

**Book Review**

**Patar, Raktim. 2021. *The Tiwa Ethnohistory*.  
Chennai : Notion Press, pp. 246, Rs. 509/-**

**Shreya Sarmah**

*PhD Research Scholar*

*Department of Archaeology, Cotton University, Guwahati - 781001*

*Email: shreyasarmah09@gmail.com*

Writing the history of the native cultures is fundamental to the process of understanding land and its people. Globally, the multidisciplinary research in social sciences involving history, anthropology and ethnography has taken diverse expression by the late twentieth century largely in response to the poststructuralism (Foucault 1971) and deconstructionism (Derrida 1982) that challenge the attempt to establish any ultimate meaning to a text. By the same period, it was rendered vital to emphasize the identities of the indigenous, diasporic and minority people that otherwise elude the histories of nations, states and colonial empires.

As per the Census 2011, India has been the home for 645 distinct tribes constituting 8.6% of the total population and yet tribal researches in India are still at the rudimentary level. However, theoretical and cross-cultural discussions of ethnographic and historical materials are being accentuated by scholars across the world and such academic trends have freshly been adopted by several scholars in the Indian context as well. These interdisciplinary studies reflect the wide range of scholarship inspired by anthropological and historical approaches to comprehend and discern human cultures. One such fetching attempt has been made by Raktim Patar through conceptualizing ethnohistory as a course to learn the indigenous lifeways of the Tiwa or Lalung community of Assam and Meghalaya in his recent publication 'The Tiwa Ethnohistory'. The book provides an encyclopedic understanding of the Tiwa population by addressing a range of issues including their likely migration from Tibet, their traditional belief system and the origin and evolution of their social institutions. The book also discusses the gradual transformation of the Tiwa society on structural and functional levels as a result of a variety of factors such as easy transportation that facilitated their interactions with neighbouring communities; improved life standards with the introduction of market economy and commercialization of agriculture; modern elementary education, and technological advancement.

The earliest reference to the Tiwa tribe is found in the *Buranjis* (Ahom Chronicles) where they were referred to as the '*Datiyaliya*', the literal translation of which is 'the people living in the margins'. Later, they appeared in the colonial writing under the nomenclature of 'Lalung', a semi-Hinduised representative branch of the Kachari tribe. While the colonial records have included the Tiwas in their Census reports, those were devoid of valuable information. The histories written in the post-independence period too have not accommodated any socio-cultural understanding of this community. 'The Tiwa Ehtnohistory'

was materialised against such backdrop with a meticulous and diligent perusal arranged in seven precise chapters, each incorporating multiple aspects of the Tiwa community.

The Tiwas are bifurcated into two heterogeneous socio-cultural groups – those settled in the plains who speak Assamese and follow a patrilineal descent system bearing Assamese patronyms and those residing in the hills, speaking a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo group that follows a matrilineal descent system – largely, going by the names of Plain Tiwas and Hill Tiwas. While the Plain Tiwas were converted to Neo-Vaishnavism by the seventeenth century as a result of their subjugation by the Ahoms, the Hill Tiwas managed to profess their traditional religion until the missionaries initiated a mass-scale conversion of the community to Christianity. Despite their socio-religious differences, both the branches of the Tiwa tribe claim a common ancestry. Patar has dedicated two chapters for the discussion of their religion and belief system which is not a code of organised theological doctrine. He surmised that the Tiwas were initially nature worshippers or practitioners of totemism blended with fetishism and shamanism. He recorded plenty of religious ceremonies and songs dedicated to their creator, other deities and ancestral spirits. The Plain Tiwas still adhere to their age-old traditions, despite the incorporation of Vedic Hindu religious norms into their belief system. They have similar birth ceremonies and mortuary rituals, agricultural festivals and social taboos with the Hill Tiwas who used to practise human sacrifice till the consolidation of the British administration in Assam.

The venture undertaken by Raktim Patar extends from the pre-colonial period to the creation of the state of Meghalaya from the erstwhile undivided Assam in 1972. The far-reaching consequences of the decision of Karbi-Anglong to remain with the state of Assam did not leave the Tiwas unscathed as their population was largely scattered in this district, apart from Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup and Dhemaji in Assam and Ri-Bhoi in Meghalaya. In fact, it had brought about the wake of political identity into their conscience. While, a discussion on the political character of the Tiwa history is patently beyond the scope of the book; in recognition of their voices, Patar has contextualized the social and historical aspects of the issues through addressing the questions about their indigenous identity, their changing settlement pattern and strategies, the broad spectrum of their behaviour influenced by cultural and ecological factors, their changing relationship with the environment and the weight of external hegemony over their culture resulting in a change of trends in marriage and descent, traditional village administration and the Tiwa religious belief system.

The reconstruction of ethnicity has never been easy, especially, given the fact that the majority of the tribal languages in India have become vulnerable and occasionally endangered due to a lack of vernacular literature and virtually non-existent state recognition. The Tiwas, not unlike the many other indigenous groups has been creating and transmitting an oral archive of its knowledge system in the forms of folk songs, stories and mythologies through generations. Several such empowering narratives grounded on the lived experiences of the people have been given a place in the book. Their oral traditions and enduring customs coupled with Ahom chronicles and scanty colonial reports are the only available sources for the reconstruction of their history. Through this book, the author has set an example of methodological and empirical choices in a multidisciplinary perspective by breaking down

the monopoly of the pursuit of tribal studies in the confinement of conventional disciplinary boundaries. He has utilized a set of assorted methodologies of data acquirement which involves field exploration and photographic documentation supplemented by archival sources. With distinct cross-disciplinary analytical frames, the book maximises the reader's insight into the emerging trends of a perspective shift in tribal studies, thus mapping multi-dimensional growth of knowledge in the field and providing a road map of empirical and theoretical understanding of tribal issues in contemporary academics.

The mobility of goods, people and ideas (Smith 1776) has led a good number of traditional societies including that of the Tiwas into the path of modernisation – economic and social alike. This painstakingly researched seminal book is insightful for understanding the Tiwa community, their symbiotic existence in nature and how their transformation in the name of modernization has intensified in the post-globalisation era. In the context of Northeast India, addressing the ethnicity of the tribal groups from a socio-cultural and economic viewpoint is vital for understanding the pattern of the region as we see it now. Despite its various limitations, which Patar himself acknowledged, this book can very easily be considered the most thorough scholarly work so far on this historically marginalised Tiwa community within the frame of composite understanding of human civilisation. Through a contemporary engagement with the multidisciplinary wave of scholarship, this book participates in the mainstream sociological discourse and attempts to critically evaluate their assumptions and trajectories. The simplicity of Patar's language and the depth of his critical worldview resonate with many young scholars stepping into the field of historical analysis of ethnicity.

## References

- Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. The historical *a priori* and the archive. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Smith, Adam. 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahand and T. Cadell.