Tripura’s Cultural Dimensions

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Different races have converged on Tripura over the centuries, and with them came their mores, transforming the state into a confluence of art and cultures in their splendid forms and substance. The author has analysed them in detail, portraying the cultural identity of Tripura as well as its richness in creative art.

According to research scholars, the Mongoloid people started settling in Tripura around 1000 B.C. Professor Sunity Chattopadhyaya in his famous book ‘Kirat-Janakriti’ indicated that the ‘TIPPRAS’ or the ‘TRIPURI’ clan are original settlers of ‘Kirat Bhumi’. Down the passage of history, people from different origins settled in this ancient tiny land. All carried their indigenous traditions which merged together to give shape and content to a unique blend of art and culture. This land is said to be once inhabited by people of Austric race. Subsequently, the land experienced impacts of Hindu religion as a result of Aryan influence over the Austric & Dravidian races.

Culture denotes a sum total of mores and conventions developed by a group of people or a nation. Culture of a people is a complete blend which includes strands of religion and form of worship, conventions and rituals, food and drink, art and craft, music and dancing, sex and marriage, crematory rites and everything else. An enquiry into the culture of a people ought to examine it in the light of the present as much as the past. In order to appropriately understand the art and culture of Tripura we have to keep in mind its hoary past, the chequered literary, musical and other creative traditions of the various distinct groups of races who had down the ages contributed to its unique cultural milieu.

Like other tribal culture, sex is also a dominant theme of culture of this land, which sometimes is implicitly expressed in different aspects.

As it is very difficult to discuss all the aspects of art and culture of Tripura in a short paper, I shall cite only a few interesting points on this issue.

As we know, Tripura is the home of a number of ethnic groups like Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Khasi, Bhil, Chaimol, Bhutia, Lepcha, Uchai etc. Their customs and rituals are more or less similar and they have a similar lifestyle.

Though Tripura is meeting ground of different races, tribals of Tripura reflect distinct traits of animism in their lifestyle.

Having attained a certain stage of development of human civilisation people instilled in themselves animistic faith, which believes existence of life in everything in the immediate natural surroundings like trees, hills, mountains, rivers, animals etc. It is a deep-rooted feeling which recognised life-force in each and everything that constitutes the Universe. This strong undercurrent of unshakable faiths made the ancient men to consider every dust particle as inalienable part of the universal life cycle.

With the tribals of Tripura, there was no concept of the worshipping of idols. Tree and bamboo were the symbols of God and Goddesses. Even today the deity of ‘Ker’ is symbolised by bamboo-poles. Fourteen God-heads are worshipped as ‘Chaturdasa Devata’. Maybe this is a result of austric influence. According to animistic philosophy, practice of worshipping symbolic heads is again an indication of worship. There is, therefore, a synthesis of ritual practices in Tripura, though the tribals are mainly animistic in their traditions.

Even when we observe the names of fourteen individual Gods, we find the traces of nature worship of the ancient people, notwithstanding the fact that the 14 Gods are named after Hindu religion. Like cherished traditions among the tribal societies in America, Europe, Egypt, Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, we find traces of sun-worshipping clans present in Tripura also. Sun God
carved in rocks have been found in Pilak. Tripura rulers and upper class gentry took pride in calling themselves as descendants of Lunar and Solar races.

Some people believe that totemism is the most ancient religion of the world. When a society establishes social relationship with animals, creepers and even inanimate objects then such objects are called 'Totem'. Some people even believe that they are descendants of 'totem'. Totem sometimes becomes the symbol of the clan. Though 'totems' are not Gods but they receive the same respect. In the folklore of Tripura we often come across stories of marriages between human being and creatures like toad, snakes, termites etc. which confirms the prevalence of Totemism in Tripura of yesteryears.

Research scholars and anthropologists have told us about the existence of a highly powerful mind faculty in pre-animistic era which was both impersonal and mysterious and which earned a respect mixed with fear of the fellow human beings. In different ancient cultures this all pervading superspirit has been termed as ‘Mana’. Here in Tripura also we have a striking resemblance of ‘Mana’ theory in the story behind introduction of ‘Chaturdasa Devata’ puja, where the Queen Mother Herabati hypnotised the buffalo, where fourteen Gods failed to tame it. The ‘Mana’ living in the breast-cover (richa) of the Queen could easily subjugate it. There are stories in ancient tribal life of Tripura supporting the ‘Mana’ concept.

In the tribal lifestyle of Tripura, as we find in several folklore, there were rigid taboos, as for examples in matters of marriages between own brothers and sisters. ‘Today it may seem irrelevant, but this was a common feature in ancient society. Once motherhood prior to marriage was not an uncommon feature, but today this is a taboo.

‘Jhuming’ or shifting cultivation was once not only the prime feature of food production, but the entire musical, cultural and oral literary traditions revolved round jhumming. All their festivities and merry-making were based on jhumming. With the passage of time people are shifting from this outdated mode of cultivation and obviously leaving its decaying impacts on the hoary tradition.

Being close to the nature, the very rhythm and unique aesthetic equilibrium of the nature lends distinctive traits to art and culture of the tribal people. From cradle to grave their whole life passes through various rights and rituals blended with unique colourful cultural activities. The oral literary traditions are quite rich reflecting their deep-rooted philosophy of life. Their faiths and customs strongly resemble the traits of universal tribal heritage.

Though it is said ignorance is the root of all prejudices and vices, but when simple innocent people do not find anyway out from worldly miseries like diseases, bereavements, sorrows, they take recourse to the path shown by their forefathers or succumb helplessly to the force of inevitable.

Since the days of yore weaving had been a compulsory practice of every woman in Tripura. Risha of the breasts cover worn by elderly ladies in the family were to be worshipped first before any social rituals could be started. Risha was worn by the ladies only and perfection in its weaving was regarded as a special quality for the girls. In a folksong it is expressed in a decent way where a girl is expressing her desire to weave the risha perfectly. Otherwise the king will not marry her.

Tripura handloom is famous for its stylised decorative design and striking colour combination. However, the motifs used in handloom indicate the different communities’ tradition. Reangs, the second largest tribal community, use mostly black and scarlet colours because a tradition originating from a royal decree forbidding them from using any other colour in the wearing apparel. Tripura use bright natural colours. The motifs are mostly taken from nature like flowers, animals, birds, fish-stars etc. Their artistic skill is also represented in their indigenous utensils, musical instruments and other articles of daily use.

Tripura women are specially gifted in making floral ornaments. The wide use of floral decorative designs carved out of bamboo poles, use of colourful clothes etc., speak of the distinct heritage of the people of Tripura. Specially, bamboo bears their life spirit. The making of utensils for daily use, like ‘Langa’ (a basket), pots for carrying water and cooking, utensils used for the preparation
and drinking of home-made liquor, making agricultural tools and ‘toughar’ bamboo is the prime factor. It is the raw material of different types of cottage industries also.

However, age has taken a toll on these creative endeavours, and the artificial ornaments and decoration are gradually replacing the local crafts. In their wearing apparels also the intrusion of modern trendy design is quite visible. However, despite tremendous odds, the tribal people have still retained some of their traditional art and crafts, thanks to the indomitable spirit of the rural masses who carry on with chequered tradition.

As we have said before, Tripura is the home of several groups of tribal and non-tribal people. With the passage of time, there has been a sea-change in the demographic pattern of the state. But the local inhabitants with their remarkable spirit of hospitality accommodated all people who sought refugee in the tiny home. There has been a tremendous bond of amity and brotherhood between the communities for hundreds of years. It is a matter of great pity that today cracks have developed in the century-old mixed society of Tripura. There are social, political, economic and perhaps even religious reasons behind this atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Maybe it is a transitory phase of conflict between the traditional society and the inevitable complications of modern society.
We only hope the people with their great spirit will overcome this dark era and the bright sun of civilisation will shine again over the blue horizon assuring a new life of peace and amity for everybody.

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Life is greater than all art. I would go even further and declare that the man whose life comes nearest to perfection is the greatest artist.

*Lenin & Gandhi, Pg.210*