



Traditional Economy and Contemporary Challenges: Livelihood Dynamics among Tribal Communities in Assam, Northeast India

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Abstract: The Northeastern state of Assam is an abode of several tribal communities, each having their own idiosyncrasies. Traditionally, these communities have been predominantly agrarian, with agriculture being their principal source of livelihood. Their economy and also culture primarily revolved around land. However, their agricultural system is largely dependent on nature, particularly on the monsoons, thereby making it vulnerable to climatic variability and environmental uncertainties. Studies suggest that in the recent years, there has been a gradual shift, with many tribal households in the region gradually moving away from agriculture towards engagement in the informal sector. This transition is driven by a multiplicity of factors, including declining agricultural productivity, the physically demanding nature of farm work, erratic rainfall patterns, recurrent flood, and the increasing precarity of agrarian incomes so on and so forth. In addition, there has been widespread land alienation among tribal populations owing to poverty, chronic indebtedness, and disadvantageous socio-economic conditions. Thus it has been observed that agricultural distress coupled with the need for cash, growing consumerism, and asymmetric economic settings have led a considerable section of the tribal population to give up on land and agriculture and look for alternative livelihood avenues. Additionally, state-led development projects and private industrial ventures have also contributed to the dispossession of tribal lands, further exacerbating economic vulnerabilities. An empirical study on the Tiwa tribe of Central Assam underscores this trend. The study shows how agricultural distress, poverty, need for cash, indebtedness and economic asymmetries have accelerated land dispossession and resulted in significant transformations in the tribal economy. This paper based on the study of the Tiwa tribe argues that there is an urgent need for state intervention for revitalizing agriculture and strengthening tribal livelihoods to ensure the economic sustainability and cultural integrity of tribal communities in Assam.

Keywords: *Traditional Economy, Rural Economy, Agricultural Distress, Livelihood Diversification, Informal Workforce.*

Introduction: The Tiwas, also referred to as the Lalungs, constitute a plains-dwelling tribal community in Assam. While it is generally believed that their ancestral origins lie in Tibet—similar to other Mongoloid tribal groups in the region—the specifics of their migration to the plains remain unclear and contested due to the absence of reliable written records. As Gohain (2006) observes, "There has been no systematic study of the Lalung tribe by any ethnographer and administrator, during the British rule, although Assam has been fortunate in having a number of ethnographic accounts of other tribes and missionaries during this period." Consequently, much of the existing understanding regarding the Tiwas' origins and patterns of settlement relies on oral traditions and folk narratives. Today, the Tiwa population is primarily concentrated in the central Assam districts of Morigaon and Nagaon, though smaller communities are also present in other parts of Assam and the neighbouring state of Meghalaya. According to the 2011 Census of India, their total population stands at 182,663.

Historically, the Tiwas have been a predominantly agrarian society, with the majority engaged in agriculture and reliant on land and forest resources for their sustenance. However, their economic practices and livelihood patterns have been undergoing gradual transformation. This study seeks to investigate the evolving nature of economic activity and livelihood among the Tiwas, and to identify the key factors contributing to these shifts.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To understand the traditional economic practices and livelihood mechanisms of the Tiwa community.
2. To explore the transformations in the economy and livelihood patterns among the Tiwas over time.
3. To identify and evaluate the underlying factors driving such changes in their economy.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, based on extensive fieldwork carried out across selected villages and field sites in the Morigaon district of central Assam. The study is exploratory and analytical in nature, and seeks to examine the evolving economic patterns within the Tiwa community. Primary data was collected through qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions so on and so forth which enabled an in-depth understanding of the issue. Particular emphasis has been placed on oral narratives which serve as a crucial source to understand the trajectory of changes in the economy. In addition to primary field data, the study also incorporates a range of secondary sources, including academic books, journal publications, newspaper reports, and official government documents, to provide contextual depth and support the analysis.

Changing nature of tribal economy and livelihood in Northeast: An Overview:

Land is most integral to the life, culture and economy of the tribal communities. Apart from being a source of sustenance, "their lives, religious beliefs and practices take shape around land and nature" (Louis, 2000, 4087). Therefore, "land is basic to tribal culture" (Fernandes, Baruah and Millik, 2019, 3) and intrinsically connected to their way of life, culture and worldview. However, despite being primarily agrarian and dependent on land for livelihood, it has been observed that tribal communities are now alienating and dispossessing their land owing to economic distress. (Gupta 2005, 751) states that it is the sheer inertia of the agrarian economy that hardly allows for any optimism, which is forcing people to look elsewhere for both livelihoods and respect" Some other studies

reveals that it is more of a “dispossession due to neglect” (Vijayabaskar and Menon, 2016) triggered by the neglect of state towards agricultural revamping, rural development and socio-economic security of the rural communities especially the youths on one hand and its thrust on privatisation and commercialisation on the other. This has led to agricultural distress and thereby leading to poverty and indebtedness. Rao et al (2006-2007) argues that indebtedness is a major reason behind tribal land alienation in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, Ambagudia (2010) argues in the same light as above-mentioned scholars that the fragile and continuously shrinking economic base of the tribal communities is the root cause of land alienation among them. The Morigaon district of Assam, primarily an agrarian region, where the present study has been conducted has also witnessed a gradual decline in cultivated land (Bora and Bora, 2024). Thus studies have shown that most of the tribal communities in the country including Assam has been suffering from agricultural distress led by lower productivity owing to lack of agricultural inputs, necessary state support, irregular monsoons so on and so forth. Since agriculture is their mainstay, its crisis has generated a livelihood stress among the tribal communities and therefore they are abandoning agriculture, relinquishing their land and searching for other viable means of livelihood for survival. It is in this context, that the present study seeks to understand the changing nature of economy among the Tiwas. It attempts to explore the constraints and challenges of their traditional economic practices and livelihood mechanisms and what kind of economic transformations have emerged among them.

Traditional Economy Among the Tiwas

The Tiwa community, predominantly located in the plains of Assam, has traditionally relied on agriculture as the principal means of livelihood. Although oral traditions indicate that the Tiwas were once engaged in hunting and gathering, similar to many other tribal groups in the region, these practices have significantly declined and are now largely obsolete. At present, paddy cultivation constitutes the core of their agrarian economy, with major varieties including *Sali*, *Bao*, *Boro*, and *Ahu* (Kalita, 2010). Characterised by a consumption-oriented economic model, paddy is primarily grown for subsistence, with the minimal surplus being sold in the market to meet other household needs.

In addition to paddy, some Tiwa households cultivate cash crops such as mustard, jute, and sugarcane. Horticultural crops like areca nut, bamboo, and betel leaves are also commonly grown, serving dual purposes—both for household consumption and commercial sale. Among these, areca nut and betel leaves have emerged as important supplementary sources of income. Vegetables are also cultivated, though primarily for personal consumption. Bamboo, in particular, holds economic and cultural significance due to its versatility and widespread use. It is cultivated extensively and contributes to the household economy through the production of various items such as baskets, fishing tools, and domestic implements.

Besides cultivation, the Tiwas are also engaged in a range of other allied occupations including weaving, animal husbandry, fishery, and cane and craft work etc. Livestock such as pigs, poultry, and cattle are raised both for consumption and income generation. Field interviews suggest that livestock also serve as assets during financial distress. For instance, Chunky Pator, a middle-aged resident of Makaria village, one of the selected field sites of this study, shared “Sometimes during medical emergencies we sell off our cattle and pigs to meet our medical expenditure.” Similarly, Rina Sagra from Barkhal village noted, “The cattle are our saviours during difficult times. We exchange them for money during marriages and other social functions, medical emergencies etc.” Narayan Bordoloi of Nakhula Gaon echoed this sentiment, stating, “Pigs, poultry and cattle are our major source of income. We sell them in the weekly markets to purchase our other household goods.”

Weaving remains a culturally embedded and economically significant activity among Tiwa women, contributing to household income. Additionally, the brewing and sale of traditional rice beer serves as another

source of livelihood for many families. However, opportunities for formal employment remain limited, and only a small number of Tiwa individuals have secured positions in government services.

Thus we see that the tradition economy of the Tiwas is primarily dependent of land and natural resource. Agriculture and allied activities have been their major source of livelihood. However, theirs is a subsistence based economy and production is mainly for household consumption. Whatever surplus is produced is exchanged in the market for other household needs.

Contemporary Challenges and Changes:

In Morigaon, while some groups have a long-standing presence, others migrated during the colonial period and thereafter. Further, though Morigaon is primarily a rural area, with villages in majority, over time, urban centres such as Morigaon and Jagiroad have come up within the district. This has led to considerable demographic diversity, comprising of communities of various caste, community and religious backgrounds. Demographic influx stemming from colonial rule and emerging demographic diversity due to growing urbanization in the district has led to significant transformations in the economic practices and land ownership in the region.

Field findings indicate that while indigenous communities like the Tiwas remain largely engaged in agriculture and allied sectors, immigrant communities are largely engaged in commercial activities and commercial enterprises. Moreover, the Tiwas tend to cultivate for subsistence, whereas the immigrant groups engage in market-oriented, commercial cultivation. Therefore, compared to the Tiwas, the other communities, particularly the immigrant communities, residing in Morigaon are relatively more advanced in terms of socio-economic status. A significant proportion of these groups are engaged in business, salaried employment, and commercial agriculture, which provides them with more stable and regular sources of income and opportunities for savings. In contrast, the Tiwas remain largely dependent on a subsistence-based economy, lacking such financial security and economic diversification.

Additionally, though agriculture continues to be the dominant livelihood activity; however, it is largely subsistence-based and heavily reliant on monsoonal rainfall. This dependence on unpredictable and increasingly erratic climatic patterns exposes Tiwa farmers to heightened levels of vulnerability, particularly in the absence of irrigation infrastructure, modern farming techniques, and institutional support. Crop yields are often low and inconsistent, which in turn undermines income stability and food security. Further the rising cost of cultivation further aggravates their distress. Field findings indicate that there is growing disinterest among Tiwa youth in continuing traditional agricultural practices. Empirical data reveals that outdated farming technologies and erratic monsoons have contributed to low productivity, making agriculture an increasingly unattractive option. As a result, many young Tiwas are seeking employment outside the agricultural sector. A noticeable trend of outmigration has emerged, with youth moving to cities such as Hyderabad, Himachal Pradesh, and Bangalore, where they are employed as informal workers in various industries.

Thus it has been observed that over the years there has emerged of a very asymmetric economic setting in Morigaon whereby the Tiwas, owing to their subsistence cultivation are cash deprived and other communities residing their have cash in their hand. Economic necessity has also compelled many Tiwa families to sell their land, resulting in a growing number of landless households, many of whom now work as wage labourers. Owing to low agricultural yield, poverty etc. they have to often resort to leasing and selling off their land to meet their needs. This have led to considerable land transfers from Tiwas to Non-Tiwas in the region. The relative financial advantage of immigrant communities, particularly their access to liquid capital, often enables them to purchase land from Tiwa households. This has led to significant land dispossession among the Tiwas, contributing to a

fundamental shift in their economic structure. Land ownership, which had erstwhile served as the lifeline for livelihood of the Tiwas, has undergone massive erosion and is thus a critical factor driving economic transformation within the Tiwa community. However, this phenomenon is not confined to the Tiwas alone but reflects a widespread pattern across rural Assam.

Thus in the nutshell it can be said that the economy of the Tiwas have undergone notable changes in recent decades, marked by shifts in occupational engagement, livelihood mechanism and land ownership. These transformations are not sudden or isolated, but rather the outcome of long-standing historical processes. Colonial policies related to land, revenue, and immigration, combined with post-colonial economic developments favouring commercialisation, growing urbanisation etc. have collectively shaped the present economic landscape of the Tiwa community.

In addition to the persistent challenges associated with agricultural distress, the Tiwa economy also remains underdeveloped due to minimal growth in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial activity within the community remains marginal. Limited access to capital, markets, technical skills, and financial literacy hampers the growth of non-farm enterprises. The lack of adequate institutional mechanisms such as credit cooperatives, self-help groups, and government support further constrains their entrepreneurship potential.

Further, although local handicrafts and handloom weaving remain integral to the cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems of the Tiwa community, these activities have not evolved into sustainable sources of livelihood. Field observations and interactions with local artisans suggest that the primary constraint lies in the limited market access for these products. In the absence of well-developed supply chains, marketing infrastructure, or institutional support for promotion, artisans struggle to secure fair prices for their goods.

The market for traditional crafts remains largely informal and geographically confined, with limited penetration into larger commercial or urban markets. Moreover, there is a lack of training in product diversification, quality enhancement, and branding, which restricts the competitiveness of Tiwa handicrafts in comparison to mass-produced alternatives. As a result, despite the cultural value and artisanal skills embedded in these practices, handicrafts and handloom weaving do not offer a dependable or scalable livelihood option for most families.

Consequently, many artisans are compelled to treat craft production as a supplementary activity rather than a primary occupation. This reflects a broader trend in rural economies, where traditional industries face marginalisation due to insufficient institutional backing, inadequate market integration, and the dominance of large-scale industrial goods. Without strategic interventions such as capacity building, market linkage development, and policy support, the potential of traditional crafts to contribute to rural income generation and cultural preservation will remain largely untapped.

Thus from the field findings it can be stated that majority of the Tiwa population are incapable of meeting their daily expenses due to rising prices on one hand and dwindling income from agriculture on the other, thereby pushing them further towards poverty and indebtedness. Moreover, opportunities for income generation through entrepreneurship, handloom, and handicrafts remain limited for the community. All of these together has also triggered land alienation and loss of land ownership among them. Many of them, who were erstwhile land owners have now become now wage earners. Their youths are migrating to join informal sector and majority of them are compelled to thrive on daily wages. This is also true for other rural communities where agriculture has lost its earlier viability and meeting daily needs with only agriculture or local crafts as a source of income has become

extremely difficult. Hence there is tremendous livelihood diversification with more and more people joining either the informal sector or resorting to other alternative sources of livelihood.

Conclusion:

The present study shows that a significant proportion of the Tiwa population is increasingly unable to meet their daily household expenditures. This financial strain is largely attributed to the combined impact of rising costs of living and declining agricultural income. The diminishing viability of agriculture—due to factors such as low productivity, lack of technological inputs, and erratic climatic conditions—has led to growing poverty and indebtedness within the community. Furthermore, the scope for sustainable income generation through entrepreneurial activities, including handloom weaving and traditional handicrafts, remains significantly constrained within the community due to limited market access, lack of financial capital, lack of institutional support, and inadequate capacity-building mechanisms.

One of the most significant outcomes of this economic precarity is the widespread phenomenon of land alienation. As families struggle to cope with financial distress, many are compelled to sell or lease out their agricultural land, leading to a gradual erosion of land ownership. This loss of land has forced numerous Tiwa households—once cultivators and small landowners—to shift to wage labour as their primary means of survival. Increasingly, Tiwa youth are migrating to urban centres and industrial hubs, often taking up insecure employment in the informal sector where labour rights and protections are minimal.

This trend, however, is not unique to the Tiwas. Similar patterns are observable across many rural communities in Assam and beyond, where the traditional agrarian economy has lost much of its earlier sustainability and capacity to support household livelihoods. As a result, there has been a marked shift towards livelihood diversification, with a growing number of rural individuals abandoning agriculture in favour of low-paying, informal employment in both rural and urban labour markets. This transition reflects a broader structural transformation in rural economies, highlighting the urgent need for targeted policy interventions to revitalise agriculture and support alternative livelihood strategies.

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