

## **Traditional Socio-Political Institutions of the Tiwas**

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### **I. Introduction**

The Tiwas are concentrated mainly in the central plains of Assam covering the district of Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup. A section of the Tiwas lives in the hilly areas of Karbi Anglong, some villages are in the districts like Jorhat, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji of the state of Assam and Ri-bhoi district of eastern part of the state of Meghalaya. The Tiwas, other than hills, foothill and some remote/isolated areas don't know to speak in their own language. A rapid cultural change has been observed among the Tiwas living in the plains. It is also revealed that, the process of social change occurred in traditional socio-cultural practices in a unique direction and places have formed sub-culture. In the areas- Amri and Duar Amla Mauza of Karbi Anglong, Mayong parts in the state of Meghalaya, villages of foothill areas like Amsoi, Silsang, Nellie, Jagiroad, Dimoria, Kathiatoli, Kaki (Khanggi); the villages like Theregaon near Howraghat, Ghilani, Bhaksong Mindaimari etc are known for the existence of Tiwa language, culture and tradition. In the *Pasorajya* and *Satorajya*, where the plain Tiwas are concentrating become the losing ground of traditional socio-political, cultural institutions, practices and the way of life.

#### **The King and the Council of Ministers:**

Before the advent of Britishers the Tiwas had principalities that enjoyed sovereign political powers in the area. The Tiwa kings (Rajas) ruled over kingdoms or principalities, were known as *Deoraja* as because they also perform some rituals and religious functions in their society. The octogenarians of the Tiwas in the hills believe that the first Tiwa kings were Sotonga Raja, Mallowa Raja and Lampha Raja. The Gobha was the great kingdom by its name and fame in latter stage. The other smaller kingdoms like; Nellie, Khola and Sohori were the state subordination to the Gobha kingdom; which itself was under the tutelage of Jayantia kingdom in transition. During the time of Ahom rule in Assam, the *Pasorajya* and *Satorajya* were the chieftains under Ahom suzerainty. The *Pasorajya* was the five clustering principality like- Kumoi, Baghara, Torani, Kacharigoan and Gukhanagug. The *Satorajya* was the seven clustering principality like - Ghagua, Tetelia, Mikirgoanya, Baropujia, Tupakushi, Khaigarh and Sara-rajya. A legend of the Tiwas goes to the extent that there were about one hundred chieftains in different areas of the Tiwas.

Sources reveal that during the Pre-British period the all the Tiwa kingdoms were under the suzerainty of Jayantias for a long time. Later on, the Ahoms made an expedition over and the *Rajas* of *Pasorajya* and *Satorajya* were surrendered in the first stage. For a long period of time it was the vessel kingdoms under the Ahoms. The Ahoms ruled the kingdoms as appointing the existing Tiwa Rajas as chieftains. They called the Tiwa kings as *Raja Poowalis* acted under the behest of the Ahom rulers. During that period of time the Tiwa Rajas were exercising the powers and functions in coordination with the Council of Ministers (Patra Mantris). The system of governing was based on theoretically limited monarchy, but in practice on the basis of imposing democratic principle, where the customary laws and traditional rules and practices got top priority. There were ministerial portfolios distributed by the kings with common consensus. The Council of Ministers decided on all the matters of socio-cultural, traditional, public policy and external relations. Each member of the Council of Ministers were known by the portfolios given as; *Doloi*, *Dekadoloi*, *Dekaraja*, *Pali-Senapati*, *Patar*, *Dewri*, *Sangdoloi*, *Sangmaji*, *Koraimaji*, *Loro*, *Phongorai*, *Bhandari*, *Hari-khunguri*, etc. The Meetings of Council of Ministers or *Raj Dorbar* were held in a regular manner. Opinions of the different office bearers of different level of political hierarchy were taken with due importance in the process of decision making. So the system was run by participatory democracy, wherein the public opinions played a significant place.

The Tiwa society was divided into several kingdoms or principalities, but the society was intact with mutual understandings. There was no major clash or conflict in the Tiwa Society; among the groups, folds or the principalities. So a kind of balance of power system was prevailing among the people of different principalities. This process seems to have been democratic rather than autocratic or authoritative. There was no place for totalitarianism. The Tiwa kingdoms were governed by a system of decentralized and hierarchical administrative system and the role of the kings were very nominal.

The Tiwa kings maintained cordial relations and followed the politics of reciprocity when they remained under the suzerainty of the Jayantias. Reflection of Jayantias political institutions, socio-political, cultural life and practices took place on the Tiwas. The Jayantia rule has many legacies on the Tiwas. A kind of

similarity builds up in the political institution of Doloiship, clan system and village administrative units. The legacy of Jayantias is more than the Ahoms on the socio-politics of the Tiwas. Nevertheless, during the suzerainty of Jayantias and Vessel Kingdoms to the Ahoms, there were no major changes took place in the traditional political institutions of the Tiwas; where they face the socio-cultural extinction. But when Britishers annexed the Gobha Kingdom in 1835 the traditional political institutions of the Tiwas under monarchical form of political system got a jolt to have to be changed grossly. During the British colonial rule the Rajas were acted as chieftains to collect taxes of the British governing system. Even after the British a lot of changes in the traditional cultural institutions took place under influence of modern social cultural processes. Yet, the cultural institutions of the Tiwas are not abolished totally. The powers of the kings are become lesser but some traditions are still continuing. This is observed from the very existence of the king of Gobha, and other ceremonial kings of the principalities; which are politically, historically and culturally well known.

In the present Tiwa society the kings are still exercising influential powers in performing some socio-cultural functions and occupying topmost position in the traditional power hierarchy. Still Gobha Raja has a Council of Ministers and exercises the traditional power and functions. The annual *Junbil-mela* (An annual market of exchange of goods), near Jagiroad is convened by present Gobha king Dipsing Dewraja for the purpose of integration, peace and harmony; builds a kind of social, economic and political relation with nearby states and the people living both in the hills and plains. This is revealed by the practice of annual community fishing at *Junbil* and exchange of goods in the *Hat or Mela* the King also collects taxes from his subjects during the *Hat or Mela* days. The *Junbil-hat* of Gobha king is famous for the traditional barter system.

### The Institution of Loro & Doloi:

The Tiwas had long association with the Jayantias and had a neat political set up. In the set up there is a regional chief called *Loro* for each region assisted by the functionaries called *Doloi*, *Pator*, *Hadari*, *sangot*, *Maji*, and *Parikha*. Loro is a leading priest who also performs judicial functions in the Tiwa society. There are presently ten Loros in the hills Tiwa habitats, but earlier seven Loros of the clustering regions were there. The present Loros of the Tiwas in the hills are (i) Amsai Loro (ii) Marjong Loro (iii) Rongkhoi Loro (iv) Amni Loro (v) Makro Loro (vi)Malang Loro (vii) Sogra Loro (viii) Lumphin Loro (ix) Amjong Loro and (x) Amri Loro. These functionaries have higher social status as they regulates the social, religious functions, and politics and administration of the Tiwas. Now they exercises powers in particular regions of the hill Tiwa villages (*Shongs*). Generally the village headmen with the Village Council and elders settles all disputes and problems both social religious and village governance, but when they can't settle the problem it is referred to the regional set up which dictates terms in matters of socio-politics, religion and culture.

It was under the subordination of great Gobha king there were seven major Loros and seven major Dolois. A Doloi is a leader who generally performs some executive functions entrusted to him by Loro or the Village Council. The hill Tiwa society was organized around seven major villages under seven major Loros and Dolois. Each major village was known by the name - Shong. A Shong may be the cluster of small villages or a larger village. An old village is also known as Shong. The Tiwa people were living in communities by forming a Shong or small communities in the form of a *Krai* (Village). Each and every village was constituted with a village political unit (Village Council) consisting of *Pisai Pakhona* (office bearers). It is revealed that prior to the evolution of *Shong*, the *Wali* (wing) system was there among the Tiwas. In the hills a *Loro* ship was for a cluster of villages. It was due to the scattered population pattern in the hills, evolution of the villages or changed nature of habitation the age old traditional political institutions have also got changed. It is observed that in the plains the Loro-ship was for each *Shong* and also for the *Krai or Sub-shong* (Village). When the Loro ship was for the *Krai* he was known as *Krai-Loro*. The society followed and obeyed the order of the Loros in the socio-cultural, religious, judicial and political occasions. The Loro along with Doloi and other *Pisai-Pakhona* exercises the power and prestige in the society and could run the society in peace, harmony and security.

**Tiwa Population in Govt. 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 of data: Census of India

### The Shamadi (Dekasang):

The Shamadi (*Dekasang*) was the traditional learning academy where the boys, who had reached adolescence, were required to join the institutions and learn, entertains, sleep and protects the village as using it as the village port. It is a huge hall constructed on wooden posts raised a few feet above the ground. There is a big round post called *Thom- thuna* significantly, while the other posts are small in girth. There are no walls on the sides but small bamboo posts are erected on two sides, one side of the roof covering the bamboo floor of the Shamadi. There is a wooden ladder having generally nine steps leading to the entrance of the *Shamadi*. Both the front and back of it are open without walls and there is a ladder on its backside also. The *Thom- thuna* of the Shamadi is changed in every twelve years. It is the place where the chief of the boys are called *Shangdoloi* takes seat in specified. The *Thom-thuna* is decorated with the designs and a mat with designs is placed near it for the *Shangdoloi*.

The floor of the Shamadi is made with Bamboo. The Shamadi is used as the sleeping place for the bachelors and sometime guests are also allowed to sleep there. There is no bar for the married male to go to the Shamadi. It is the meeting place for the boys and it is place where the village council of the elders sits for settling cases.

In a village where the traditional functionaries like *Doloi*, *Pator*, *Sangot*, *Maji* are there in the selection of *Shangdoloi* and *Shangmaji* they take active role. In villages where the traditional functionaries are not present, the Gaonburah (village headman) of the village selects them with the consent of the village council. The other functionaries of the like *Suramul Banthai*, *Kra Khura Banthai*, *sakhosa Banthai* are selected by the boys themselves. The functionaries of a Shamadi are well defined and in the villages where the above noted traditional functionaries are present the boys are divided into three categories as- (i) *Suramul Banthai* (ii) *Kra Khura Banthai* and (iii) *Sokhosa Banthai*. In the villages where the traditional functionaries are not present the hierarchy of the Shamadi organization is as follows:

- (i) *Shangdoloi* -- head of the organization
- (ii) *Shangmaji* --- second in command.
- (iii) *Suramul Baro* --- third in command
- (iv) *Khurumul* --- fourth in command
- (v) *Khuruma Baro* --- fifth in command
- (vi) *Khuruma Baro sakoria* --- sixth in command

The Tiwas were indoctrinated with the history of the village relations in hostile surroundings. It was a unique institution practiced by the Tiwas besides as the institution of learning where all the male young members of the village conscripted themselves as member's up to a certain age group to train and educate in all round customary practices and lifestyle and to be groomed to a standard human being to the fitness of the contemporary time. It also served as 'Watch Tower' to detect the incoming enemy's raid and used as the security fort for the village. The safety and prestige of the village was the vigilance of the Youngs in Shamadi. So far the Tiwa villages; especially hilly and foothill areas are concerned still there are the existences of Shamadi. But it is not in traditional form; rather is sometime uses as the *Namghars*( Religious Temple or the place of worship) in the village plains. Sometime the villager uses the Shamadi for the traditional annual festive occasions or as the ritual institutions and sometime sits there for meetings of public importance and some judicial works. The Tiwas have in the offences own system of punishment. Rarely the cases are referred to the police or courts. Otherwise the settles themselves in the meetings organized in the Shamadi. Among other things in the Shamadi; the youths were taught mainly arts and handicrafts. All these were taught so that the boys would become fully prepared to success in the struggle for of life in the future days to come.

Now the Shamadi's are changed both in structure and uses. The traditional Shamadi is done away by the *Namghars* in the plain areas who do not understand its traditional relevance and significance. The traditional use of Shamadi for academic purposes, socio-cultural, village protective activities and acting as the juridical institution have been changed with the passage of time. This transformation is clearly seen in the context of Shamadi as it was not just a social centre of learning but also a ritual centre. As the Vaishnavism began to grow; the importance of Shamadi as ritual centre as well as traditional democratic institution decreased. The Vaishnavite Tiwas began to develop an aversion towards the Shamadi considering it as the devils alter. Gradually the building of Shamadi in traditional form fell into disrepair until the whole institution becomes the things of the past especially in the village plains.

#### **Village Organizations/Units:**

In a Tiwa Krai a person was appointed as *Kangbura* (village headman). He was also known by another name- *Kraiboroi* (village old age headman). The family, clan and village affiliations were of paramount importance in the social functions and administration. The traditional Tiwa villages were governed consisting representatives of different *Khul* or clans persons of the village and they were democratically elected or selected by consensus and opinion polls. As per the *Khul* affiliation some persons were elected/selected for certain posts of the village political unit in certain Tiwa villages. In the Village Council headed by *Doloi* and *Kangbura* hears

the complaints and disputes the complaints as well as the accused persons take oath in the name of *Khamari Raja*, the creator. Elephants tusk, Tigers teeth, bears teeth and beard are put in water and kept in front and anybody deposing before the village council will have to swear by touching such water. Other oaths: "If I have done this, I will be dead," "if I have done this, I shall be burnt in fire", "If I have done this, I shall fall from a tree" and so on. By swearing in the name of god each member of the council becomes responsible to the society.

To the Tiwas village affiliations are of paramount importance so far traditional culture in them is concerned. The traditional Tiwa village governance is such kind that it consists of representatives as *Loro, Hatari, Jela, Hari, Parikha, Dewri, Pishai Pakhona* etc from all the clans in the village is democratically selected by consensus. The village council has the power of legislation, execution of village rules and the judicial authority within the village jurisdiction. These practices are still there in the majority of Tiwa villages; however the powers of the village council now seem to have been taken place by the general meetings of the villages with the changing paces of time and environmental impact on them. But still the posts are respectable and authoritative in the villages. The feeling of solidarity is very strong among the villager in respect of their clan affiliation. The village is highly organized unit in which every man of the village renders his service for his village. The villager thinks much of the welfare of his village takes part in any social and customary functions and works and helps to run it and fight and defends for it. The villager contributes and subscribes for the service of his village. All decision affecting the village used to be taken by debating in meeting through a perfect democratic political cultural set up and mutual consensus.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the powers and functions of village councils are still there in minimal in the majority of the Tiwa villages in the hills, foothills or in some other plain areas. In places now the powers of the village councils seems to have been exercised by the general meetings of the villagers. It is due to the passage of social change, external influences and environmental impacts. But still the institutions are respected and authoritative in the villages. The feeling of solidarity is very strong among the villager. The village is a highly organized unit in which every man of the village renders his service for the welfare and security of his village. Still the village unit has its two major wings- *Panthai-khel* and *Boroi-khel*. The *Panthai-khel* is the wing for the youths and the *Boroi-khel* is for the age old persons. The villagers think much of the welfare of their village, take part in any social, customary, cultural and political functions and work and help to run it and fight and defend for it. The villagers contribute and subscribe for the service of their village. All decisions affecting the village are taken by debate and discussions through a perfect democratic set up.

The villagers of a Tiwa village is divided into *Khul* or clans and each clan has their respective unit made up of clan people and are assigned certain jobs according to the clan line practices and as per the social position of the particular clan people performs in the village organization. Each clan has *Jela-Hari* and they have distinct functions depending on the nature of social occasions. The clan and kinship system regulates social behaviours to a large extent. Clan exogamy is strictly followed and till today clans are the chief unit based on principle for the social ceremony, funeral works, mutual support and defence. So the principal links of the whole society are based on clan or family kinship. Further, in Tiwa society a village man is identified by clan as belonging to it when such a member is born in a *Khul* or clan. *Khul* or clan can be viewed as domestic group persons. There are 12 major *Khul* among the Tiwas spreading over many districts of Assam and the state of Meghalaya. There are many sub-clans of these 12 major clans of the Tiwas. The female head of each *Khul* or clan head is known as *Hari-khungori* (to care and to lead the female *Khul* members) while the males are *Jela* (protector and manager) of the domestic groups. The *Jela & Hari* also perform some rituals of their respective *Khuls*. A *Jela and Hari-khungori* has to take different decisions relating to the affairs of the individual *Khul* or the domestic groups. It was carried out collectively by a *Mahar* (domestic group council). Adult males and females are its members with the *Jela and Hari-khungori* as its representative head.

The villagers of a Tiwa village is divided into clans and each clan has their respective unit made up of clan people and are assigned certain jobs according to their clan way of practices and the position they occupy in the village organization. Each clan has *Jela Hari* and the clan has a distinct way of position and different practices depending on the nature of social occasions. Some major clans found among the Tiwas are *Amshi, Amsong, Kholar, Khorai, Pumah, Amphi, Muni, Madar, Darphng, Chamsal, Karkho, Lumphuid, Sogra* etc. The marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited for the Tiwas. The clan and kinship system regulates social behaviors to a large extent. Clan exogamy is strictly followed and till today clans are chief principle unit for the social performing, funeral works, for mutual support and defense. So the principal links of the whole society are based clan or family kinship.

#### **Present Scenario of Changes:**

It is needless to say that the Tiwas evolved a distinct pattern of cultural ways; its own code of laws, each of them have by and large succeeded in maintaining the system till recent time as other demographic and other socio-cultural impact was not there. The surrounding environment degraded the traditional value system day by day and also deteriorated the sustainable social order of the Tiwas. As there was conversion the ethnic

tradition and culture either were replaced or abandoned. For example, after the conversion to Vaishnavism, there was the replacement of their age-old institutions like *Shamadi (Dekasang)* to *Namghar*, the *Nobaro (Barghar)* the place of worship) to *Manikut*. The change in the clan system, language, culture, rituals, ways of living etc. have been brought under the process. In the process the Tiwas were holding grip to rapid change in their cultural pattern and democratic ethos.

Now the hilly Tiwas are different from the rest in respect of their language, food, dress habits and performing rituals and festivals. For example, the Tiwas perform cultural and religious festivals like *Jhangkhong, Borot, Mela Uliuwa, Pishu* etc. only in Plain areas and *Sogra, Yangli Langkhon, Wansuwa* etc. only in the hilly areas. The songs like *Khelchawa, Magromisawa Panthairojawa* etc. are there only in hilly areas and *Godalboria, Pishu-Borot* etc. only in certain areas of plains.

## II. Conclusion

Now it seems that majority Tiwa villagers have hazy idea about their own socio-political processes. But knowingly or unknowingly some of them follow the traditional socio-political institutions which are based on democratic principle and important so far to encourage the social justice, liberty; harmony and security in the present problematic society are concerned. The traditional institutions can be protected for active participation in the social process and to get involved in the successful working of processes. To coup up with the challenges of changes, the traditional socio-political institutions can get stress giving heartfelt impact. The democratic ingredients can attribute to the social well being, unity, integrity and social justice of the modern nation. Further it can be an ample source to flourishing the modern political institutions and democratic way of life.

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