

Socio-Cultural and Economic Identity of the Reang (Bru) Community: A Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of Tripura

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Abstract: *The tribal populations in Tripura like any other Northeastern tribes are of varied ethnic affinities and linguistic backgrounds. These diversities define their commonness they have in nature of their struggle and difficulties in their respective societies. The word 'tribal' imply different negative meaning such as 'primitive', 'savage' or being inferiority with low level of socio-religious and economic system, etc. The present paper seeks to explore various alternative views with reference to the Reang (Bru) community of Tripura with special issues relating to their identity. The study is of importance in the case of such tribal societies known for their economic backwardness. An attempt will therefore be made to figure out the status and rights of the Reang (Bru) community of Tripura; the only particularly vulnerable tribal group in Tripura.*

Keywords: *Bru, Culture, Chudri (village headman), Hojagiri, Tribal, Rai (community head)*

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Introduction

The State of Tripura is situated in the Northeastern parts of India. Tripura is bounded in the eastern side by the States of Assam and Mizoram while the rest is surrounded by Bangladesh. Tripura was once a princely state until 1949 when a merger agreement was signed and it became a part of India. Tripura was categorized as a Union Territory till 1963 and it attained statehood only in 1972. There are nineteen tribal communities in Tripura namely: the Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Garo, Halam, Jamatia, Khasi, Kuki, Lepcha, Lushai, Mog, Munda, Noatia, Orang, Riang/ Reang, Santhal, Tripuri, and the Uchai.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. The PVTGs are those special tribes whose population's growths are stagnant with low literacy and economic status.²

Brief Profile of the Reang (Bru) Community

The Reangs (Bru) are basically a semi-nomadic tribe who practice *jhum* (slash and burn) or shifting method of cultivation.³ They belonged to the mongoloid group and speak *Kau Bru*, which is a part of the tibeto-burmese language group. The Reangs (Bru) also call themselves as *Bru* denoting ‘community’.⁴ 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.⁵ Therefore he does not want the Community to use and associate his name to be part of the overall clan system.⁶

Socio-Cultural Structure

The main system of the Reang (Bru) 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 Reangs (Bru) society. But such system collapsed after the great Reang movement of 1942-43. This has created fissures and cracks in their traditional solidarity.⁷ The Reang (Bru) social structure is also based on the system of clan structure. There are a number of kin groups among the Reangs (Bru) 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.⁸ Therefore, the Reang (Bru) kinship system embodies the concept of *sandai* along with *houchu* (affines). Music and dance is a vital part of the Reang (Bru)’s culture. Folk songs, dance and music are a composite whole which is one of the dominant characteristics of Reang (Bru)’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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) includes *Kham* (drum), *Ksumu* (flute), *Sota*, *Srenda* (local violin), *Chonghpreng* (local guitar), *Dandu* (mouth piece instrument), *Uathop* (bamboo musical instrument), etc. Such instruments produce different musical notes.

The most important and popular dance of the Reangs (Bru) is the Hojagiri dance. The Hojagiri *ri* 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 *choudri* (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.⁹ 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).¹⁰

Economic Structure

The Reangs (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) society is that they have a very simple technology which fits well with their ecological surroundings. There is no any uniform pattern in the Reang (Bru) economic way of life.¹¹ Their economy is of 'subsistence type'. The structure of the Reang (Bru) 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. The economy of the Reang (Bru) community is basically simplistic in nature. In a joint Reang (Bru) family, few household members may work as a cultivator (s), 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 Reangs (Bru). So, substitute occupation like shifting cultivation (*jhum*) is in practice in the hill slopes for their subsistence.¹² The economic system of the Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) is one such important example of women participation in the field of cultural activities among the Reang (Bru) society. Hojagiri also locally known as '*medol/ menpati*' basically indicate the 'night of the feast'. The frequent movements of the Reangs (Bru) 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 Reang (Bru) 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.¹⁴ Usually, the family stays at their *kairing* till the completion of their *jhum* harvests.

Developmental Framework of the PVTG (Reang/ Bru) in Tripura

The Reangs (Bru) are also identified as the Primitive Tribal Group (now Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group or PVTG) by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India in 1975-76 on the criteria already categorized on the basis of their dependence on pre-agricultural technology, very low level of illiteracy and having a stagnant or declining population. The Government of Tripura established a separate department called the Tribal Rehabilitation in Plantation and Primitive Group Programme (TRP & PGP) in 1983 for the overall socio-economic upliftment of the Reangs (Bru) or the PVTG in Tripura. As emphasized by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India the major activities undertaken by Tripura State Government for the PVTGs includes providing Health facilities (like Janashree Bima Yojana), Housing, Land Distribution (Right to Forest Dwellers Act, 2005), Agriculture Development, Cattle Development, etc. There are also different other programmes/ Schemes which are solely implemented for the PVTGs.¹⁵

The funds and other financial matters for the developmental scheme that are implemented for the PVTGs are then released by the Central Government. The various schemes thereafter are implemented according to the guidelines of the Conservation-cum-Development (CCD) Plans submitted by the State Government through different agencies like the Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDP)/ Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDA), Tribal Research Institutes (TRI) and different Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO). In order to make available the funds meant for the PVTGs in Tripura, the Reang (Bru) families who usually lived scattered on hill slopes were regrouped into compact villages. These new villages were then provided with various facilities like drinking water, schools, roads, etc. The Reang (Bru) families were also rehabilitated through rubber plantation apart from small business scheme and pig rearing, horticultural resettlement, etc. Many Reang (Bru) families also benefited from the rights of occupation and livelihood under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest (Recognition of Forest Dwellers Rights) Act 2006.¹⁶

Conclusion

The Reangs (Bru) are witnessing the different phases of the socio-cultural and economic developmental phase. The socio-cultural and economic pattern of the Reangs (Bru) 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 Reangs (Bru) 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.

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5. *Kaskau* refers to the title of the Community Chief of the Bru/Reang Community. There are a total of 64 *Kaskau* spanning from the year 1327 A.D. upto 1627 A.D. Lincoln Reang (2024) *History of the Reang (Bru)*, Guwahati: Eastern Publications, pp.9-10.
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