



WOMEN IN UTTAR PURBA BHARATA: A STUDY ON KHAMTI WOMEN, THEIR ROLES AND REPRESENTATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Uttar Purba Bharata, popularly known as North-East India, is a region distinguished by its rich ethnic diversity, indigenous knowledge systems, and unique socio-cultural formations. Assam, as a central state of the region, accommodates several Tai-origin communities, among which the Tai-Khamti constitute a distinct ethnic group with a well-defined cultural identity shaped by Theravada Buddhism, agrarian traditions, and community-oriented social life. This seminar paper examines the roles, status, and representation of Tai-Khamti women within contemporary Assamese society, situating their experiences within the broader discourse of gender, ethnicity, and social change in North-East India. Traditionally, Tai-Khamti women have played a vital role in household management, agriculture, weaving, and the preservation of cultural and religious practices. Although the social structure of the Tai-Khamti community is predominantly patriarchal, women have historically enjoyed relative autonomy, social mobility, and respect within both family and community life. In recent decades, processes such as modernization, expansion of education, economic transformation, and increasing interaction with mainstream Assamese society have significantly influenced the lives of Tai-Khamti women. These changes have opened new opportunities for education, employment, and social participation, while simultaneously posing challenges related to cultural preservation, identity negotiation, and representation in public and political spheres. Using a qualitative and descriptive methodology based on secondary sources including ethnographic studies, academic literature, historical records, and reports on indigenous women the study analyzes both continuity and change in the lives of Tai-Khamti women. The paper highlights that Tai-Khamti women continue to function as custodians of cultural heritage through weaving, ritual practices, and transmission of traditional values, while gradually asserting their presence in education, economic activities, and community organizations.

KEYWORDS : Tai-Khamti Women, Uttar Purba Bharata, Indigenous Women, Gender Roles, Cultural Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Uttar Purba Bharata, popularly known as North-East India, is one of the most culturally diverse and historically significant regions of the Indian subcontinent. Comprising a mosaic of indigenous communities, languages, and belief systems, the region presents a unique social fabric distinct from mainland India. Assam, situated at the heart of Uttar Purba Bharata, functions as the cultural, political, and economic gateway to the region. Over centuries, Assam has witnessed the interaction and coexistence of various ethnic groups, including several Tai-origin communities such as the Tai-Ahom, Tai-Phake, Tai-Aiton, and Tai-Khamti. Among these, the Tai-Khamti community occupies a distinctive place due to its rich cultural heritage, Theravada Buddhist faith, and well-preserved social traditions. The Tai-Khamti are a Tai-speaking ethnic group believed to have migrated from Southeast Asia and settled in the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining regions during the medieval period. In Assam, the Tai-Khamti population is primarily concentrated in Upper Assam, especially in the districts of Tinsukia and Lakhimpur, with smaller settlements found in parts of Dibrugarh district. These areas, characterized by fertile riverine plains and forest-fringe landscapes, have significantly influenced the agrarian lifestyle, settlement patterns, and socio-economic activities of the Tai-Khamti community. The relative geographical concentration of the community has also played a crucial role in preserving their language, religious practices, and cultural identity despite increasing interaction with the broader Assamese society. Women in the indigenous societies of Uttar Purba Bharata have traditionally held important roles in sustaining family life, economic activities, and cultural continuity. Unlike dominant patriarchal structures prevalent in many parts of India, several indigenous communities in North-East India exhibit relatively flexible gender relations. Within the Tai-Khamti community, women have historically been engaged in agriculture, weaving, household management,

and religious activities associated with Theravada Buddhism. Their contribution is not limited to domestic responsibilities; rather, Tai-Khamti women act as custodians of cultural heritage, transmitting traditional knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to the next. In recent decades, the lives of Tai-Khamti women have been undergoing notable transformation due to processes such as modernization, expansion of formal education, economic diversification, and increased exposure to mainstream Assamese society. Access to education and employment has opened new opportunities for social mobility and empowerment for younger generations of Tai-Khamti women. At the same time, these changes have introduced challenges related to cultural preservation, identity negotiation, and representation in public and political spaces. The coexistence of traditional expectations and modern aspirations has created a complex social reality for Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assam. Against this backdrop, the present seminar paper seeks to examine the roles and representation of Tai-Khamti women within contemporary Assamese society. By situating their experiences within the broader socio-cultural context of Uttar Purba Bharata, the study aims to highlight how gender, ethnicity, and tradition intersect in shaping the lives of indigenous women.

Review of Related Literature

The study of indigenous women in North-East India has highlighted the complex interplay between culture, gender, and social change. Singh (2003) in *People of India: Assam* emphasizes that women in tribal societies such as the Bodo, Karbi, and Mishing play multifaceted roles that combine domestic responsibilities, agricultural labor, and participation in cultural practices. Singh notes that, despite existing patriarchal norms, tribal women enjoy considerable autonomy in family and community matters, particularly in decision-making related to household management and

cultural preservation. Similarly, Sharma (2016) argues that women in indigenous Assamese communities serve as key custodians of cultural knowledge and traditional practices, including weaving, rituals, and oral transmission of folklore, ensuring intergenerational continuity. These studies demonstrate that women's contributions extend far beyond domestic labor, shaping both the economic and socio-cultural fabric of their communities. Specific literature on Tai-origin communities provides additional insights relevant to Tai-Khamti women. Sahapedia (n.d.) reports that Tai-Khamti women are deeply engaged in agriculture, weaving, and religious activities, particularly those associated with Theravada Buddhism. Despite a patriarchal social structure, women are accorded respect and autonomy, particularly in household management and community rituals. Their role in cultural transmission, especially in festivals, weaving traditions, and Buddhist practices, positions them as key agents in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity. Ethnographic work on related Tai communities, such as the Tai-Khamyang, further supports this perspective, highlighting that women play a central role in teaching language, religious rituals, and ethical values to the younger generation (Sahapedia, n.d.). The impact of modernization and socio-economic change on tribal women in Assam has also been widely studied. Limboo and Karki (2024) highlight that access to education and employment has created new avenues for empowerment among indigenous women, although challenges such as limited political participation and structural inequality remain significant. Basumatary (2024) similarly emphasizes that women's involvement in self-help groups and community initiatives illustrates a dynamic negotiation between traditional practices and contemporary opportunities, reinforcing both cultural identity and social agency. Despite these contributions, there remains a research gap concerning Tai-Khamti women specifically. Most studies focus on historical, religious, or cultural aspects rather than on their contemporary roles and representation within Assamese society. This study addresses that gap by examining the domestic, economic, cultural, and public roles of Tai-Khamti women, situating their experiences within broader discussions of gender, ethnicity, and modernization in North-East India.

Research Gap

Despite growing scholarly interest in women of North-East India, studies focusing specifically on Tai-Khamti women remain limited. Most existing literature on tribal and indigenous women in Assam, such as the works of Singh (2003) and Sharma (2016), emphasizes general tribal women's roles in domestic, economic, and cultural spheres but does not provide in-depth analysis of Tai-Khamti women. While ethnographic accounts and resources like Sahapedia (n.d.) discuss the cultural practices, religion, and social organization of Tai-origin communities, they largely focus on historical or cultural descriptions and provide minimal insight into the lived experiences, contemporary roles, and representation of Tai-Khamti women within Assamese society. Additionally, research on the impact of modernization, education, and socio-economic change on indigenous women often addresses broader groups or more prominent communities, leaving smaller ethnic groups such as the Tai-Khamti underrepresented (Limboo & Karki, 2024; Basumatary, 2024). There is a lack of systematic investigation into how Tai-Khamti women negotiate the tension between traditional roles and modern aspirations, including their participation in education, employment, social organizations, and public life. Furthermore, studies rarely address their representation in decision-making processes, political participation, and cultural preservation, which are critical for understanding women's agency within both family and community contexts. This gap is significant because Tai-Khamti women, despite their small population, play a crucial role in sustaining cultural heritage, economic livelihood, and social cohesion.

Understanding their experiences can contribute to broader discussions on gender, ethnicity, and social change in Uttar Purba Bharata. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the domestic, economic, cultural, and public roles of Tai-Khamti women, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in contemporary Assamese society. By doing so, it provides a focused, gender-sensitive perspective that enhances existing knowledge and informs policy-making related to indigenous women in North-East India.

Research Questions

Based on the identified research gap, the present study focuses on understanding the roles, status, and representation of Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the traditional roles performed by Tai-Khamti women in their community, particularly in domestic, economic, and cultural spheres?
2. How have modernization, education, and socio-economic changes influenced the social status and representation of Tai-Khamti women in Assamese society?
3. What challenges and opportunities shape the contemporary lives of Tai-Khamti women, particularly in terms of cultural preservation, social participation, and empowerment?

To address these questions, the study is designed around the following objectives

Objectives

1. To examine the traditional social, cultural, and economic roles of Tai-Khamti women.
2. To analyze the changing status and representation of Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society.
3. To identify the major challenges and emerging opportunities faced by Tai-Khamti women in the context of modernization and social change.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine the roles and representation of Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society. The research is based on secondary data sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic studies, government reports, and credible online resources on Tai-Khamti and other indigenous women of North-East India. Data are analyzed thematically to understand patterns in domestic, economic, cultural, and social roles, as well as challenges and opportunities faced by Tai-Khamti women. The approach emphasizes a gender-sensitive and culturally contextual analysis, situating findings within the broader socio-cultural framework of Uttar Purba Bharata.

Historical and Cultural Background of the Tai-Khamti Community

The Tai-Khamti community is one of the smaller Tai-origin ethnic groups settled in Assam, with ancestral roots tracing back to the Shan regions of present-day Myanmar. Historical sources suggest that the Tai-Khamti migrated to the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining areas of Upper Assam between the 13th and 18th centuries, primarily to seek fertile lands for agriculture and to escape regional conflicts (Singh, 2003). Unlike the Tai-Ahom, who established political dominance in Assam, the Tai-Khamti settled in relatively small, cohesive communities, maintaining a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Their settlements are primarily concentrated in Upper Assam districts, particularly Tinsukia and Lakhimpur, with smaller populations in parts of Dibrugarh. The geographical location of the Tai-Khamti, mostly along riverine plains and forested areas, significantly shaped their agrarian economy, settlement patterns, and social organization. The Tai-Khamti society is organized

along patriarchal lines, yet women and men perform complementary roles that ensure social cohesion and economic stability. The community's social structure is village-centered, with each village comprising multiple families bound by kinship, collective responsibility, and religious affiliation. The village chief (Chao) oversees communal matters, but household-level decisions often involve consultation with senior family members, including women, reflecting a degree of female agency within domestic and economic spheres (Sharma, 2016). Culturally, the Tai-Khamti have preserved a unique identity influenced by Theravada Buddhism, which arrived in the region from Southeast Asia. Buddhist teachings and practices permeate daily life, social norms, and festivals. Religious institutions, such as the Khamti monasteries, serve as centers of education, spiritual practice, and community gathering. Women actively participate in these religious and cultural activities, including festival preparations, offerings, and the teaching of moral and ethical principles to children, thereby sustaining both religious and cultural continuity (Sahapedia, n.d.). The Tai-Khamti are primarily agrarian, with rice cultivation forming the backbone of their economy. Women play an integral role in agricultural production, from sowing to harvesting, alongside men. Beyond agriculture, the community is known for its traditional weaving and handicrafts. Women, in particular, weave garments such as the phanin and pha lo, which carry symbolic patterns linked to Buddhist and cultural motifs. These textiles not only fulfill household needs but also function as a medium for cultural expression and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Traditional festivals, such as Poi Sangken (the Tai New Year water festival), are central to the community's cultural life. These events involve collective participation in religious rites, social gatherings, and artistic expressions. Women play a prominent role in organizing and performing during these festivals, emphasizing their importance in preserving Tai-Khamti heritage. The practice of oral history, folk songs, and ritualistic storytelling further illustrates the role of both men and women in maintaining the community's collective memory. Interactions with neighboring Assamese and tribal communities have shaped the Tai-Khamti's social and cultural dynamics. Trade, intermarriage, and shared religious spaces facilitated cultural exchange, while the community retained its distinct language, rituals, and ethical practices. The ability of the Tai-Khamti to maintain cultural integrity while adapting selectively to external influences reflects a dynamic and resilient social structure. The historical and cultural background of the Tai-Khamti community reveals a society deeply rooted in agrarian livelihoods, Buddhist traditions, and close-knit village life. Their settlements in Upper Assam's Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, and Dibrugarh districts provided a conducive environment for preserving language, religion, and cultural practices. Despite a patriarchal framework, women historically enjoyed respect and agency within domestic, economic, and cultural spheres. Understanding this historical and cultural context is essential for analyzing contemporary changes in the roles, representation, and social status of Tai-Khamti women in Assamese society.

Traditional Roles of Tai-Khamti Women

Tai-Khamti women have historically occupied significant roles within their communities, combining responsibilities in domestic management, economic activity, cultural preservation, and religious participation. Unlike many mainstream patriarchal societies, Tai-Khamti society exhibits a pattern of complementary gender roles, where women contribute actively to both household and community life, while their work is recognized and respected within social structures (Sharma, 2016). In the domestic sphere, Tai-Khamti women are primarily responsible for managing household affairs, including cooking, childcare, maintenance of family hygiene, and supervision of family resources. These responsibilities require skill, planning, and organization, and

form the backbone of the household economy. Women ensure the smooth functioning of daily life and the sustenance of family well-being, which is particularly crucial in agrarian communities where household stability directly influences economic productivity (Singh, 2003). Economically, Tai-Khamti women are integral to agricultural production. Rice cultivation, the primary occupation of the community, involves women in various stages, including sowing, transplanting seedlings, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. In addition to agriculture, women contribute to weaving and handicrafts, producing traditional garments such as phanin and pha lo, which hold both functional and symbolic significance. Weaving not only generates household utility but also serves as a medium for cultural expression, with motifs and designs reflecting religious beliefs and community values (Sahapedia, n.d.). The cultural and religious roles of Tai-Khamti women are particularly significant. The community follows Theravada Buddhism, and women participate actively in religious rituals, temple offerings, and festival preparations. During major festivals, such as Poi Sangken, women organize ceremonies, prepare ritual foods, and guide younger generations in understanding traditional practices. They act as custodians of cultural knowledge, ensuring the transmission of ethical, moral, and spiritual values to children and maintaining continuity of Tai-Khamti identity (Sahapedia, n.d.). In addition to household, economic, and cultural responsibilities, women participate in community-based activities, albeit often indirectly. They influence social decisions within families, contribute to community harmony, and occasionally engage in communal tasks such as managing village resources or assisting in social events. Although formal political power is limited, women historically exercised influence through their roles in family networks and cultural institutions, demonstrating social agency within the constraints of patriarchal structures (Sharma, 2016). Overall, the traditional roles of Tai-Khamti women are multidimensional, integrating domestic, economic, cultural, and religious responsibilities. Their labor and knowledge are central to sustaining the household economy, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting social cohesion. These roles reflect a balance between patriarchal expectations and female autonomy, highlighting women's agency as a critical factor in maintaining community stability. Understanding these traditional roles provides a foundation for examining the changing status, challenges, and opportunities faced by Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society.

Tai-Khamti Women in Contemporary Assamese Society

In contemporary Assam, Tai-Khamti women are negotiating the intersection of tradition and modernity, balancing the expectations of their indigenous cultural heritage with emerging social, educational, and economic opportunities. Historically, Tai-Khamti women played central roles in household management, agriculture, weaving, and religious practices. Today, while these traditional responsibilities remain, significant social changes have expanded their roles and visibility within the broader Assamese society (Sharma, 2016). Education has emerged as a major catalyst for change among Tai-Khamti women. Access to primary and secondary schooling has increased over the past few decades, enabling younger generations to acquire literacy, professional skills, and awareness of rights and opportunities (Limboo & Karki, 2024). Educated women are increasingly participating in formal employment, including teaching, administrative roles, and small-scale entrepreneurship. This transition has empowered women economically, allowing them to contribute to family income beyond traditional agriculture and craft production. Education has also enhanced women's agency, providing them with tools to engage with wider social and cultural discourses, thereby increasing their visibility in community and public life. Despite these advancements, Tai-Khamti women continue to face socio-cultural and economic

constraints. While the community respects women's domestic and cultural roles, patriarchal norms still limit access to formal leadership and decision-making positions. Political representation remains minimal, and women's voices are often mediated through male family members or community elders (Basumatary, 2024). Economic limitations, particularly in rural areas, restrict women's ability to pursue higher education or entrepreneurial ventures independently, reinforcing dependence on traditional family structures. Cultural preservation remains a critical domain for Tai-Khamti women. They continue to act as custodians of religious rituals, festivals, and weaving traditions, ensuring that the community's language, folklore, and Buddhist practices are transmitted to younger generations (Sahapedia, n.d.). However, exposure to mainstream Assamese culture and media has created both opportunities and challenges. While women are increasingly able to integrate modern ideas and education with traditional practices, there is a risk of cultural dilution if younger generations disengage from indigenous rituals and crafts. Community initiatives and self-help groups have provided a platform for Tai-Khamti women to assert collective agency. Through participation in cooperative ventures, women can pool resources, enhance economic security, and strengthen social networks. Such initiatives demonstrate a shift from purely domestic roles to active engagement in community development, highlighting the adaptive strategies of women in maintaining cultural integrity while embracing socio-economic change. Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society navigate a complex landscape shaped by tradition, modernization, and socio-economic transformation. While traditional roles in domestic, economic, and cultural spheres continue to define their identity, education, employment, and community engagement have expanded their agency and representation. Understanding these dynamics is essential to recognize the evolving status of Tai-Khamti women and to formulate policies and programs that support their empowerment without undermining cultural heritage.

Challenges and Opportunities of Tai-Khamti Women

Tai-Khamti women, while historically respected for their roles in domestic management, agriculture, weaving, and religious practices, face several challenges in contemporary Assamese society. One of the primary challenges is limited political representation. Despite their contribution to community cohesion and cultural preservation, women remain underrepresented in formal decision-making processes and local governance structures. Patriarchal norms, both within the family and the community, restrict women's active participation in leadership roles, limiting their influence on social and developmental policies (Basumatary, 2024). Socio-cultural constraints also affect women's autonomy and mobility. While Tai-Khamti women historically enjoyed a respected status within household and cultural spheres, traditional expectations continue to dictate their responsibilities. Women are often expected to prioritize domestic work and caregiving over education or professional ambitions, which constrains their opportunities for social and economic advancement (Sharma, 2016). Economic limitations further exacerbate these constraints, especially in rural areas where subsistence agriculture dominates. Limited access to independent income sources reduces women's financial empowerment and decision-making capacity, making them dependent on male family members for economic security (Limboo & Kariki, 2024). Education remains another area of challenge. Although primary education has become more accessible, higher education is still limited due to geographical remoteness, financial constraints, and socio-cultural expectations. The lack of educational opportunities restricts women from acquiring professional skills, entering formal employment, or engaging effectively with wider Assamese society. In addition, Tai-Khamti women face the risk

of cultural dilution as exposure to mainstream Assamese culture and modernization sometimes discourages younger women from participating in traditional practices such as weaving, religious rituals, and festivals (Sahapedia, n.d.). Balancing traditional expectations with modern aspirations can also create psychological stress and identity conflicts for women. Despite these challenges, Tai-Khamti women also experience significant opportunities in contemporary society. Education and skill development have become critical tools for empowerment, allowing women to participate in formal employment, entrepreneurship, and professional training. Economic participation through agriculture, weaving, handicrafts, and small-scale business ventures enables women to contribute to family income and attain financial independence, enhancing their social agency. In addition, women's involvement in community initiatives and self-help groups strengthens leadership skills and provides platforms to assert collective decision-making and community development (Basumatary, 2024). Cultural preservation remains a vital domain where women continue to exercise agency. They are central to maintaining language, religious rituals, festivals, and traditional weaving practices, ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage to younger generations. Exposure to digital media and technology offers further opportunities for education, entrepreneurship, and networking, enabling women to expand their reach beyond their immediate communities. Government and NGO initiatives targeting tribal women in areas of education, skill development, and economic empowerment also provide structured support for socio-economic mobility. Finally, the growing interest in cultural tourism and indigenous handicrafts presents new avenues for women to monetize traditional skills while promoting Tai-Khamti cultural identity. Tai-Khamti women navigate a complex socio-cultural landscape shaped by both constraints and opportunities. While challenges such as limited political representation, socio-cultural restrictions, economic dependency, and cultural dilution persist, education, economic engagement, community participation, and cultural preservation offer pathways for empowerment. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and programs that support Tai-Khamti women, enabling them to preserve their cultural heritage while participating fully in contemporary Assamese society.

Major Findings of the Study

1. Central Role in Household Management: Tai-Khamti women continue to play a pivotal role in domestic work, including cooking, childcare, and family resource management, sustaining household stability.
2. Active Participation in Agriculture: Women are actively involved in all stages of agricultural production, from sowing and transplanting to harvesting and post-harvest processing, contributing significantly to the family economy.
3. Custodians of Cultural Heritage: Women serve as key custodians of cultural practices, including weaving, folk rituals, festivals, and oral traditions, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of Tai-Khamti identity.
4. Religious Engagement: Women participate in Theravada Buddhist rituals, temple activities, and festival preparations, reinforcing both spiritual and social cohesion within the community.
5. Impact of Education: Access to education has enhanced women's agency, enabling participation in professional employment, entrepreneurship, and broader social engagement.
6. Economic Opportunities: Beyond agriculture, women's skills in weaving and handicrafts provide avenues for income generation, though commercialization remains limited in rural contexts.
7. Challenges of Modernization: Exposure to mainstream Assamese culture and modernization creates potential

tension between traditional roles and modern aspirations, risking partial cultural disengagement among younger women.

8. Limited Political Representation: Women have minimal participation in local governance and decision-making processes, restricting their influence on community development and policy matters.
9. Socio-Cultural Constraints: Patriarchal norms continue to dictate women's responsibilities, limiting mobility, career opportunities, and independent decision-making despite historical autonomy within domestic and cultural spheres.
10. Community Engagement: Participation in self-help groups, cooperative ventures, and community initiatives has increased women's collective agency and leadership in social and economic activities.
11. Digital and Media Influence: Access to digital media and technology has provided women with new tools for education, networking, and entrepreneurship, enhancing their social visibility and outreach.
12. Cultural Preservation and Adaptation: Women maintain traditional practices while adapting to modern demands, reflecting resilience and the ability to balance cultural continuity with socio-economic change.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the multifaceted roles, challenges, and opportunities of Tai-Khamti women in contemporary Assamese society. Historically, women in the Tai-Khamti community have been central to domestic management, agriculture, cultural preservation, and religious life, serving as custodians of both family well-being and community heritage. These traditional roles continue to shape their identity and social status, demonstrating the enduring significance of women's contributions in sustaining cultural continuity and community cohesion. In contemporary times, modernization, education, and socio-economic changes have expanded the scope of women's participation beyond traditional spheres. Access to education has empowered younger generations, enabling them to pursue professional opportunities, engage in community development, and contribute to economic activities. Despite these advancements, Tai-Khamti women face persistent challenges, including socio-cultural constraints, limited political representation, economic dependency, and the risk of cultural dilution due to external influences. Rural remoteness, restricted access to higher education, and patriarchal norms further hinder full participation in decision-making processes. Tai-Khamti women exemplify resilience, adaptability, and the ability to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity. Recognizing and supporting their contributions through targeted policies, educational programs, and community initiatives is crucial for promoting gender equality, cultural sustainability, and socio-economic development. The study underscores the importance of understanding women's roles within their cultural context while creating opportunities that enhance their agency and visibility in contemporary Assamese society.

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