CHAPTER-II

TRIBAL PEOPLE OF TRIPURA: THEIR ORIGIN, PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS.

Hindus constitute the most predominant community in the population of present Tripura state. They are mostly Bengali-speaking people and they constitute approximately (68.95%) of the total population. Regarding their social customs, family traditions and cultural patterns, with the exception of some Christians, they follow the same traditions as prevalent in Bengal among the Hindus. But apart from these people, there is an important section of the people in this state, known as the tribal communities, who make up for the rest of the population.

According to the order of the President of India in 1956 on the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Tripura, there are nineteen scheduled tribal communities in Tripura. They are:¹
(1) Tripuri (or Tripura)
(2) Reang
(3) Jamatia
(4) Chakma
(5) Halam
(6) Noatia
(7) Magh
(8) Kuki
(9) Lushai
(10) Garo
(11) Munda
(12) Orang
(13) Santal
(14) Uchai
(15) Khasia
(16) Bhil
(17) Chaimal
(18) Bhutia
(19) Lepcha
Of the nineteen tribes mentioned above, the Tripuris are the largest while the Reangs who migrated from Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh), are the second largest. Other major tribes of the state are the Chakmas and the Maghs, both Buddhists, and a few tea-garden tribes.

The tribal people of Tripura, both major and minor, belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The tribes and races of this group came from outside and settled in India clinging to the skirts of the Himalayas and the North-east Frontier regions. They are ethnically homogeneous with certain variations in languages and dialects, food habits, means of livelihood, day-to-day life, culture and rites-and-rituals.

The origins, physical characteristics and social structures of the tribal people of Tripura require an elaborate study. In the present context, therefore, an attempt has been made to draw a clear picture, as far as possible, of these people and for this purpose an exhaustive field work has been undertaken by the present researcher.
At present the Tripuris are the largest dominant tribe in Tripura. The Dev Barmans belong to this tribe and they claim themselves to be Kshatriyas from the very beginning. The Rajamala contains the tradition and history of these people. They have taken the stature of Kshatriya as they claim their origin from the lunar race (=Chandravamsa).

Their present title 'Barman' means 'armour' — the term applicable to all Kshatriyas, and their family name was 'Pha' upto 1279 A.D. The family has recently intermarried freely with other stocks in India. In the recent past through commingling and inter-marriage within the so called Tripuri Kshatriyas, even persons belonging to different families have acquired this exclusive title i.e. Dev Barman.

Formerly the Tripuris were divided into two groups: Old Tripuris and New Tripuris. Old Tripuris are the original inhabitants of the district. The
former rulers of Tripura emerged from this class. The new Tripuris came into existence at later periods as a result of marital contacts between the Old Tripuris and a certain section of the Bengalee settlers. At the 1951 Census no difference was made between the Old and New Tripuris and they were enumerated under the one common head 'Tripuri'. The Tripuris taken as a whole constitute the most weighty section of the entire tribal community, representing more than 50% of the total tribal population of Tripura. Although very predominant in Khowai, Vishalgar and Sadar subdivisions of West Tripura, they are to be found in every part of Tripura. A section of this Tripuri community has advanced so far in matters of education, culture and general enlightenment that it is a misnomer to include them within the tribal or Hill Tripuris who still live their distinctive tribal ways of life on the slopes of hills in the interiors.

At one time the Tripuris were divided into groups according to their assignment in the royal court or, according to their vocation. These sub-divisions were as follows:
(a) Bachal
(b) Siuk
(c) Koatia
(d) Daitya-singh
(e) Hujuria
(f) Silatia
(g) Apaia
(h) Chatratuiya
(i) Deoorai or Galim
(j) Subenarayan
(k) Sena and
(l) Julai

The 'Julai' sub-division was further divided into several smaller sections (eleven in number), the basis being division of labour. In course of time, these sub-groups have assimilated with each other.

The Tripuris can also be divided into three groups on the basis of language, culture and socio-economic factors — Beri, Dona and Daspa. They
are distributed over all parts of Tripura, though the major concentration is in the West Tripura district.

The 1981 Census recorded the Tripuri population in the state as 3,30,872. The community’s mother tongue is Kakbarak. Translated the name Kakbarak means ‘the language of man’. It is the most important language of the state after Bengali. The Tripuris use a Bengali dialect and script when communicating with outsiders. Among themselves they use their own mother tongue and script i.e. Kakbarak.

**REANG**

The Reangs constitute second largest group among the tribal population of Tripura. The subdivisions of Kailasahar, Amarapura, Bilonia, Khowai and to some extent Dharmanagar have high concentration of this tribe. It is believed that the Reangs migrated to Tripura from Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh) in the distant past. They are distributed to all over Tripura with the maximum concentration in the South Tripura district. According to the 1981 Census, the total population of the
Reangs in Tripura was 83,476. The Reangs belong to Mongoloid racial stock and their dialect has been classified as belonging to the Austro-Asiatic group of Tibeto-Burman family. The dialect is known as 'Polong-O'. Their ethnical affinity with the Kukis is claimed by scholars.

The Reangs are divided into two broad groups: Meshka or Mechka and Marchai or Malchai. Within the Meshka group there are again some sub-groups, the principal among whom are the Masha and Raichak. In the Marchai group also there are sub-groups, the chief among whom are the Reang, Apet and the Champung or Chamrong sub-groups.

The Reangs speak the Reang language which has no script. Some of them speak Kakbarak, though few know how to write it. With outsiders they communicate in Bengali. Their children learn Bengali and Kakbarak in school. The state government has declared the Reangs as a primitive tribe.
The Jamatias form the third largest tribal community in Tripura. Previously they were mainly concentrated in Sonamura and Udaipur subdivisions, but in recent times they have scattered all over the state. Economically they are more advanced than other tribal people of Tripura.

According to some tradition the Jamatias are economically sound in comparison with other tribal people, as they served the Royal army, which was called 'Jamat' and they were exempted from paying taxes (so they were called Jamatias). Jamatia is a self-given title. They are believed to be one of the earliest settlers in Tripura.

Many decades ago they have abandoned the 'jhum' cultivation and instead they have adopted the plough cultivation. Just like the Reangs they also speak Kakbarak, without knowing how to write it. With the outsiders they converse in Bengali. Their children learn Bengali, English and Kakbarak in school. The Jamatias are now settling down in the plains, building houses in the manner of the plains people.
The Chakmas, the fourth largest group in Tripura, are to be found mainly in the sub-divisions of Kailasahar, Amarapur, Sabrum, Udaipur and Bilonia. The history of their origin is not clear. According to the Chakmas, they belong to a branch of Kshatriya who lived in Champaknagar, the capital of Bhagalpur in ancient Bihar Province. They are proud of declaring themselves to be Kshatriyas as their Lord Buddha belonged to the Kshatriya clan. There is doubt that the Chakmas of the present Tripura state came directly from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh).

Anthropologically they belong to a branch of Tibeto-Burman tribes originally belonging to the Mongoloid race. The Chakmas speak their own language and they have got their own script. Now they can read, write and speak Bengali. With the outsiders they speak in English and a mixed form of Bengali. The medium of instruction in the schools attended by the Chakma children is Bengali.

From the recent Census Report of 2001 it is learnt
that the Chakmas in Tripura now number 64,293, of which 32,951 are male and 31,342 are female.

The Chakmas are Buddhists and follow the Theravada Buddhist tradition. They are progressive in education and culture.

**HALAM**

Ethnologically and linguistically the Halams belong to the Kuki groups. It is said that the Kukis lived in Tripura even before the Tripuris came in to conquer the land. Those of the Kukis who had submitted to the Tripura king, came to be known as Halams. The Halams had always been the Jhum cultivators. They are reputed to have been a ferocious people who used to kill strangers. Thus their neighbours named them Halam which means “killers of humans”.

The community has 12 sub-tribes, viz. Bongcher, Charai, Hrangkhol, Kaipeng, Kaljang, Kaloi, Lankai, Machaphang, Migli, Mitahar, Molsom and Rupini. But according to Rajamala the number of sub-tribes was 13 and according to Tripura Gazette (1940) the number was 16.
The Halam settlements are distributed all over Tripura. They speak their own Halam language, having no script of their own. But according to the Govt. of India record these people speak Kakbarak language which has a script of its own. But most of the people cannot write it. While conversing with the outsiders they speak a little corrupt Bengali. Their children learn Bengali and Kakbarak in the schools.

The Halam dialect is akin to the Kuki-chin group of the Tibeto-Burman family. But most of the Halams are bi-lingual and can speak Mrung or Tripuri fluently.
The word Noatia means new. The Noatias may be taken as a section of the bigger Tripuri group. The characteristics or ways of their living, as found now-a-days, do not suggest that actually they are a separate tribe. Even if they were separate in the past, it appears that they had been absorbed within the main Tripuri stream long time ago.

According to some scholars the Noatias are a hybrid race— a mixture of Tripuri, Burmese, Chakma and Magh communities. Ancient history of Tripura records as follows:

Maharaj Dharmamanikya conquered Arakan in the year 1512. At that time some Tripuri soldiers settled in Arakan. Then in 1529-1565 Maharaj Vijayamanikya of Tripura conquered Chittagong Hill Tracts. Later on when the Moghuls occupied those areas, many Tripuri people did not come back from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Arakan and settled in a place called “Naitong”, a place between Arakan and Chittagong Hill Tracts. In due course they had marital tie with the Burmese and the Tripuris, used

49
some Burmese titles like Naitong, Mongbai, Dhonhabai and Khaklu with their name. As a result a new Tripuri community came into being and when came back to their original homeland, especially South Tripura, they were named as “Noatia” meaning ‘New-comers’.

But the new-comers did not like to call themselves Noatia (=new-comers), instead they preferred to call themselves Tripuri or Tripura. As a result it is noticed that in the Census Reports their number decreased day-by-day. For example:

In 1951 their number was 24,992.

In 1961 their number became diminished to 16010.

In 1971 their number further diminished to 10292.

In 1981 their number became 7073.

The main reason behind this decrease, most probably is the merger of the Noatia people with the Tripuris.

The Noatias have similarity with the Tibeto-Mongoloid group of people. They have got big head,
small eyes, flat nose. They have no beard on the face, no hair on the breast, their face comparatively flat and lips are corpulent. The womenfolk possess sound health, but are of short height in comparison with the men. The Noatia women are fond of regular hair-dressing and decoration of the body. For decoration they use silver ornaments and flowers. They use flowers as ear-rings and for decorating hair.

**M A G H**

The Maghs are believed to have migrated from Burma (now Myanmar) to the Arakan Hill Tracts in ancient times. From the Arakan Hill Tracts they moved on to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh), before arriving at their present habitat in Tripura. They are now distributed all over Tripura. They are now mostly found in the South Tripura. Their population increased day-by-day. From a little less than 6000 (six thousand) in 1931, their population now is 30,385, according to the Census Report of 2001.
The anthropologists are of opinion that the Maghs belong to Indo-Chinese racial stock. They are divided into several groups such as, Marmagri, Bhuiya, Barua, Rajbanshi, Myamma, Roang, Thongatha and Jhumiya Maghs. In the latter period these several groups reduced to three distinct clans, such as:

(a) Jhumiya
(b) Roangya
(c) Marmagri or Rajbanshi, Barua and Bhuiya Maghs.

According to the “Maharajoang” (a Burmese chronicle) and “Rajoang” (an Arakanese chronicle), the Maghs have descended from the same line of Kshatriya clan in which the Buddha Gautama was born. They believe that they are the Royal descendants of the Magadha kings of Bihar and most probably being driven out of Magadha after Ashoka, the Magadhan Emperor, they established their kingdom in Arakan. Since then the inhabitants of Arakan came to be known as Magh (a colloquial term of Magadha)\(^\text{10}\).
All categories of Maghs profess Buddhism and they do not have liking for any other religion. Most of the Magh people speak Burmese and some also know how to write it. While conversing with the outsiders they mix their language with Bengali. A few can write their names in Bengali. The medium of education in their schools is Bengali. According to the list of Scheduled Tribes of India, the Maghs belong to the Scheduled tribe community.

KUKI

The Kukis claim that they have settled in Tripura long ago. They call themselves Hre-em. Tripuris of Tripura call the Kukis as “Sikam”, while the common people call them as “Darlong Kuki”. The Kukis of Tripura may be divided into two groups: Darlong Kuki and Rokhum Kuki. The Kukis inhabiting in the North are called Darlong Kuki, while the Kukis inhabiting the South are called Rokhum Kuki. According to their own tradition the Kukis originally settled in a place called “Simlong” by the side of the river “Mekang” in South-West China. From there
they gradually migrated to Shan country; then to Burma (Myanmar); then to Lushai Hills (now Mizoram); then entered Manipur through Cachar, Mikir Hills and Naga Hills. As a result still Kukis are found in Mizoram, North-east part of Tripura, southern part of Manipur, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Myanmar. In present Tripura state they have settled in Kailasahar, Dharmanagar, Khowai, Udaipur, Kamalpur, Longthai valley, Amarapur and Sadar sub-divisions. From the 1987 Census Report it is found that 166 Kuki families depended on Jhum cultivation and 157 Kuki families depended partly on Jhum cultivation and partly on pineapple cultivation. They produce pineapple in the slopy land of Dhalai district of North Tripura. It is said that the Darlong Kukis are very expert in producing pineapple.

**LUSHAI**

It is very difficult to find out the original homeland of the Lushai people of Tripura. According to some scholars the Lushais and the Kukis of Tripura originated from the same stock and they are one
and the same people. But the Lushais prefer to call themselves “Mizo” meaning ‘a highland dweller’. They are accustomed to live on the hilltops, most probably as a measure of defence against invaders. They have been known to their neighbours as war-like people and head-hunters (=Lushai, ‘Lu’ meaning ‘head’ and ‘Shai’ or Chai meaning ‘hunter’).

The Community belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of the main Tibeto-Chinese race. It has been identified as one of the sub-groups of the Assam-Burman branch. The general opinion of the scholars is that the Lushais have their origin in China, but their legends and folk songs have no mention of China. Burma (=Myanmar), however, figures quite often. But for want of food, disputes among the different tribal people, and in search of Jhum cultivating land, in course of time, the Lushais left Burma and entered Mizoram in several batches, each under a CHIEF. They have permanently settled in Mizoram, Manipur, Cachar of Assam, Tripura and Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh).

The Jampui Hill of Tripura is the demarcating line between Tripura and Mizoram. Most of the Lushais
used to live in this Jampui Hill area. The villages of
the Jampui Hill mostly inhabited by the Lushais
are: Monpui, Monchuan, Talakshi, Bhangmun,
Belian-chip, Bangla, Talansang, Sabual, Phuldamsi,
Kompui, Khantalang, and also in Laldingabari of
Sakan hill. One Hrangvunga Sailo adopted
Christianity in 1906. But when famine broke out in
Lushai Hill, Hrangvunga Sailo, accompanied by 300
Lushai people, crossed the river Langai and entered
Tripura. He established the village Phuldungsei in
the Jampui Hill in 1912.

According to the 1981 Census, the Lushai
population was 3,734. They speak the Kuki-Chin
language. It is claimed that the Lushai language
originated from the Dublian language. It is close to
the Kuki language. Since the Reangs live in the
neighbourhood, most of the Lushais can also speak
Reang-dialect. With the outsiders the Lushais speak
English and Bengali, apart from their own language.
The Roman script is used for written communication.

The Lushais and the Kukis do not actually signify
two different tribes; they mean the same group of
people with a common racial stock. In fact the wider
term is Kuki. The Kukis as a tribe are in fact divided into sixteen clans according to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes orders (Amendment) Act, 1976:

(a) Paitu  
(b) Beialhut  
(c) Thanguluya  
(d) Laifang  
(e) Hajango  
(f) Mizel  
(g) Namte  
(h) Chalya  
(i) Phun  
(j) Kuntoi  
(k) Lentei  
(l) Jangtei  
(m) Rangchan  
(n) Balte  
(o) Khareng  
(p) Rangkhole
Of these groups, people belonging only to the first five clans are found in present-day Tripura. As a process of simplification they may be further divided into two broad categories: Lushais and Darlong Kukis.

Although racially of the same origin, there is a degree of difference between the Lushais and the Kukis so far as culture and educational attainments are concerned. In education the Lushais have gone far ahead of the Kukis, and as a result of the spread of education their general level of culture and accomplishment also has much improved. Christianity has spread fast among the Lushais and they have taken to western dress and manners. All this has brought about a line of demarcation between the two groups. While the comparatively backward sections of the Kukis are still going on by their old name, the advanced and progressive sections have come to be known as Lushais. In Tripura at present the Lushai-Kuki class are found mainly in Dharmanagar, Kailashar, Kamalpur, Khowai, Amarapur, Longthai valley, Sadar and Udaipur sub-divisions.
G A R O

The Garos of Tripura came from Mymensing and Sylhet districts of present Bangladesh. They have settled mostly in Udaipur, Sadar, Kamalpur and Kailasahar sub-divisions of Tripura.

The Garo community is divided into groups according to habitat:

(a) Achuk Garos and (b) Habeng Garos. The Achuk Garos live in the high hills, whereas the Habeng Garos live in the plain area. The Garos of Tripura belong to the Habeng section, and have two sub-groups: Maak and Sangma.

According to the 1981 Census, the number of Garo population in Tripura was 7,297, of which 3,943 were Christians, 3,300 were Hindus and 54 were Buddhists.

The Garo people speak the Turi dialect while communicating among themselves. With outsiders they speak Bengali and Kakbark. The school-going children learn Bengali, Kakbarak and English.

The perception of the Garos regarding their
position in the local social hierarchy does not match the perception of the neighbouring ethnic groups. They consider their social position as second only to the Brahmanas. The non-Christian Garos are aware of the caste-system and consider themselves to be Kshatriya.

The bodily structure of the Garos resembles that of the Mongolians. They have got sound health having medium height (the males in average of 5 ft. while the females of 4 ft. 10 inches). Just like the Mongolians they have small eyes, flat and big nose, corpulent lips, big ears and having broad jawbones. They have no beard on the face and no hair on the breast. Their bodily complexion is a mixture of blue and green.

**Mundra**

The ancestors of the Mundas were the residents of Bihar. It is not known when they first migrated to the tea gardens in eastern and north-eastern India. Some of them were brought to Tripura in 1916 from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) to start tea-plantations. Today the major concentration of the community is
in the North Tripura state. Their habitat is hilly with a thin forest cover.

According to the 1981 Census, the Mundas’ population was 7,917. They speak the Mundari language among themselves. While working with the Bengali-speaking plantation officers and with the labourers from Oraon and Santhal communities they speak a Bengali dialect. Their Bengali dialect, however, vary to a great extent in intonation and pronunciation from the original Bengali dialect spoken by the Bengalees. The community is listed as a scheduled tribe in Tripura.

**SANTHAL**

“Santhal” is a name given by the British, the original colloquial term or name is “Shaotal” and sometime “Santal”. According to their tradition they came from Bihar. They do not know when their ancestors migrated to the tea-garden areas of Assam and other places of Bengal. Just like the Mundas the Santhals too were brought to Tripura in 1916 from the North-East Frontier regions when tea plantations were first set up in the Tripura state.
At present they are found scattered all over Tripura, especially Northern part of Tripura. Like the Mundas they also habitat in a hilly terrain with a thin forest cover. According to the 1981 Census, their population was recorded as 2,709. They speak Santhali among themselves and this dialect is very popular in Ranchi and sub-urban areas of Bihar. While working in the plantation sites they speak Bengali with other labourers and officials. This speech is a little different from the Bengali dialect spoken by the neighbouring communities. They use Bengali script while writing. They are listed as a scheduled tribe in Tripura.

**UCHAI**

The name “Uchai” has originated from the term “Olchai”. In the language of the Uchais, ‘ol’ means ‘after’ and ‘chai’ means ‘followed after’ or accepted afterwards. Their folktales indicate that they migrated to their present habitat following in the footsteps of the Reangs. Hence the name Uchai. Some others in the community believe that the Reangs and Uchais, though considered separate
groups, are actually descendants of two blood-brother—Reangsa and Ucha respectively. For this reason, similarity is noticed between these tribal people so far as their language, rites and rituals and culture are concerned.

The Uchais are mainly distributed in the Bilonia and Amarapur sub-divisions of the South Tripura. Some settled in the Dharmanagar sub-division of the North Tripura. The 1981 Census recorded the number of the Uchais in Tripura as 1,295. Apart from their own mother tongue, they can also speak Kakbarak and a mixed form of the Bengali language. A few of them know how to write Bengali. In Tripura, they are listed as a scheduled tribe.

So far as the physique is concerned, the Uchai people have got similarity with the Mongolians. They have got broad nose, small eyes and the males have no beard on the face nor hair on the breast.
KHASIA

It is very difficult to find out original homeland of the Khasia people. Most probably they were spread over the plains lands of Sylhet and Kamrup, before they became finally confined to the Khasia and Jaintia hills. They are believed to have migrated to their present habitat of Tripura from Meghalaya which earlier formed part of Assam. They are now distributed over the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. In Tripura they are concentrated in the North and West Tripura districts.

According to the 1981 Census, the community’s population in Tripura was 457 (235 males and 222 females). The Khasias had among them 357 Christians, 93 Hindus, 4 Muslims and 3 Buddhists. The Khasias are bilingual. At home they speak Khasia, and with outsiders Bengali. Their identification mark consists of the fali (white turban) for the men, and the sulap (jacket) for the women. They have been enlisted as the scheduled tribes.
It is difficult to ascertain the derivative meaning of the term "Bhil". But it is supposed to be derived from the Dravidian word for a 'bow', which is the characteristic weapon of the tribe. Both ethnographic and historical accounts about the Bhils exist. Their ancestral home is known as Bheelwara which consists of the Vindhya, Satoura, Satmalli and Khandesh hill ranges and the jungles on the banks of the Narmada and Tapti rivers. At various times in history they are supposed to have interacted with the Rajputs, Marathas, Mughals and British. Lietenant James Outram, a British government servant, is said to have pacified the Bhils. He helped raise the first Bhil Corps in 1825.

The Bhils migrated to Tripura during the first quarter of this century. In 1916 Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya Bahadur gave permission to start tea gardens in Tripura. It was then that the Bhils and many other tribals were brought to Tripura state to initiate work in the tea plantations. Now-a-days the Bhils inhabit the tea garden areas of
the West and North Tripura regions. According to the 1981 Census total Bhil population in Tripura was 838 (of which 450 males and 388 females). Of these only 10% were reported to be urban dwellers. They speak among themselves the Bhil dialect which, according to Sir G. Grierson, belongs to the Kolarian group of speeches. They can communicate in Bengali, Hindi and Oriya with the outsiders. A bow and arrow consist their traditional identification mark. They are considered a scheduled tribe in Tripura.
Notes and references to Chapter-II


5. B.B. Sarkar, Ibid., p. 29.


8. K.S. Singh, People of India, Tripura, p. 166.


11. B.B. Sarkar, Ibid., p. 96.


14. B.B. Sarkar, Ibid., p. 68.
15. Ibid., p. 69.
17. Ibid., pp. 447; 450.
20. Ibid., pp. 68-69.