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Preserving Heritage While Building the Future: Cultural Continuity, Language Endangerment, and Educational Development Among the Tiwas of Northeast India

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Abstract: *The Tiwa (Lalung) community of Assam and Meghalaya possesses a rich cultural heritage characterized by seasonal agricultural festivals, intricate handloom weaving, bamboo craftsmanship, folk music, and traditional youth institutions such as the Chamadi. At the same time, rapid modernization, cultural assimilation, economic hardship, and gaps in formal schooling threaten both the survival of the endangered Tiwa language and the educational progress of Tiwa youth . This study examines the dual challenges of cultural preservation and educational development within the Tiwa community]. Using a descriptive and analytical methodology based on census data, ethnographic studies, and educational literature, the paper explores the structural barriers limiting school enrollment and retention—including geographic isolation in hill villages, agrarian poverty, gender disparities in literacy (72.0% male versus 51.6% female literacy according to the 2011 Census), and a school curriculum disconnected from indigenous life . The study argues that sustainable progress for the Tiwa community requires culturally responsive education that integrates the Tiwa language, oral literature, and traditional knowledge into modern classrooms, enabling students to succeed economically without losing their indigenous identity.*

Keywords: *Tiwa Culture, Educational Development, Language Endangerment, Chamadi, Gender Disparity, Culturally Responsive Curriculum, Northeast India.*

1. Introduction: Education and culture are deeply connected foundations of community development [cite: 1]. For indigenous peoples across the world, formal education provides the knowledge, technical skills, and economic opportunities needed to overcome poverty and participate fully in modern civic life [cite: 1]. At the same time, when formal schooling ignores local languages, traditions, and social values, it can unintentionally separate young learners from their own heritage [cite: 1]. Nowhere is this delicate balance between modernization and cultural survival more evident than among the Tiwa community of Northeast India [cite: 1].

The Tiwas, also known in historical and administrative records as the "Lalungs," are an indigenous Scheduled Tribe living primarily in central Assam across the districts of Morigaon, Nagaon, Hojai, Kamrup, Karbi Anglong, and Dhemaji—as well as in the Ri-Bhoi district of neighboring Meghalaya [cite: 2]. Tracing their ancestry to the Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic family, the Tiwas have enriched the cultural landscape of Northeast India for centuries through their agricultural festivals, matrilineal and patrilineal kinship traditions, oral folklore, and eco-friendly arts and crafts [cite: 2].

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Historically, Tiwa society passed down knowledge, moral values, and practical life skills through informal community institutions rather than formal classrooms [cite: 2]. Elders shared historical legends and proverbs around the family hearth, while village youth learned discipline, music, and cooperative work inside the traditional youth dormitory known as the Chamadi [cite: 2]. In the post-independence period, however, formal schooling became essential for securing employment and political representation [cite: 2]. While literacy rates among the Tiwas have steadily improved over recent decades through government schools and non-governmental efforts, educational attainment in rural and hilly Tiwa areas still lags behind state and national averages [cite: 2]. Simultaneously, the influence of dominant regional languages, mass media, and economic migration has placed the Tiwa language and traditional customs at risk of gradual erosion [cite: 2].

2. Objectives and Methodology: This study aims to achieve three core objectives: first, to document the distinctive cultural traditions, social institutions, festivals, and material crafts that define Tiwa identity across both hill and plain settlements; second, to identify and analyze the primary geographic, economic, linguistic, and gender-based barriers hindering educational development among Tiwa children and youth; and third, to propose practical, community-centered strategies that align modern educational progress with the preservation of Tiwa language and cultural heritage [cite: 2].

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach based on secondary data collected from peer-reviewed academic journals, ethnographic books, Census of India demographic reports, UNESCO linguistic assessments, and regional educational surveys [cite: 2]. By bringing cultural studies and educational policy together, this paper outlines a practical pathway for holistic development in Tiwa-inhabited areas [cite: 2].

3. Cultural Fabric, Social Institutions, and Material Heritage: To design an effective educational framework for the Tiwas, educators and policymakers must first understand the depth and diversity of Tiwa social life [cite: 3]. Depending on their geographical location, the community exhibits distinct cultural patterns between the Hill Tiwas (settled in the hills of Karbi Anglong and Ri-Bhoi) and the Plains Tiwas (settled in the Brahmaputra valley of Morigaon, Nagaon, and Kamrup) [cite: 3].

3.1 Social Structure and the Institution of Chamadi: Tiwa society is organized into exogamous clans (khels) that govern marriage alliances, inheritance, and ceremonial responsibilities [cite: 3]. Among the Hill Tiwas, society traditionally follows a matrilineal descent system similar to the neighboring Khasi and Garo tribes, where children take the mother's clan name and women hold prominent social authority [cite: 3]. Among the Plains Tiwas, centuries of close contact with Assamese Hindu society have shaped a patrilineal structure and the adoption of Assamese surnames alongside traditional clan identities [cite: 3]. Village governance is traditionally led by a respected chief called the Loro, functioning alongside modern Gram Panchayats [cite: 3].

A vital pillar of Tiwa social and educational heritage is the Chamadi (also called Dekachang), the traditional youth dormitory situated at the center of Tiwa villages [cite: 3]. Historically serving as an indigenous school of life, the Chamadi trained young men in woodcarving, bamboo craft, traditional drumming, cooperative farming, conflict resolution, and respect for elders [cite: 3]. Together with community prayer halls such as the Borghar, Thaan Ghar, and Namghar, the Chamadi nurtured social solidarity and collective responsibility [cite: 3].

3.2 Religious Beliefs and Agrarian Festivals: The Tiwas practice a syncretic spiritual tradition that blends indigenous animism with Vaishnavite Hinduism, while a section of Hill Tiwas has adopted Christianity since the mid-twentieth century [cite: 3]. At the core of traditional Tiwa belief is a deep respect for nature—rivers, hills, forests, and ancestral spirits—as well as reverence for the legendary Gobha Raja as a sacred historical figure [cite: 3]. Because agriculture (wet-rice farming in the plains and shifting jhum cultivation in

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the hills) is the main livelihood of the Tiwas, major festivals follow the agricultural calendar, as summarized below [cite: 3, 4].

Festival / Fair	Season / Timing	Cultural Significance and Ritual Practices
Wanshuwa	Post-Harvest (June–Aug cycle)	Major agricultural thanksgiving festival featuring rice-powder pounding rituals, traditional dances, and prayers to deities for bountiful harvests [cite: 4].
Sagra Misawa	Spring Season	Celebrates the arrival of spring and the beginning of the sowing season with traditional folk dances and community feasting [cite: 4].
Jonbeel Mela	Winter (Magh, January)	Historic annual fair in Morigaon where Hill and Plain Tiwas, Karbis, and Khasis practice the ancient barter system and promote inter-tribal harmony [cite: 4].
Pisu (Tiwa Bihu)	Seasonal Agrarian Transitions	Observed on specific days of the week with distinctive rituals such as Boka Nach (mud dance), Jora Tola, and Gosai Utiwa Utsav [cite: 4].
Borot Utsav & LangkhanPhuja	Puha Purnima / Kati & Fagun	Celebrated to protect villages from epidemics, crop pests, and wild animals, accompanied by traditional songs like Lo Ho La Hai and Lali Hilali Lai [cite: 4].

3.3 Performing Arts, Textiles, and Craftsmanship: Music, dance, and handicrafts form an essential part of Tiwa cultural expression [cite: 4]. Folk songs such as Lo Ho La Hai and Lali Hilali Lai preserve oral history during weddings, harvest ceremonies, and name-giving rituals, accompanied by traditional instruments including the Khram (drum), Siphung and Kali (bamboo flutes and pipes), Doba, Gogona (jaw harp), Tandang (indigenous violin), and Thogari [cite: 4]. Ceremonial dances like Langkhon and Dain Niam unite entire villages in rhythmic celebration [cite: 4].

In material culture, Tiwa women are skilled weavers who create colorful handloom textiles on traditional looms using cotton and silk [cite: 4]. Traditional garments include the Kasong (wrap-around skirt), Phaskai (upper body breast cloth), and Nara (woven waist belt), decorated with geometric patterns handed down through generations [cite: 4, 5]. Traditional ornaments include cowry-shell garlands (Khuri lo), coin garlands (Sigi lo), Shap lo necklaces, and Khaila earpieces [cite: 5]. Additionally, Tiwa artisans excel in bamboo and cane craftsmanship, producing durable baskets (Duli), winnowing fans (Sop), mats, and eco-friendly fishing traps [cite: 5].

4. Language Endangerment and the Crisis of Cultural Transmission: Despite this rich cultural heritage, the Tiwa language faces a serious risk of extinction [cite: 4, 5]. Belonging to the Bodo-Garo subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family, Tiwa has historically been an oral language rich in folktales, myths, and proverbs, with only recent initiatives to standardize a written script [cite: 4, 5]. According to the 2011 Census of India, out of a total ethnic Tiwa population of approximately 371,000 in Assam, fewer than 35,000 individuals—less than 10 percent—reported Tiwa as their spoken mother tongue [cite: 5].

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UNESCO has officially classified Tiwa as an endangered language [cite: 5]. While Hill Tiwas in Karbi Anglong and Ri-Bhoi have maintained spoken fluency to a greater extent due to geographic isolation, most Plains Tiwas have shifted to Assamese in everyday communication, trade, and education [cite: 5]. Because many parents increasingly speak Assamese or English at home to help their children perform well in school, intergenerational transmission of the Tiwa language has declined sharply [cite: 5]. Without sustained institutional support in primary schooling, the loss of the Tiwa language threatens to disconnect younger generations from their oral literature, ritual songs, and ancestral worldview [cite: 5].

5. Barriers and Struggles in Educational Development: Census statistics and regional field studies indicate that educational advancement within the Tiwa community remains uneven and hindered by deep structural obstacles [cite: 5]. According to the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate of the Tiwa community in Assam was 61.8% (leaving 38.2% illiterate), which remained below the broader state average [cite: 5]. Even more concerning is the wide gender gap: while male literacy reached 72.0%, female literacy stood at only 51.6%, meaning nearly half of Tiwa women lacked basic literacy [cite: 5]. In remote pockets such as UmsiangMayong in Meghalaya's Ri-Bhoi district, community surveys recorded an even lower overall literacy rate of 52.9% [cite: 5].

Six primary barriers explain why Tiwa children and youth face difficulties in accessing and completing quality education [cite: 5]:

- **Geographic Isolation and Inadequate School Infrastructure:** Many Hill Tiwa villages in Karbi Anglong and Ri-Bhoi lack nearby middle or secondary schools [cite: 5]. Children often walk long distances across rugged, hilly terrain—particularly during the heavy monsoon season—resulting in irregular attendance and high dropout rates [cite: 5, 6]. Even in plains districts like Morigaon and Nagaon, annual floods damage school buildings and disrupt academic schedules for months [cite: 6].

- **Agrarian Poverty and Child Labor Pressures:** Most Tiwa households depend on low-yield subsistence farming without modern irrigation, high-yield seeds, or reliable market access [cite: 5, 6]. When family income is insufficient, older children are frequently withdrawn from school to help with rice planting, harvesting, fishing, or household duties [cite: 6].

- **Linguistic Disconnect and Alienating Curriculum:** For children raised in Tiwa-speaking hill families, entering a primary classroom where lessons are delivered solely in Assamese or English creates an immediate learning barrier [cite: 6]. Furthermore, standard school textbooks rarely include Tiwa history, festivals, or local traditions, making indigenous learners feel disconnected from formal education [cite: 6].

- **Shortage of Trained Teachers and Learning Resources:** Rural schools in Tiwa-inhabited areas often suffer from teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, lack of science facilities, and an absence of bilingual textbooks or culturally sensitive teaching aids [cite: 6].

- **Gender Inequality and Early Marriage:** Traditional social expectations frequently prioritize boys' education over girls' [cite: 6]. Due to economic hardship, lack of separate sanitation facilities in rural schools, and persistent practices of early marriage, many Tiwa girls discontinue their studies before completing secondary education [cite: 6].

- **Health, Nutrition, and Social Stigma:** Economic deprivation contributes to malnutrition among rural children, directly affecting concentration and academic performance [cite: 6]. In addition, some tribal students attending mixed urban institutions report subtle social stigma or stereotyping, which negatively affects their confidence and sense of belonging [cite: 6].

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6. Opportunities and Strategic Pathways for Holistic Progress: Addressing these challenges requires an integrated strategy that treats Tiwa culture not as a barrier to progress, but as a strong foundation for inclusive education [cite: 6]. Government departments, the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC), non-governmental organizations, and community bodies such as the Tiwa Mathonlai Tokhra (Tiwa Literary Society) and the All Tiwa Students' Union (ATSU) can work together on five practical interventions [cite: 6]:

- **Bilingual and Culturally Responsive Curriculum:** In alignment with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—which promotes mother-tongue instruction in the foundational years—the state government should fulfill its commitment to introduce the Tiwa language at the primary school level [cite: 6]. Developing illustrated textbooks based on Tiwa folktales, songs, and local ecology will make early schooling engaging and accessible for Tiwa children [cite: 6, 7].

- **Targeted Support for the Girl Child:** Expanding residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) in remote Tiwa blocks, providing scholarships, bicycles, and free uniforms, and building safe, separate toilets in rural schools can significantly improve female enrollment and reduce early marriage [cite: 7].

- **Revitalizing Traditional Youth Institutions:** Community elders and youth organizations can adapt the spirit of the traditional Chamadi into modern village learning centers offering after-school tutoring, digital literacy, reading rooms, and traditional music and craft workshops that connect youth with their heritage [cite: 7].

- **Teacher Training and Local Recruitment:** Recruiting qualified local Tiwa youth as primary teachers and training non-tribal educators in culturally responsive pedagogy will foster supportive, inclusive classroom environments [cite: 7].

- **Skill-Based Vocational Education and Cultural Tourism:** Secondary schools and colleges in Morigaon, Nagaon, and Karbi Anglong should offer vocational courses in sustainable farming, herbal medicine, handloom design, and bamboo crafts [cite: 7]. Connecting local weavers and artisans to cultural tourism initiatives centered on the Jonbeel Mela can create sustainable livelihoods while strengthening pride in Tiwa identity [cite: 7].

7. Conclusion: The Tiwa community of Assam and Meghalaya stands at an important turning point [cite: 7]. Enriched by a remarkable cultural legacy—from the barter traditions of the Jonbeel Mela and the communal spirit of the Chamadi to intricate handloom weaving and ecological knowledge—the Tiwas possess deep social and cultural strengths [cite: 7]. Yet persistent economic hardship, geographic isolation, gender gaps in literacy, and the rapid decline of spoken Tiwa threaten their long-term empowerment [cite: 7].

Sustainable progress cannot be achieved by forcing indigenous youth to choose between modern education and their ancestral heritage [cite: 8]. By improving rural school infrastructure, closing the female literacy gap, supporting low-income families, and integrating the Tiwa language and culture directly into primary classrooms, policymakers and community leaders can build an education system that honors the past while preparing Tiwa youth to thrive in the modern world [cite: 8].

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