

Preservation of Riang Cultural Heritage Through the Hojagiri Dance

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Abstract: The Riangs are basically a semi-nomadic tribe who practice *jhum* (slash and burn) or shifting method of cultivation on the hill sides. The Riang basically belonged to the mongoloid group and speaks the tibeto-burmese language 'Kau Bru'. The Riang inhabited almost in all the district of Tripura and with small populations in the neighbouring States of Mizoram and Assam.

The Riang of Tripura has a rich cultural heritage composing of various songs, dance and music. The Riang also has a rich and vibrant material culture. Their most important dance form is the Hojagiri. Their custom depicts their belief in simplicity. The diversity of culture across tribal groups is reflected in the diversity of songs, music, instruments and techniques.

The present paper seeks to explore various alternative views with reference to the Reang (Bru) community of Tripura with special focus on the Hojagiri as a means of preserving their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Reang/Riang, Bru, Hojagiri, Tribal, Culture, Primitive

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Introduction

The State of Tripura is situated in the Northeastern parts of India. Tripura was once a princely state until 1949 when it became a part of India. There are nineteen tribal communities in Tripura namely the Tipras/ Tripuri, Riang, Jamatia, Noatia, Lushai, Uchoi, Mog, Kuki, Chakma, Khasi, Garos, Halam, Bhutia, Bhil, Munda, Orang, Lepcha, Santhal and Chaimal.¹ The Riang/Reang (also known as Bru) are the only tribe to be categorized as the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Tripura. There are a total of seventy-five PVTGs throughout India recognised by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India on the basis of their pre-agricultural level of technology, extremely low level of literacy, declining or stagnant population.

Nomenclature of The Riang Community

The Riang are basically a semi-nomadic tribe who practice *jhum* (slash and burn) or shifting method of cultivation.² They belonged to the mongoloid group and speak *Kau Bru*, which is a part of the tibeto-burmese language group. The Riang also call themselves as *Bru* denoting 'community'.³ There have been various opinions regarding the derivation of the word *Bru*. The importance of the interpretation can also be used for referring the term *Bru* from their folklore as being the descendents of Bruha. Bruha and Braiha, according to their folklore are two brothers, who along with several followers

reached Tripura in course of their migration. While moving they reached a river where both groups caught and cooked prawns for meal. Braiha's group ate their meal soon and moved on leaving Bruha's group behind. But they told Bruha's group that they would make a track on the path to let them on the same route. Bruha's group too proceeded on their journey after their meal. On their way they saw a plantain cut by Braiha's group; but the plantain shoot grew quickly without showing any new sign. So they felt that they lost the track made by Braiha's group.

The Riangs also consider the term *Bru* and not Reang/Riang to be the name of the tribes. There are twelve clans (*panji*) in the *Bru* Community, viz., *Molsoi*, *Meska*, *Msha*, *Raikchaoh*, *Apeto*, *Uairem*, *Chongpreng*, *Nouhkham*, *Tuimoi-Yaphauh*, *Yakstam*, *Chorkhi* and *Tauma-Yakcho*. The fact that Reang/Riang was not included in the said clan system was because the last *Kaskau* (Chief) who was also powerful and tyrant name was Reang/Riang.⁴ Therefore he does not want the Community to use and associate his name to be part of the overall clan system.⁵

Socio-Cultural Structure

The main system of the Riang social organization is the family. It is a patriarchal society with the eldest male member as the head of the family. These families are mutually dependent on one another for the production and consumption of food and other requirements. The eldest male member also ensures that all family requirements are fulfilled. The *chudri* (village headman) who have a vast authority in the village integrate any families into the village. The *Rai* or the Community head since 1667 AD was heading the social hierarchy as well as political structure of the entire Riang society. But such system collapsed after the great Riang movement of 1942-43. This has created fissures and cracks in their traditional solidarity.⁶ The Riang social structure is also based on the system of clan structure. There are a number of kin groups among the Riang known as *panji* (clan), who are of patrilineal lineage. The *sandai* (lineage) plays a vital role in the kinship pattern of behaviour. The *sandai* is a homogenous and patriarchal group.⁷ Therefore, the Reang (Bru) kinship system embodies the concept of *sandai* along with *houchu* (affines).

The diversity of culture across tribal groups is reflected in the diversity of songs, music, instruments and techniques. Music and dance is a vital part of the Riang's cultural heritage. Folk songs, dance and music are a composite whole which is one of the dominant characteristics of Riang's culture. The wide variety of folk dance, songs and music has its own social importance. The folk tune conveys the feelings and sentiments of their lives and thoughts, their activities and achievements, their morals and discipline. Songs encompasses and touches the soul of every man. In Riang society, a song plays a very important part in their everyday life- from birth to death. Traditional songs include the baby lulabally while the baby is made to sleep. The *jhum* songs (love), competitive meaningful debate songs (*poto khoye rchamung*), festival songs (*goroia*), etc. The musical instrument of the Riang includes *Kham* (drum), *Ksumu* (flute), *Sota*, *Srenda* (local violin), *Chongpreng* (local guitar), *Dandu* (mouth piece instrument), *Uathop* (bamboo musical instrument), etc. Such instruments produce different musical notes.

The Jojagiri

The most important and popular dance as well as festival of the Riang is the Hojagiri. The Hojagiri dance is usually performed on the occasion of *maikhlungmo* i.e. worship of Goddess of paddy and cotton especially during the month of September-October after the successful completion of *jhum*

(shifting) cultivation harvesting. *Maikhlungmo* consist of four varieties viz. *mainouhma* (goddess of paddy), *khunouhma* (goddess of cotton), *maiktama* (goddess of new food grains) and *maikchamma* (goddess of old food grains). On the particular day of the worship, *i.e.* in the morning, three fowls would be sacrificed. Some well-to-do families like the *chudri* (village head) even sacrifice pig and buffalo, wherein all the villagers would be invited for the feast. The feast would continue throughout the day and as night approaches the Hojagiri dance would be performed. The dance continues throughout the night. It is believed that the dance originated on the occasion of the *maikhlungmo* ritual as to receive blessing from the mother goddess.⁸ Hojagiri basically indicates the ‘night of the feast’. All the villagers would enjoy *auaing thai* (a rice cake wrap with plaintain leaves) and drink *arag* (locally brewed rice wine).⁹

In a Hojagiri dance, the Reang (Bru) maiden would expose their dance expertise and skills of various techniques. The dancers would start dancing by standing on the pitcher and by balancing the plate and simultaneously balancing a round shaped bamboo tray in their hands and also keeping a bottle attached with a burning lamp on top of their head. They would dance simultaneously moving their body in a harmonious rhythm to the beats of musical instruments like drum, flute and folk songs. Some of the dance rhythms are two parts ceremonial entry (*khonjon*), rhythmic movement of hands (*dailo yaugh kolmo*), sharpening knife (*da hu mo*), clearing *jhum* forest patches (*huh hau mo*), sowing grains (*mai kai mo*), clearing weeds from grains (*mai tang mo*), harvesting grains (*mai ra mo*), collecting/gathering bamboo shoot (*muiya khouh mo*), collecting/gathering flowers (*khum khouh mo*), acrobatic moves (*rongo tal*), catching fish by netting (*cheihσαιh mo*), standing acrobatically on the earthen pot with plates (*mairang-kola kamo-puthi kathi mo*), acrobatically showing the blooming of flowers while simultaneously with movement of plates in hands (*sitri bamo-khonjoni bai mairang phorye lailai mo*), standing on a three earthen pot, back-leaning with bamboo tray on a finger and with a plate on the fore head (*bailing bai dehmo [kola thaitham]-kpal o mairang themo*), imitating jump of a bird (*tau chouh baih mo*), standing on each other’s belly (*bohauh kalai kalai*), standing on the shoulder (*baikung sahaing*), belly leaning (*bohauh dehmo*), breaking a piece of cloth hip (*rumal sing phaimo moi*), clearing dirt/orphaned dance (*phoing kakhrai mo/sunaroiha dailo*) and exiting with all dance materials (*manui tuiye baikhouh mo*). Hojagiri is also known by other names like *medol msamung* and *menpati*.

In order to preserve the tradition, the first state level Hojagiri festival was organized in 1993 at Gachhirampara village under Kanchanpur sub-division in North Tripura district. Since then the two-day festival is being organized at different places of Tripura by the Bru Socio-Cultural Organisation (BSCO), a Non-Governmental Organization of the Reang (Bru) community in collaboration with different Tripura Governmental Departments and Tripura Tribal area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). The two-day Hojagiri festival showcasing it as a secular festival is usually celebrated every year one-day after the celebration of the *mainouhma* ritual (goddess of grain).¹⁰

Economic Structure

The Riang live amidst rich natural resources, but are not able to tap these resources to their fullest advantage; hence are left economically backward. The socio-economic structure in Riang society is that they have a very simple technology which fits well with their ecological surroundings. There is no any uniform pattern in the Riang economic way of life.¹¹ Their economy is of ‘subsistence type’. The structure of the Riang economy is generally based on forests and its product. At the economic and cultural level, the family is a unit of both production and consumption.

Table 1: System Requirement for the Hojagiri Dance

<i>Materials System for the Hojagiri Dance</i>		
<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of Items</i>	<i>Details & Time, etc.</i>
1	Duration of Dance	Ten (10) minutes of Hojagiri dance and two (2) minutes of <i>Dailo</i> (acrobatic dance through simultaneous movement of hand, leg and hip) Female dancer (artist): 06 nos. Male (musician/artist):- 1. <i>Kchumu</i> (flute): 01 No. 2. <i>Kham</i> (drum): 01 No. 3. <i>Khreh</i> (drum accompanist): 01 No. 4. <i>Sota</i> (kartal): 01 No. 5. <i>Rchanai</i> (singer): 01 No. 6. <i>Dailo</i> (traditional dancer): 03 Nos. 7. Team leader: 01 No.
2	Colour of Pot	Red, Bira Black and Dark Brown
3	Colour of <i>Satrai</i> (Pot Stand)	Red
4	Colour of <i>Chat</i> i (Lamp)	Black and White
5	Colour of <i>Bailing</i> (Bamboo Tray) and Design	Made of original bamboo with no external design or colour
6	Colour of Bottle and Size	Black champaign bottle size
7	Size of <i>Kham</i> (Drum)	Medium with no design
8	Size of <i>Ksumu</i> (Flute)	Medium and as per performance
9	Female Dress (Costume)	<i>Rnai</i> (lower portion of garment)- <i>kchom</i> (black) <i>Rsa</i> (upper body cover)----- <i>mtreing kchouh</i> (lining should be red in colour with bamboo design and it should reached upto <i>homthai</i> (pupek) Blouse-----red (both long & short)
10	Female Ornaments	Entire Reang (Bru) ornaments
11	Male Dress	<i>Pondri</i> (white/ green/ dark blue coloured dhuti) <i>Kutai takbrouh yauh plong</i> (long shirt) <i>Kamsogh</i> (head turban)
12	Musician Sitting Position	At the Stage Corner

Table 2: Musical Instrument and Dance System for the Hojagiri

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of Items</i>	<i>Details</i>
1	<i>RCHAMUNG</i> (SONGS)	Original words as per dance <i>tal</i> (tune), direction of dances, not to use slang words or Non-Kau Bru words.
2	<i>KHAM</i> AND <i>KREH</i> (DRUM)	With <i>Nagra</i> (Drum Stick)
3	<i>KSHUMU</i> (FLUTE)	As per <i>tal</i> (tune) of the dance
4	<i>MSAMUNG</i> (DANCE ITEMS)	
i	<i>Khonjon</i> (2 part) (entry style)	
ii	<i>Da hu mo</i> (sharpening of knife)	
iii	<i>Huh hau mo</i> (clearing of jungle during <i>jhum</i> [slash and burn] cultivation)	
iv	<i>Mai kai mo</i> (planting rice during <i>jhum</i> [slash and burn] cultivation)	
v	<i>Mai tang mo</i> (cleaning weeds during <i>jhum</i> [slash and burn] cultivation)	
vi	<i>Mai ra mo</i> (harvesting of rice during <i>jhum</i> [slash and burn] cultivation)	
vii	<i>Mairang</i> (plate)- <i>Kola kamo</i> (standing on pot)- <i>Puthi kathi mo</i> (standing on belly)	
viii	<i>Sitri bamo</i> (flower blooming)- <i>Khonjoni bai Mairang phorye lailai mo</i> (rotating of plate)	
ix	<i>Bailing bai dehmo</i> (<i>kola thaitham</i>) (acrobatic with bamboo tray on three sets of pot)- <i>Kpal o mairang themo</i> (putting plate on forehead)	
x	<i>Sing phaimo</i> (rotating the hips)	
xi	<i>Moi</i> (<i>phoing</i>) <i>kakhrai mo</i> (kicking the leftover food/waste) and (<i>sunaroiha dailo</i>) (dance of orphan)	
xii	<i>Manui tuiye baikhoh mo akhe Dailo</i> (exiting the stage followed by <i>Dailo</i> (acrobatic dance through simultaneous movement of hand, leg and hip)	

The economy of the Riang community is basically simplistic in nature. In a joint Riang family, few household members may work as a cultivator, another member may graze the cow, yet another may go to the forest to collect food or firewoods. The permutation and combination of all kinds of economic activities by the members of a family defies any suggested schemes of classification. Their economy has little specialization. Techniques and tools used are few in number and simple. Food gathering activity consisting of collection of vegetables, fruits, honey, etc. is the main activity of the Riang. So, substitute occupation like shifting cultivation (*jhum*) is in practice in the hill slopes for their subsistence.¹² The economic system of the Riang thus display a kind of characteristic distinctiveness on account of which it constitute a significant part of the cultural fabric of the society.

Transformation in Socio-Cultural and Economic Activities

The Riang community has a rich and vibrant material culture.¹³ In term of cultural activities, it was the female members who have all the attention right from preparing the local wine (*arag*) to everything relating to dance and songs. Modern music and songs in Riang society now differ much with the traditional. In the modern days the songs are mostly influenced by religious chantations. The Christian's choirs and solo encourage the Riang with new innovative technique of songs like the use of musical instruments of drumsets, guitars, etc. Bhajans, Bollywood songs, English songs, etc also have a great impact especially among the youngster. The Riang songs and music were thus produced with different tunes then the traditional ones. Women life was far more much better with numerous privileges of women rights when they were untouched by modern culture. But the incursion of modern culture deep insight their heritage started destroying their society and culture. Most of the women have now discarded the use of such colorful dresses (*rnai/rsa*) and ornaments (*rangbauh*) except during special occasion like marriage ceremonies or festival. This vibrant culture of the Riang community can be categorized as highly influential in terms of their interaction with other tribal communities. Also, the cultural activities greatly infused a sense of unity and development among their society. The Hojagiri dance of the Riang is one such important example of women participation in the field of cultural activities among the Riang society. Hojagiri also locally known as '*medol/ menpati*' basically indicate the 'night of the feast'.

The frequent movements of the Riang due to their dependence on *jhum* system (shifting or slash and burn method of cultivation) are also one of the causes for the growth of new villages at different places. Sometimes a new village is formed at the *jhum* (shifting or slash and burn method of cultivation) site which may consist of a few families at the beginning but later on may increased or decreased depending upon the advantages or disadvantages of the settlement site. Normally the Riang move to their *kairing* or *jhum* (shifting or slash and burn method of cultivation) hut temporarily from the start of their *jhum* cultivation. After harvest or sometime later they go back to their permanent house in the village. The idea of a temporary settlement in the *kairing* appears to be to avoid wastage of time and tiresome journey between their permanent home and their *jhum* (shifting or slash and burn method of cultivation) site. Usually, the family stays at their *kairing* till the completion of their *jhum* harvests.

Conclusion

The Riang culture and their traditions and practices pervade almost all of the aspects in the society. The distinctiveness of the tribe lays in their cultural heritage and above all the harmony in which they survive in unison with nature. Their custom depicts their belief in simplicity. The Riang are also witnessing

the different phases of the socio-cultural and economic developmental phase. The socio-cultural and economic pattern of the Riang is specific in nature. The PVTGs are the most backward tribal groups in India. Therefore, Government both at the State and the Center and different Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are working for their upliftment and socio-cultural and economic development. The Riang have too have articulated at different points of time in different ways to include the need for special developmental measures. The Central government can give direction to the State Government to formulate and execute various Tribal welfare plans, project and programmes as per Article 339 of the Indian Constitution. The 6th Schedule is exclusively undertaken so as to form several autonomous body exclusively for the tribal development. Although, several developmental measures are underway for the Schedule Tribe since the 1st five-year plan but from the 5th year plan onwards, a separate sub-plan was introduced in order to accommodate various schemes for the development of the tribal's of India specially the PVTGs at a later stage.



Fig. 1: Glimpse of Hojagiri Dance

Notes

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