

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

Acculturation and Changes in the Society of Tiwa Tribe in North East India

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Krishna Kachari: Acculturation and Changes in the Society of Tiwa Tribe in North East India -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(9). ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: Acculturation, Assimilation, Ethnicity, Extinction, Identity

ABSTRACT

The present work plans to make a scientific study on the process of acculturation and social change in the society of Tiwa tribe leading to socio-political and cultural conflict. North East India is a multicultural region in its nature as well as character. People belonging to various tribes, castes, language, traditions and beliefs lives in the region since time immemorial. Cultural assimilation is a unique feature of the region. But in the process of this assimilation in the region many tribes are losing their original culture and some are in the process of cultural extinction which is leading to various socio-political conflicts in the region. In the tribal societies of North East India, the process of acculturation brings threats to lose of distinct identity, distinct culture and distinct languages among the tribal people. These phenomena of acculturation can also be seen among the Tiwa tribe of North East. The people of Tiwa tribe are mainly living in Assam and Meghalaya. The Tiwas have large contribution for the formation of greater Assamese culture of the state. But in this process, it is often seen that large section of Tiwa people are dissatisfied with the process. Cultural change among them caused by some homogenous and heterogeneous factors itself has become a threat to the very existence of their own culture, tradition and languages. The process of this rapid cultural change was phenomenal in the present Tiwa society which often leads to loss of their own way of distinct cultural life and identity.

1. Introduction

Cultural change is a common feature in any society of the world. These changes frequently lead to significant transformation in social structure. It also leads to change in social thought and way of life of common people in the society. The process of social change is a complex one of alteration of different structure in a society over a certain period of time. This change develops in a society through socio-cultural, political, religious, economic and environmental ways which has both positive as well as negative impacts in the society. The negative aspects bring socio-political and cultural conflicts among various groups living in the society. The factors like measures undertaken by the

government, communication system, spread of education, urbanisation, occupational mobility, community development projects, frequent contacts with the people living in neighboring societies in urban as well as rural areas and impact of other religion and social movements etc, helps in the process of cultural change in a society.

North East India is a multicultural region where people belonging to various tribe, caste, religion, languages and cultures has been found. Diversity, multicultural or cultural multiplicity becomes the character of this region. The diversity and multiplicity constitute its base of existence in a democratic social set up of the communities in the region. The process of assimilation exists among the various ethnic communities of North East India. The Assamese culture is also formed by the different groups of people and ethnic communities in the state.

Assimilation as one of the ethnic processes of ethnic nationality formation may be a progressive development, but, when socio-political consciousness develops among the assimilating tribes; strive for distinct identity, distinct culture, distinct language and its promotion and preservation often develops. This is also seen among the Tiwa people of North East India. Although from time to time especially in the last few decades it is seen that the different ethnic groups are dissatisfied with the process. The cultural change among them caused by some homogenous and heterogeneous factors itself has become a threat to the very existence of their culture, tradition and languages. The people belonging to various tribal groups of Assam have been suffering a lot other concomitant problem for their survival basically due to the heterogeneous factors. However, both the homogenous and the heterogeneous factors are responsible for the cultural and other problems of ethnic groups in the region. Instead of updating, or reforming, or keeping or adapting the prevailing original; once the intrusion and exclusion have been allowed in time and places so far ethnic culture, values, ethical norms, practices etc. in the region is concerned. The problem of assimilation becomes sometimes more complicated when an indigenous community or groups of people began to follows the cultural life style of another community and abandoned their own original cultural practices.

2. Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical one based on both primary and secondary sources. Interview and observation in Tiwa dominated areas constitutes the major source of data in preparing this work. The secondary sources are mainly books and journals.

3. Results And Discussion

The rapid cultural change has been taking place in the society of Tiwa tribe also. In the past also the process of acculturation has brought a negative impact in the Tiwa society for which they had to loss their original culture and traditions. Sometimes it was occurring so extensively in form, especially

among the plain Tiwas that the people in those areas have lost their own way of life so rapidly. This was the principal reason for which the Tiwas have suffered from problems of identity crisis and in such a situation the problem become so complicated that the Tiwas begun to assert the revival of their lost culture, tradition, custom, language and their own way of life.

The people of the Tiwa community are mostly living in the state of Assam and Meghalaya. Majority of Tiwa tribe of Assam are living in the district of Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Dhemaji, Kamrup and Hojai. The Khasi and Jaintia district of Meghalaya state is also the home of Tiwa tribe. Tiwas living in the hills can speak their own language but most of the Tiwas in plains have lost their culture and language.

The Gobha, Khola, Nellie, Sahari and the 'Pancharajya' and 'Satarajya' were the areas dominated by the Tiwas, where they lived with distinct cultural identity since time past. In these places also conversion to other religion, specially from animism (*Adi dharma*) to Hinduism led to drastic cultural changes of the Tiwa culture. This is so because much of their culture has been influenced by their religious practices. Besides religious conversion there was conversion by Tiwa tribe to other community. So the conversion, *sanskritization*, assimilation, modernization or other processes of social change which led the drastic change of a culturally rich community are signified as factors responsible. The factors which led bring problems for survival and become threats for extinction can't be considered factors good for the social change.

Looking at the historical background of the problem of ethnic and cultural transition in Assam, it can be said that the first jolt comes with the establishment of the Ahom rules in Assam. Sukapha had laid the foundation of the Ahom dynasty in 1828 and during his reign the cultural integration process was peaceful to certain extent. Later on, the smaller Tiwa kingdoms like the Sato Rajya, Paso rajya, Gobha, Nellie, Khola and Sahari was annexed by the Ahoms and the Ahoms had ruled entire kingdom according to their own way of life.

The second jolt to Tiwa culture came with the imposition of Hindu faith and practices by Rani Phuleswari of the Ahom dynasty. The indigenous faith (*Adi-Dharma*) and cultural tradition got tremendous pressure during her reign and she had converted various ethnic tribes and forced them to embraced Hinduism.

The third jolt to tribal culture came with the spread of Vaishnavism by Sankardeva. In smaller kingdoms of plain areas belonging to the Tiwas mainly in the *Sato rajya* and *Paso rajya* there took the process of social mobility from the Tiwa tribe to other higher caste of the society. This process of socio-cultural mobility had changed the very foundation of the Tiwa society.

The fourth jolt took place when British government had annexed the majority areas of North East India after signing the treaty of Yandaboo. The British had annexed the whole territory of the Tiwas in 1835. Along with the British the entry of the Christian Missionaries had changed the socio-political and cultural spheres of the region. The British rule in North Eastern parts of India and

introduction of their administrative changes and the spread of Christianity in Tiwa dominated areas had changed the cultural outlook of the Tiwa community.

In the pre-British period, the Tiwa kings (*rajas*) had occupied an important position in the society. But after the annexation of their kingdom to British empire resulted loss of all the royal facility and honour in the society. The Tiwa *rajas* of smaller kingdoms like Gobha, Nellie, Khola, and Sahari were under the subordination of Jayantia kings for a long period of time. On the other hand, the *raja Poowalee*'s (local chiefs) of '*Sato rajya*' and '*Paso rajya*' such as Kumoi, Baghara, Torani, Kacharigoan, Gukhanagug, Ghagua, Tetelia, Mikirgoanya, Baropujia, Tupakushi, Khaigarh and Sara came under the administrative dominion of the Ahoms. The Ahom rulers controlled the general people with the help of local chiefs or Kings. During the reign of the Ahom dynasty I the medieval period the Tiwas and the Kachari tribes were forced to follow the practice of '*Thapita-Sanshita*' by which they had to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom power. Under the pressure of the ruling class of the Ahoms, the Tiwas were compelled to change their original culture and traditions.

The emergence of Brahmanism in Assam in the medieval period had an impact on the culture of the Tiwa tribe. Large numbers of the people belonging to Tiwas came to the influence of Brahmanism and Vaishnavism and they began to follow this new concept at the cost of their original culture. The Tiwa king of Baghara had donated 400 *bighas* of land to the Brahmins and praised the principles of Brahmanic culture. They had also given the *Lakheraj Grant* to *Batadrowa-than* (a place of public worship) in present Nagaon district of Assam. The present '*Kachari Satra*' near Kampur area of Nagaon district is also an example of religious conversion of tribal people which also changed Tiwa culture to certain extent.

It is also to be mentioned that *Vaishnavism* attracted the people of the Tiwa communities. They had come to the influence of the people living in nearby *Vaishnavite* villages. Although it is not known whether after the religious conversion to *Vaishnavism*, its leader, Srimanta Sankardeva sought the cultural and caste/tribe conversion, the fact remains that *Vaishnavism* during Srimanta Sankardeva's time and in the latter period converted the Tiwas along with other people in religion first then in caste/tribe and culture through '*Horon-Bhajan*' (religious instruction and mode of worship). After the religious conversion there took place the process of conversion of their caste system to other communities.

The process of '*Saron*' (religious instruction) and '*Bhajan*' (mode of worship) of the Vaishnavite culture had become a tool for conversion of tribal people to Vaishnava principle. In this process the *Gosain* (preacher) took a leading role and he had forced the tribal people to give up their traditional culture, habits and customs. They had also to undergo atonement ('*prayachit*') and receive '*Horon-bhajan*' from a '*Gosain*'. In this way, the native tribes including the Tiwas embraced Vaishnavism. After this conversion, they got a new status called '*Sarukoch*' (low Koch) in the society. However, it is worth to mention

here that contrary to the social acceptance in third generation once when Gait wrote is not universal for all the cases of the Tiwas as there is the reverse process of De-Sanskritisation among them. It happened when the admittance could not receive the desired status. This has been observed greatly in recent period among the Tiwas in plains.

The reign of Jaidhaj Singha is important as far as the matter of conversion of tribal people to Vaishnava religion is concerned. It was during reign, the first batch of the Tiwas had accepted *Vaishnavism* in 'Sato rajya' and 'Paso rajya' areas of middle Assam dominated by the Tiwa community. Satuwa, the local chief of Mikirgonya *Rajya* and the *Raja* of Topakushi were the path makers in this process. They had embraced Vaishnavism and discarded their age-old culture and religion of the Tiwa community. Even both of them had converted their ethnic tribalism to *Sarukoch* of *vaishnavite* principle. Later on, the other *Raja Poowalees* of 'Paso rajya' and 'Sato rajya' also followed the same path. Eventually, their *Prajas* (the subjects) also converted to vaishnavism following the footsteps of their *Rajas*. The subjects also converted themselves into the same line as shown by their kings and considered as *Raja's Dharma* as their *Dharma*.

The conversion of Tiwa people to other caste or religion resulted gradual decrease of Tiwa speaking population to a large extent. G.A. Grearson in his book '*Linguistic Survey of India*' reported that there were 40,160 Tiwa language speaking people in 1891. Dr. Grierson who first studied about the origin and status of Tiwa language has given data in his work which was first published in 1903. But the figure came down to 10,576 according to the 1961 Census and 9954 in 1971. Assimilation of the Tiwas into the broad Assamese life and culture is the major cause for this downward trend. Besides this conversion of large number of Tiwa people to other group is also a cause for this reason.

The following table reveals the fact that while it is natural phenomenon that the numbers of Tiwa population should have to be increases in every decadal survey but the numbers of Tiwa people decreases in certain decadal census in comparison to certain earlier survey. There were drastic reductions in growth rate of Tiwa population in the Government survey of 1940 and 1950.

Table-1: Tiwa Population in Assam in Government Decadal Censuses Since-1872

| Year of Census | Population | Year of Census | Population |
|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| 1872 | 34,859 | 1941 | 51,308 |
| 1881 | 47,650 | 1951 | 52,352 |
| 1891 | 52,423 | 1961 | 61,315 |
| 1901 | 35,513 | 1971 | 95,609 |
| 1911 | 39,213 | 1991 | 1,43,746 |
| 1921 | 41,033 | 2001 | 1,70,622 |
| 1931 | 43,448 | 2011 | 4,01,830 |

Source: Censuses of India

The demographic vagaries of Tiwa tribe cannot be explained off hand. They may be partly attributed to certain cultural shifts taking place in the Tiwa society for a long time. A large number of Tiwas of the plains have been absorbed into the larger framework of *Vaishnavite* culture. It may also be noted that a good number of Tiwas have also converted to Christianity. Those Tiwas who had converted to Christianity had adopted Cristian way of life. Even in plain areas also, a sizable number of Tiwa people accepted Christianity as their religion.

Langtuk Hanse and his family had come from N.C. Hills district to Marjong Tiwa village of west Karbi Anglong in 1911. They had converted a section of the Tiwa people to Christian religion. This process of conversion was continued in 1914 by Reverend Christopher Baker of the Roman Catholic Salvadorian Missionary Institute. They had established the Saint Mary's Church Marjong Tiwa village in 1916. Araw Malang, Kathsala Amsong (Lukas), Talaw Amsong, and few others were the first group of the Tiwas who had converted to Christianity in that village. In 1932, another Church namely 'Saint Joseph Church' was established in the area that converted the people of Pandurimakha, Sikdamakha and Amsobra village. The Catholic Celestial Missionary also converted large numbers of Tiwa people to Christianity. The Presbyterian Missionary also followed the same principle and converted the people of the village like Romphom, Maulen, Amsetri, Pantalu, Roman Mayong and Amkhashi to Christian religion. The Tiwas of Meghalaya also accepted Christianity and abandoned the cultural practices of the Tiwa tribe.

It is interesting to note that there are cases of Tiwas re-aligning their ethnic affiliation and have identified themselves as other ethnic groups which may be called ethnic 'conversion', although the term may not be accurate. The most glaring examples of the Tiwas' 'conversion' are their conversion to Khasi and Karbi. This kind of conversion often took place under the operation of certain kinds of push and pull factors. Some examples of Tiwas who converted into Karbi and Khasi tribe are given hereunder. It has been recorded that Marjong Tiwa villagers, after they accepted Christianity, converted to Karbi. The motivating factor in this regard was probably the quest to also get the social privileges and benefits under government schemes the Karbis are getting in Karbi Anglong. Because after having accepted Christianity, if they identify themselves as 'Karbi', they would easily get whatever benefits the Karbis of the region are enjoying. The conversion into Karbi was accelerated by their similarity with the Karbis in some social institutions and habits, customs and practices. Wadel wrote in 1881, *'the Lalungs got mixed up with the Garos (Khasi) and Mikirs; they have numerous exogenous clans*. For another political reason the Tiwas were converted into Khasi in the state of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya a section of the Tiwas converted into Khasi so that they may get recognition as Schedule Tribe, and enjoy the privileges the Scheduled Tribes are enjoying because Tiwa tribe is not recognized as Scheduled Tribe in Meghalaya. The Meghalaya government also prefers Christianity as the main religion of the state.

The conversion of religion of the Tiwas resulted change in the traditional institutes and practices of the Tiwa people. After conversion to *Vaishnavism* the Tiwas had abolished their age-old institutions like *Chamadi* (dormitory), *Nobaro* (main place of worship). They began to worshiped at *Namghar* and *Manikut*. Changes also occurs in clan and ritualistic practices. Many Tiwas had even changed their titles and accepted the titles of other communities like Deka, Hazarika, Baruah, Rajbongshi, Thakuria, Medhi, Koch, Bhunya etc.

In the process of transition, change of religion appears to have contributed a lot to rapid social and cultural change. For example, though they are able to preserve linguistic identity and dress habits after having converted to Christianity in the hills, there were loss of faith in folk culture and folk tradition. What could be observed in this regard is the gradual loss of *Chamadi* (Village youth dormitory) especially in Tiwa hill villages dominated by Christians. The festive occasions were also discarded by the Christian Tiwas. Once they took the path of Christianity they took the path of westernization or modernization as well. One point of significance in this regard is that it created internal division among the Tiwas people.

As a result of conversion, the ethnic tradition and culture is either replaced or abandoned. After conversion to Vaishnavism, there was the replacement of their age-old institutions like 'Samadi' (Dekasang- the village dormitory system) to 'Namghar', the 'Nobaro' (Barghar- the place of worship) to 'Manikut' so on and so forth. The change in the clan system, language, culture, rituals, ways of living etc. have been brought under the process. Further in the transitional stage, they have been accepted titles like Deka, Hazarika, Baruah, Rajbongshi, Thakuria, Medhi, Koch, Bhunya and so on. Such an example is that Sri Rashmayi Rajbongshi; who was the office bearer of Koch Rajbongshi Sanmilani and from the family Lakhani Singh (Tiwa Senapati of famous Phuloguri Dhawa and a relative of Tupakushi Raja) took the Rajbongshi title only after the Baropujia conference of the Sanmilani.

In the age of transition this group of Tiwas by adopting to new practices have imitated new custom, social values and way of life following the theological and religious beliefs taught by the new religions, either Viashnavism or Christianity. The impacts of this cultural changes can also be seen in the traditional dress pattern of the Tiwa tribe living both in hill and plains areas. Some of the traditional dresses of the Tiwa community are *Kasong*, *Faskai*, *Joskai*, *Tagla*, *Thana*, *Kamsa*, *phagri* etc. The people who had converted their religion and practices to Vaishnavism even abandoned their traditional dress pattern in the society. They also avoided to participate in festivals of the Tiwa tribe like *Yangli*, *Sagra*, *Lukhumi*, *Wanchuwa*, *Borot*, *Thal Phuja* etc.

There were some other factors for which Tiwas had undergone social and cultural changes. During the pre-colonial period in the region, the Tiwa king appointed his office bearers and the headmen of Tiwa villages. The office bearers of the royal family of the Tiwas like *Loro*, *Deori*, *Hatari*, *Doloi*, *Sangdoloi*, *Sangmaji*, *Jela*, *Hari* etc. worked for the preservation of socio-cultural traditions of the Tiwa tribe.

The relative deprivation of the Tiwa tribe was one of the key factors for the process of acculturation. The ambition of the people to occupy higher position and honour in the society forced them to accept other religion and even converted themselves to other caste. This design of a section of Tiwas lead to loss of original Tiwa culture. From the study, it is observed that there are two groups of people in the in the process of social transformation in Tiwa society. Majority of the Tiwas are preserving their own cultural heritage. But those people belonging to other groups is not only converting their religion but also their own tribal identity and caste. The reformation in Tiwa culture in later stages had changed the concept of conversion. The socio-cultural exploitation in the society by dominating groups also contributed in the process. For example, their culture and language doesn't find a place in *Assam Sahitya Sabha*'s policy for its promotion or preservation for several years. As a matter of fact, the Tiwa and various ethnic groups thought that Assamese leaders are chauvinist. So, the Tiwa tribe had formed their own literary body. The *Tiwa Sahitya Sabha* or *Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra* is the result of such chauvinist attitude of greater Assamese society. It was mainly formed to safeguard the socio-cultural and literary aspects of the Tiwa community.

Some other factors are also working in the process of acculturation and transition to other dominant groups of the society. These factors are-

1. The thought of recognition to other culture and social values.
2. The complexity to their tribe culture and the very nature of tradition.
3. The thought of assimilation in the process of building greater and unique Assamese society with composite culture.
4. The feelings to get superior status in the social hierarchy.

The present study reveals the fact that those people who had converted to Vaishnavism or converted their own caste and religion did not get superior position in the new society. They remained neglected in the new social set up and people belonging to other caste or groups did not appreciate their activities because of socio- psychological reason. The cultures which received a transformation has no similarity with their original one. As a result there seems a great cultural variation within a same ethnic Tiwa groups. A unique visible pattern of cultural change among the Tiwas in the region can be observed.

In the 1960's, the '*Lalung Darbar*', a socio-cultural and political organization of the Tiwas, was able to restrict the ethnic conversion processes of the Tiwa community. The Tiwa Sanmilan also succeeded to block the system of caste or religious conversion of Tiwa people. The groth of socio-political consciousness of the Tiwas helped them to preserved their ethnic culture and identity. The Tiwa autonomy movement for an autonomous district within the state of Assam to protect their socio-political and cultural rights and for overall development of the Tiwa community also helped them to preserved their languages and distinct cultures. The All Tiwa Students Union, Lalung Darbar, Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra, Tiwa Womens Association, Lalung Youth Front and Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee worked to bring cultural and political consciousness among the Tiwa tribe in North East India. The Tiwa autonomy movement also brought drastic changes in the socio-cultural life of

the Tiwas. The spirit of revivalism ignited among the Tiwa masses which helped them to realize the importance of their own culture and traditions in the Tiwa society. All the Tiwa organisations is working to accelerate the process and they are trying to stop religious conversion process. The establishment of language training centers, cultural centers, revival of age-old institutions like *Samadi (Dekasang)* etc. also helping in this regard.

4. Conclusion

The present-day society in North East India is becoming very rigid in nature so far social structure and composition is concerned. The social evil system like the 'Varno' and 'Caste' system is still playing a role in the existing society. Neo-vaishnavism has brought different changes to the life of plain and hills Tiwas of Assam. The politics of conversion has also created a psychological distance between both Converted people (Saraniya) and those believes in original Tiwa culture (Osaraniya). This division is very much wide in Tiwa society. It is important to note that no Saraniya people even take any food from osaraniya people. Because they considered the Osaraniya as lower to them in social structure.

India's North Eastern region is a land of cultural variations and people belonging to various ethnic communities lives in the region. This variation sometimes brings cultural conflicts among various ethnic communities. Cultural assimilation is necessary to build a strong nation but this process should not be at the cost of others' cultural identity. A particular community or group of people can not get superior position or status just by converting their religion or caste. People can not attain salvation by religious conversion. The distinct cultural traditions and languages introduce the originality of a tribal community. A proper scientific research on acculturation and social changes in Tiwa society is important to find a solution of the problem. Cultural changes have also brought lot of undesirable change in the society resulting loss of original culture and traditions. The study reveals the fact that the fear of losing cultural identity of the Tiwas is one of the main reasons for ethnic assertion of the Tiwa tribe in post-colonial period. The harmonious and equal sustainable developments of all ethnic communities are the needs of the hour of diverse human races in North East India.

5. Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude and sincere thanks to Prof. Biswajit Baruah of Dibrugarh University, Dr. Lakhinanda Bordoloi of Dhing College, Nagaon and Dr. Rabindra Bordoloi who gave me relevant suggestion and materials in preparing this research work. I would also like to wish my thanks to all people of the Tiwa community met in the field for their wholehearted cooperation and assistance in carrying out this work.

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