

THE ROLE OF RITUALS AND FESTIVALS IN PRESERVING TIWA HERITAGE WITHIN THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORK

Gargi Doloi

PG Student
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya,
Nagaon, Assam, India.
Gargidoloi11@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to establish the significance of the rituals and festivals in the conservation of the culture and values of the Tiwa community in relation to the IKS system in India. The Tiwa's, an indigenous tribe of Assam India have been part of old age civilization with vast cultural background rooted in their festivals and ceremonies like Junbeel Mela and other agricultural rituals. These traditions serve as cultural expressions and vehicles for the transmission of traditional knowledge, ensuring that the values, beliefs, and customs of the Tiwa community are passed on to future generations. The Indian Knowledge System, with its holistic understanding of knowledge, culture, and society, provides a platform for examining how the Tiwa community navigates modern challenges while preserving its heritage. The concept of knowledge in the Indian Knowledge System can be represented and facilitates the exploration of how the Tiwa community faces modernity and still maintains its cultural values. This study draws on ethnographic research to demonstrate how these rituals and festivals act as mediums for cultural preservation and resilience, enabling the Tiwa to maintain their identity in the face of modernization and socioeconomic shifts.

Keywords: Tiwa community, cultural preservation, rituals, Indian knowledge system

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tiwa tribe, an indigenous group predominantly residing in Assam and Meghalaya, is one of the many tribal communities that contribute to the cultural diversity of Northeast India. The Tiwas are a culturally and socially distinct people with their own language and customs, as well as their own system of beliefs. They are mainly a rural people, and their main economic activity is farming and animal rearing, and they have a belief system that is a combination of animism and Hinduism. The Tiwa community is divided into two groups: the Hills Tiwas, who are mainly found in the hills of Karbi Anglong and Ri-Bhoi districts and the Plains Tiwas who are found in the plains of central Assam (Chamsal, 2020). However, there are differences in the geographical location of the tribe, but they still share common practices, customs, ceremonies, and celebrations that help in the continuity of their culture.

Modernization, characterized by economic development, technological advancement, and social change, has had profound effects on traditional cultural practices worldwide (Andreeva et al., 2017). This study draws on theories of cultural change and continuity, particularly those proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973) and Arjun Appadurai (1996). Geertz's concept of "thick description" provides a method for understanding how cultural practices, such as those at Junbeel Mela, are imbued with meaning and how these meanings change over time. Appadurai's notion of "global cultural flows" offers insights into how modernization influences cultural practices through the spread of ideas, technologies, and people. Cultural events such as the Junbeel Mela, an annual fair where goods are exchanged in a traditional barter system, and agricultural festivals like Wansuwa serve as essential expressions of Tiwa identity. Such practices are not just forms of social functions; they are libraries of indigenous knowledge and effective means of passing that knowledge from one generation to another (Doloi et al., 2024). In this context the concept of Indian knowledge systems which recognize multiple knowledge systems can provide a framework for understanding how the Tiwa safeguard their cultural identity in face of pressures of modernization globalization and socio-economic transformation. Traditions and celebrations have always been served as a tool for passing down the Tiwa culture and traditions from generation to generation. They allow the passing of cultural information, assumptions, and orientation from one generation to other hence preserving the community's integrity. But in the present day society, the Tiwa community, like other indigenous peoples, has its experience shaped by such factors as modernization, globalisation and social economic transformational processes (Borkakati, 2020). Such forces have derailed established culture and practices and provided outside influences that pose a risk to the practice of specific traditions.



Picture1: Entry to Junbeel Mela

2. UNDERSTANDING THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORK

The Indian knowledge framework is a vast and inclusive system that accommodates both traditional indigenous knowledge and modern educational systems. To understand the knowledge structure in India one has to go deeper, as it is a very broad knowledge structure where it is possible to study aboriginal people's knowledge and European educational system together. Based on pre-modern philosophical, religious, and practical conceptions of life, Indian Knowledge framework presupposes the existence of many kinds of knowledge, from Vedic heritage to tribal wisdom. Indigenous knowledge, a key component of this framework, includes practical skills, moral values, agricultural techniques, medicinal practices, and ecological insights passed down through generations. Especially for indigenous communities like the Tiwa's, festivals and rituals are used as a way of passing this knowledge. Unlike institutionalized education, which often disconnects individuals from their cultural roots, the rituals and festivals of the Tiwa's integrate everyday knowledge with cultural expression, enabling them to maintain a strong connection to their heritage while engaging with the broader national identity.

Digital preservation has emerged as an effective way to document and safeguard IKS. Different initiatives have been undertaken to develop manuscript, folklore and oral history collections online. The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) is one among such endeavours of the Government of India that has been set up to conserve manuscripts in India. Another project is the Indian Digital Heritage Project which is also engaged in the digitization of architectural and cultural heritage. A title of the study "A STUDY ON DIGITAL PRESERVATION METHODS FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES IN INDIA" explains the importance of digital preservation using technology in preserving cultural objects and the knowledge associated with them. The study emphasizes that digitization plays a pivotal role to preserve the traditional knowledge to make available for future generation as well as to avoid the loss of information due to the physical reasons (Jenifar et al., 2024).

3. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the role of rituals and festivals in preserving the cultural heritage of the Tiwa community within the broader Indian knowledge framework. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Examine how Tiwa rituals and festivals function as repositories of traditional knowledge and facilitate the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and customs across generations.
2. Investigate the adaptability and resilience of these practices in the face of modernization, globalization, and socio-economic changes.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

It has become important to examine how rituals and festivals continue to preserve Tiwa heritage within the broader Indian knowledge framework, which encompasses both indigenous knowledge systems and more modern, institutionalized forms of learning. Through examining these practices this paper aims at revealing how this group of the Tiwa people manages to strike the balance in the contemporary world while maintaining the traditions of their ancestors. The historical analysis of Tiwa subculture as a part of composite Indian culture identifies it as a favorable perspective for reconsidering the role of rituals and festivals in maintaining Tiwa culture. This paper also employed ethnographic research methods with the rationale of documenting and analyzing these cultural practices in a bid to determine how these cultural practices maintain their relevance as potential tools for socio-cultural preservation in the face of advancing relative socio-cultural changes. This way, it also adds to the existing knowledge on indigenous people's knowledge systems as well as cultural practices in the preservation of the vulnerable cultural assets.

5. RITUALS AND FESTIVALS AS CHANNELS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION

5.1. Junbeel Mela: A Repository of Economic and Social Values

The Junbeel Mela is one of the most significant festivals of the Tiwa community in Assam. It is celebrated annually in the Morigaon district of Assam. Junbeel Mela is a unique cultural event where participants from the Tiwa and other communities engage in a traditional barter system. Historically, the festival was used to barter items like grains, vegetables, and fish to show that the tribes were distinct in their own way that they relied on each other in the economy system (Adhyapak, 2023). The continuation of this barter system in modern times underscores the festival's role in preserving Tiwa economic traditions while resisting the dominance of currency-based economies (Doloi, 2024).



Picture2: A glimpse of Junbeel Mela in 2017

5.2. Wansuwa: Celebrating the Agricultural Cycle

Agriculture has been the backbone of Tiwa society, and many of their rituals and festivals are linked to the agricultural calendar. Wansuwa, for example, is an important post-harvest festival that celebrates the yield of crops and honors the deities responsible for fertility and abundance. The festival includes ritual sacrifices, offerings, and community feasts, which serve as expressions of gratitude to nature and the spirits believed to govern the land's fertility (Hazarika, 2021).

Wansuwa not only reinforces the community's connection to the land but also functions as an educational tool. The festival's rituals teach younger generations the importance of sustainable agricultural practices, land

management, and communal work ethics. In this way, Tiwa agricultural festivals ensure that traditional ecological knowledge is passed down, providing lessons that are crucial for the community's survival in the face of environmental challenges.



Picture3: Celebration of Wansuwa festival at Khaplangkunchi in West Karbi Anglong, 2017

5.3. Langkhan Puja

It is a significant religious ritual observed by the Tiwa community, and it holds a deep connection with the principles of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), especially in the realms of ecological balance, spirituality, and community well-being. In line with the Indian Knowledge System, which emphasizes a harmonious relationship with nature, Langkhan Puja is a ritual that reflects the Tiwa people's deep reverence for the natural world. The puja is typically conducted to appease the spirits of nature and to seek blessings for favorable weather and agricultural productivity (Doloi et al., 2024). This practice aligns with the IKS's eco-centric philosophy, which sees human beings as an integral part of the natural world and stress. In performing the Langkhan Puja, the Tiwa community showcases their respect for the environment and their understanding of ecological balance, which has been passed down through generations as part of their indigenous knowledge. Langkhan Puja involves invoking deities and spirits believed to protect the land, animals, and people. This reflects the IKS notion of holistic living, where spiritual well-being is interconnected with the health of the land and community.



Picture4: A glimpse of Langkhan Puja

5.4. Sagra Misawa, or Sagra Puja

It is an important fertility festival celebrated by the Plains Tiwa community, and it reflects several principles that align with the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The IKS emphasizes a holistic approach to knowledge, integrating ecological balance, spiritual wisdom, and community well-being, all of which are central to the Sagra Misawa festival.

Starting from Sunday or Wednesday, Sagra-misawa festival is celebrated for a week. At the core of Sagra Misawa is the worship of deities associated with agriculture and fertility. The ceremonies included in the festival are those

that help to encourage good harvest, which evidence the perception of Tiwa people on the cycles of nature and their dependence on it (Senapati, 2020). This aligns with the IKS's emphasis on sustainable agriculture and living in harmony with nature. The ritual offerings and sacrifices made during Sagra Misawa symbolize the Tiwa people's respect for natural resources and their commitment to maintaining ecological balance, a key tenet of IKS. In the Indian Knowledge System, spirituality is intricately connected with daily life, including agricultural and economic activities. Sagra Misawa embodies this connection by invoking the blessings of spiritual entities for the prosperity of crops and livestock. The festival reinforces the belief that ethical and moral conduct toward nature and the land is essential for receiving the blessings of the divine.

6. CHALLENGES OF MODERNIZATION AND THE RESILIENCE OF TIWA TRADITIONS

Economic globalization in today's modern world leads to uneven and harmful impacts on indigenous communities, with short-term gains overshadowed by displacement, land loss, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods (Toti, 2024). As modernization and globalization increasingly affect indigenous communities, the Tiwa community faces numerous challenges in maintaining their traditional practices. These include the encroachment of market economies, changes in land use patterns, and the influence of external religious and cultural forces. However, Tiwa rituals and festivals have shown resilience by adapting to these challenges while retaining their core values. For example, Junbeel Mela with barter system still persist along with modern monetary system as the ritual itself has an important cultural significance of its own. Like with agricultural rituals, the techniques that lay an emphasis on sustainable farming have been integrated with the current technology, while continuing with the core aims of ecological harmony, and the welfare of the people in society. Such flexibility shows that despite the modernization influence the Tiwa people whose values and beliefs are anchored on IKS still maintain a firm foothold on their cultural orientations.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that the Tiwa community's rituals and festivals are critical ways through which the indigenous group perpetuates their cultural practices and passes down the knowledge. They are derived from the Indian Knowledge System and represent the principles of sustainable living, right conduct and, social order. Through festivals such as Junbeel Mela and agricultural celebrations, the Tiwa maintain their connection to their ecological environment, sustain traditional economic practices, and transmit moral and ethical values across generations. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, the Tiwa's rituals and festivals have proven resilient and adaptable, allowing the community to preserve its heritage while engaging with the modern world. The concept of Indian Knowledge System is a useful and comprehensive approach to explain how Tiwa community deal with modern problems while preserving their culture. The study also makes it clear that cultural practices are an important part of the IKS and stresses the need for their preservation and sustaining as the ways that will keep indigenous people's communities strong in the future.

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