The two prominent languages used in Tripura are Kokborok and Bengali. The mother tongue of the ‘Tripuris’, the majority among the indigenous people of the land, is Kokborok. Eight communities out of the 19 of the original inhabitants speak this language. It belongs to the ‘Bodo’ branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Earlier, this language was known by different names. Dr. Sukumar Sen and other renowned linguists used the names: Tip-ra, Tipra, Tipura, Tiperah etc. But the language of the indigenous people has been almost always called Kokborok in the hills and plains of Tripura. During the long years of princely rule, Kokborok suffered the worst neglect. Although it was the mother tongue of the rulers, the Maharajas felt ashamed of speaking the language of the poor common subjects and of the near-naked hill people practising Jum. In the absence of recognition over a deplorably long period of time, a script acceptable to everyone has not yet been developed. The word Kokborok means the ‘language of the Borok race.’

At one end of the spectrum was the wishful claim of the royal family to have hailed from the illustrious pre-historic ‘Lunar dynasty’ (Chandra Vamsa), while at the other end on flowed the stream of Kokborok language with its tributaries, satiating the thirst for self-expression of its poor commonplace speakers. As a living language Kokborok developed into a wide range of oral literature, flowering into stories, proverbs, riddles, songs and lyrics. Life and living are pictured in Kokborok oral literature in their details. Starting from the description of the advent of a new season, Kokborok oral literature notices the power of hierarchy in nature, it comprehends and states, in its own simple way, abstract concepts of good and evil, of justice and duty. Ranging from a child’s first look at the sun, lullaby, love in youth, even death and last rites are all included. A nomadic way of life had developed among the Tripurus who had to move from place to place every year in search of suitable hill slopes for ‘Jum’ (shifting) cultivation. They went deeper and deeper into the dense forests. In due course of time some small permanent villages came up in the forests, but the Jumias had to go to their Jum fields from these remote villages. In their daily journey to and fro, and during work in the fields young men and women developed relationships which often culminated in love, and such love stories are celebrated in songs and stories.

The traditional Jum cultivation demanded back-breaking labour from sunrise to sunset. After such a day of toil, evenings called for recreations. This included songs and dances and story-telling sessions. With the rainbow colours of their stories the elderly narrators carried their audience, mostly young, to a world between reality and dreams. The Jum being the principal economic activity of the Tripuri life, it frequently formed the backdrop of the stories. The tales also introduced the social and religious practices, social and political customs, faiths, beliefs, values, taboos and totems. The Kharengbar-tale is about a taboo, so is the Chethuang tale. Some of the folk-tales hold in them suggestions of social evolution. In spite of being one of the most ancient races, a comprehensive history of the Tripuris has not yet been reconstructed. Attention of history has been almost invariably drawn to the kings and the court. The course of development of the indigenous society has remained mostly unknown. As a source material for social history, oral literature is of great value. With the passage of time, the present generation is moving away from the treasures and pleasures of oral literature. Story telling (obviously a folk-tale) was cultivated as an art. A popular Kokborok saying goes, “One who leaves would have to drone on
and on, all alone, before a bunch of deeply sleeping listeners.” In most scholarly circles folklores are categorized as folk-tales, fairy-tales, myths, legends etc. In Kokborok such a division is absent. In Kokborok there is a single term for folklores, that is ‘Kerang Kothoma’. A Kerang is a land-tortoise and Kothoma means a tale. Folk-tales are, therefore, tales of the wild land tortoise, whether there be a tortoise in it or not. The reason for this nomenclature is not known but it continues from the remote past. Tortoise belongs to the turtle group, but is an exception. Instead of water, it lives on land. Its appearance is strange and defence mechanism stranger; it is said that even a tiger cannot make an easy prey of a tortoise. When under attack it draws itself up in the fortress of its shell. Even if it is present in a story, the tortoise, by itself, may not have any special significance. In the story of the yellow tortoise and the doe, the focus is on ‘natural power hierarchy’—why snakes never look up at kites.

The Bengali folk-tales are deeply linked with their original vast repertoire, without much change in the content or character; what is interesting, though, is that those prevalent in Tripura have sometimes assimilated the local background, local flora and fauna. Otherwise they are more or less uniform all over Bengali speaking communities. The Chakma tales, in that respect, have distinctive features. Their story of the ‘Beginning’ does not have any close parallel. Oral literature of Tripura is a field worth the attention of scholars.

The Tripuris and most other ancient ethnic groups of Tripura celebrate Garia Puja at the end of the last month of Bengali calendar (Chaitra). It continues through the first week of the first month of Bengali calendar (Baisakh). Tripura has been called a land of ‘composite culture’. Different cultural traditions co-exist so harmoniously without losing their respective identity, that, when looked from the surface, one looks identical to the other. The Garia festival often coincided with Bengali New-year celebrations and Ganesh Puja. To a discerning observer though, the differences become clear. There is no denying that because of its being a ‘Hindu Kingdom’, and because of long neighbourly association with Bengalis practising the Brahmanical rites, Tripuris and other communities might have taken some elements; but these remained only external. In spirit, Garia is a God of the soil, result of indigenous spiritual thought.

In the worship of Garia, a whole bamboo stands as the symbol. For all the clans the struggle for existence starts almost invariably with hunting. The early hunters on Tripura soil soon discovered bamboo to have the potential of being a very important weapon for hunting. In ancient worlds, whatever brought benefit was attributed to magical or divine powers. “To the savage the world in general is animate, and trees and plants no exception to this rule” (Frazer). Trees are credited with power in most ancient communities, and their beneficial powers raised them to the status of gods. Since the ‘soul’ in the bamboo was performing a good act for the community, they donated through ‘sacrifice’ blood and flesh of birds and animals for the satisfaction of that soul. This ritual of sacrifice continued and grew even stronger in the cultivation age. “The work of tilling, sowing and reaping is slow, arduous and uncertain. It required patience, foresight, faith. Accordingly, agricultural society is characterised by the extensive development of magic” (Thomson). In later agricultural society, bamboo found many more uses: It was essential for the