Traditional aphorism, beliefs, proverbs, riddles, stories and songs current among the tribes of Tripura constitute an important area of research in folk-thought. Judged by their proverbs, these tribes seem to possess a sound understanding of human nature. Their proverbs indicate careful observation and wise generalisation on human character. This article attempts to understand the social thought of the Tipperah (alias Tripuri, Tipra, Deb Barma), the largest tribal community of Tripura.

Historical background

Tripura is situated between Assam and West Bengal and its population is heterogeneous. The Bengalis from the west and the tribes from the east have extended their settlements, which resulted in two types of agronomy: plough cultivation practised by the Bengalis and shifting cultivation practised by the tribes. As such, the western valley has become bookland, while the eastern hills have remained folkland for a long time now. The socio-political order was dominated by a ruling dynasty of the Tipperah community. The kingdom was attacked repeatedly and invaded by Afghans and Mughals, but the battles ceased during the period of British administration. The dynasty survived several vicissitudes of history and was handed over to the Government of India in 1949.

The major tribes of Tripura are: Tipperah, Riang, Kuki, Lushai, Halam, Jamatia, Noatia, Magh and Chakma. Most of them are farmers who use the slash-and-burn method of cultivation. The life is largely rural, there is little commerce and literacy is very low. The middle class is very small in number. Each community has a chief and village council. The prosperous males are polygynous, while the ordinary people are monogamous. Family is the main unit of social life.

Social thought of Tipperah

The lack of written records makes the span of social thought a short one. But it reveals a keen sense of observation and a desire for world affirmation. Selected illustrations of proverbs have been noted below which illuminate the main themes and concerns of Tipperah tribal life.

That evil deeds return upon the doer is recognised by such proverbs as ‘Spittle falls back in the face of him who spits upwards’, ‘A spear hurts its maker’, ‘Sin does not spare one who commits it’, and ‘Pride makes a scholar blind and immoral conduct makes a saint blind’. The power of money is understood through the proverb ‘If somebody possesses sufficient money he can obtain even a tiger’s eye’.

The importance of industriousness is reiterated in a few proverbs such as ‘He who loves family too much sinks and dies; he who loves work prospers’, ‘He who takes food on banana leaf during his youth will take food on a plate of metal during old age’ and ‘An idle person finds no food, a shrewd person finds no shelter’.

The hollowness of foppishness has been censured by the proverb; ‘Even a rat does not enter into his house to discharge faeces, but he exhibits foppishness’.

The advantage of keeping company with good persons is expressed in the following proverbs: ‘Burning of poor quality wood produces excess of ashes, talking to notorious persons produces altercation’ and ‘Prefer a house next to that of seven witches, but avoid a house next to that of a deceitful person.’ The influence of social environment on human life is stated in proverbs like ‘Keeping company with a fickle lady makes a man fickle; keeping company with a fickle man makes a woman fickle; and ‘Keeping company with a thief makes a man a thief’.

The following proverb makes an assessment about the three prominent neighbouring communities: ‘The rice
of the Kuki-Lushai people is fine, the curry of the Bengalis is tasty, the hands of the Riang people are open.

The need for independent thinking has been urged in this aphorism: ‘If you scatter rice in a jungle on other people’s advice, it will be impossible to collect all the grains again.’

The force of rumour has been explained with an analogy from wild life: ‘It is possible to shut the mouth of an elephant and a tiger, but it is impossible to shut the mouth of man.’

Practical advice for business transactions is uttered thus: ‘Money in one hand, goods in another.’ Another very shrewd advice is ‘Do not give loans to a sweet-tongued man’, ‘After taking a loan weep a little, laugh a little if you are denied a loan.’

Sweet behaviour has been appreciated in this proverb: ‘After swallowing sweetmeats, we no longer feel sweetness, but the sweetness of amiable behaviour remains in memory.’

The selfish tendency to get rid of someone after he has served his purpose finds expression thus: ‘Young boys! Please come and help in cutting down deep jungle. Young boys! Please go away, we are now relishing the pork of a big swine.’

The danger of going to law courts for filing suits against neighbours has been pointed out: ‘It is better to step faeces than to step in a court of law or on a policeman.’

A mother’s love and affection has been found to be a genuine and enduring trait. So the proverb runs: ‘There is nothing as round as the moon, there is nothing as powerful as the sun. There is nothing as good as a mother’s love.’

In domestic life, peace and prosperity have been highly valued. Hankering after beauty and luxury is despised. So the admonishment: ‘Do not marry a beautiful lady, do not go to market to purchase vegetables and do not eat big fish.’

In domestic and civic life, due attention was paid to organic solidarity and social control, as well as obedience to elders and fraternity. Precocity has been disliked. Too much control is disastrous. The following proverbs are significant:

‘If strangled, milk will come out’
‘Elder brothers are as honourable as parents’
‘If brother is good, loan is available’
‘If sister is good, curry is available’
‘Friction arises even among earthen vessels’
‘Indirectly teach the daughter-in-law a lesson, by directly beating the daughter’

‘While being overflowed, even a dry bamboo takes a side’
‘Where posts are properly planted for a hut, it is difficult to push axe to slash the hut’
‘Dry bamboo depends on green bamboo, green bamboo depends on dry bamboo’
‘Excessive beating makes the back mad, excessive abuse makes the ear mad’

In domestic life, the hazard of being the parents of many worthless children is realised and at the same time the reputation of being the parents of only one popular and prominent son is preferred. The relevant proverb is: ‘Sometimes ten gourd plants cannot cover the whole trellis and sometimes only one gourd plant can cover the entire trellis.’

Their social thought indicates a strong tendency towards world affirmation. Theirs is not a philosophy of world negation. The saying goes like this: ‘While you work, work with dogged tenacity; while you eat, eat like a king.’

Folk thought is usually strongly influenced by a deep belief in supernatural forces; divine reward and punishment are supposed to be behind every action. Fate, soul, rebirth, deity and ghosts and spirits occur prominently in the folk thought of the Tipperah people. Here are some proverbs about fate:

‘Thundering of clouds is audible, but thundering of forehead is not audible.’

‘The Mahabharata is readable, but this small forehead is not readable.’

The Tipperah community ruled the kingdom for several centuries, and it boasts of having as many as 185 kings. On the whole, the Tipperah folk thought is, like that of many other preliterate people, simple, practical, direct, and rich with rhetoric decorations and imagery drawn from the immediate sylvan neighbourhood.