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Beyond Sanskritisation: Neo-Vaishnavism, Cultural Fluidity, and Identity Reformation among the Tiwas of Assam, India

Kakati BK*

Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), Indian Institute of Technology Jodhpur, India

***Corresponding author:** Kakati BK, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), Indian Institute of Technology Jodhpur Rajasthan, India; E-mail: bhaskarkumarkakati@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines ethnicity and identity formation among the Tiwas of Assam, a northeastern state of India, within the context of neo-Vaishnavism. It explores how religion, specifically neo-Vaishnavism influences the integration of the Tiwa community into the broader Oxomiya society of Assam and the formation of a new cultural identity. The field study reveals that with the adaptation of neo-Vaishnavism, Tiwas of Assam experienced a significant cultural shift, challenging traditional caste hierarchies and promoting inclusivity within the greater Oxomiya society. As a result, the neo-Vaishnavism movement has given rise to new social groups within the Tiwa community. This ongoing societal transformation reflects the adaptability of the Tiwas in the face of changing circumstances. Their embrace of neo-Vaishnavism demonstrates resilience and the ability to navigate evolving social norms. The study highlights the complex nature of social change and advocates for a nuanced understanding that goes beyond conventional frameworks such as Sanskritisation.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Identity; Neo-Vaishnavism; Sanskritisation; Tiwas; Assam

Introduction

This study examines ethnicity and identity formation among the Tiwas of Assam, a northeastern state of India, within the context of neo-Vaishnavism, which Sankardeva introduced during the 15th century. It explores how neo-Vaishnavism has contributed to social change, leading to social transformation, particularly among the Tiwa community. The Tiwas, who migrated to Assam long ago, have their own rich cultural heritage, including religion, customs, language, and traditions [1-3]. However, over time, various factors—including the need for communication with non-Tiwas, modern education, and government policies—have compelled them to integrate into the larger Oxomiya (Assamese) community, resulting in the creation of a new social identity. In this context, neo-Vaishnavism has played a key role in shaping their emerging identities [4-6]. Through empirical research, this study aims to shed light on the identity formation and social transformations experienced by the Tiwas through their adoption of neo-Vaishnavism. Ethnicity and identity are complex, multifaceted concepts that scholars approach in various ways. Fredrik Barth (1998) emphasises the layered nature of ethnicity. He identifies key elements of identity, such as biological continuity within ethnic groups, shared cultural values expressed in visible forms, communication among group members facilitating norm transmission, and a collective sense of identity that distinguishes one group from another. Furthermore, ethnicity can be understood as the collective identity of a culturally unified group, encompassing shared elements such as language, music, cuisine, attire, traditions, racial affinity, religious beliefs, and historical lineage, drawing on Barth's framework. These elements foster a strong psychological bond among members [7]. Ethnic groups can take various forms, from homeland societies asserting territorial ties to diaspora communities scattered across regions, focusing on cultural preservation and socio-political empowerment [8]. Therefore, ethnicity reflects an intricate interplay of cultural, historical, and social factors crucial for understanding individual

and communal identities within broader societal contexts. Conceptualising social change involves understanding the dynamics of 'order and integration' Scholars argue that social change is not simply a process but a phenomenon dependent on various social factors [9,10]. Social change can be defined as a transformation in social structures, such as the size of society, particular social institutions, or relationships between institutions [11]. Change may manifest in the form of observable differences in societal organisation, thought patterns, and behaviours, as well as shifts in relationships among individuals, groups, organisational cultures, and societies over time. As Nath (2001) notes, definitions of social change vary based on its direction, magnitude, rate, and source, which gives rise to multiple perspectives. Social change can be categorised into adaptation and transformation [10]. Adaptation involves quantitative shifts in specific variables without altering the underlying relationships between those variables and their context. In contrast, transformation refers to qualitative changes in relationships that fundamentally alter the structure of the system as a whole [10]. Adaptive changes may not be sustained if older or new circumstances arise, whereas transformation leads to enduring shifts in societal structure [12]. To understand the phenomena of social change in India, Sanskritisation is one of the important theories. Sanskritisation occurs when lower caste groups adopt the cultural practices of higher castes, seeking to elevate their social status [13].

Social change in the tribal villages of Assam is a multifaceted process influenced by various historical, cultural, and political factors [14-16,6]. The Oxomiya society, traditionally defined by language, is, in fact, a conglomerate of multilingual communities, each contributing to significant social transformations. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam from 1228 AD to 1826 AD, unified disparate regions into a cohesive territory, marking the beginning of a unified Oxomiya identity [15]. The primary reason for adopting the Oxomiya identity by the Ahom was to consolidate their power over other communities, which, in turn, shaped the development of the Oxomiya identity [14]. One critical factor in this social change is neo-Vaishnavism, a sect of Hinduism propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva-which profoundly impacted the culture of Assam [16,6].This is because culture often evolves from belief systems, with religion shaping customs, traditions, and values [12]. In fact, the loss of religion often leads to a loss of culture and, consequently, a loss of identity [17]. For the Tiwas, the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism represented a significant cultural shift. However, compared to other communities in Assam, the Tiwas adopted neo-Vaishnavism relatively late [1]. Adopting new cultural practices associated with neo-Vaishnavism, the Tiwas abandoned some traditional practices that the new faith prohibited, impacting their earlier social identity. Furthermore, a new wave of socio-cultural changes introduced during the British colonial period led to the emergence of an educated middle class in Oxomiya society. This class comprised Marwari traders, tea plantation labourers, Hindu Bengalis in white-collar jobs, and Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants [18]. The influx of these new groups created challenges for the indigenous Oxomiya population, particularly concerning land and livelihood. The language legislation introduced in Assam after independence led to further transformation of Oxomiya society. In-migration and political development in the 1980s further complement this process [19]. This shows that the formation of modern Oxomiya society is not only a religious outcome but also influenced by various socio-political factors. In recent years, a new form of resurgence has been observed among the tribal communities of Assam regarding their identity. Many have begun adopting their clan names as surnames to reassert tribal identity [20], returning to indigenous tribal religions (Sharma, 2009), and advocating for autonomy and language rights [14]. These shifts reflect the broader social changes occurring in modern Oxomiya society, where no single factor can fully explain the ongoing transformations. Based on this context, this article aims to analyse the complex and evolving nature of identity creation and social formation of Tiwas of Assam in the study of neo-Vaishnavism.

Methodology

This article aims to understand the impact and implications of neo-Vaishnavism on the Tiwas of Assam through an empirical approach. Accordingly, two villages, Udahinbori, located in the Mayong development block, and Kapurpurabori, in the Bhurbandha development block, were selected from Morigaon district for the field study. Morigaon was chosen as the field site because it has the highest concentration of Tiwas in Assam and serves as the headquarters of the 'Tiwa Autonomous Council. Further, these two villages were selected for the study because of their distinct characteristics. Both villages are inhabited by Tiwas and far from the district headquarters, preserving a rural atmosphere. Additionally, the villages presented a unique contrast within the Tiwa community. For instance, Kapurpurabori included both traditional adherents and neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas, while Udahinbori was exclusively inhabited by Tiwas, who followed the traditional religion. Fieldwork and primary data collection were conducted during November–December 2024 using a multifaceted approach, including in-depth interviews and participant observation. A total of 15 interviews were conducted. Out of which 10 were community members (religious leaders), two were prominent authors from the Tiwa community, i.e., one was a traditional adherent Tiwas, the other a neo-Vaishnavite. Two were office bearers of the 'All Assam Tiwa Students' Union (AATSU)'. Further, this research also interacted with one political and social

activist in the Tiwa community. To ensure a balanced perspective, community members were selected equally from both traditional adherents and neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas. Additionally, the researcher attended six rituals as part of participant observation. These included birth and death ceremonies, Nama-kirtan (chanting of holy prayers) among neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas, and traditional pujas conducted by traditional adherents. Apart from this, the personal involvement of the author in neo-Vaishnavism provided a unique perspective on the correlation between religious practices and the adoption of neo-Vaishnavite beliefs. Alongside primary data collection, this study also extensively reviewed secondary literature, primarily works written by Tiwa authors, to analyse and support the findings from the field.

Tiwa Identity: A Traditional Perspective

The Tiwas, a culturally rich tribal group of Assam, primarily inhabit central Assam and parts of Meghalaya [21]. Historically, they had their own religion, customs, language, and traditions. However, due to the limited availability of written records on the history of Tiwas, scholars heavily rely on folk narratives to reconstruct their history. Mainly belonging to the Mongoloid branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, the Tiwas are also known as Kiratas in ancient Indian texts [21,10]. Geographically, the Tiwa population can be divided into two main sub-groups, i.e., the Hajowali and the Datiwali or Thaluwali. The Hajowali generally live in the hills, primarily in Meghalaya, while the Datiwali or Thaluwali are mostly found in the plains of Assam [21,22]. Since they live in different geographical locations, variations are observed in the socio-cultural and political lives of these two sub-groups. Anthropometric studies show significant physical differences between Tiwa men and women in various parameters such as stature, leg length, and head dimensions. Linguistically, the Tiwa people belong to the Bodo-Naga sub-division of the Tibeto-Burman group within the Sino-Tibetan language family [23,24]. This positions them in close relation to other groups of Northeast India, such as Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa, and Garo. Despite the richness of the Tiwa language, many regard it as a dialect of Duwan [3]. The language itself is divided into two main varieties: Tiwamaat, spoken in hill areas, and Tiwamis, spoken in the plains. The latter shares a significant number of words with the Oxomiya language, likely due to regional language influences [22]. The Tiwa people have historically been known as Tifra or Tibra, but they prefer the terms Tifrasa or Tiwasa. "Tifrasa" combines three Tiwa words-Ti (water), Fra (father), and Sa (son)-indicating their belief that they are the sons of the Water God [25]. It is also possible that the term 'Tiwa' originates from 'Tibbatia', meaning people from Tibet, which eventually evolved into Tira-Tippera Tiwa. They also refer to themselves as 'Tiwa Libungs', meaning 'Tiwa people,' where 'Ti' means water and 'Wa' means superior [26]. The name Lalung, attributed to them by the Karbis, is said to refer to those living on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River, with 'La' meaning water and 'Lung' meaning rescued [27].

There are differing interpretations of the name Lalung. Deben Chandra Kalita suggests that 'Lang' means water and 'Lung' means sinking, symbolising the people living on water [28]. According to Tiwa scholar Jyotirmoy Bordoloi, Lalung may have derived from 'Living' or 'Libru,' which means Tiwa people. Another version of the story suggests that when separated from the Jayantia king, the Tiwas migrated to the plains, where they encountered a river. Many were rescued by the Karbis, who, unfamiliar with their language, referred to them as Lang-Lung, which eventually became Lalung [23,29]. In Karbi, 'Lang' means water and 'Lung' means human. Tiwa mythology further enriches their identity. One legend connects their origin to Lord Mahadeo (Shiva). The myth describes how intoxicated with rice beer, Lord Mahadeo became unconscious, and a stream of saliva from his mouth gave birth to a man and a woman, who became known as Lalung, after the 'Lal' (saliva) in Tiwa language [25]. Some believe the Tiwas descend from the mythical King Bali [4]. Although Tibet is often considered their original homeland, the exact origin of the Tiwas remains uncertain [1]. According to Lankeswar Koch Kakati, the Tiwas are believed to have entered Assam through its northeastern corner, settling in regions such as Sadiya and Dhemaji before moving to Nagaon, Morigaon, and Darrang, where they established the Khola and Khari kingdoms [28]. The Tiwas have a diverse history, including their role in the medieval period under the Ahom administration. They governed several principalities, including the Panchorajya and Satorajya. However, they did not have independent status under the Ahoms [30]. The seven principalities of Satorajya and the five of Panchorajya were ruled by the Puwali Rajas. The Tiwas also had other kingdoms under the jurisdiction of the Jayantia, such as Gobha, Nelie, Dimoria, and Sahari [30,26]. Gobha was the largest and most influential of these kingdoms, and it is believed that the Malewa clan established it. Members of this clan are regarded as traditional rulers of Gobha [31]. Social divisions among the Tiwas are primarily based on clan and sub-clan affiliations, although it is difficult to distinguish these divisions based on physical traits or religious practices. The development of this social division can be understood from their most popular legend. The legend explains that earlier, they had only one family. This family had twelve sisters. When they attained their marraige age, they unable to find suitable partners for them. Therefore, they decided to end their life. When they were about to kill themselves, God appeared and created twelve boys for them. From these twelve couples, the twelve clans of the Tiwa community emerged, each forming a distinct social group known as 'Bongsha' or 'Khuta' [25]. Religiously, the Tiwas adhere to

Hindu beliefs, particularly the 'Sakta' religion. The traditionalist Tiwas worship Lord Mahadeo as their supreme deity, and all rituals begin with a prayer to him. Various religious office bearers, including Bar Jela (an expert in folklore and religion), Ghar Jela (chief priest), Sipdoi, Loro (presider over religious performances), Giyati, and Harikuwari, perform different rituals among the community. The sacred place of worship for traditionalist Tiwas is the Borghar or No'-Baro, where they perform rituals dedicated to their family deity. The Borghar typically consists of three rooms: No'-Maji (for men during auspicious occasions), No'-Kathi (reserved for women), and a storeroom. Tiwas perform prayers here before embarking on any new ventures or occupations [25].

Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Tiwas of Assam

Neo-Vaishnavism, the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism, flourished in medieval India, with Sankardeva playing a pivotal role in spreading it throughout Assam. This religious movement emphasises devotion to Lord Vishnu through three central practices: Sravana (the love of listening to His name and glories), Lila (appreciating His divine pastimes), and Kirtana (chanting His prayers). At its core, neo-Vaishnavism centres on four principles: Nama (the names of the deity), Deva (God), Guru (spiritual guide), and Bhakta (holy association). Sankardeva notably advocated for dasya (servitude) as a way of expressing devotion [32,33]. In simpler terms, neo-Vaishnavism affirms the individual's direct communication with God, bypassing intermediaries and rituals [34]. When Sankardeva promoted neo-Vaishnavism during the medieval period, Assam was under religious oppression. Brahmanical religious practices were highly ritualistic and controlled by priests, making them inaccessible to many, especially non-Aryan ethnic groups who had little knowledge of Sanskrit [35]. In this period, human sacrifices and the low status of women were part of the royal religion, with women subjected to being taken by the Bhogi (a person who was selected for sacrifice to appease deities) for sacrificial rites [32]. The Tantric cult further contributed to social problems, such as adultery among men (Borkakoti, n.d.). These oppressive practices targeted socially downtrodden and economically disadvantaged classes, exploiting them for the sensual pleasures of the upper caste [36]. The primary goal of Sankardeva was to establish social equality. His purpose was not to propound a philosophy; instead, he envisioned bringing about a modern and comprehensive outlook on life and a healthy structure of social behaviour with an all-pervasive organisational setup [37]. He challenged the intellectual rigidity of Brahmanical philosophy and the misguided practices of Tantricism, initiating a religious reform that aimed for a more inclusive society [38]. To spread his message, Sankardeva utilised performing arts to engage the Oxomiya people, profoundly impacting their hearts and minds [39]. Neo-Vaishnavism's doctrine of universal brotherhood directly opposed the caste system, promoting the dignity of all people regardless of their social status. Various followers from different communities-such as Govinda from the Garo, Damodara from the Bhutia, Chandkhai from the Muslim community, Rama from the Kachari, and Narayana from the Miri-were attracted to the inclusive ethos of neo-Vaishnavism. They adopted the faith [40]. Sankardeva ushered in the neo-Vaishnavism movement in Assam at a time when the highly ritualistic and priest-dominated rites of Brahmanical religion were considered unsuitable for the majority of people, particularly those from non-Aryan ethnic groups who had little or no knowledge of Sanskrit, the language in which these rites and rituals were conducted [35,37]. Furthermore, there are references to human sacrifices offered by some followers of the Tantric sect of Hinduism during medieval Assam [35]. The authoritative presence of Brahminism was at its peak during Sankardeva's time, and Assamese society was in a state of instability due to widespread divisions based on caste, class, gender, and religion [41]. At this critical juncture, Sankardeva propagated neo-Vaishnavism, which was grounded in liberal humanism. Even prior to his movement, Tantric practices had already blended with the religions of non-Aryan tribes, resulting in distorted religious forms.

Over time, many communities in Assam adopted neo-Vaishnavism due to its accessibility and simplicity, which resonated with ordinary people. Beyond religious reform, neo-Vaishnavism evolved into a broader social movement, with its influence visible in various cultural practices of its followers. Similarly, the Tiwas who adopted this faith experienced significant changes in their religious and social practices. Notably, field studies show that the impact of neo-Vaishnavism extended beyond its followers to include non-converted Tiwas living nearby. In common parlance, those who adopted the faith are called Saraniya. At the same time, those who continued practising their traditional religion are known as Osaraniya, resulting in a social divide within the community. The adaptation of neo-Vaishnavism by Tiwas of Assam dates back to the reign of Ahom King Jayadhwaj Singha when the first Tiwas adopted neo-Vaishnavism. This religious shift profoundly impacted their ethnic identity, transforming it in line with neo-Vaishnavite beliefs. The changes were particularly evident in the social structure of Tiwa society [1]. In the studied village, neo-Vaishnavism gradually replaced many traditional customs. For instance, the Chamadi system, a traditional practice where seniors trained juniors in the village dormitory, was replaced by the Naam-Ghar (a community prayer hall for neo-Vaishnavite devotees). The No' Baro, a traditional worship site within respected clan members' homes, gave way to market spaces where devotees housed their deities. Additionally, sacrificial practices, once common in Tiwa society, significantly declined. In the village studied, only one

family among the traditional adherent Tiwas still follows the Sakta religion, while the rest align with the neo-Vaishnavite tradition. Over 70 per cent of the villagers no longer worship traditional deities, including Lord Mahadeo, but instead adhere to neo-Vaishnavite practices. Although a small group of traditionalists maintain their religious customs, they have even adopted certain neo-Vaishnavite elements, such as chanting Nama-kirtan rather than traditional mantras. Regardless of their religious affiliation, all villagers participate in the rituals held at Naam-Ghar, which are held separately for the Saraniya and Osaraniya groups.

The field data reveals that this division has deeply affected social and religious dynamics within the Tiwa community. Neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas no longer participate in religious ceremonies with traditionalists, and the traditional adherent Tiwas avoid eating in the homes of neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas, even if they are close relatives. The conversion has caused a psychological divide between the two groups, as one informant explained:

"This division has caused a rift within our community. Those who have embraced neo-Vaishnavism or followed Chaitanya's teachings consider themselves superior to us, the traditional adherent Tiwas. Even my own brother, who converted to Chaitanya's teachings, refuses to dine at my home. Such instances are not uncommon. But in our traditionalist circles, we view everyone as equals, and we gladly share meals with Saraniyas."

While the Saraniya group was most directly influenced by neo-Vaishnavism, its impact also extended to the Osaraniyas. Many Osaraniyas adopted the Nam-Ghar for their rituals and abandoned traditional sacrifices, offering mah-prasada (sanctified food) instead of animal sacrifices. Like the Saraniyas, the Osaraniyas shifted their worship focus from Lord Mahadeo to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. Field study shows that the influence of the Saraniyas primarily drove this transformation. Infact, one respondent said organising Naam-Kirtan over traditional pujas is easy. Organising traditional pujas was more difficult because of the monopoly of priests who conducted such events. Thus, this new shift in the Tiwa society marks the process of complementary social change aimed at maintaining social harmony and universal brotherhood [1,42]. It is important to recognise that religion, as a cultural element, is not the sole marker of group identity [12]. In the case of the Tiwa community, individuals navigate multiple identities, such as religious identity (whether Saraniya or Osaraniya) and tribal identity. They prioritise differently depending on the context [43]. As a result, neo-Vaishnavite Tiwas have not entirely abandoned their traditional practices, and traditional adherent Tiwas have integrated certain neo-Vaishnavite customs. This phenomenon can be seen as cultural osmosis, where cultural elements are exchanged within a community of diverse religious groups. Moreover, some traditional practices, once abandoned, are reclaimed when deemed necessary [12]. For example, in many places, tribal communities of Assam started using their clan's name as their surname to relate to their traditional roots [20].

Beyond Sanskritisation: Neo-Vaishnavism And The Dynamics Of Cultural Assimilation In Assam

The concept of Sanskritisation has sparked ongoing debates within social sciences. While it provides valuable insights into caste dynamics, it requires continuous reassessment due to its temporal and spatial variations [44]. M.N. Srinivas first defined Sanskritisation as a process in which lower castes adopt the cultural practices of upper castes to gain higher status. This process results in a positional shift, but it does not restructure the caste hierarchy [13]. Though Sanskritisation focuses on upward mobility, it does not challenge the core caste framework. Srinivas noted that Sanskritisation involved more than adopting new customs; it included exposure to new ideas and values derived from sacred and secular Sanskritic literature (Ibid). While Sanskritisation remains a significant theoretical contribution, especially within the context of Indian society, its application requires careful examination. Initially met with scepticism, the concept gained traction among Indian and Western scholars [45,46], who found it helpful in understanding the intricacies of the social structures of India. However, some critics have questioned its aesthetic appeal, and Srinivas himself acknowledged the model's limitations in explaining social transformations in India [47]. The process of Sanskritisation has been instrumental in studying broader societal changes. However, its relevance to tribal dynamics, particularly the Tiwa community in Assam and their adoption of neo-Vaishnavism, remains under scrutiny. Unlike Sanskritisation, neo-Vaishnavism represents a distinct form of social and religious change. Rooted in Hinduism but centred on egalitarian principles, neo-Vaishnavism does not require adopting an upper-caste identity. Instead, it promotes a casteless, equal society. Adherents of neo-Vaishnavism, including Brahmins, have embraced its values without abandoning their caste identities, signalling a shift away from traditional caste-based structures [35]. Among the Tiwas of Assam, the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism meant abandoning earlier practices associated with their traditional culture, such as pig-rearing and drinking laopani (homemade rice beer). The abandonment of these practices brought them into the cultural fold of neo-Vaishnavism but not into the fold of the caste system, as neo-Vaishnavism fundamentally does not believe in the caste hierarchy.

Earlier studies [48,6], showed that the adoption of Sarana (shelter) by tribal communities in Assam led to their integration into the Hindu caste system. This process, facilitated by figures such as the Gosain, gradually transformed these communities into the Koch caste lineage [48]. However, this integration gradually evolved

through stages like Saraniya Koch and Saru Koch before the third generation attained full Koch caste status. It is true that, following the death of Sankardeva, there were attempts at reviving the caste hierarchy within the neo-Vaishnavite faith. Immediately after his death, Damodaradeva and Harideva-two of Sankardeva's disciples-separated their identities and declared themselves independent [35]. Sankardeva had never directly criticised or abused the Brahmins and their Vedic culture. However, he strategically endeavoured to reduce the extremities of orthodox beliefs and practices by challenging the caste conservatism and exploitation introduced by Brahminism into the peaceful society of Assam [49]. Though he succeeded to a great extent in reducing disparities among people and sowed the early seeds of nationalism in Assamese society, this progress was undermined by the re-emergence of Brahminism after his demise in 1568 [50,51]. Furthermore, during the reign of Rudra Singha, Brahminical revivalism influenced the region's contemporary Vaishnava tradition. He decreed that no Brahmin could reside in a monastery headed by a Shudra Satradhikar and mandated that all monasteries perform idol worship using Brahmin priests. He publicly humiliated those who refused to comply with his orders [50]. This institutionalisation of Brahminical casteism used the satras as platforms to extend its reach over the masses, primarily through the Brahma-Samhati satras, which facilitated this process by incorporating Vedic rites and compromising on sectarian ethics [41]. Although caste revivalism was evident in Assam after Sankardeva, it is difficult to label the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism as Sanskritisation due to the complex social dynamics of the region, which differ significantly from those in other parts of India. Unlike Sanskritisation, which focuses on emulating upper-caste practices, neo-Vaishnavism promotes an inclusive concept of purity that transcends caste distinctions. Although neo-Vaishnavism never directly attacked the caste system, it did not accept it either. The faith viewed all devotees as divine incarnations, creating a unified community where equality prevails. Thus, the principle of bhakti, or devotion, asserts that all creatures of the world are equal in the eyes of God. Accordingly, Sankardeva initiated individuals from marginalised communities, including untouchables and tribals, and even demonstrated the inclusive ethos of the faith [38,33].

However, neo-Vaishnavism's approach to purity remains complex. While it advocates for an egalitarian spiritual path, it still maintains certain rituals and purity codes that reflect traditional notions of purity and pollution within the community. These codes govern the dietary habits and interactions of neo-Vaishnavites, reinforcing distinctions in ritual observance despite the sect's inclusive philosophy. While neo-Vaishnavism challenges the caste system by promoting equality, caste distinctions persist within the sect, particularly regarding purity and ritual observance. In his study of Sanskritisation, Srinivas noted the role of Brahmins in legitimising caste claims [13]. However, in the case of Oxomiya neo-Vaishnavism, Brahmins play a minimal role in shaping its religious framework. Though some gurus may assume roles akin to Brahmins, evidence shows that lower-caste individuals have also held leadership positions within neo-Vaishnavism. The ancestors of Dihial Gowswami, for example, hailed from the Kairbatta community, while the first Satradhikar (head of the Satra) of Barpeta was Mathuradas Ata, a member of the Scheduled Caste [48]. This marks a significant departure from the traditional Brahminic hierarchy and indicates a more egalitarian structure within neo-Vaishnavism. In Assam, neo-Vaishnavism departs from caste-based hierarchy and emphasises devotion as the guiding force. Unlike the more rigid caste structures found in other regions of India, the caste system in Assam operates with greater flexibility. Satras, autonomous religious entities, do not follow a strict hierarchy, and the status of individuals within the religious community is less dependent on caste [48,60,20]. This fluidity contrasts with the traditional caste dynamics described by Sanskritisation, which focuses on collective mobility and status shifts. In Assam, the individual agency plays a greater role in determining religious and social status, allowing for a more dynamic and less rigid religious and social participation system.

In the context of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, the formation of the Saraniya or Vaishnavite identity represents a new ethnic category rather than a caste. This identity is not based on caste affiliation but on shared religious practices and values. P.R. Brass (1991) defines ethnicity as the use of cultural elements by a group to distinguish itself from others. In this sense, the Saraniya identity holds significance for its members, much like class consciousness does for social classes. While the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism by tribal communities in Assam could be seen as part of the Hinduisation process, it does not necessarily lead to Sanskritisation. The Saraniya community forms a distinct group, unified by their adherence to neo-Vaishnavism, regardless of their previous caste or non-caste identities. Unlike Sanskritisation, which often results in upward mobility within the caste hierarchy, the process of Vaishnavisation emphasises equality among the devotees of the faith. However, it was observed that this sense of equality was maintained only within the community, not extended to those outside the faith. Thus, neo-Vaishnavism in Assam represents a nuanced process of cultural assimilation. The fundamentals of neo-Vaishnavism foster equality and devotion but do not necessarily result in caste-based social mobility, especially before the proliferation of the faith alongside Brahmanism. The movement challenges traditional caste dynamics and creates a new identity for its followers by equally sharing religious practices among devotees. This marks a departure from traditional Sanskritisation processes, where social mobility is typically constrained by caste

hierarchies. On the other hand, neo-Vaishnavism's promotion of an egalitarian community offers a distinct path for social and cultural change in Assam [52-62].

Conclusion

The transformation of the social identity of the Tiwas of Assam due to the influence of neo-Vaishnavism also supports the argument that social change is a dynamic and ongoing process. The journey of the Tiwas reflects their continuous negotiation with cultural and religious dynamics, showcasing adaptability and resilience amidst evolving social landscapes. It was also observed that neo-Vaishnavism significantly differs from Sanskritisation, as the foundation of neo-Vaishnavism is based on inclusivity and equality—principles not seen in Sanskritisation, which is rooted in upward mobility within caste hierarchies. With the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism, followers from the Tiwa community experienced a new phase of transformation in their cultural, social, and religious lives. The experience of the Tiwa community highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of social change, moving beyond simplistic narratives like Sanskritisation. Neo-Vaishnavism continues to shape the socio-religious landscape of Assam, fostering inclusivity and unity while challenging traditional hierarchical structures. Its expansion reflects an attempt to integrate Vaishnavism with local cultural practices, contributing to a renewed but distinct process of Sanskritisation in the region.

1. The Government of Assam established the Tiwa Autonomous Council in 1995 to oversee the welfare and development activities among the Tiwas. The administrative model of the council is similar to those formed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Its jurisdiction extends across the Morigaon, Nagaon, and Kamrup districts, encompassing satellite and core areas predominantly inhabited by the Tiwa tribes. For further details, see Kakati, B. K. (2019). Autonomy and Autonomous District Councils in the Study of Tiwa Autonomous Council. Dialogue Quarterly, 20(3), 139-153.
2. It refers to a change in identity. Sanskritisation offers a new identity through upward social mobility, whereas the adoption of neo-Vaishnavism does not necessarily alter the entire identity of the follower. For instance, followers of neo-Vaishnavism typically retain their ancestral names and surnames while adopting the religious and cultural practices of the neo-Vaishnavite faith. Unlike Sanskritisation, which often entails a shift in social status within the broader Hindu hierarchy, neo-Vaishnavism does not usually lead to upward or downward mobility. Instead, it allows individuals to maintain their traditional social identity while embracing new spiritual practices.

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