



# The *Chongkhongsal* Monoliths of the Hill *Tiwas* of Assam: A Sociological Study

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## Abstract

The *Tiwas*, as a significant ethnic group, hold a crucial position in the socio-cultural history of Assam. Their unique and important rituals, customs, and traditional practices make them a vibrant and distinctive culture. Among all, the festivals of *Chongkhong Puja* are famous, which is generally a ritualistic practice of the hill *Tiwas* related to the burial, and an age-old tradition of worshipping the ancestors. As a tribute to their ancestors, they observed this auspicious *Puja*. Certain roles and regulations are also related to their burial practices. Every year, during the time of *Chongkhong Puja*, they worship their clan ancestors and sacrifice animals and install a flat stone or monolith to tribute their souls. The members of their traditional village council, such as *Loro* (head priest), *Phador*, *Toloi*, *Hadari*, etc., play their specific roles during the *puja*. This monolith makes their historical background strong and reflects the evidence of their settlement in the Umswai Valley for a very long back. This article aims to highlight its key features of the *Chongkhongsal* monolith as an important cremation site for the hill *Tiwas*. Along with that, the traditional beliefs and other practices related to the societal and historical background are also included.

**Keywords:** Monoliths, *Tiwas*, *Lalung*, Tribe, migration, and settlement, Northeast India.

## Introduction

The *Tiwas* are an indigenous or tribal group of northeast India, mostly found in the region of Assam and Meghalaya. However, presently, the maximum population resides in Assam. They are found in both the hills and the plains of Assam. Earlier, they were commonly called as “Lalung”, but with the word “Lalung”, they feel neglected (Bordoloi,2020). In the Ahom period, they were also known as “Dantialiya” as they were found in foothill areas of the region. Later, during the period of the British, they were commonly recognized as a scheduled tribe under the Constitution of India. Whatever the term used for them, they only prefer to call themselves as “Tiwa”, which means a clan living near the water or river. Linguistically, they belong to the group of Tibeto-Burmese. Ethnically, they are the branches of the larger Bodo tribe (Bordoloi, 2020). It is noteworthy that both the groups of hills and plains *Tiwas* follow and maintain different socio-economic and political systems. At present, the majority concentration of the *Lalung* is found in Morigaon, Nowgong, Lakhimpur, Kamrup, Dhemaji, West Karbi Anglong, and the *Jayantia* district of Meghalaya (Thakur, 1983).

Among the *Tiwas*, the culture and tradition of monoliths are one of the important elements of their society that reflect the evidence of the various historic events and phenomena. The monoliths are a symbol of the sacred aspects, and it hold some story or folktales which reflect the entire community. Monoliths are generally a pillar of a single piece of stone that offers insights into a particular society.

Among the tribes of northeast India, the culture of megaliths and monoliths is crucial in various ways. Generally, it is a common feature of tribal society. Every tribe has its own megalithic and monolithic stories that differentiate it from other non-tribal groups. It is a great source of records of the prehistoric events or phenomena.

As like the other tribes of northeast India, such as Khashi-Jayantia, the *Tiwas* of Assam also have preserved their monolithic culture. Among the various monoliths, the *Chongkhongsal* monolith is one of the most popular monoliths of the hill *Tiwas*, situated in the Valley of Umswai of West Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Recently, the *Chongkhongsal* monoliths attracted the attention of many researchers and other historians. The *Chongkhongsal* monolith is located at Amsai Pinung Village. According to the residence of Amsai Pinung, the *Chongkhongsal* monolith is also able to grab the attention of archaeologists and other foreigners.

It is a very significant area for the hill *Tiwas* of Amsai Pinung in terms of religious beliefs and practices, culture, reflecting their history of migration and the period of settlement, etc. There are more than two thousand small and large stones found in the Amsai Pinung area. Which symbolised their period of settlement. Every year, in the name of their ancestors, they erected a piece of flat stone. Many traditional beliefs and practices are also related to the *Chongkhongsal* monoliths. They considered it as a sacred place.

### Objectives of the study

1. To study the historical background of the *Tiwas*.
2. To study the significance of the *Chongkhongsal* monolith of the *Tiwas*.

### Methodology

To study the historical background and the significance of the *Chongkhongsal* Monolith of the *Tiwas*, the researcher has applied various methods. To collect the primary data, the researcher went to the field and observed it. Through the method of participant observation and interviews, information is gathered. Additionally, the secondary sources of data included published books, journals, and theses to gain insight into the historical background of the *Tiwas* and the significance of the *Chongkhongsal* Monolith.

### Result and Discussion

The *Tiwas* had a close relationship with the Jayantias. According to folktales, the first king of the *Tiwas*, the *Sotonga* Raja born in the Jayantia hills (Gohain, 1993). For a long period, they lived with the Jayantias, and they adopted all the customs and practices from the Jayantias. However, gradually, they did not want to follow the property inheritance practices and sacrifice tradition. So, some of them left the Jayantia hill and moved to settle in another place (Baruah, 2013).

The Jayantias are expert and famous for their megalith and monolith culture, which is considered as a great source of prehistoric evidence. In some pocket areas of the Jayantias hill, the Jayantias are still associated with their socio-cultural and other traditional practices with the megaliths and monoliths culture. These are widely spread and deeply rooted traditions among the Jayantias. The Nartiang, the summer capital of the Jayantias, is famous for its various monoliths and megalithic culture.

Although all the tribes of northeast India are diverse in features with their own characteristics, they also have certain common culture, known as Kirata culture (Hakasham, 2016). Each tribal communities have certain beliefs and practices related to their ancestors, and they try to worship their ancestors in various forms or through various ways. The *Tiwas* of Assam, especially in the hills of West Karbi Anglong district, feel incomplete without worshipping their ancestors every year. The *Chongkhongsal* monolith is one of the sacred places where they worship their ancestors every year. The literary meaning of the “*Chongkhongsal* Monoliths” is “*erected stones in memories*”. It is basically an honor to the ancestors. To satisfy the ancestors, they follow certain rituals and beliefs. They have their own “*Loro*” (priest) and “*Phador*” (member of the village elder committee) to worship the ancestor. The “*Phador*” is installing a flat stone piece, planting a flame tree in his memories, and tie up a white cotton thread at the top of the stone as a symbol of the turban. The *Tiwas* believe that if the flame tree does not die, the planters of the tree will die soon. On the other hand, if the tree dies, then they believe that their ancestor will become happy and in that particular year, they will get more profit in the field of agriculture. The Khasis and the Jayantias also erect a monolith immediately after the death of their ancestors. As a tribute, they erect the stone piece, which stands upright.



Fig: The Chongkhongsal Monoliths of the Umswai Valley.

The *Chongkhongsal* monolith is significant for various reasons. In terms of reflecting their historical background, providing proof of the settlements, celebrating their cultural and religious practices, in terms of economy or agriculture-related traditions, the *Chongkhongsal* monoliths play a special role among the *Tiwas*.

According to historians, to know the historical background of the *Tiwas*, the *Chongkhongsal* monolith is one of the best sources. Through this monolith, one can track their migration and settlement history. There are more than two thousand flat stones, which symbolise that they settled there more than two thousand years ago. Moreover, according to the local residents, the size of the stone also reflects the nature and personality of that particular ancestor.

There are many rituals and traditional practices that are also related to the *Chongkhongsal* monolith. Every year, to erect the stone, they celebrate *Chongkhong Puja*. In the puja, the village elder committee, such as *Loro*, *Phador*, *Toloi*, *Hadari*, etc., play a significant role. Before erecting the stone in a particular alignment, they worship their ancestors, beat the drums in a rhythm and flute, and engage in performing a sacrifice (Baruah, 2020). Along with all this, there must be two slabs of stone. One slab is set up on the ground, and another one is set up vertically.

Among the *Tiwas*, festivals are somehow related to their economy (Senapati, 2020). The *Chongkhong puja* is deeply rooted in agriculture, also. The hill *Tiwas* believed that if their deity is satisfied with their worship, the production of the villagers will be good and enough. Before the *Phidari Chongkhong*, they celebrated the *Bor Chongkhong puja*. It is considered as taboo that before the *Bor Chongkhong* ceremony, they do not till the soil. If they do cultivation before the ceremony, they believe that the cultivator will die from disease or be attacked by a tiger. If someone starts cultivation before the Puja, he has a penalty of rice beer and pork (Borkakati, 2013). They called their ancestor as *Phidari*, and after the three weeks of *Bor Chongkhong* ceremony, they celebrated the “*Phidari Chongkhong*” ceremony. It is a significant annual ceremony of the *Tiwas*. On that auspicious ceremony, three male pigs are brought to be sacrificed in the early morning by the *Loro* (head priest). Among the three pigs, one should be black (Patar and Hazarika, 2023). People of Amsai Pinung worshipped *Palakhongor* as their prime deity. By the sacrifices of pigs, they try to satisfy their deity. After the sacrifices of the pigs and fowl by the *Loro*, they mixed the skins and intestines of the pigs with some rice powder or rice flour. Among them, there are found different mega and monoliths are found among the *Tiwas*, such as *Menhirs*, megaliths like a Hindu shrine, stone slabs of the royal palace, megaliths in front of the *Loro*'s house, and as a boundary wall of the *Shamadi* (youth dormitory). *Tiwas* are forbidden to look at their backs towards the eastern direction on the day of the *Phidari Chongkhong* ceremony (Patar, 2018).

In a nutshell, erecting monoliths is related to the culture of a community. Through these monoliths, many information can be collected for future use. Monoliths have a definite structure, and it's symbolize the roots of that particular community. It is a box of mysteries that hold identity, history, and various unknown events. As most of the tribes of northeast India have no written history of their origins, at that point, the monoliths and other archival materials are the best way to find their roots.

## Conclusion

The region of northeastern India is very rich in terms of ethnic diversity. Different ethnic groups practice their traditional practices and try to preserve their age-old traditions as much as possible. In some pockets of Assam, the tribal people are still trying to preserve their customs and traditions. However, the young generations are not very much interested in maintaining all the traditions, and some of the practices are gradually fading from their society. Remote or geographical location, negligence, lack of awareness, and lack of knowledge about its importance are some of the main causes of its loss of glory.

The *Chongkhongsal* monoliths are unique and serve as a marker of the Tiwa's tradition. It survives as a living tradition among them (Pao and K, 2023). The hill *Tiwas* of Assam also try hard to maintain the importance of *Chongkhongsal* monolith along with the other cultural practices. As a result of modernization and globalization, the hill *Tiwas* are facing many problems and challenges. With the evolution of time, they faced some obstacles to celebrate their practices.

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