

The Impact of Migration on the Folk Beliefs of the Tribal People in Tripura: an Ethnographic Study with Special References to Boroks

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate how the influx of tribal refugees from the neighbouring country Bangladesh impacted the socio-cultural and economic aspects of Borok people concentrated in different parts of Tripura. During 1983-98, due to some political conflicts within Bangladesh, thousands of indigenous tribal people migrated and were rehabilitated in refugee camps in Tripura through a contract between Indo-Bangladesh governments. Over time, the rehabilitated/migrant tribal people of Bangladesh impacted the socio-economic-religious life of the local tribal people in Tripura. The religious beliefs and practices of the refugee tribal population dominated the religious beliefs and practices of the local tribal people by outnumbering them. Many local beliefs, practices, and ritual activities thus were neglected and forgotten or blended with the imported ones. The refugee society even challenged the control of the local priests to defend their positions within their society. Without serious effort to retrieve those local practices, such marginalised indigenous traditions shall be lost forever.

Keywords: traditional beliefs, ritual, refugee, migration, Borok people.

1. Introduction

The Boroks, one of the prominent tribal communities of Tripura, have rich and varied oral literatures of their own, of which many are on the verge of extinction day by day. Their kinds of literature are related to their lives, personal experiences, reminiscences, human imaginations and perceptions, and cultural lore and are part of their folklore in unscripted forms. The oral traditions of the Boroks, particularly the belief system, are expressed through rituals that express the socio-cultural and religious life of the community.

Undoubtedly, the state has welcomed countless Hindu refugees at various points in time who were victims of religious persecution and political conflicts in the neighbouring countries of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh. Similar to this, thousands of Hindu tribal people (Tripuris, Chakmas, and Mogs or Barma) from Bangladesh were forced to seek refuge in Tripura in 1983–98. It is said that the native tribal population of Parbatya Chattagram demanded the establishment of a tribal territorial council within the tribally populated areas following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. To create an organisation that would represent all of the tribal people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Manabendra Narayan Larma established the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samahati Samiti on February 15, 1972, following Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Larma was elected to the national assembly, the Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad. Larma and the PCJSS started forming the Shanty Bahini (Peace Corps), an

armed group that operates in the Hill Tracts area after Larma's ongoing attempts to get the government to acknowledge the rights of the tribal people through political talks had failed. It fought against the government for many years after being founded in 1972. Attacks on Bangladesh Army convoys were initiated by Shanti Bahini in 1977. They committed extortion and kidnappings. Larma then hid from the security services of the government. Larma's position was undermined by factionalism within the PCJS, and on November 10, 1983, he was assassinated. Thirteen people were killed on June 23, 1981, when the Shanti Bahini attacked a camp of Bangladeshi rifles. 24 members of the Bangladesh rifles were later captured and executed. Such a political situation created violence in the hill tract areas and compelled the tribal people to take refuge in parts of South Tripura, India. The victims were provided rehabilitation camps and were sent back to their homeland, Bangladesh, in 1997–988 after a peace accord agreement between the Shanti Bahini and Bangladesh government.

The local Borok population was much smaller than the migrated refugees. As a result, many cultural aspects and the traditional beliefs and practices of the Boork people were marginalised, and it became a new challenge for those who were known as religious leaders or priests to defend their positions within the society. Such beliefs and practices of the Borok people are on the verge of becoming extinct not only due to marginalisation but also due to education, modernisation, proselytisation, and so on.

2. Folk Beliefs

The term folk belief was first coined in 1892 by English folklorist Lawrence Gomme. Folk belief is a genre of folklore that is often expressed in narratives, customs, rituals, food ways, proverbs, and rhymes. It also includes a wide variety of behaviours, expressions, and beliefs. All cultures possess a variety of beliefs that can be classified as folk beliefs, common beliefs, or popular beliefs. These beliefs are not necessarily founded on scientific evidence, but they are widely acknowledged as truth by the majority of tribal people. In a culture, folk beliefs can be found in many different ways. Some remain private and are unknown only within the group, while others have become more visible. Folk beliefs and practices are a rich tapestry of cultural stories and activities that echo societies' histories, cultural identities, and collective wisdom. Most of the folk beliefs are ritualistic actions or customs that have been passing down through generations. They range from daily routines, like greetings and eating habits, to yearly festivals and ceremonies.

Since each belief system has its term with specific meaning which relates to the community. The community term can define and describe its beliefs either in cosmology, spirituality, in rituals or god. The Western term religion is derived from the Latin word 'Religare' which means "to bind together" cannot define a community belief system or a tribal beliefs. The word religion is completely distinct from an indigenous belief system or a folk belief in terms of origin, meaning, connotation, philosophy, worship, and understanding. Therefore, a community belief system can only be conceptualized or described by its term that provides a comprehensive understanding. Usually, an indigenous belief system is traced through folk music, folktales, riddles, myths, and rituals. .

3. Borok Folk Beliefs

As already mentioned, folk beliefs or tribal religion cannot be understood by the Western term religion. A tribal religion of folk beliefs can only be understood by its own term. Therefore, it is useful to employ the community term which can describe and define its belief system. Similarly, the Borok people also have their term which is known as '*motai*' is a collective term that describes the traditional belief

system, or religious activities of the community. The Borok people have many different folk beliefs and rituals which are performed in different aspects of their life. Their traditional deities or gods and goddesses are invoked in the form of bamboo altars. There is no script to perform any rituals but some words and performances are performed by the priest while performing a ritual. The beliefs and practices of the Borok people can only be understood through features.

4. Impact of migration on the Borok Folk beliefs

Since the Borok people are one of the indigenous tribal groups in Tripura, has many folk beliefs and practices that are expressed through rituals performed in different aspects of their life. Some of the important rituals are *Lampra*, *garia*, *porah*, *khoksumani*, *dristi khibinai*, *najar khibinai*, *kharangnai*, and so on were impacted by the influx of Bangladeshi tribal refugees. As already mentioned due to some political conflicts in the year 1983-98 in the neighboring country Bangladesh, around fifty to sixty thousand Hindu tribal people were displaced and hence had to take shelter at different parts of South Tripura namely Jatanbari, Shilacheri, and Sabroom. Therefore, there was an impact of migration on the socio, cultural, economic and religious aspects of the local Borok people. The migrated tribal refugees were mostly from Mogs, Chakmas, and Tripuri or Borok communities became the dominant ones. All these three tribes had their religious faiths that impacted the local religious faith, particularly the folk beliefs of the Borok people. Since the research paper concerns only the folk beliefs of the Tripuri known as Borok people concentrated in Sabroom border areas hence special emphasis has been given to the said community. Many cultural aspects of the Borok people were influenced by the migrated ones, especially the ritual activities. Over time, the local priests had to face a tough challenge in terms of defending their positions as local priests and performing ritual activities within the society. There were many priests among the tribal migrants and they were more approachable than the local priests. Consequently, the migrated priests were preferred more for ritual performance. One of the interviewees said that many migrated priests used to perform rituals at free cost. Therefore, many local rituals and practices were impacted. For example, the *garia* ritual of the Borok people was also impacted. Though, there is not that much distinction between the local *garia* and Bangladeshi tribal *garia*, nevertheless, some sort of distinction is noticeable in terms of performance, the shape of the deity, the equipments, songs, rhythms of the drum, dances, and so on.

5. Findings and Conclusion

There is no doubt that migration can have positive as well as negative impacts on the lives of the local citizens. Migration, depending on numbers can bring a serious impact on the culture, traditions, and economy and politics of the local people. It is important to mention here that migration in Tripura has become a subject of research. The state provided rehabilitation camps at different times in different parts of the state to the victims of religious persecution and political conflicts in the neighboring country East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. As a result, the local tribal people turned into minority from the majority. Therefore, many local cultures, traditions, and religions have been modified and the State turned into a diverse region in northeast, India. Similarly, in 1983, thousands of Bangladeshi Borok people had to migrate to different parts of South Tripura Sabroom south Tripura due to some political conflicts and religious persecution within their country Bangladesh. The estimated number of migrants was around fifty thousand whereas the local population was only 8 to 9 thousand hence many local beliefs, customs, and practices had been marginalized some of which are no longer practiced like before. The folk belief

which was brought to Sabroom Tripura by the Bangladeshi tribal refugees was called *Bangla haa ni mantra* (mantras of Bangladesh). There is a strong belief among the local Borok people that the *mantra* of Bangladeshi tribal people was more sacred and active in terms of actions. Therefore, sometimes, when a householder or a person needs to invoke a deity by a ritual then the priest is asked whether his mantras are migrated ones or not. Apart from this, there was a serious impact of migration on the learning of black magic practices. It is said, that during the stay of migrants somebody could have easily convinced the migrated priests to perform malicious rituals and to learn *swkal* (witchcraft). The migrated refugees, due to poverty, used to impart good/bad mantras at very low costs so they could manage their daily life. Therefore, there are many priests among the local priests who learned from the Bangladeshi priests and are prioritized much more than the local ones in the Borok society. There was also a clash between the local priests and migrated priests in terms of proving one were better than the other. They fought each other by applying black magic. As a result, at the times, many priests lost their lives.

The folk beliefs that are concerned in this research will be scope for further research for those who are enthusiastic about culture, religion, rituals, history, and politics. Since this study is a pioneering attempt at the migration of Bangladeshi tribal people and its impacts on the folk beliefs of local Borok tribal people will bring more aspects related to migration, politics, and socio-economic and cultural life of Tripura.

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