions are historically known to be uncomfortable with. During larger interactions between power and religion, the mythical woman, thus, is pushed downwards in the ritual hierarchy. She does not qualify as ideal. In religious sanctions steeped with patriarchal values, it is only the docile and conforming Hindu woman who is considered ideal. Most religious texts only sanction the husband-abiding wife as the ideal Hindu woman. This layered duality of the Hindu woman has been upheld by many scholarships alike and also has been a site of varied contention for most feminist scholars.

Much post-structuralist scholarship has critically examined this notion of structural duality of the Hindu woman inspired by the idea of binary opposition (Strauss, 1953). The main premise of their argument is that it limits any possibility of understanding societies and their realities through agency of the subjects. Wadley (1977) along with a number of other scholars on women in traditional Hinduism (Dube, 1988, Bell, 1997, Pinchman, 2007, Doniger, 2009, Urban, 2011) discusses how Hindu women make use of the permeable ritual boundaries to negotiate with the religious structure. More often than not these negotiations are carried out within the structure of patriarchy, many a times reinforcing existing patriarchal norms. What is important to note is the ambiguous character that agency takes on in the lives of these women, thus only further complicating and problematising the established binary notion.

As a Hindu tribal woman, the case of the *Haari* is both in sync and disjuncture to the above notions. In terms of textual visibility, the *Haari* is absent- both at the level of undocumented oral traditions as well as at the level of gender bias in documentation of

indigenous community practices by both western as well as indigenous scholars. Though her presence is reported by a section of scholarship on the Tiwa tribe, the significance of her role in understanding the social characteristics of the tribe has gone undocumented. Nonetheless, at the level of practice, her ‘actual’ role as a female ritual specialist of the clan is profound. Her ritual role is socially sanctioned and ritually prescribed, commanding a kind of ritual authority within the tribe.

In this context, one can refer to Wilkerson (2007)’s study of female ritual specialists of the ancient Zhuang religion of China. During interactions between power and religion, the mythic woman is placed at a lower hierarchy. How does the actual woman assert herself in these interactions? Wilkerson highlights a subversion in the interactions between local ideals and world religions when he discusses how the indigenous female ritual specialist of the Zhuang people, although not formally recognised by the male-privileging Chinese Taoist religion, in practice still displays an undeniably important space in the ritual life of the people of Zhuang. She thus exists somewhere in between- not securing a formal place of visibility in the sanctioned religious texts and practices but nonetheless challenging through actual practice the normative structure of world religions that seem to offer women with positions of invisibility. In the specific context of interaction between power and religion within the broader ambit of Hinduism, this study examines empirical field data to argue that the *Haari*, more specifically the term ‘*Haariye gaari*’, signifying the crucial aspect of corporeality or embodiment of the ritual role of the *Haari*, highlights how women’s practices and experiences from indigenous traditions of Hinduism often problematise the binary representation of the woman in traditional Hinduism that offers her no subjecthood. While doing so, what it stresses on is the ambiguous nature of subjecthood and agency.

My field observations presented data that highlights two important facts about ritual positions and authority viz-a-viz the *borghor* and the *haari*. First, though operating within an ambiguity of private and public domain, the ritual role of the *haari* in the *borghor* is a formal one. It is a defined, visible position of authority allowing her a formal access to power. Second, the formal hierarchical boundaries viz-a-viz ritual position and authority were observed as getting blurred in practice. In that sense, the remark ‘*gutei barapujjar burhaxopai iyake murot tuli thoise*’ (all the old men of Barapujia have kept her in high regard) made by Podumi’s husband in a casual conversation during fieldwork is

significant. Later as I observed her during the community rituals of Madur *kul*, I noted how the *borjela* of their *khel* consulted Podumi throughout the process and how she physically stayed by his side and guided the young *ghorjela* through the rituals of sacrifice. Upon being asked, a number of members of the *kul* said that it was because of Podumi's years of experience and wisdom that her presence has been adding value to their rituals. The fact that she has the added distinction of being the third generation in the line of haaris and thus embodying the accumulated wisdom on the basis of oral transmission of knowledge through generations, adds to her importance in terms of actualising herself outside the ambit of her ritual authority formally assigned to her.

The remark '*haariye gaari*' made by Podumi that was discussed above is relevant in this context. Juxtaposing it with the evident ambiguities in hierarchy one understands that the sense of power or ritual authority indicated in the remark '*haariye gaari*' is a phrase that may not be formally pronounced but is an undeniable truth in the ritual lives of the community, the essence of which lies in practice. If one further juxtaposes this understanding with Wilkerson (2007)'s observation about the female ritual specialists of Zhuang religion, it may be argued that in this case the actual woman exercises her authority even within the sphere of indigenous ritual practices. We shall examine this process of actualisation by the haari in a later section to follow.

Interestingly, these ritual practices may not necessarily pronounce a hierarchy in ritual roles. On the contrary, what was observed was a shared space of mutual wisdom and knowledge about their belief system which was both within and outside the formal positions of ritual authority.

Nonetheless, the above two observations form the empirical basis to the alternate framework suggested in the second chapter. Making sense of the tribal women's negotiation with power structure from positions of ritual authority, particularly in practice, must come from an understanding of ambiguity. The presence of multiple structures of power in ritual practices and in religion complicates the ways in which ritual authority is manifested for the ritual specialists.

4.6. The *borghor* and the female ritual specialist: Beyond the ambit of vernacular Hinduism

A multitude of feminist scholars on religion have established through their work how most of the world religions exclude women from doing the ‘main’ chores of religion. In other words, women have been historically denied positions of power in the institutions bearing religious symbolism and meaning. Power is a product of access. In most cases it means access to and control of the core of any institution or structure. In Hinduism, the ‘*garbhagriha*’ or ‘inside’ of a temple is where the divine power is believed to reside. For a multitude of reasons, the primary of which is often cited as the issue of purity and pollution, most of the sects of Hinduism forbid women from entering the insides of their sacred structure along with specific taboos on touch observed by authorities of most institutions. All of these practices deny the Hindu women any kind of autonomy, and positions of authority and power within their own faith.

Moving beyond the binary debate of denial of subjecthood and religious autonomy to Hindu women, Vasudha Narayanan (2005) argues how diversity, plurality and a lack of central authority in the Hindu traditions allow space for a lot of changes to happen where there are constant interactions between the sanskrit, the brahmanical and the vernacular, allowing women to take various leadership positions including that of sacerdotal functions (Narayanan, 2005, 30-31). While she recognises the contemporary changes of gender dynamics in vernacular Hinduism, Narayanan in her study of the female priests of Melmaruvatur temple examines women’s authority within the ambit of and as derived from the religious values of Hindu traditions. In the context of Neo-Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism in Assam as well, the Assamese Hindu Vaishnavite woman may have access to or touch the ‘*monikut*’ (the core and innermost sacred structure) of a *namghar* (Assamese prayer hall of Neo-Vaishnavite sect) only after menopause. In other words, any kind of access to the ‘*monikut*’ is prohibited for any women of reproductive age (Kakoty 2016).

The *Haari* qualifies as an Assamese Hindu Vaishnavite Tiwa woman. However, her ritual role and the authority she derives from it henceforth have to be placed in a much more indigenous context even if it is analysed from the point of view of vernacular Hinduism. The reason that the *haari* cannot be examined within the regular ambit of traditional or vernacular Hinduism is the essentially ‘tribal’ character of her role- a role that is intrinsically related to kinship ties of the clan. Though the *borghor* is used as a prayer

space, it cannot be seen as directly analogous to a temple or a *namghar*. For the clan members, it is first and primarily a sacred physical structure that symbolises their lineage- more specifically, their biological connection to the same ancestral mother. By virtue of her ritual role, the *haari* has formal access to the innermost and the most sacred spaces of the *borghor*, irrespective of her reproductive age- the ‘*bahir mojiya*’ or the ‘*nu-maji*’ and the ‘*bhitor mojiya*’ or the ‘*nu-kathi*’. The core of the *borghor* may seem similar to the *garbhagriha* of a temple or the *monikut* of a *namghar*, but the tribal nature of its functions and the assigned ritual roles distinguishes it fundamentally from the former two sacred structures. Unlike a temple that denies any kind of access to the *garbhagriha* for women of any age or a *namghar* that restricts the access of the *monikut* to male devotees only, the *haari* is one of the formal care takers of the *thuna khuta* and the seat of the *kul* goddesses and gods in the ‘*bahir mojiya*’ and also of the seat of the ancestors in the ‘*bhitor mojiya*’.

In other words, the *borghor* symbolically links the members to their ancestors. In terms of kinship, thus, the ritual actions of the *haari* inside the *borghor* make her an anchor of sorts between the world of the *maayeki-baapekis* (a term used to refer to ancestors) and the world of the *kul* members.

It is not surprising that gendered specificities of ritual roles were pronounced from the construction of the *borghor* to the beginning of worship in its premises. This point shall be elaborated in the next chapter that will examine the annual community rituals hosted within the *borghor* premises. However, what is undeniable, as we shall see in the next chapter, is the indispensability of the *haari* in ritual offerings and prayers to the Gods, goddesses and ancestors inside the *borghor*. She is physically in charge of taking care of the divine- an access and a role usually enjoyed by and assigned to male specialists in traditional world religions, particularly in conservative and also in most vernacular Hinduism.

4.7. The ‘private’ *Borghor* and its ‘public’ courtyard: Ambiguities of boundaries

The public domain of religion has historically been dominated by men. As discussed in the previous chapters, most of the literature on the relationship between religion and women have established how in Indian context, barring a few exceptions, Hindu women’s participation in religion has mostly been in the private domain, denying them authority positions in the public sphere of religion.

An important observation that was carried out during fieldwork was the complex interactions of the public and private domain within the physical structure of the *borghor*, making the ritual position of the *haari* both complicated and interesting in terms of understanding agency through ritual status.

Unlike the *monikut* of a *namghar* or the *garbhagriha* of a temple that despite being the core or innermost space of a sacred structure clearly falls within the ambit of the public domain, the *borghor* is an ambiguous mixture of private and public. Field observations suggested that the inside of a *borghor* falls within the ambit of private domain. In that sense, the *bahir mojiya* and the *bhitor mojiya* of the *borghor* to which the *haari* has formal access, also actually comprises a private domain. This point aligns the practice of the *haari* with the larger discourse of women's participation in religion as an affair of private domain only, despite her holding a position of ritual power. The demarcation of private and public within the *borghor* premises, however, gets blurred in multiple ways and it is in this blurring of boundaries that one would have to understand how the two domains operate in the religious imagination of the Tiwas and how the *haari* actualises herself in the blurring of these boundaries. We shall elaborate this below.

The ritual power and authority assigned formally to the *haari* is within the *kul*. She is not given any ritual position outside her *kul*, though her social position as the *haari* of her *kul* is recognised. As observed in the field, the Tiwas perceive all operations within the *kul* as taking place within the ambit of domestic or private sphere. In that sense, the *borghor* becomes a place where the public and the private come together to interact with each other. It is in this sense that hierarchical boundaries of ritual positions get blurred and the *haari* can be seen actualising the essence of her ritual authority across these formal boundaries.

To elaborate, a *kul*, however big in size, comprises closely knit kins, usually descended from a common female ancestor and hence, in a lot of ways falls within the ambit of the private sphere. A *khel* on the other hand is not always formed of kins. It is formed by a group of *kuls* which may or may not have kinship ties. In its essence *khel* is a social entity which comes into the picture during formal social occasions like marriage, funerals, births among the *kuls* within its scope and also to solve disputes within and between *kuls*. From the nature of its functioning, a *khel* can thus essentially be considered to be part of the public sphere.

The *borghor* is the central place of interaction between these two spheres, i.e., the private *kul* and the public *khel*. The *borghor* qualifies as a private domain because it is a representation of the immediate kinship shared by a *kul*, a place that symbolically keeps the links with their ancestors alive. The physical structure of the *borghor* is also present within the private premises of a household of a family of *kul* members. It is in this domain where the *haari* is formally assigned the position of a female ritual specialist.

Again, the *borghor* is also a place through which a *kul* interacts with the *khel* during events like marriage, community rituals as well as during instances of inter-clan grievance or conflict, making it a public domain. In that sense, the *haari*, the *ghorburha* and the *borjela* are the ritual anchors through which the private and public domain of the ritual life of the Tiwas interact. It is this arrangement that makes the Tiwa kinship and social organisation a complicated one and it has implications on gender, as evident from the field.

As we would observe in the community rituals in the chapter to follow, gender demarcation viz-a-viz the private and public domain is formally spelt out in the ritual sphere of the Tiwas wherein the ritual prophecies for men and women are different and distinct. A number of scholarships on Tiwa social life (Dewri, 2018, Senapati, 2018, Patar, 2017, Sharma Thakur 1985, Baruah, 1989) have written how in the traditional matrilineal Tiwa society family and household is the domain of the women who control decision-making regarding domestic affairs while public is the domain of men who take care of social decision-making. During fieldwork, the phrases ‘*tur ron ghorot*’ (your battle is at home) for female children and ‘*tur ron bahirot*’ (your battle is outside) for male children were observed to be used by the *borjela* of the *khel* in the formal initiation ceremony of newborn members, indicating gender demarcations between private and public domains as applicable to women and men of the community. It could be interpreted, then, that the scope of the role of the female ritual specialist, even when carried out in public, is perceived by the community as operating within the private domain of their *kul*. This could also explain the absence of a defined ritual position for women within the scope of the *khel* which is perceived and referred to as *xomaj*, a term essentially referring to public domain.

Thus, the ritual life of the tribe comes into live somewhere between the ‘private’ sacred guided by the *haari* or the female ritual specialist and the ‘public’ sacred guided by the *borjela* in the courtyard. The boundary between these two spheres is where the *haari* actualises herself.

During fieldwork the hierarchy of gender roles was nonetheless found to be present outside the *kul* and within the *khel*. It was observed that the position of a female ritual specialist is present only within the kinship organisation of a *kul*. It was found to be absent at the level of *khel* where a more socially revered ritual position was observed to be that of the *borjela* or the senior male ritual specialist. The *borghor* was found to be the place where the *haari*, the *ghorjela* and the *borjela* came together; it was a place where their ritual positions directly interacted with one another. This observation from the field complicates the understanding of the private and public in Tiwa social life, further complicating the nature of ritual authority assigned to the role of *haari* and leading one to interpret the embedded gender hierarchy as ambiguous.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the structure of *Borghor* legitimises ritual positions within the tribe. It assigns definite ritual positions to men and women through their roles as the ritual specialists in the functioning of the *borghor*. It thus also legitimises a gender divide between the ritual specialists. This gender divide does not necessarily imply ritual inequality between the genders in terms of authority or labor. From what could be gathered from field observations, there is an understanding of who will conduct prayers inside the *borghor* and supervise rituals, or who will summon other ritual specialists or physically invite them. These ritual duties were not found to be denoted in terms of taboos or ‘cannot’s. It is not to say, however, that hierarchy is absent. Ritual hierarchy gets pronounced formally during the meeting of the *khel* members in community rituals preceded by the *borjela* of the *khel*. The role of the *borjela* is formally designated as the senior most one in the hierarchy of ritual roles of the *khel*. However, it is the practice of the rituals during which ambiguity slips in. It is where blurring of boundaries in terms of ritual authority can be observed. This shall be further examined while discussing community rituals in the next chapter.

4.8. Between overlapping religious experiences: *Borghor*, the *namghar* and the oscillating ritual position of the *haari*

Podumi Patar, *haari* of Madur kul, is also a *namghar*-going Tiwa woman. The other *haaris* who I interviewed also said that they are affiliated to the *namghars* of their respective localities. All of these women regularly visit the *namghar*, especially during the month of *bhado*, a month in the Assamese calendar celebrating the birth of Lord Sri Krishna.

The presence of multiple religious institutions in Bohgaon has seen an overlap of ritually diverse practices. Thus, the woman who acts as a *Haari*, that is, a woman with a ritual position in Tiwa religious rituals becomes a common devotee in Assamese religious proceedings. Subsequently, her ritual status oscillates between extreme sacredness and commonness. An important point here is- the *haari*, an Assamese Hindu Vaishnavite Tiwa woman also oscillates between the Hindu notion of purity-pollution that is observed in Assamese *namghar* and the tribal notion of ritual purity that is to be observed by a ritual specialist in the Tiwa *borghor*. She constantly navigates through the patriarchy that exercises itself in between.

To generally deny access to women is the basic feature of most religious practices, though the nature and degree of these denials vary across religions and sects. In the context of overlapping religious experiences, how do these women make sense of their ritual position in simultaneously operating ritual universes that are fundamentally different from one another?

Upon being asked about this dual identity as a Tiwa ritual specialist and female Vaishnavite devotee, Podumi *haari* shared-

'Itiya naamghorot jaba holi kisuman niyom maniba laga hoi na... suwa tuwa holi jaba napai... aako aagote aami okol lalung manuhxopa goisilu...aaji keibosormaanor pora kus gaaor pora manuh aahiba loisi...hehetor maaikiburor aako niyom dher... amar ghorotu guxaai ghor aase jetiya...(points towards the small prayer room in their courtyard)... gotike niti niyom maanibai lagibo..'

(Now if you want to go to the *namghar* then you will have to abide by some rules, isn't it.. You must not visit if you are menstruating or impure in any way... and earlier only us lalung people used to go... now from a few years people from Kus village have started coming... their women follow a lot of rules...and since we also have a prayer hall at home ((points towards the small prayer room in their courtyard) so we also abide by the rules...)

Upon being asked who reads the holy texts in the *namghar*, Podumi responded, *'Maiki juwa hoi... amar maliku jaai..'* *manuhok suba nidiye nohoi...mota pathokei porhe.. Aami xuniba jaau aa... bhadomohiya xodaaye*

(They don't let women touch...so the male readers only read...we go to listen...during the month of *Bhaado* it's a regular affair...my husband also goes along...)

The Bohgaon *bornamghar*, estd in 1952 used to be an all Tiwa prayer space but as told by Podumi *haari* in the personal interview, in the past decade it has seen an in-coming of people, especially women from Kus community. These women are apparently better versed in *Naam-Kirtan* (prayer chants performed in Assamese *namghars*) and have introduced stricter rules in the *namghar* in terms of everyday observance of purity by female devotees. According to Podumi, this eventually impacted the ritual as well as everyday lifestyles of the Tiwa women who visit the *namghar*. Wearing proper *mekhela saador* (Assamese traditional attire) even in a Tiwa social setting became a norm for the Tiwa women who commonly used to wear *methoni* (a woven skirt/*mekhela* wrapped from the bosom till usually without a *saador* or the separate piece of cloth covering the bosom, unlike the Assamese way of wearing the *mekhela* from the waist and wrapping the *saador* around the body) as a dailywear. Observing Hindu menstrual rules and taboos with regards to the *namghar* has gotten extended to the Tiwa women observing these rules in the domestic space of home as well.

Upon being asked about how she felt about being a *haari* in her *borghor* and a *namghar* going woman at the same time, Kamali, *haari* from Amshi *kul* shared-

'Borghorot kothatu olop beleg.. moi khua buwa sob xabodhan hoi solu aa.. Jaare taare pora khaba nuwawong.. Jote tote nejaang.. aamar nixedh aase.. Sob laara kora koribo laage na.. jimaan paari pobitto hoi thakiba sesta korong.. Aako suwa holi borghor naahu aa.. Tetiya ghorburhai saaki jolaai.. Naamghorot tu aami lara kora xokaam naai aa.. Maaiki manuhok sun teneke eku koribaai nidiye.. (naam) xunibahe jaau..

(It's different in the *borghor*.. I have to be very alert while eating and drinking.. I do not eat from just anyone or anywhere.. We have to follow some restrictions.. Since I have to do (and touch) everything (in the *borghor*).. (I) try to stay pure as much as possible.. And I do not come to *borghor* when I'm menstruating.. Then the ghorburha takes care of it.. in the *namghar* there is no task as such for us women.. They usually do not let women do anything.. We just go to listen to the *naam* (prayer chants)).

The fact that the *haaris* do not carry out the *borghor* duties while menstruating suggests that similar to the Assamese Vaishnavite women visiting *namghar*, the notion of purity and pollution and rules with regards to menstruation are followed by the *haaris* as well. However, these rules are different under the different settings of the *borghor* and the *namghar*. While access to the '*monikut*' or ritual tasks such as reading the holy texts in the

namghar are usually denied to all women of menstruating age regardless of the fact that they are menstruating at the time or not, the *haaris* irrespective of reproductive age have access to the inside of the *borghor* and can take up the ritual tasks of praying to the clan gods, goddesses and ancestors as well as overall maintenance of the *borghor* premises. It is however important to note that the *haaris* are the only Tiwa women who have access to carry out ritual activities inside of the *borghor* by virtue of the position of ritual specialist that is formally assigned to them.

4.9. The changing notions of purity: Contemporary shifts in the idea of the feminine

Podumi *haari* further shared how she remembers seeing no menstrual rules as such for common Tiwa women while growing up. She remembered her mother and other female kins entering the hearth, cooking, doing the regular household chores and even going to fields during the season of paddy cultivation. Podumi said that she does not remember from when exactly the Tiwa women started observing the menstrual taboos within the household but she can tell that now in almost every Tiwa household the Hindu rules for menstruation are observed.

Premalata, the 85-year-old *haari* of Phamsong *kul* shared how earlier the ritual of *tuloni biya* (ritual celebration of menarche by Assamese Hindu community) was not common among the Tiwas as menarche and menstruation as a whole was considered something essentially private. Within the past decade, the number of families observing *tuloni biya* celebrations similar to the neighboring caste Hindu communities have significantly gone up in their village.

She shared-

‘Amar dinot eibur kuwa kothai naasil.. Lukor suwali daangor hole luke kiya nu jaaniba laage hoi.. Etiya dekhun luke sobeo bor biyar nisinakoi paate.. Poisa paatiu dher hol aa manuhor.. Dher kibakibi khuwai buwai.. dhoribaai nuwari aamar lalungei ne kus kolita..’

(In our days these were not things to be shared.. If some other’s daughter has attained puberty why does some other need to know.. Nowadays everyone celebrates it like a real marriage.. People also have a lot of money now.. They feed a variety of food.. Can’t differentiate the lalung (Tiwa) from the Kus Kolita (neighboring non-tribal Assamese communities)..)

This information resonated with the findings of my M.Phil research conducted between 2015-2017, part of which examined the observance of menstrual taboos among the Assamese Hindu Vaishnavite Tiwa women of Central Assam. The study used empirical field data to argue how young Tiwa women observe menstrual taboos prescribed by Hindu patriarchy and how they negotiate these taboos in their everyday life towards their own benefit. The study had also argued how the sense of femininity and womanhood get shaped early in life for these women who long for their own *tuloni biya* celebration because of a multitude of factors, some of these include the tradition of receiving gifts and dressing up as brides as well as sharing of gendered knowledge of menstrual taboos and ritual celebrations by female peers from non-Tiwa households.

If one juxtaposes these changing notions of purity, the influence of Neo-Vaishnavite ideologies and the rising idea of a docile, submissive feminine self, observing the taboos and regulations suggested by Hindu patriarchal values among Tiwa women with the existence of a formal ritual position of the female ritual specialist within the tribe, perhaps one arrives at a fair understanding of the layers of complex social realities that surround the ritual identity of the *haari*. The observations discussed above give out implications of these changes on a matrilineal practice with ritual authority derived from an institution like the *borghor*, that has been surviving so far within a patrilineal, patrilineal and patriarchal social structure. It is perhaps these implications that make the question of agency among the *haaris* complex and ambiguous, and yet, unavoidably important.

4.9. Of concrete *borghors* and divine images: Changes observed during fieldwork

A folk phrase that the elderly men of the community were commonly seen singing on various occasions during the course of my fieldwork was ‘*Laali hilaali laai mur pitadeu, laali hilaali laai, laali laang ghorote biraali xumale saang tol molongi jaai*’ (Laali hilaali laai o’ my father/laali hilaali laai/in my simple household the malice has entered/my house has now started to suffer). While an analysis of this phrase itself can reveal the layered multiple social realities about the tribe, a direct allusion of this popular folk phrase can be observed towards the erosion of the Tiwa ways of life, their traditions and culture. The phrase raises the concerns of the tribesmen about the invasion of Tiwa folk life by foreign elements and the subsequent loss of ethnic identity of the tribe. The fact that phrases like these are also sung in religious rituals in the form of prayer chantings imply how the folk

and cultural sensibilities of the tribe are intertwined with their religious and ritual sensibilities. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

In the context of shifts in the institution of *borghor*, a significant change that was observed during the course of fieldwork was the reconstruction of some of the *borghors* from traditional thatched structures made with bamboo to concrete structures made of cement. Upon being asked, the members responded that reconstruction of the *borghors* is a part of an initiative by the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) in 2022 to preserve the Tiwa heritage and culture. These were tin houses made with brick and cement, and imitated the traditional structure or format of a *borghor* with two rooms- the ‘*nu-maji*’ or the ‘*bahir mojiya*’ and the ‘*nu-kathi*’ or the ‘*bhitor mojiya*’. The seats of the clan goddesses, gods and ancestors were erected in cement in contrast to the traditional heaps of mud.

Another physical change was observed in the newly constructed *borghor* and it seemed to alter the symbolic meaning of direction attached to the two sacred rooms ‘*bahir mojiya*’ and ‘*bhitor mojiya*’ to a physical meaning of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. The new concrete *borghor* had changed from being a structure with two entrances to being a structure with a single entrance. With lack of light entering from both sides, this physical change also made the inner space somewhat dark, giving out an impression of the *garbhgriha* of a temple that is usually dark.

The second and the most significant change that was observed was the introduction of images of Gods to the *borghor*. On my second visit to the field to attend the community rituals of the *Amshi kul* in Uzonikusi, I encountered a concrete *borghor* standing in place of the old traditional *borghor* made of thatched bamboo. A photo of Lord Shiva was cemented into the wall that had the entrance door of the *borghor*. I noted this phenomenon as a fundamental change both in terms of the physical structure and symbolic meaning of the *borghor*. The Tiwas are not known to worship images within the premises of the *borghor*. The fundamental characteristic of the *borghor* is the absence of any image, idol or representation of the gods and goddesses. It is what separates it as a specific space of sacred meaning in the ritual universe of the Tiwas. Upon being asked, most of the members opined that this action by the TAC was deemed acceptable by the *kul* members as their prime deity, *Mindaipha* is a version of Lord Shiva. Many said that *Mindaipha* is himself Lord Shiva.

Another ambiguity in practice with regards to ritual norms pertaining to the *borghor* that was noticed was its presence in isolated, separate lands. While some *borghors* were established within the residential premises of a family of their *kuls*, some others were established in lands that belonged to a family but were without residences. This further seemed to complicate the already present ambiguity of public and private domain with regards to the *borghor*.

Upon being asked, the members cited this development as an action of convenience. This argument was also put forward by the members when asked about their opinions on the newly constructed concrete *borghors*. While they admitted that the construction took place with the consent of the members of the respective *kuls*, some of the members expressed concerns about the impending changes that such a move would bring. Some elderly members who had moved out of the village for work and visited their home for the rituals expressed their disappointment upon seeing the photo of Lord Shiva on the entrance wall of their *borghor*. One of them commented, ‘*amartu etu niyomei nohoi.. Kiyu ba koribo dile.. sob sorkari agenda jen he laage aaru..*’ (this is not our culture.. who knows why they did it.. It feels like everything is Government agenda..).

What are the implications of such changes on the practice of religious rituals in the *borghor* in particular and on the religious imagination of the tribe in general? How would such changes impact the traditionally institutionalised practice of *haari*? Looking at the ritual practice of *haari*, documenting the nuances of this institutionalised practice and the nature of agency exercised by the women assigned with the ritual position of *haari* become immensely relevant in such times as such a practice evidently bears a mark of the ethnic and cultural specificities of the tribe.

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter explored how the centrality of the *borghor* in Tiwa religious rituals, kinship and social organisation is intrinsically related to the centrality of the role of *Haari* in the community life of the Tiwas. Based on empirical field findings, it looked at Tiwa kinship organisation around the *borghor* in an attempt to find linkages to a possible matrilineal past and thus historically locate the institutional practice of *Haari* among the Tiwas. It focused on the fundamental characteristics of the physical structure of the *borghor*,

organisation of space and division of labour between and among different ritual specialists associated with the place, and the belief systems that it is based on.

Looking at the formal positions of ritual authority and the ambiguities associated with them, the chapter establishes how the ritual practice around the *haari* is actualised around the *borghor*, thus critically examining the ritual role of the *Haari* as a female ritual specialist through the institution of *borghor*.

Using the institution of *borghor* as an entry point, this chapter attempts to highlight how community and ritual life is fluid and hybrid. The idealism depicted in the textual traditions is often contested by the field which uses empirical observations to prove that community life is dynamic as dichotomous rather than being fixed or static. Sometimes this fluidity and dichotomy are depicted through symbolic representation of material objects- like simultaneous use of *mindaipha* and *thuna khuta*, an amalgamation of Hinduism and animism; on other times it is manifested in the ambiguities in the division of space as well as division of labor.

Keeping these reflections in mind, the chapter attempts to get an insight about the conditions of the Tiwa community life and then proceed to examine the changes, continuities and negotiations happening at the community as well as individual level in the contemporary context of the tribe. At community level, this chapter tries to highlight the current trends and changes pertaining to the *borghor* and how it relates to the larger socio-political and identity shifts within the community. At an individual level, the chapter touches upon the issue of overlapping religious ideologies and its implications on the ritual experiences of the female ritual specialists of the tribe.

Using field analysis, this chapter explores *borghor* both as an anthropological site and a site of sociological contentions. It further argues how women's practices and experiences from indigenous traditions of Hinduism often problematise the binary representation of the woman in traditional Hinduism that offers her no subjecthood. While doing so, what it stresses on is the ambiguous nature of subjecthood and agency. Using empirical evidence, this chapter argues that the ritual role of the *haari* is complicated, making the nature of her authority ambiguous. What then remains important, particularly from the point of view of this study, is to empirically observe the nuances of her role and through those nuances arrive at an understanding of how these women look at their own positions as ritual

specialists, how they perceive hierarchy, and negotiate their own reality as *haaris* of their respective *kuls*.

The next chapter shall document and discuss the details of the community birth and death rituals that are carried out in the *borghor* premises. Through an analysis of these rituals, the chapter shall explore how gender division is pronounced in the *borghor* premises through the community birth and death rituals. It would then examine the role of the *Haaris* through these rituals and explore how the gender division sanctioned by the community informs the ritual status of the *haaris*, and shapes/colors/influences their agency as individual as well as female ritual specialists that further gets exercised outside of the ritual sphere.



Figure: 4.1. *Haari* and *jela* of *Madur kul* praying inside the *borghor*.



Figure: 4.2. The outer room or the '*bahir mojiya*' or the *na maji* of the *borghor*.



Figure: 4.3. *Haaris* inside the *borghor* during a ceremony.



Figure: 4.4. *Haari* of *Amshi kul* supervising the cooking of ritual food for ancestors by the *giyaati*. The cooking is done in the space adjacent to the *borghor* and not inside due to the new construction.



Figure: 4.5. Two pictures showing *thunda phangs* or *thuna khutas* of two *borghors* of Amshi and Madur *kul* respectively.



Figure: 4.6. Newly constructed *borghor* of Amshi *kul* with photograph of Lord Shiva on the door.