

The Importance of Chowak in The Rituals of The Twiprasa in Tripura: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to investigate the use of *chowak* (rice beer) in several ceremonies as a social custom among the members of the Tripura tribe. In the Tripura tribe, *chowak* plays an important role in their socio-cultural life. It is also an essential part of their animistic belief system. Just as without animal sacrifice their deities cannot be worshipped, similarly without rice beer any propitiation remains inconclusive. According to popular belief, rice beer is the representative of the goddess Devi Laxmi. Hence, it is brewed with much religiosity. The preparation of rice beer involves a series of methods as well as taboos. Needless to say that *chowak* brings community harmony and it acts as a great way of bringing people together. It is assumed that sharing or drinking a bit of rice beer is like sharing the blessings of the goddess Devi Laxmi. They offer rice beer as a representation of Devi Laxmi while worshipping the deities. Rice beer is required in one's life from the day of birth to the day of death for it is a must for every ritual. Rice beer is used in rituals as a kind of hospitality and respect towards the visitors. But with the passage of time, the significance of *chowak* is waning among the members of the tribe due to, commercialization, religious conversion, acculturation, and modernization.

Keywords: Tripura tribe, rice beer, animism, animal sacrifice, Oral tradition.

1. Introduction

The northeast comprises eight different states namely Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura. The north east of India itself is a diverse region in terms of cultures, myths and mythology, belief systems, traditions and ethno linguistics. There are total of two hundred twenty ethnic groups found residing in north east, India. Twiprasa is one of them residing in Tripura since time immemorial. In this state of Tripura, there are twenty indigenous communities found namely: Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang, Uchoi, Noatia, Orang, Mog, Chakma, Lushai, Garo, Bhil, Santal, Lepcha, Halam, Bhutia, Kuki, Chaimal, Khasia and Munda, and Darlong. All these tribes may linguistically be divided into three groups: Tibetan- Burman group, Kuki-chin group and the Arakan- group. On the other hand, there are some sub-tribes speaking the same language "Kokborok" which is a Tibeto-Burman language. These sub-tribes are - (1) Tripura, (2) Reang (3) Jamatia, (4) Noatia, (5) Uchoi, (6) Kalai, (7) Rupini, (8) Debbarma and (9) Murasing. All these nine clans or sub-tribes are addressed as "borok", "Twiprasa" and "Tripuri". The word Twiprasa means children of water ('Twi' means water and 'Phra' means god 'sa' means children). These sub-tribes share almost common culture, traditions, and religion. Rice beer plays an important role in every tribal culture across the globe. It has an immense factor in

different aspects of their life. Undoubtedly, like in other cultures, the rice beer in the Twiprasas culture has been playing an important role in their religious beliefs and practices. There is no doubt that the community professes a primitive belief system which has no script and passes down orally for generations. Their religious beliefs and practices are expressed through the rites and rituals which are observed in different aspects of their life. There are numerous rituals in which different types of propitiations are made to please their traditional deities. Each deity is propitiated in different ways with different items. And rice beer plays an important role in the Borok rituals. It is one of the most essential items used as offering to please the deity. Without rice beer a ritual cannot be conducted hence, it is an essential part of a ritual. It is required on every social occasion like birth, marriage and death ceremonies and also on social occasions.

2. Religion of the Twiprasas

There is no doubt that each and every tribe has their own religious faith which has been passing down orally for generations. Most of the tribal people across the globe profess kinds of beliefs and practices which are related to Mother Nature. They worship many objects like trees, hills, rivers, stones and the moon and sun believing all of them as living soul. Similarly, the Twiprasas who are considered as one of the ethnic groups in the state of Tripura follow such types of beliefs and practices which the anthropologist called it 'animism'. The term animism is an anthropological term coined by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 in his book *Primitive Culture*. The term animism is derived from the Latin word *anima* or *animus* which generally means a 'Breath' or 'soul' or 'spirit'. The Twiprasas worship the bamboo altars in rituals which represent the traditional deities. Their rituals are mostly sacrificial. It is seen that not even a single ritual is conducted without sacrifice. Their religious faith is polytheistic. They don't believe and worship any single deity. They propitiate different deities for different well-being. For instance, they worship the deity *Garia* for prosperity, family welfare and they worship the deity *Lampra raja* for purification and to find new ways to get welfare and so on. Apart from following their own traditional religious faith, they are also seen to follow the Shanatana Hindu Dharma. For instance, they worship some Hindu gods and goddesses like the lord Shani is worshipped individually at home. There are many Hindu gods and goddesses worshipped by them at the same time when the Hindus worship their gods and goddesses. It is important to mention that in several aspects it is seen that their traditional religion is directly and indirectly interconnected with the Shanatana Hindu Dharma.

3. The Myth Related to Rice Beer

There are several myths on the rice beer prevalent in their culture. One of the myths is narrated by a priest, Surendra Kumar Tripura on July 23, 2021. The story goes like this: There was a time when living beings were required to be brought to Earth. Initially, the Earth was full of water and fogs. There was nothing but a lotus flower which was floating on the water. In that lotus flower, the Almighty god known as Ishwar was sleeping inside the lotus. After many years, the gods and goddesses decided to complete the Earth. Hence they had decided to awaken Ishwar by a rooster. Each of the gods and goddesses had contributed some body parts of their own to create the rooster. It is said that the eyes were given by Kalachan raja, the tongue was given by Srimaa Gangi and the sound was given by Devi Swashati. The wings were given by Bikrampati raja and the life was given by Ananda Ghasin and so on. After the completion of the rooster, the almighty god was awakened and the Earth was completed by him. He created human beings. Then there were requirements of Devi Laxmi for the welfare of human beings on

the Earth. Therefore, Akhatra and Baikhatra the two brothers were told to go to Gulukul land to bring the goddess Devi Laxmi to the Earth. At first the elder brother Baikhatra went to Devi Laxmi's house. He was asked by her why he was at her home. Then he was asked whether he would like to test alcohol or not. He was not familiar with it hence he asked her what would happen after drinking it. She told him that once somebody drinks it will lose consciousness. He agreed to test it. After drinking the alcohol, he could not balance himself. He was unable to menace his clothes hence he was ashamed and finally he ran away from her house to the land of human beings. After that, his younger brother Baikhatra was sent there to bring her. Similarly, he was also asked whether he would like to test it or not. He denied testing it. Then she came with him. She brought many things with her livestock like pigs, chickens, goats and so on. She also brought the fruits like the jhum cucumber, and types of edible fruits available in the jungle. Therefore, in the Twiprasa culture, while they propitiate the two brothers in the ritual of Lampra, they don't offer rice beer to the younger brother who is known as Baikhatra. Instead they propitiate the deity two chickens whereas; the elder brother is offered only one chicken with one bottle of rice beer. And the rice beer is offered as a symbol of blessing of the Devi Laxmi.

4. Used of *chowak* in different rituals

There is no doubt that *Chowak* (rice beer) has an important role in the rituals of the Borok people in Tripura. There are different types of *chowak* is fermented to use in several rites and rituals. Some of the rites and rituals are as follows:

4.1 Khoamani Chowak

The literate meaning of *khoamani chowak* is the rice of the deity Baa khoama. This type of rice beer is offered to a deity named Baa Khoama. The deity is worshipped in the ritual of *Khoroksumani*. The deity is offered one bottle of rice beer and along with a chicken. The priest performs this ritual for the welfare of a person, who is either newly married, or pregnant, just recovered from prolonged illness and so on. The rice beer which is offered to the deity is not allowed to drink until it is concentrated by the priest. It is believed that if somebody drinks it secretly before it is concentrated then he might have a mental imbalance which is called *baibagala* in their native term.

4.2 Ayok kwatal ni chowak

The literate meaning of *ayok kwatalni chowak* is the rice beer of new life. This is one of the rituals performed as a rite of birth. After the birth of a child, when the baby turns 2-3 years old then the ritual is performed to get blessing from Devi Laxi. A priest performs a ritual in the name of Devi Laxmi and propitiates her by offering a rooster or boar. After the ritual, a feast is arranged for the locals and relatives. Before they have meals a ritual is performed which is known as '*khotipui*'. There the baby is sited facing the east and on both sides of the baby two banana leaves are placed in which some cotton and some burning paddy is kept and a bottle of rice beer is also kept as symbol of blessing of Devi Laxmi.

4.3 Sikla Chalai ni chuk

The literate meaning of *sikla chalai ni chowak* is the rice beer of the youth. This type of rice beer is fermented for youth boys and girls who take part in the ritual of Garia. Garia is one of the biggest rituals in the Twiprasas culture. This ritual is also regarded as one of the biggest festivals in Tripura. In this

ritual, a number of religious specialists are appointed to worship the deity. Those who are appointed as shamans to perform the ritual, they take the deity from family to family either for three -five or seven days. The families, which propitiate the deity, ferment many rice beers for the youth participants in the ritual

4.4 Lamprani ni chwak

This ritual is performed on several occasions like birth, marriage and death ceremonies. The actual meaning of lampra is 'lam' means ways and 'pra' means deity so it means the deity who shows ways. This ritual is performed whenever the Borok people are yet to start something. For instances like, when a hill is selected for jhum cultivation then they perform this ritual to get new ideas and ways for prosperity. In this ritual, two deities are performed namely Lampra and Lampui. Before this ritual is performed the householder has to ferment rice beers to offer to the deity Lampra. The two deities cannot be performed without rice beer.

4.5 Kuthuini chwak

When a member of the community dies then a series of rites and rituals are performed as a custom of the community. Rice beer has very immense factors on those rites and rituals performed during the cremation of the deceased. When the dead body is placed in the pyre, a priest pours some rice beer in the mouth of the deceased as symbol of Devi Laxmi. Rice beer is required until the last rite which is known as *kwthui mai khalai* is performed.

5. The Present Study

Title: Use of *Chowak* in the Rituals of the *Twiprasas* in Tripura: An Ethnographic study.

6. Objectives

- To study and document the religious beliefs and practices of the *Twiprasas*.
- To know how the fermented rice beer is used as sacred entities and symbols of deities.
- To know whether the traditions are influenced by modernity and commercialization.

7. Methodology

The prime objective of this paper is study how such alcohol or rice beer can be a sacred entity and play an important role in their religious beliefs and practices. In order to conduct the research, the researcher has undertaken an ethnographic fieldwork as a research method to learn about the beliefs, rituals, and lives of the tribe. The researcher had observed many rituals in which rice beer plays an important role. He had visit several villages under the South district of Tripura. Almost 16 villages were visited by him to collect data. Therefore he had adopt different types of methods like participant and non-participant observation, sampling methods, interview, structured and unstructured questionnaires, transcription and archival research. The researcher has also gone through for audio and video recording as the resource persons relate the myths, rituals, customs, and tales, etc.

7.1 Difficulties faced during fieldwork

Research based on primary sources seems to be very difficult. It would have been better if the research had conducted earlier like thirty years back or more than it. Because old people are found since many of

them have passed away. On the other hand, those who are still involved in such activities like priests are mostly now commercial minded. They are reluctant to share about the required data at free cost. And most of them are lack proper information about myths, customs and practices. On the other hand, most of them have been converted to other religions. Therefore, it was quite difficult to collect data and gather information in time. Most of the resource persons being workers, they are hardly available at their homes. Therefore, the researcher had to spend many nights at their home to collect source from them.

8. Findings of the Research proposal

Twiprasas are a very simple and welcoming tribe. They have their own traditional religious faith, which is polytheistic. They don't worship one deity, but several deities worshipped in different rituals. There are malevolent and benevolent deities for different purposes. They propitiate the deities by offering rice beers in the rituals. Besides rice beer, they also sacrifice specific livestock to worship the deities for the betterment of the family members. Most of the rituals prefer rice beer and it is seen that without rice beer, a ritual cannot be performed. Rice beer is used on several occasions besides religious ceremonies. Rice beer is offered to age members of the community as a symbol of love and respect. The rice beer, which is used in rituals, is fermented by following a sacred religiosity. Rice beer is used not only as a religious entity but also as a cultural entity which represents the identity of the Twiprasa people in Tripura. Rice beer represents the cultural identity of the community and it also forms a kind of togetherness among the members of the community. It is shared with each other as a symbol of blessing of Devi Laxmi known as Mailoma and Kholoma (deitie of paddy). It is seen that in different rituals, rice beer is shaped in different forms for example, at birth ritual it is known as *charai ni chowak khanmani*, in the ritual of garia, it is known as *sikkla chalai ni chowak*, in the death rituals, it is known as *kwthuini chowak*. On the other hand, with the passage of time, such beliefs and practices are waning due to education, commercialization and modernization.

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