

## The Role of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in the development of Women condition in Assam

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**Abstract:** The Tiwa is one of the important ethnic tribes of North-East India. According to the census report of 2011, the total population of Assam is 3.11 crore. Among them, 12.41% population belongs to the tribal community including both the plains and hills. Nine plain communities and fourteen hill communities are enlisted as a Scheduled Tribe in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe orders (Amendment) Act 1976. These nine Schedule Tribe communities in plain areas are Barman in Cachar, Deori, Hojai, Boro Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, Tiwa, Mech, Mising and Rabha. Hence, the Tiwa is mention as prominent Schedule tribe of Assam by the Indian constitution. They belong to great Bodo tribes of Assam into which tribes like Bodo Kachari, Chutia, Deori, Rabha, Mech, Tippara or Tifre, Garo, Dimasa, Koch and Moran etc. are also included. The Tiwa had close contact with the Jayantia for generations and it was the Jayantia king who founded the principalities of Gobha, Nelie, Khola and Sahari. During the medieval period, the Ahom established some new Tiwa principalities and most of the Tiwa principalities accepted the supremacy of the Ahom and paid their annul tributes. After the treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the British captured the Tiwa principalities one after another and the condition of the Tiwa became worse due to the heavy burden of the taxes. After the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group of knowledgeable persons among the Tiwa take the initiative to safeguard their illustrious past and to revive their language. They tried to protect their socio-cultural identity against the large scale conversion to the cast Hindu Assamese culture. Through, the plain Tiwa's main life style is similar to that of Assamese people of the plain, but the Tiwa remained backward. A new spirit developed among the educated Tiwa for the revival of their tradition and culture and started an autonomy movement after realizing that the political autonomy is very important to maintain their identification. As a result of this movement, the Government constituted the Tiwa Autonomous Council in 1995. Through the Tiwa Autonomous Council's major goal is to ensure socio-economic development of the Tiwa people in their respective areas, but the situation of the Tiwa women is worse in terms of literacy and working involvement. Education for the tribal has been a neglected issue in the past, and they have been unable to benefit from the various schemes and development projects launched by the Government or the Council in their respective areas. However, after the formation of the Tiwa Autonomous Council, the socio-economic life of the Tiwa people are improved a lot. This paper made an attempt to discussion on the role of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in the development of women condition in Assam.

**Keywords:**1. Principalities 2. Jayantia 3. Ahom 4. Yandabo 5. Autonomy 6. Development  
7. Women.

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## Introduction

Each tribal community in Assam has its own distinct ethnic identity expressed through customs, religion, language, dress, ornaments, dance and music, cultural heritage and distinct way of life. The Tiwa belong to the great Bodo race; a sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman speech family.<sup>1</sup> The Tiwa have been forced by the Aryan to left their authentic fatherland close to Allahabad and after an extended journey, they reached Brahmaputra valley.<sup>2</sup> They were forced to move further towards the east by king Narakasura where they established a principality which was known as Tribeg in the 1900 B.C and they began to call themselves as the Tifra.<sup>3</sup> The Tifra kings ruled over the Tribeg kingdom for sixteen generations. During the medieval period, the Tiwa had a close relationship with the Ahom, Kachari and Jayantia. It is historically true that the Tiwa had close contact with the Jayantia for generations and it was the Jayantia king who founded the principalities of Gobha, Nelie, Khola and Sahari.<sup>4</sup> For each principality, there was one steward (chief) which was known as the *Deoraja*. There have been a number of clashes amongst the Jayantia, Kachari, and Ahom during the whole medieval period and the chiefs of Tiwa principalities have been pressured via way of means of those effective. The Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 ended the Ahom supremacy in Assam and the British established their supremacy in Assam. The British captured all the Tiwa principalities one after another. After the annexation of Gobha in 1835, the British reduced the province of Gobha into *mauza*. Despite the fact that the Tiwa were under the British rule until 1835, but they opposed to the British imperialism from the beginning. They wanted to get free from the British; hence, they severally created troubles for the British. They not only protested against the British policy but also had a great contribution towards the freedom struggles. After the independence, the Tiwa received the Scheduled Tribe status by the Constitution of India. Some educated Tiwa demanded political autonomy to protect their identity, culture and language. After 1989, when the Central Government granted autonomy to the Bodo people, the Tiwa educated people is more conscious to preserve their identity and their movement became more rigid under the leadership of the Assam Tiwa Student Union who leads various mass agitation programs after 1990. As a result of this movement, the Tiwa Autonomous Council is formed under The Tiwa Autonomous Council Act, 1995 and they implemented several schemes for the development of the Tiwa. But, the majority portion of females in the Tiwa society are economically not self sufficient and the female literacy rate is very low among the Tiwa but the role played by a Tiwa woman in the socio-economic field is more significant than a man. The Tiwa women used to rear silk worms for the continuation of spinning and weaving culture and they play an important role in paddy transplantation and harvesting.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarma, Thakur G. C. (1985), "The Lalungs (Tiwas)", The Director, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati, p-1

<sup>2</sup> Sarma, Thakur G. C. (1985), op.cit, p-1-2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p-2

<sup>4</sup> Nath, Rajmohan (1978), The Background of Assamese Culture, p-78

### **Objectives**

The objective of the study is to evaluate the role of Tiwa Autonomous Council in the improvement of the Tiwa women condition in the society. An attempt is made to study the status of Tiwa women in the present Tiwa society in Assam.

### **Methodology**

The present study will be based on Historical and analytical method. In analytical method, we have to use facts or information already available. The study will be based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected from the Tiwa Autonomous Council office, Morigaon; Morigaon Revenue Circle; Nagaon Revenue Circle; the office of the Director of the Census Operation; the District Elementary Education office; Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati etc. Data from the secondary sources include various published and unpublished documents, relevant Books and Journals, News Papers, Government notifications, orders and acts and materials available in the internet.

### **Result and Discussion**

The Tiwa live in two different geographical situations - the Hills and the Plains. The Hill Tiwa inhabit in the westernmost parts of Assam's Karbi Anglong district. The plain Tiwa are mostly live in the Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup districts of Assam. According to census report 2011, the whole Tiwa population in Assam is 1,82,663 which represent 4.7% of the whole scheduled tribe population of Assam.<sup>5</sup> It is noted that according to the census report 2011, 59.82 percent of the total Tiwa population belongs to Morigaon district and 32.96 percent belongs to Nagaon district.<sup>6</sup> Hence it can be said that the Tiwa are mostly live in Middle Assam. They spread in Kapili, Mayang, Bhurbandha Development Block area of Morigaon district and also found in the Revenue Circle of Nagaon Sadar, Kampur, Raha, and Kaliabar in Nagaon district and the South Tribal Belt of Sonapur Revenue Circle in Kamrup district. Besides, a few Tiwa villages have been spreading in Dhemaji areas of Dhemaji sub-division, Titabor area of Jorhat sub-division, Sonapur areas of Guwahati sub-division, and the Nartiang Elaka of Jowai subdivision of Jaintia district of Meghalaya.<sup>7</sup> The homeland of the Hill Tiwa is the district of Karbi Anglong of Assam, particularly the Amri Development Block and a part of Chinthong Development Block of Hamren sub-division and Jaintia Hill district and Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Census Report 2011

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Gohain, Binendra Kumar, Continuity & Change in the Hills of Assam, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1994

<sup>8</sup> Barpujari, H.K (1999), Political History of Assam, Vol-I, Publication Board, Gauhati, Assam, p-123

The Tiwa have their own culture, tradition and social structures, just like other tribal cultures. Family is the most important social unit among the Tiwa. It is a source of pride that the Tiwa were belonged to matriarchal family group in the past. Matrilineal has lost its significance which was traced through the Gobhia Rakha method of marriage. The occurrences of Gobhia Rakha have become rare in recent years, indicating that the matrilineal system is on the decrease. Now, the Tiwa society becomes completely patriarchal where the father is the family's head and he has complete authority, and he is the one who traces the ancestry or descents.

Male and female co-operate closely in their daily lives as members of a family. Although both husband and wife contribute to the maintenance of the family, but there is a gender-based division of labor is still present in the Tiwa society. Husband walks out to plug the paddy field, harvesting the paddy and transport it back to the house. Men's jurisdiction includes fishing, hunting and caring for domestic animals. Women's-responsibilities include transplanting and harvesting, fishing, weaving and taking care of domestic duties such as child care, cooking and so on. All domestic affairs are managed by wives and as a result, they enjoy great extent of right and freedom inside the family which is a sign of good status of women in the society.

The Tiwa women command high respect from their male counterparts. In a family, children play a vital role. In the Tiwa society, male children's were given more importance than the female child in the society as compared to the past. Both male and female children's were received education in the society. For male and female children, there is a division of labor inside the house. Male children assist their father with his work, while female children help her mother in cooking, cleaning and other household works. These type divisions are found between male and female children since the birth of new born babies. While a male baby is born in a Tiwa family, then a pair of bow and arrow is given in his hand with these utterances "Your battle field is outside the home".<sup>9</sup> In the case of a girl child a sickle and some parts of loom are given with these utterances "Your battle field is inside the home".<sup>10</sup> There is a clear gender difference in the thinking of the people. In the Tiwa society, parent wants to make his boy strong, brave and powerful person and wants to make girl expert in household work, weaving, spinning etc for their future life.

Succession and inheritance of property bring about gender discrimination. In the past, the Tiwa society followed a matrilineal inheritance system. However, it is no longer fashionable nowadays. Matriliney is practiced by a small group of people who keep 'Gobhia '. Here, the son-in-law cuts off all connections with his own family and lives with his wife in her house. In such cases the property is past down from mother to daughter. But, the son-also enjoys the property right subject to the consent of his wife if he wants to transfer it. However, in the present patrilineal Tiwa society the daughters do not inherit the property. Previously, the female bloodline had the

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<sup>9</sup> Culture change in a Tribal society: a study on the Plain Tiwa of Assam by Manashi Borah, PhD thesis submitted to the Dept. of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University

<sup>10</sup> ibid

property right but at present, the male kid receives the property inheritance. Apart from the jointly owned family property, the individual members can acquire personal property.

The Tiwa women, as equal to men, play a prominent role in the economy. The Tiwa women are skilled spinners and weaving is considered as a part of their tradition. They used to utilize rare silk worms in order to keep the spinning and weaving culture alive. The Tiwa women also maintained poultry farming, animal husbandry and other activities that benefit them financially. The women also play a significant role at the time of transplanting and harvesting of paddy. A huge number of the Tiwa women used a unique form of basket known as the “*jakoi*” to catch fish. The Tiwa women participate in economic activity on an equal footing with men in all fields.

After the independence of India, the Tiwa women also start to take participate in the political field. Many young educated women formed All Tiwa Women Association and began to start demand for the Autonomous district council. Both men and women have equivalent and equal rights under the Indian Constitution. As a result, the Tiwa women have the same civil and political rights equally like other Indian community. Aside from all of this, a few Tiwa women are making waves in other cultural arenas like as games and sports, music, dance etc. and they achieve fame as a result of their efforts.

The Tiwa Autonomous council was formed with maximum autonomy under the Constitution in order to develop educational, financial, social condition of the Tiwa in Assam. At present, the Tiwa Autonomous Council covered the villages of 4 districts namely Nagaon, Morigaon, Hojai and Kamrup Metro. The Tiwa Autonomous Council has implemented a number of schemes for the social and economic development of the Tiwa in their respective area. Social development is about improving the well-being of every individual in society so that they can reach their full potential.<sup>11</sup> It requires the removal of barriers so that all citizens can journey towards their dreams with confidence and dignity.<sup>12</sup> Social development entails changes in everything at once to achieve – elimination of poverty, equal distribution of opportunities, high literacy, improvement in social welfare amenities, opportunity for personal growth, providing security against various contingencies of life, protection and improvement of health, and increase in level of employment.<sup>13</sup> Education is one of the primary agents of transformation towards development. It is the key factor for the development of a society. Education can help to bring the social change through changing people`s perspectives and attitudes.

Though the literacy rate among the tribal has gone up, yet growth of literacy rate is very slow as compared to the literacy rate of the general population. The Census report 2011 further stated that the Tiwa`s literacy rate is 63.5 percent which means that 36.5 percent of the Tiwa are

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<sup>11</sup>What is social development, Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> Monda Puja, “Social Development”, yourarticlelibrary

illiterate.<sup>14</sup> From the census report it is known that among the literate rate of the Tiwa, 54.5% are male and 45.4% are female which clearly show that female is more illiterate than male member in the Tiwa society.<sup>15</sup> The Tiwa Autonomous Council paid attention towards the development of education among the Tiwa to improve the literacy rate. Due to the effort of the Tiwa Autonomous Council, the literacy rate of the Tiwa increased from 39.3% in 1991 to 61.8% in 2001. The Tiwa Autonomous Council received Rs.48.56 lakhs for the development of the education sector for the Tiwa in 2013-14. The funds for education sector increased almost every year. In 2017-18, the Tiwa Autonomous Council received Rs. 276.90 lakhs for the education purpose.

Work participation is another important criterion for the development of a society or community. The working population among the Tiwa of Assam is not satisfactory than other community of Assam. Most of the young Tiwa instead of complete their higher education, they works in other house for their livelihood which is known as *din-haziya*. At present the rates of *din-haziya* is 300 Rs for a day. Thus they faced many problems to maintain their daily needs. Not only male, female also work *din-haziya* in other's paddy field. At present, most of the Tiwa women taking loans from private banks namely Bandhan, Annapurna, etc. and they had to pay their installment known as *kristi* in every week or every month by hook or by cook. Hence, their entire income of *din-haziya* is gone for the fulfillment of their *kristi* in those banks. Due to the closed of Jagiroad paper mill in October 2015, a large number of the Tiwa employees have not received their dues and salaries since February 2017. This paper mill is controlled by the Hindustan Paper Corporation Limited and it is under the control of the Central Government. Since 2017, the employees didn't receive their salaries, pensions and funds. A large number of the Tiwa employees face financial crisis. To create job opportunities and self-sufficient of women, the Tiwa Autonomous Council implemented several schemes and policies. . For the budget allocated fund, the Tiwa Autonomous Council every year has to submit their schemes of development to the Assam government. The State government doesn't provide the power of making a budget to the Tiwa Autonomous Council.

Despite the fact that the Tiwa Autonomous Council was designed as a source of funds in the Autonomous Council Acts of 1995, but in reality to proper implementation of the functions they are largely dependent upon the State Government's grants. From its formation, the Tiwa Autonomous Council received Rs.319.6776429 crore for the development of the Tiwa under various schemes till 2018-19.<sup>16</sup> During the first decade, the Tiwa Autonomous Council received only Rs.20.9730000 crore. On the other hand, the council received Rs.167.4426429 crore during

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<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> bid

<sup>16</sup> Annual found report collected from Secretariat Office of the Tiwa Autonomous Council, Marigaon, Assam

the second decade which was 87.47 % higher than the first decade.<sup>17</sup> After 2004-05, the annual fund of the Tiwa Autonomous Council increased rapidly. The annual fund received by the Tiwa Autonomous Council in 2018-19 is 92.37% higher than the annual fund received in 1996-97.<sup>18</sup> The annual fund received by the Tiwa Autonomous Council is increased year by year for the development of the Tiwa.

From its formation, the Tiwa Autonomous Council received Rs.319.6776429 crore for the development of the Tiwa under various schemes till 2018-19. The Tiwa Autonomous Council adopts several schemes to improve the women condition from these funds. For the promotion of cottage industry the Council not only provides grants but also provides training to the educated youth for making bamboo-cane goods. The Council also distributes sewing machine and yarn among the weavers for the purpose of weaving. Market shade constructions, for the local shopkeeper in the markets are one outcome. According to the census report 2011, among the total population (182663) of the Tiwa, 80892 (44.2%) of the Tiwa are workers only. From the census report it is known that among the working population of the Tiwa, 51068 (63.1%) are male and 29824 (36.8%) are female which clearly shows that most number of female have no way to become financial independent.<sup>19</sup> This census report, clearly mention that major portion of the people including both male and female are not economically self-sufficient.

From the early times, the Tiwa women knew the art of weaving, dyeing cloths and threads.<sup>20</sup> The use of bright colors, different types of floral, geometric, animal and fowl's motifs in their cloths are the distinguishing feature of their weaving.<sup>21</sup> Both the Hill and Plain Tiwa know how to breed eri-worms, and how to make cotton and eri-cloths.<sup>22</sup> The *hadarikhela* system is used by both men and women to manufacture cotton and eri threads.<sup>23</sup> In 2015, the Tiwa Autonomous Council constructed weaving center for four mahila samities namely- 1) the Gunamara Bahumukhi Mohia Samittee at Gunamara, 2) the Lungamukh Janajati Mohila Buwa Kata Samiti at Lungamukh, 3) the Nil-Mikirgaon Milijuli Mohila Buwa Kata Samiti at Nil-Mikirgaon, 4) the Chikabori Buwa Kata Samiti at Chikabori.

The Tiwa Autonomous Council adopted several skill development schemes for the training of the unemployed women within its jurisdiction. Construction of handlooms training cum production center at Bamunigaon, Amarawati and many other places are a good example of it. For the development of handloom and textiles sector, the Council also distributed poly acrylic yarn

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<sup>17</sup>ibid

<sup>18</sup>ibid

<sup>19</sup>Census Report 2011, op.cit

<sup>20</sup> Patar, R.D. (2007) "Tiwa Janagusthir Samaj and Sanskriti", p-45

<sup>21</sup> ibid

<sup>22</sup> The Lalung Society, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> ibid

among the beneficiaries within the Tiwa Autonomous Council area. The Tiwa Autonomous Council allocated Rs.19.95 lakhs for the distribution of foot sewing machine among the beneficiaries within the Tiwa Autonomous Council area.

The Tiwa Autonomous Council distributes cotton yarn among the poor weavers within their respective area for the development of sericulture.<sup>24</sup> The plantation of noni tress is very important for the color of the textile. From the very early times, the dyes form of noni has been used by the Tiwa to color clothing and fabrics. Hence, the Tiwa Autonomous Council provided grants-in-aid to the Deosal Ajuli SHG, the Danasworang SHG, the Samaina SHG, the Doimalu SHG and the Kopili SHG etc. for the plantation of Noni trees.<sup>25</sup> In 2016-17, the Tiwa Autonomous Council constructed fifteen Eri-rearing centers within the Tiwa Autonomous Council area and provided Rs.2 lakhs for each center.<sup>26</sup> The Tiwa culture is closely related with the bamboo craft. The Tiwa worshipped bamboo in the Langkhan puja and even bamboo is related with their myths, festivals and songs. A large number of the Tiwa women produce bamboo and cane products. Among them *chepa*, *japa*, *poloh*, and *pera* are very famous which are mostly used by the women for fishing. The Tiwa Autonomous Council further provides training to the educated youth for the making of bamboo-cane items. In 2015-16, The Tiwa Autonomous Council provided grants-in-aid to the educated unemployed or certificate holder for bamboo cane making, motorcycle & cycle repairing, cutting & knitting, beauty pooler or salon etc.

### **Conclusion**

The Tiwa women play a vital role in the household, society and religious life. Women also play a major role in the field of economic as equal as man. Both the literacy rate and the rate of working engagement are key criterion for the growth of a society or community, and both are significantly lower among the Tiwa women. The Tiwa Autonomous Council adopts several schemes and provides several grants-in-aid to the individual or Self Help Group for the improvement of women condition but both the literacy rate and the working participation rate is still very low among the Tiwa women. Most of the Tiwa girls stop their education after completion of secondary education and they prepare for defense and police job. In the Tiwa viillage, most of the Tiwa women take loans from Bandhan and Annapurna bank to run business. In the Bandhan loan, they had to pay their installment in every week. A few women are benefited from these loans whereas many of them could not repay these loans. The schemes and grants extended to the loan defaulters' and women perhaps help them to a great extent.

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<sup>24</sup> The Annual Action Plan of the Tiwa Autonomous Council collected from the Secretariat office of the TAC, Morigaon

<sup>25</sup> The Annual Action Plan of the Tiwa Autonomous Council 2016-17 session

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

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