

The Impact of Modernization on the Tribal Life of Tripura

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ABSTRACT

This research paper discusses in detail about the tribal life of Tripura and the impact of modernization on their lives. Tripura is a small state, which has a mixed population of tribal and non-tribals. Lots of differences can be witnessed in the life-style of tribal people and non-tribal communities. This paper makes a comparative study on the lives of tribal people and non-tribal communities.

This paper attempts to make an overall assessment of the impact of modernization on the lives of tribal people of Tripura. Let be the field of culture or religion; either be language or education - everywhere the impact of modernization on the traditional lives of tribal people can easily be noticed.

This paper justifies the fact that it is due to the impact of modernization by which the lives of the tribal people have been advanced to the path of development.

Keywords: *Tribal life; Modernization; culture; Religion; Language; education.*

INTRODUCTION

Tripura is a tiny, beautiful hilly state in the North Eastern Region of India. This state has its own ancient cultural heritage. Different types of 19 tribal communities have a majority of tribal population in the 19th century. Even non-tribal people of Tripura have increased their population and as per latest census of 2011, a total population of 36,73,917 with Scheduled Tribes (STs) comprising 11,66,813 individuals representing 31.8% of the total population. The major tribal groups are as follows :- Tripuris, Reangs and Jamatias. Ethnographically Tripura stands on a borderland. Tripura has a dual society in the eastern hills and a Bengali society in the Western Valley.¹ As a matter of fact, the Tripuri society consisted of a large number of clans and communities; these persons speak various dialects of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family ;most of them belong to Mongoloid race.

The Bengalis and the tribal people constitute the two major ethnic groups in Tripura, making the bulk of the population. The prominent tribal communities in Tripura are the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Kuki, Lushai, Mog and Chakma. From anthropological and linguistic point of view they were :- Tibeto-Burmese in origin. Most of these tribes besides having similar ethnological characteristics possess almost identical cultural and social traits. Besides these tribes there are Uchai, Garo, Santal, Chaimal, Orang, Munda, Bhutia, Lepcha, Bhil and Khasia tribes.²

History is the evidence of this fact that the tribal people used to stay in the - hilly areas, which was also known by the Britishers as 'Hill Tipperah'. Their life-style was based on their traditional values and ideas. As per the social norms of their ethnic culture they lived happily. They were dependent on forest; so they were also called 'Forest dwellers'. Most of the tribal people were agriculturists. They followed a peculiar system of cultivation known as 'Jhum Cultivation'. The method of Jhum Cultivation was as follows :- "Each family selected a piece of bamboo jungle for cultivation, Jungles were cut down and cleared in the month of December and set fire in the month of March. After the first fall of rain, they began to drop seeds of cotton, chilly and paddy into the holes. The paddy was generally

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reaped in September. And after that Cotton was picked in November and December and finally the chillies were gathered. After two years of cultivation they began to move in search of new land for Jhum Cultivation. To protect the Jhum crops from being damaged by birds, monkey etc. ,the Jhum Cultivators had to keep a watch on their Jhums which they did by building watch houses in the Jhum and living there day and night.³

Lewin has described the Tripuris as a 'restless tribe' ⁴ ,shifting their villages every now and then. But the Jamatias disproved this thesis.⁵ They are reported to have adopted 'Plough Cultivation' from 1887 and by 1931, almost all the Jamatia families had eschewed shifting Cultivation. Their tendency towards the landed property instead of nomadic life, made them to live in a particular place.⁶

In Tripura one finds an expression of some of the highest qualities of the Indo-Mongoloid people under Hindu inspiration. The Tripuris, like other Bodo groups, had their tribal religion modified by Hinduism. At the same time, under the patronage of Tripura rajas, a good deal of their religion and its rituals are preserved as a part of their religion.⁷ The important tribes in Tripura such as - the Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatia, Noatias and Halams are Hindus and practice all the Hindu religious rites like any other Hindu. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji, "The Cantais (the Tripuri High Priests) and the Deodais are regarded as the -Custodians of the Tripuri religion, and still occupy as exalted a position in society as the Brahmins in Hindu society."⁸

Language plays a very pivotal role for the development of culture. About 420 languages and dialects of different language families are used in a complex and wide ranging ethno and socio-linguistic configuration in north-east India. The fact confers a certain singularity and distinctness to language related issues in the region. The ethno spectra of north-east India encompass the non-tribal population as well as the heterogenous tribal population belonging to 209 scheduled tribes of the seven states of the region.⁹ The dialect of the Tripuri is known as Kokborok, the literal meaning of which is the language of men. It is one of the Bodo groups of dialects which had originated in the Brahmaputra valley and which was at the one-time spoken over a wide area in that valley and the adjoining areas of North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid bloc in north-eastern India. The dialect belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages and its root can be traced in Socio-Tibetan speech family.¹⁰ It is due to the impact of modernization that the Kokborok language is written in Bengali scripts. It happened after the migration of a large number of Bengalis during the reign of Ratna Manikya. As per latest data the Kokborok dialect has no script of its own.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Under the review of literature I have gone through many secondary sources, which proved to be very helpful to complete my research paper. As a primary source I have visited the areas where different types of tribal communities reside and communicated with them so that the reality of the impact of modernization on the lives of tribal people can be easily comprehended. The name of the secondary sources are as follows :-

- (1) 'Modernity in Tradition - A Historical study of the Jamatia Tribe of Tripura', written by K.B.Jamatia, is a very authentic book to assess the effect of modernization on the traditional lives of the Jamatia tribe.
- (2) 'Tripura Through the Ages' written by Nalini Ranjan Roychoudhury, provides ample information on the lives of tribal communities and the impact of modernization on their lives.
- (3) 'Tripura'; a book written by S.N.Guha Thakurta, is a very reliable book which provides lots of information on the religious, social, cultural and economic lives of the tribal communities and assesses the modernization and their impact on their lives.
- (4) 'The tribes of Tripura - A Dissertation', written by S.B.K. Dev Varman, is a very helpful book to carry out my research, because this small book provides all detailed information on the tribal communities of Tripura.
- (5) 'Tripura Its History and Culture', written by Omesh Saigal, is a unique secondary source by which I gathered lots of information related to my research paper. Of course, this book is very helpful.
- (6) 'A Political History of Tripura', written by J-Gan Chaudhuri, is the superb secondary source that provides more and more authentic data on my research paper.
- (7) 'Treatise on Traditional Social Institutions of the Tripura community', written by Shri Debapriya Deb Barman occupies the place of the most important secondary source related to my paper as this book talks about the social, cultural, religious and economic lives of the tribal communities of Tripura and highlights the impact of modernization on the overall condition of the tribal people of Tripura.

On the basis of above-named secondary sources I have completed my research paper and I have also tried my level best to fill-up the research gap wherever I have found it mandatory.

IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON SOCIAL LIFE OF THE TRIBAL PEOPLE

According to Cambridge Dictionary, "Modernization is the process of starting to use the most recent methods, ideas, equipment etc.- so that something becomes or seems more modern ". On the basis of this definition lots of impact on the social life of the tribal people can be observed. Being a small state of north- eastern India, 19 tribal communities and non-tribals such as Bengalis, Muslims and others reside in Tripura. When the tribal communities came into close contact with the people of the plain area, they tried to follow their culture. In this way lots of similarities were observed. S.V.K Devvarman has the term of 'Deshi Tripuris' in this manner, "The Deshi Tripuris are treated as one of the five Kshatriya tribes. They, it is believed, have originated as a result of admixture between the Tripuris and the Bengali Hindus. Socially they are more akin to the Bengalees and many of them are Vishnuits." ¹¹

The social institutions of any society are those patterned sets of positions, relations and activities involved in biological reproduction, socialization and enculturation, production and distribution of goods and services and the maintenance of order. The total network of all the social institutions and the connections among them constitutes the core social structure or social organization of the society. ¹²

It is an axiom of the history of Tripura that the Tipras entered Tripura through its north-eastern corner, settled there and gradually extended their settlement and suzerainty over the whole of Tripura. During the formative period of fumbling assumption of power, the Tipras had to face at least two resistances, first from the Bachal tribe and second from the Mogs. They were able to expand their sphere of influence as far south and west as Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Sylhet. ¹³

The tribal society in Tripura was patriarchal. Father dominated the family and lineage was always traced through him. It seems that the family was the main unit of the tribes. As per traditional belief system the families belonging to the same tribe lived in a village, which was called by the name of 'Para' or 'Bari'. This was named after the Chief of the village. The villages of the tribal people were situated on the hill-tops. Some villages were named on the name of Chheras (small hill stream).

The tribal society was dominated by the chiefs. Different tribes had their own chiefs, under whom they were administered. In the villages it was the main authority of the chiefs, where village disputes were settled in community trials. As the ordinary tribals had to approach the Government officials through their chiefs, so the chiefs realised some payment from them. The Government officials collected tax through the Chiefs and so the chiefs were exempted from paying any tax. In short, the chiefs enjoyed socially, politically and economically a specially privileged position. ¹⁴ In modern days, this is stopped and due to impact of modernization either chief or normal tribal people had to pay equal tax as levied by the Government.

MARRIAGE SYSTEM

If we observe minutely then we find that the marriage customs of the tribes were primitive in nature. When a young man wished to marry a girl, he had to serve for some years in the prospective bride's house. This practice was Known as 'Jamaikhata'. During the period of 'Jamaikhata' the young men had to perform all sorts of work. He had to obey all orders of his Father-in-law during this period. If he was found suitable, the girl was given to him. But, if he was found unsuitable or not obedient, he was paid some compensation and was allowed to go back to his own house. ¹⁵

It is noteworthy that among most tribes in Tripura a marriage ceremony is preceded by the consent of both, the groom and the bride. Unlike a Chakma marriage which is generally settled by the guardians, the young men and women of all other major tribes in Tripura enjoy a much greater freedom in the selection of their partners and the final say in the matter rests with them and not with their parents or guardians. ¹⁶

History is the evidence of this fact that child-marriage was rare among the tribal communities of Tripura. Love-marriage was in practice. Even after the death of husband, a woman was allowed to remarry. It means widow marriage was allowed. Among the Reangs and the Noatias, widow remarriage is allowed, but not before one year after the death of the husband. Similarly, a widower cannot remarry within a year of the death of his wife.

At the end of the 19th century, the Sati system was prevalent in Hill Tipperah. Reference of Sati system is mentioned in the main books of Tripura:- Such as; 'Sri Rajmala' and 'Tripura Desher Katha Likha' and Tripura Buranjis. According to Rajmala, Maharani Kamla Devi, wife of Maharaja Dhanya Manikya Committed Sati. Sati system was abolished in other parts of India in 1829A.D. by Lord William Bentinck. But, it was not banned in Tripura. It was due to modernization carried out by the greatest rulers of Tripura named as 'Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya' that the Sati system was totally banned in Tripura in 1889 A.D.

DRESS AND ORNAMENT

As we know, the tribal people of Tripura used to live in the lap of the Nature. So, Nature plays a significant role in the development of their personality. T.H.Lewin says, "The dress of women (Tipperah) is unornate. The petticoat is short, reaching a little below the knee and made of very coarse cotton stuff of their own manufacture. It is striped in colours of red and blue. The unmarried girls cover the breast with a gaily-dyed cloth and fringed ends.¹⁷ The 'Rignai' and 'Risha' are used by all womenfolk of the tribes of Tripura, though the combination of different colours differs from tribe to tribe. These are woven in traditional loin loom. Like the women, the tribal male persons use 'ritaborok' in cold season and 'Kharagrisa' (dhoti like cloth). Male persons of the tribal community also use 'Kamchuluiborok' (Jacket like Shirt), Which is made of coarse home-woven fabric.

The ornaments are used by the tribal men and women as per their traditions. But the ornaments used by the menfolk are now completely oblivious. The ornaments used by the womenfolk are commonly known as Ranghwatang, Brindabanmala Khaisamala, Ganthimala, Parbamala.¹⁸

The ornaments used for beautification of their hands are known by various names such as Mathiya, Balaya, Chenche, Bangiri, Betraborok (a comb made by bamboo) especially carved and decorated used as comb for embellishing their chignons, though not of high quality, is an indication of their artistic originality. It was used by both men and women.¹⁹

If we analyse minutely the impact of modernization on the dress code and ornaments of tribal people, it can be said with certainty that the tribal male persons do not want to put on traditional clothes, they seem to be more comfortable in putting on western dresses such as pants, trousers, shirts etc. In the same manner, the tribal women have also limited the use of their traditional dresses and they have started to prefer modern dresses. Even their traditional ornaments are also used on some special occasions only. Due to modernization, their dresses and ornaments are also modernized. They generally prefer modern attire. Due to modernization the women of tribal communities use vermilion on their head.

As a matter of fact, the Tripuri culture has evolved through ages in its own soil and developed through the generations. As they gradually came into contact with the neighbouring Bengalees an assimilation of the two cultures to a considerable extent took place. The acculturation is occurring rapidly within the urbanised Tripuris in comparison with the Tripuris residing in the interior places.²⁰ Generally, the tribal people, who live in the hilly remote areas sustain their traditional culture. Their dress, ornaments, artefacts, food habits, Folk songs, Folk dance and observance of traditional festivals can be observed.

Folk Songs :- Truly, the folk songs of Tripura depict a many sided picture of the people of the land and its social, ritual and religious structure. Folk songs and folk tales display profound thought and imagination. They have a beautiful rhyme. The folk songs are based on old traditions, thoughts, desires, love, Jhum cultivation, harvesting, festivals, beliefs and superstitions etc.

Folk Lore :- The Folk lores glorify the rich culture of the tribal people of Tripura. Folk lore always depicts the true story of forest dwellers. If we forget the folk lore of Tripuri people then we have to forget their tradition and beliefs. Generally, Folk lore is related with the Jhum cultivation of the tribal people ;the socio-economic life can be easily understood by folk lore.

Folk Dance:- The Folk Dance of Tripura is famous all-round the country some of the dances like Garia, Mamita and Lebang bumani etc are very popular among the Tripuri community. The musical instruments like Tuitreng, Lebangti etc. are played in the dance. 'Lebang Bumani' dance is one of the most colourful dances of the Tripuri community. In this dance the male and the female take part in the dance collectively, this shows the equal status of gender. The Garia dance takes place at the time of Garia Puja. Like the Tripuri community this dance is also popular in the other communities of Tripura; such as - Jamatia, Reang, Noatia etc. 'Mamita' dance is performed in the months of October and November.

Due to the impact of modernization the folk song, folklore and folk dance are mixed with modern song and modern dance. The tribal youths are more interested in modern songs and modern dance. But, on special occasions and festivals the traditions are not forgotten.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Practically, the tribal community of Tripura observe animism, which is based on Hinduism. An overwhelming majority among the important tribes in Tripura- the Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatia, Noatias and Halams - are to all intents and purposes, Hindus and practice all the Hindu religious rites like any other Hindu. Certain rituals connected with even those pujas which are confined exclusively to them bear close similarity to those of the other Hindus.²¹

The Mogs and the Chakmas are Buddhists. The Lushais and some people of the Kuki and Garo communities embraced Christianity. Although the religion of the majority of the tribal people is termed as Hinduism, it is a curious mixture of Hinduism and animism, the Old Gods have not yet been ousted and they are worshipped side by side with those of the Hindus by tribal priests. They worship the elements, such as the God of water, the God of fire, the God of forests, the God of earth etc.²²

Generally, the tribal people of Tripura are attached with the following temples or Pujas :-

- (i) The temple of Fourteen Gods
- ii) The temple of Tripura Sundari
- iii) Kherchi Puja
- iv) Ker Puja
- v) Garia Puja
- vi) Ganga Puja etc.

If we trace back the history of Tripura, we find that human Sacrifices also prevailed in Tripura from a very ancient time. These human sacrifices were done at the altar of Gods and Goddesses. When the Hindu rulers of Tripura and their followers became the worshipper of Siva in tantric form and were influenced by the Sakta cult, the human sacrifice became a popular system in Tripura .²³

Due to the impact of modernization on the religious life of the tribal people of Tripura human sacrifice was stopped and the religious life became modernized. But, it is also to be noted that it was due to the Missionary work many tribal people of different communities embraced "Christianity. Thus, the traditional religious life of the tribal people took a major change due to modernization.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE LANGUAGE OF THE TRIBAL PEOPLE

The tribal people of Tripura speak Kokborok language and other languages based on their traditions. The Kokborok dialect has no script of its own and is written in Bengali script. It has remained almost confined as non-literary vocabulary among the Tripuris inhabiting hill slopes or hillocks.

Kokborok language has many proverbs and sayings in the Kokborok dialect. But after the arrival of Bengali people in Tripura, the tribal communities of Tripura started to use Bengali language and afterwards Kokborok language was written in Bengali script. It was due to the impact of modernization that made 'Bengali' language as the most common language and due to the large number of Missionary schools English language occupied the pivotal place in the state of Tripura.

CONCLUSION

Thus, on the basis of above-mentioned facts it can be said that traditional beliefs and customs of the tribal communities of Tripura are still prevalent. But, on the other hand due to the impact of modernization lots of changes took place in the lives of tribal people by which they came to be known as modernized. Though the tribal people of Tripura used to stay in the hilly areas and their life-style was based on their traditions. Lots of change can be witnessed in the dress and ornaments, marriage system, cultural life, religious life and economic life of the tribal people of Tripura. To conclude, it can be remarked that it is the mingling flow of tradition and modernization that shaped the lives of tribal people of Tripura in a better manner. Nowadays they all are part and parcel of 'Global village'.

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