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Autonomy, Identity, and Political Mobilization: A Political Perspective on the Tiwa Community of Assam

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Abstract: *This research article examines the political evolution, socio-historical mobilization, and administrative struggles of the Tiwa (Lalung) community in Assam, Northeast India. Moving beyond cultural description, this paper investigates the tectonic shift from traditional kingship and clan-based structures to post-colonial ethnic nationalism, sub-national autonomy movements, and the geopolitical limitations of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) established under the 1995 Tiwa Accord. By analyzing state responses, inter-ethnic friction (such as with the Amri-Karbis), and the ongoing quest for Sixth Schedule constitutional status, this study underscores the broader implications of indigenous self-determination, land alienation in Tribal Belts and Blocks, and the delicate equilibrium of pluralistic federalism in Northeast India.*

Keywords: *Tiwa Community, Autonomous Council, Ethnic Nationalism, Political Mobilization, Tribal Belts and Blocks, Sixth Schedule, Assam.*

1. Introduction: The Geopolitical Matrix of Indigenous Identity: The northeastern frontier of India represents a complex tapestry of multi-ethnic societies where cultural assertion and political mobilization are deeply intertwined [7]. Within this mosaic, the Tiwa community—historically designated as Lalung—constitutes an indigenous Scheduled Tribe residing primarily across the plains and hills of Assam and Meghalaya [1, 5]. While early ethnographic studies predominantly categorized the Tiwas through their agrarian rituals, matrilineal/patrilineal dichotomies, and folklore [5, 9, 10], contemporary socio-political realities demand a rigorous political science critique.

In post-colonial India, indigenous communities have increasingly utilized democratic agitation, sub-national autonomy frameworks, and constitutional advocacy to counter perceived cultural assimilation and economic marginalization [1, 2]. For the Tiwas, the journey from localized clan organizations to pan-community political fronts reflects a classic trajectory of ethnic nationalism [7, 8]. This article explores the root causes of the Tiwa political awakening, the fractional dynamics of their leadership (exemplified by the friction between the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee and the All Tiwa Students' Union), the structural constraints of the 1995 Tiwa Accord, and the contemporary imperative for genuine constitutional devolution [3, 6].

2. Historical Roots: From Sovereign Kingdoms to Colonial Incorporation: To understand the contemporary political aspirations of the Tiwas, one must examine their pre-colonial sovereignty and colonial displacement [2, 9]. During the Ahom regime, the Tiwas maintained considerable political autonomy through several small, independent or tributary principalities—most notably Gobha, Nellie,

Marigaon, Khola, and Sahari [5, 9]. These kingdoms served as vital geopolitical buffers and thriving trade nexus points between the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley and the Jaintia/Khasi hill kingdoms [9, 10]. The Ahom administration permitted these traditional kings (Rojas) to govern internal affairs according to customary laws in exchange for allegiance and tribute [9].

British annexation in 1826 systematically dismantled this decentralized sovereignty, amalgamating traditional Tiwa territories into the centralized colonial administrative apparatus [2, 9]. The imposition of colonial land revenue systems, combined with subsequent waves of agrarian migration, initiated the erosion of traditional community lands. Following India's independence in 1947, the framing of the Indian Constitution introduced the Sixth Schedule (Article 244(2)) to safeguard hill tribes through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) [6, 7]. However, the initial architects of the constitutional framework restricted these protections primarily to specific hill districts, leaving plain-dwelling indigenous groups like the Plains Tiwas outside immediate structural safeguards [4, 6]. Furthermore, boundary delimitation controversies in 1951—such as the incorporation of Tiwa-dominated hill tracts into the Mikir Hills through disputed demographic data—ignited early grievances of administrative erasure [2, 8].

3. Post-Colonial Political Mobilization and the Rise of Ethnic Organizations: The crystallization of political consciousness among the Tiwa community gathered momentum in the mid-20th century, catalyzed by the Assam Official Language Act of 1960 and the general socio-economic backwardness of indigenous habitations [1, 8]. Fearful of cultural assimilation into the dominant mainstream Assamese linguistic and social structure, Tiwa intellectuals, youth, and leaders began organizing structured political movements [1, 8].

The foundational milestone occurred in 1967 with the establishment of the Lalung Darbar at Umsuai, led by pioneering figures such as Abra Malang and later Indrasing Deuri [2, 8]. The Darbar formally raised the demand for a separate "Lalung Hill Autonomous District" encompassing contiguous Tiwa-inhabited zones [8]. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, delegations relentlessly petitioned state and central authorities, including meetings with Assam Governor B.K. Nehru in 1970 [2, 8].

As geographical bifurcations between Hill Tiwas and Plains Tiwas became pronounced, unifying bodies such as the All Assam Tiwa Sanmilan (originally Tiwa Yuva Chatra Sanmilon) and the Lalung Youth Front emerged to bridge community divides [2, 4]. A critical turning point occurred on October 30, 1985, with the formation of the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC) under the leadership of Giridhar Patar and Narayan Kumar Kakati [2, 4]. Recognizing that the demographic majority of the Tiwa population resided in the plains rather than the hills, the ALDDC strategically shifted its core demand from a hill-specific district to a comprehensive autonomous district covering plain sectors in Nagaon, Morigaon, and Kamrup districts [4, 7]. Concurrently, the emergence of the All Tiwa Students' Union (ATSU) in February 1989 injected militant youth vigor and uncompromising nationalism into the movement [2, 7]. ATSU criticized older leadership factions for complacency and demanded constitutional guarantees modeled after the most robust autonomous structures in the region [3, 6].

4. The 1995 Tiwa Accord and the Structural Deficits of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC): Faced with sustained democratic agitations, road blockades, and political pressure and influenced by parallel accords signed with the Bodos, Mishings, and Rabhas, the Government of Assam under Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia engaged in formal negotiations [3, 4]. On April 13, 1995, the Assam Government signed the historic Tiwa Accord with the ALDDC, leading to the creation of the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) [3, 4].

However, the genesis of the TAC was marred by severe political contention and structural compromises [3, 6]:

- **Absence of Territorial Continuity and Fixed Boundaries:** Unlike Sixth Schedule autonomous councils, the 1995 TAC agreement failed to demarcate a consolidated geographical boundary [3, 6]. It was structured around an Apex Council and scattered Lalung Village Councils (LVCs) spanning specific notified villages across Morigaon, Nagaon, and Kamrup [3].

- **Exclusion of Major Inhabited Zones:** Numerous contiguous Tiwa-majority villages and forest fringes were left outside the administrative purview of the TAC, creating administrative fragmentation [3, 7].

- **Leadership Fractures:** ATSU, the All Tiwa Women Association (ATWA), and the Lalung Youth Front vehemently rejected the 1995 Accord, arguing that the ALDDC leadership acted opportunistically by accepting a toothless arrangement without constitutional Sixth Schedule protection [3, 6].

- **Inter-Ethnic Friction:** The inclusion of certain pockets in the Kamrup (Metro) district under the TAC triggered sharp opposition from neighboring indigenous groups, notably the Amri-Karbis, resulting in complex territorial friction [6, 7].

Administratively, the TAC was granted executive powers over 34 designated subjects (including agriculture, primary education, health, and rural infrastructure) [3, 4]. Yet, in practice, financial dependency on state exchequer grants, bureaucratic red tape, and allegations of systemic fund mismanagement transformed the council into a heavily politicized patronage instrument rather than an engine of radical socio-economic transformation [3, 6].

5. Contemporary Political Dilemmas and Policy Imperatives: Today, the Tiwa political landscape is caught in a profound structural dilemma. While the TAC provides limited administrative space, the absence of constitutional status under the Sixth Schedule leaves the community vulnerable to the same systemic pressures that triggered the initial autonomy movements decades ago [6, 7].

Key contemporary challenges include:

- **Land Alienation and the Erosion of Tribal Belts and Blocks:** Land remains the foundational anchor of Tiwa economic survival and cultural identity [5, 9]. Although Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act (1886) established Tribal Belts and Blocks to protect indigenous lands from non-tribal encroachment, lax enforcement, illegal migration, and land grabbing in districts like Morigaon, Nagaon, and Sonapur have systematically dispossessed Tiwa peasants [6, 7]. Strengthening legal protections against land alienation is paramount for political stability.

- **Linguistic Preservation and Educational Integration:** The Tiwa language, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, faces severe endangerment due to aggressive assimilation and the dominance of regional majority languages [1, 10]. Although educational frameworks theoretically mandate mother-tongue primary instruction, bureaucratic inertia has delayed the effective implementation of Tiwa-medium curricula and the recruitment of qualified vernacular educators in rural schools [1, 5].

- **Reconciling Sub-Nationalism with Pluralistic Federalism:** A central tenet of modern political discourse in Assam is the tension between regional sub-national claims and the overarching concept of a unified Asomiya (Assamese) nationality [1, 7]. Mainstream socio-cultural organizations must recognize that tribal sub-nationalisms are not inherently antagonistic to broader regional unity; rather, they are democratic assertions of cultural survival [7]. True integration can only be achieved through mutual tolerance, multicultural respect, and genuine administrative decentralization [6, 7].

6. Conclusion: The political evolution of the Tiwa community encapsulates the broader struggle of indigenous minorities in Northeast India striving to reconcile modernity, state-led development, and ethnic self-determination [2, 7]. From traditional tribal governance and independent 18th-century principalities to

post-colonial agitations and the formation of the Tiwa Autonomous Council, the political trajectory of the Tiwas demonstrates an unyielding commitment to cultural preservation [5, 8, 9]. However, the structural inadequacies of the 1995 Accord—characterized by undefined boundaries, lack of constitutional Sixth Schedule protection, and socio-economic marginalization—necessitate immediate state intervention [3, 6]. To foster enduring peace and equitable development, both state and central authorities must engage in constructive dialogue with all stakeholder organizations, resolve outstanding territorial disputes, empower local administrative bodies with fiscal autonomy, and safeguard ancestral lands [6, 7]. Only through such sincere political reforms can the Tiwa community thrive as an active, empowered architect of India's diverse democratic federation.

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