

Study the Role of Tribal Women as Custodians of Culture through Traditional Ecological Practices in Assam

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Abstract:

Tribal women serve as primary custodians of culture by engaging them in different types of sustainable traditional ecological practices such as agriculture, traditional health care practices, bio-diversity conservation, weaving etc. to maintain cultural heritage across generations. Tribal women play a vital role in the production activities of different type of silk viz. raising food plants, rearing of silkworm, reeling of cocoon, weaving, marketing etc. to earn money for their livelihood which is an integral part of tradition and culture of Assam. They use various ethno-medicinal plants to cure different diseases and ailments such as diarrhea, diabetes, jaundice, dysentery, boils, pain, snake bite, etc., which is based on traditional knowledge, culture and belief. Tribal women in Assam have been involved in various socio-political movements, specially related to autonomy, land rights and cultural preservation such as the Bodoland Movement, Laika-Dhodia Rehabilitation Movement, Moran Community Protest, Anti-Opium and Freedom Struggle etc. They play multifaceted roles in day to day life by maintaining intimate relationship with the natural resources like forest, water, land etc. and transmitting oral traditions, rituals and indigenous knowledge. Due to the prevalence of tribal economy and influence of traditional work patterns, the tribal economy depends on women work force only. They are generalized as a group of vulnerable and marginalized section in all spheres of life viz. educational field, social situation, economic activities, political field and so on. The method of the paper is purely descriptive and it is analytical in nature. Present paper on study the role of tribal women as custodians of culture through traditional ecological practices in Assam is based on both primary and secondary data.

Keywords: Tribal Women, ecological practice, traditional health care, bio-diversity, Assam

INTRODUCTION:

The tribal population of India 104 million is larger than that of any other country in the world. Myanmar, with a tribal population of 17 million, has the second largest. The tribal population of India is more than total population of France and Britain and four times that of Australia. The tribal people are more in numbers in the North East Region, 94.5 per cent in Mizoram, 89.1 per cent in Nagaland, 85.9 per cent in Meghalaya, 64.2 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, 39.96 per cent in Manipur, 31.05 per cent in Tripura and 12.41 per cent in Assam (Anonymous, 1994).

Paray, (2019) reported that tribal women have comparatively high social position than non-tribal women

when it comes to resource control. They have active participation in decision –making regarding land utilization, agriculture and the control of cash flow in the tribal economy.

Tribal women play their role as custodians of culture through traditional ecological practices by using different parts of ethno-medicinal plants such as flowers, leaves, bark, roots etc. to cure from various diseases. These practices are closely related to the local customs of tribal societies, often using specific remedies provided by traditional practitioners. Indigenous medicinal plant is an important part of modern-day plant science, which is getting a unique dimension in India in the exploration process of the ethno-botanical wealth of different regions among various ethnic groups. Progress in scientific validation of traditional knowledge – based herbal medicine and ethno-medicinal plants has resulted in continuous increase demand for plant-based medicine, cosmetics and food supplements in both national and international market (Ravi S and Bharadvaja N.2019 & Sachdeva V, Roy A and Bharadvaja N, 2020).

The North Eastern Region is one of the biodiversity hot spots which is considered as rich floristic region for medicinal plants, where workers like Anonymous 1994, Jain and Borthakur 1980; Baishya and Majumder 1980; Basumatary *et al* 2004; Gogoi and Borthakur 1991; Hajra and Baishya 1981; Jamir 1997 etc. are contributing a lot in the field of ethno-botanical research.

Muga, the famous golden silk of Assam, stands as the pride of the state, which has rooted in a rich and centuries-old traditional production. Since time immemorial, the tribal women of Assam have been involved in various silk production activities, which have become an integral part of culture and tradition of Assam. Muga silk is deeply related with Assamese identity, customs and traditional attire. Assamese women were solely responsible for producing silk (Goswami, 2005). Sericulture in Assam has been closely related with rural households, where tribal women play an important role in various stages of the production process. It is estimated that nearly 60 percent of the workforce engaged in the sericulture sector in India comprises women, highlighting their dominant role in the industry. Women are involved in activities such as maintaining host plants, caring for silkworms, collecting cocoons, spinning silk threads and operating handlooms for weaving silk fabrics. Infact, Sericulture has become an important livelihood activity for many rural tribal women, offering opportunities for income generation, economic independence and social participation. The involvement of tribal women in this sector has helped in strengthening household economies and preserving indigenous knowledge.

There are 11,79,507 women weavers in Assam which is the largest number in the country. Assam has 58,114 registered female artisans with the office of the Handloom Development Commission. The tribal women of the state have been experts in needlework since ancient times. Apart from these they were proficient in the art of combining raw cotton with the silk. Cotton was used to weave endi or eri. Cotton and stroke silk are rarely combined, but they are often paired with muga, churi and riha with similar accessories were normally produced (Arts, 2019). According to Phukan (2012), India's handloom sector produces 19% on the country's total production of textile, also helps in the earning of Valuable foreign currency by exporting handloom products.

Tribal women in Assam are vital custodians of culture, preserving cultural heritage through traditional weaving (especially Mising and Bodo communities), agricultural practices, folk music and ritualistic knowledge. As keepers of intangible heritage, they maintain community identity and social unity, acting as a link between ancestral practices and the present generation

In tribal society women play significant role in traditional weaving practices. This practice showcases aesthetic beauty as well as contributes to the socio-economic growth of Indian tribes (Thosar and

Sharam, 2024). Among tribal groups, traditional dressmaking has become a significant source of self-sufficiency for marginalized women (Paray, 2019). Women in weaving sector promote sustainability, foster self-reliance and contribute to the Indian economy (Mehta, 2024). This empowerment permits them to make informed decisions, access resources and enhance family well-being (Singh and Singh, 2008). Moreover, the sector provides women with a sense of autonomy (O'Connell, 2023). Initiatives like microfinance programmes, however, are providing instrumental in allowing tribal women to achieve financial independence and understand their basic rights (Sahu *et al.*, 2024). Weaving practices are deeply rooted in age-old traditions and contribute to daily life by fostering community bonds and social ties (Swargiary & Pegu, 2020). Socially, weaving practices help in preserving cultural heritage and strengthen community ties, positioning women as protectors of tradition and identity (Manna, 2024). Weaving practices hold deep cultural significance for tribal women, serving as both a source of income and a means of preserving community identity in Northeast India. Among the Reang community in Tripura, weaving supports cultural identity while adapting to socio-economic changes (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023).

Assam is well known for its exquisite handwoven fabrics, metal crafts, ceramics and wickerwork (Ramswamy, 2013). The importance of crafts in promoting women's empowerment, their impact on the sustainability of the arts and the challenges faced by this hard work in Assam (Devi, 2013). Crafts have played a significant role in women's economic and social growth and have been an integral part of their life. The indigenous crafts of Assam are basically dominated by women, they are engaged in multiple activities of the production process, such as spinning, dyeing, and weaving (Devi, 2013).

India's handcraft item accounts only a small share of the global handicrafts market, but this sector has the potentiality to grow at significant rate. (Fabeil, 2012). Tribal women play a significant role in the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge, especially those dealing with the management of natural resources, sustainable livelihood practices, and cultural heritage (Kurtkoti and Joshi, 2024).

In a tribal society women play a vital role in their social, cultural, economic and religious ways of life and are considered as an economic contributor in their society. The tribal economy depends on women only. Tribal women pass oral traditions, folklore, rituals, knowledge from one generation to another, reinforcing cultural identity and ecological ethics. Their role sustains and transmits cultural values within the community.

Objective:

To study the multifaceted role of tribal women as custodians of culture through ecological practice in the study area.

Methodology:

The method of the paper is purely descriptive and it is analytical in nature. The present study entitled "Study the role of tribal women as custodians of culture through traditional ecological practices in Assam" is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through personal interviews, among the women members of the study area to know about the women's diverse role as custodians of ecological practices and tradition. The secondary data was collected from different books, research paper, journals, news-papers, internet and annual reports of the departments.

Findings and Discussion:

Assam has diverse tribal community such as Bodo, Mising, Kachari, Rabha, Dimasa, Hajong, Karbi, Tiwa, Miri and Garo. The tribal women in Assam act as the primary custodians of culture in various fields including agriculture (agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, fishery), medicine, sericulture, handloom, handicrafts, environmental protection, bio-diversity conservation and other forms of social custodianship. They preserve and transmit cultural identity across generations through their unique textile arts especially within the Mising and Bodo communities.

Agriculture:

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for tribal people as they are predominantly an agrarian community in the study areas. Tribal women maintain ecological balance by playing crucial role in day-to-day life viz. in the cultivation of traditional crops, holding deep knowledge of ethno-botanical medicinal plants for health and wellbeing, managing kitchen gardens without applying chemical fertilizer to improve family diet and financial security, conservation of indigenous seeds, maintenance of sustainable practice for collection of firewood and other forest resources without exploiting them. They play important role in sustainable agriculture as key contributors to the rural economy and food security by doing the activity such as land selection, care of paddy field, selection of seeds, sowing, transplanting, weeding, manuring and post-harvest processing, winnowing, threshing, storing food, preservation of seeds, managing of local markets, marketing of finish products and rearing livestock etc. In paddy fields, women do more work than their male counterparts. Comparatively womenfolk are harder worker than man. Apart from these, the tribal women are responsible for their domestic duties like child rearing and preparing food for the entire family which are considered culturally to be women's traditional roles.

Animal husbandry:

Tribal women have been involving themselves in animal rearing as one of the traditional economic activities in the area under study. The tribal women are used to rearing domestic animals like cattle, pigs, goats and other live stocks like poultry. Poultry farming are maintained for chicken and eggs for family consumption purpose.

Horticulture:

Tribal women also engage in cultivating kitchen gardens which provide food security and additional income.

Fishery:

The tribal women actively participate in fishing and play an important role in supporting their families financially.

Traditional herbal medicine:

Tribal women have depended on traditional medicine for their health and wellbeing since time immemorial. This use of traditional medicine is an integral part of culture. They actively cultivate the local ethno-medicinal plants, protect them and extensively use different parts of those plants like flowers, leaves, barks, stems and roots to cure different diseases and ailments such as diarrhea, diabetes,

jaundice, dysentery, boils, pain, snake bite, etc., especially when modern healthcare is inaccessible or expensive, which is based on traditional knowledge, culture and belief in the study area.

Environmental protection and bio-diversity conservation:

This study has revealed that tribal women are not merely passive beneficiaries of nature but are active agents in maintaining ecological balance. The role of tribal women characterized by their involvement in agro-forestry, sacred ecology and community rituals constitutes the core values of eco-feminism. Tribal women play a pivotal role in managing natural resources, acting as guardians of ecological resilience through their sustainable knowledge and traditional agricultural practices. Tribal women maintain bio-diversity conservation and environmental protection with the help of their close relationship with the land, forest and other natural resources. They play active role as custodians of indigenous knowledge systems by maintaining sustainability without exploiting the natural resources. They produce eco-friendly products from bamboo, water hyacinths, organic farming and plantation. They are often the primary consumers of forest resources and actively involved in the maintaining of forest ecosystem and wetlands.

Historically, tribal women have acted as custodians of biodiversity by protesting against the encroachment of land by non-tribal groups and the degradation of natural resources as their livelihoods are directly related with forests and agriculture.

Sericulture:

Sericulture is considered economically highly profitable and it is very popular in the tribal community in the state of Assam. Women play prominent role in the production of different type of silk viz. eri, muga and mulberry. They play an active role in raising food plants, rearing of silkworm, reeling and spinning of cocoon for production of yarn and use their traditional looms.

Handloom:

The tribal women are very expert in weaving cloth in handlooms and produce different types of products in their traditional looms. Almost all the tribal communities in the area under study weave their traditional attire on handlooms and wear it during their festivals. Bodo women are producing gamocha, aronai, dokhona, eri and muga chadar, both for domestic use and for commercial purpose. Traditional weaving practices are deeply gendered in tribal society and significantly contribute to economic development while maintaining the aesthetic beauty of tribal art in the study area. Weaving of cloths in handlooms is considered a prestigious activity in Bodo women in the bodo tribal society (Mochahary, 2021). Even there is a believe that if a Bodo girl does not know weaving in handlooms, then it is considered as the lacking of traditional practices and thus it might be difficult to get married of such a girl (Basumatary, *et al.* 2017).

Traditional weaving practices act as a means of cultural preservation as well as a vital source of income for tribal women, which empower them financially. Mising women are vital contributors to the economic stability of their community through their active involvement in handloom and handicrafts. They produce handwoven fabric, vibrant colour intricate geometric design and diamond-shaped motifs using traditional Mati Xaal looms. The Mising women are more active in weaving prepared traditional crafts, such as vibrant ege gas (warp) and gadu (shawls), which are iconic symbols of Mising identity. Through this cultural contribution, Mising women not only preserve their community's unique identity

but also play an important role in improving their socio-economic status. They are intrinsically linked to traditional handloom weaving, producing distinct designs that signify their heritage, such as *Mirizim*. The rabha women wear typical costume known as koum. They woven by back-strap loom known as Kontong.

Handicrafts:

Tribal women act as the primary custodians of indigenous knowledge systems. They are the backbone of the Assam's handicrafts sector, representing an overwhelming majority of the local handicrafts workforce. These handicrafts not only preserve the tribe's cultural heritage but also serve as a source of income, especially through cooperative ventures and self-help groups.

Movement:

Tribal women have played active role as the backbone of various social, political and ethnic movement in protecting land rights, preserving cultural identity etc. For instance, Bodo women have played a pivotal role during Bodoland movement through the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation to fight for the rights of the Bodo community. Moreover, women from the Mising tribe have been effective in mass mobilization for community rights and the preservation of language and culture. Apart from these in Assam Movement tribal women especially from rural areas, participated in hunger strikes, protests and mass mobilization, contributing to the movements, demand for protection of indigenous rights. They have participated in agitations against domestic violence and violations of child rights.

Conclusion:

Tribal women are the primary Custodians of Cultural heritage through traditional ecological practices in Assam. The findings of this research reveal that tribal women play multifaceted role as custodians of ecological practices by actively taking part in various traditional activities such as agriculture and other allied sectors, traditional health care practices, bio-diversity conservation and weaving. Their role can be identified in different aspects of tribal life and therefore have contributed a lot to society for the preservation of culture and tradition. The diverse role that women play in tribal society helps in the survival and maintenance of traditions and culture. Although the role of tribal women as custodians of culture in Assam is both foundational and transformative, yet their efforts are often overlooked, underappreciated and unrecognized. Hence it is important to safeguard their knowledge and skills in maintaining cultural identity and the study therefore highlights the necessity for greater recognition of women's vital role in indigenous society.

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