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Memory, Migration and Oral Heritage: Unveiling the Reang Community's Narratives in Tripura

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Abstract:

Tripura is a small state located in northeast India. The north-eastern includes eight states known as seven sisters and one brother namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim respectively. It is a place and home to a mix of tribal cultures and religious groups. The Reang community, primarily residing in the state of Tripura in Northeast India, holds a rich and diverse cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in its mnemonic history, migration patterns, vibrant oral narratives. Mnemonic history constitutes an integral part of the Reang community's identity formation. The Reang people have traditionally used mnemonic devices such as songs, dances, rituals, and other artistic expressions to protect and transmit their historical narratives across generations. These narratives contain valuable information about their migration routes, historical events, social structures, and traditional practices. Migration also plays a significant role in the Reang community's history and cultural dynamics. Over the centuries, the Reang people have migrated from their ancestral homeland in present-day Bangladesh to various regions, including Tripura.

Keywords: Mnemonic, History, Migration, Oral Narratives, Origins, Cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Tripura with an area of 10486 sq. km has always been a multi-ethnic state like most other northeastern states of India. It is mostly hilly and often inaccessible area. Tripura is the

second most populous state in Northeast India after Assam. According to the list of Schedule Cast/Schedule Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976, there are 19 Schedule Tribes in Tripura, namely the Tipras, Reang (Bru), Jamatias, Noatias, Lushais, Uchois, Mogs, Kukis, Chakmas, Khasis, Garos, Halam, Bhutias, Bhils, Mundas, Orangs, Lepchas, Santhals and Chaimals.

The Reang is at different stages of social, cultural, and economic development. The Reang is considered one of the most backward indigenous ethnic groups in India. Reangs out of the 19 Schedule Tribes of Tripura, were recognized by the government of India as primitive Tribes, now it is considered the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. The original homes of Reang are very difficult to ascertain without any documentary evidence. However, there are many opinions regarding the Reang homeland and their migration. Reangs are considered one of the mongoloid tribes from the perspective of their linguistic, ethnic, and physical features. A large concentration of the speakers of these linguistic groups is found in China, Tibet, Myanmar, the whole part of the north-eastern part of India and Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh).

The Origins and History of Reangs do not have the correct information. What they have in folklore bears little historical value. Their indefinite physical features like scanty hair on the face and body, flat face etc have Mongolian features. The homeland of the Reangs of present-day in the state of Tripura and the Hill Tracts of Chittagong. But for sure they have not been residing here from time immemorial. It's been immigrated here from elsewhere.

The Reangs (Bru) speak *Kau Bru*, part of the Tibeto-Burmese language that belonged to the mongoloid group. (Reang 8) Grierson (1927) in his survey of linguistics makes an interesting observation. In his research, the original home of the people speaking Sino-Tibetan languages is somewhere in north-western China.

The Reang (Bru) tribe have 12 clans namely Molsoi, Meska, Msha, Apeto, Raikchaoh, Chongpreng, Wairem, Nouhkham, Tuimoi-Yaphauh, Chorkhy, Yakstam and Tauma-Yakcha. The Reangs (Bru) are known for their Simplicity. At the same time, due to their simplicity and isolation, it has been possible for them to maintain their rich age-old folk cultures and distinctive lifestyle.

This journal will mainly focus on the mnemonic history of their culture, movement and oral narratives within the society. It will also include the findings of the Reang (Bru) lifestyle and culture in ancient times. This study aims to bring out the Origin and History of the Reang (Bru) from the olden days to the present time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reangs are considered ‘wanderers’ moving from one place to another in search of fertile land. Many writers mentioned the migration of Reangs taking place from century to century and place to place. Historically and presently speaking Reangs are not new to the shifting cultivations and we still find some the family from hilly and isolated areas moving from one place to another place in search of new jhum land. While searching for new sites they also tend to shift their village to a new place. We can only differentiate Reang tribe with the other tribes through their dressing style and use of ornaments and of course the Hodaigiri dance which act as a tool in identifying the Reang tribe through the methods of mnemonic study which will also help in studying their past history.

Chaudhury, Jagadis Gan’s *The Riangs of Tripura* Publish in 1983 deals with the “The language spoken by the Riangs is called Riang or *Kak bru*”. “Kak bru belongs to the great Sino-Tibetan linguistic family”.

Grierson (1927) in his linguistic survey of India made interesting observations. He believed that the original home of the people speaking Sino-Tibetan languages is somewhere in north-western China. His survey can be used in studying the Origin and Migration that take place in Reang Society.

Reang, Lincoln’s *History of The Reang (Bru)* published in 2021 states that “The Reang (Bru) express their cultural identity and distinctiveness through their social organisation, language, rituals and festivals”

An article issued by *Tribal Research and Cultural Institute* titled ‘Reang’ stated, “Reangs are said the have come first from Shan State of upper Burma (now Myanmar) in different waves of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and then to Southern part of Tripura. Similarly, another group entered Tripura via Assam and Mizoram during the 18th Century. Reangs belong to Indo-Mongoloid racial stock”. In the same article, it is said that “Reangs traditionally are endogamous and do not marry outside their community”. I strongly believe that this very statement needs more research and survey. Even though a maximum of the Reangs do marry within their community but still we also do find marriage outside society thus we cannot fully agree with this article.

Meska and Molsoi are indeed the two major clans of Reang. But some of the articles and journals had written “Meska group and its subgroups namely Mwasa, Chorkhi, Raikwchak, Wairem, Tokma Yakcho, Twimuiyafak.” “Molsoi group and its six subgroups”. *Tripura, the land of fourteen gods and a million statues*, <http://www.tripura.org.in/reang.htm> Due to the lack of proper research this very journal gave a piece of wrong information regarding clans,

first of all, no clans is above or under any clan, they exist their own ways with a unique story. There are no sub-clans of a particular clan in Reangs *Panji* (Clan).

MNEMONIC HISTORY OF REANG COMMUNITY

By utilizing a mnemonic device, the study seeks to facilitate the retention and recall of key events, challenges, and achievements shaping the community's past. The research delves into the cultural, social, and political aspects of the Reang community, exploring their resilience, ethnicity, agreements, conflicts, humanitarian crises, inclusion efforts, solidarity, traditional practices, and socio-economic development. Through this mnemonic approach, the journal aims to contribute to a more accessible understanding of the Reang community's history.

The Reang community, also known as the Bru community, is primarily found in the Indian states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. They are considered one of the major ethnic groups in the state of Tripura.

Memory functions as a mechanism for preserving the past. Within the Reang community, individuals and groups actively engage in remembering and maintaining their historical narratives. Through oral traditions, storytelling, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the Reang people ensure that their history is not lost or forgotten. This preservation of the past serves as a foundation for their sense of continuity and connectedness to their ancestors. Furthermore, memory also serves as a means of constructing meaning. The Reang community uses memory to make sense of their present circumstances and to derive lessons and insights from their history. Through storytelling and reflective practices, they interpret their past experiences and extract wisdom that guides their decision-making and problem-solving in the present.

By remembering and transmitting their collective history, the Reang people create a sense of belonging and solidarity among themselves. Shared memories and historical narratives reinforce a shared cultural and social identity, providing a collective framework that strengthens their community bonds. Memory not only connects individuals to their community but also helps shape their self-identity as Reang individuals.

Performative arts play a crucial role in the mnemonic representation of the Reang community in Tripura. These artistic expressions, including dance, music, and theatre, serve as powerful tools for preserving their cultural heritage and memories. Here are some key examples of performative arts in the Reang community:

Dance: The Reang community is known for its vibrant and expressive dance forms. The *Hodagiri* dance is one of the most popular dances performed during festivals and cultural events. The *Hodaigiri* dance is usually performed on the occasion of *maikhlungmo* i.e., worship of the goddess of paddy and cotton especially during the month of September-October after the successful completion of *jhum* (*shifting*) cultivation harvesting. This dance serves as a mnemonic representation of their customs and traditions.

Music: Music is a vital part of the Reang (Bru) culture. Folk songs and music are a composite whole which is one of the dominant characteristics of Reang (Bru) cultural development. Music is an integral part of Reang's performative arts. Traditional musical instruments, such as the Chongpreng, Sranda, Ksumu (Flute), Khamb (Drum) etc are used to create melodious tunes.

Festivals and Celebrations: Festivals and celebrations offer opportunities for the Reang community to showcase their performative arts. During festivals like the Garia Puja and Kharchi Puja, dance and music performances are an integral part of the rituals. These performances entertain and serve as mnemonic representations of their religious beliefs, mythologies, and cultural memories.

The Reang community is a living example of resilience, adaptation, and creativity in the face of changing circumstances. They have preserved their unique traditions, language, and beliefs, while also embracing modernity and progress. They are an integral part of the mosaic of Tripura's society and culture.

COURSE OF MIGRATION

The Reang community of Tripura is one of the oldest and largest tribal groups in the state. They have a rich and diverse history of migration, culture, and identity. The Reangs are said to have originated from the Shan State of upper Burma (now Myanmar) in different waves to the Chittagong Hill tracts and then the Southern part of Tripura. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and speak the Kaubru language.

The Reangs have been practising shifting cultivation or *jhum* for centuries, which has been a major factor in their nomadic nature and migration. *Jhum* is a traditional method of farming that involves clearing a patch of forest, burning it, and then planting crops in ash-enriched soil. After a few years, the soil becomes depleted, and the farmers move on to a new patch of forest.

The migration of the Reang tribe can be traced back several centuries ago. It is believed that they migrated in small groups, moving through the hilly terrains of the region, seeking

fertile lands and better living conditions. The exact reasons for their migration are not clear, but it is speculated that they were driven by factors such as conflicts with neighbouring tribes, environmental changes, or socio-economic reasons. The ancient migration of the Reang tribe, also known as the Bru tribe, is believed to have its origins in the Tibeto-Burman region of the Mongolian plateau. It is believed that they originally migrated from Tibet and settled in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, which is present-day southeastern Bangladesh.

Social and cultural factors also play a crucial role in driving migration within the Reang community. These factors are deeply ingrained in their identity and history, shaping their decision to migrate and influencing the patterns and destinations of migration. Overall, the ancient migration of the Reang tribe played a crucial role in shaping their identity, culture, and economic practices. It influenced their relationship with neighbouring communities and continues to have lasting impacts on their community's present-day circumstances.

The historical and cultural background of the Reang community also influences migration patterns. The Reang people have a long history of displacement and migration, primarily due to ethnic conflicts and political instability in the region. As a result, migration has become deeply ingrained in their cultural practices and traditions. The concept of "jhum" cultivation, or shifting cultivation, which is central to the Reang agricultural system, necessitates periodic movement from one place to another in search of fertile land. This historical experience of mobility and adaptation has shaped the community's resilience and mobility, making migration a familiar and accepted practice.

In some cases, political ideologies and changes in political regimes can also impact migration. Shifts in political power, the imposition of policies that disadvantage specific communities, or changes in governance structures may cause uncertainty, fear, or loss of rights for the Reang community. Such situations can prompt individuals to migrate to regions where their political beliefs or identities are more aligned with the prevailing ideologies and policies.

Environmental factors also play a critical role in driving migration within the Reang community. These factors encompass various aspects of the natural environment that can influence individuals and families to relocate in search of better living conditions and opportunities.

Migration has various impacts on the Reang community, ranging from social, cultural, economic, and demographic changes. The major significant impact of migration is a transformation in the social dynamics within the community. When individuals or families migrate, there is often a separation from their original social networks and support systems. This can lead to a sense of isolation and a loss of social cohesion within the Reang community.

ORAL NARRATIVES

The Reang community, also known as the Bru tribe, is an indigenous community predominantly residing in the northeastern states of India, particularly in the states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. Like many indigenous communities, they have a rich tradition of storytelling through oral narratives, which serve as a means of preserving their cultural heritage and passing down knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next. These oral narratives encompass various genres and themes, including myths, legends, folktales, and historical accounts. Rooted in the essence of storytelling, Reang's oral narratives offer a glimpse into the community's profound connection with its past. These narratives are not mere chronicles of events but are living embodiments of the Reang people's collective memory, offering insight into their origins, beliefs, and aspirations. Through the art of spoken word, elders have artfully preserved the community's mythological sagas, recounting tales of celestial beings and heroic deeds that shape their worldview.

The oral narratives of the Reang community are not confined to the pages of history; they extend into the present, serving as a bridge between generations. These stories serve as a conduit for the transmission of cultural practices, traditions, and values that are integral to Reang's identity. As the embers of campfires kindle gatherings, members of the community gather to share these narratives, forging bonds and fostering a sense of unity among individuals young and old.

Folktales and Fables: Folktales and fables are an integral part of Reang's oral narratives. These stories often revolve around moral lessons, societal customs, and practical wisdom. They feature characters such as animals, plants, and humans, and are used to teach ethical values and impart practical knowledge to the younger generation. These narratives also showcase the Reang people's close connection with the environment and their reliance on nature for sustenance.

Apart from dance, music, and theatre, oral recitations and storytelling play a significant role in the mnemonic representation of the Reang community. Elders and community members recite epic tales, legends, and myths, orally transmitting knowledge and historical accounts to younger generations. These oral narratives serve as mnemonic devices for preserving the rich cultural and historical heritage of the Reang community.

The Reang community relies heavily on oral narratives to pass down their historical and cultural knowledge. Elders share stories, legends, and myths that serve as mnemonic devices, helping the younger generation understand and remember important events, customs, and ancestral lineage.

CONCLUSION

The mnemonic approach to studying the history of the Reang community in Tripura is a valuable tool for preserving their heritage, promoting inclusivity, and gaining insights into the challenges and triumphs they have experienced throughout their historical journey. Mnemonic practices and commemorative rituals help the Reang community maintain a connection to their historical past and contribute to preserving and continuing their rich cultural heritage. They serve as vital tools in transmitting their traditions, values, and identity from one generation to another.

Migration has played a significant role in the Reang community's history. Over the years, they have faced political and social upheavals, leading to multiple migrations within and outside of Tripura. These migrations have been driven by various factors, including conflicts with neighbouring communities and changes in political dynamics.

Oral narratives have also served as a vital means of preserving the Reang community's history and culture. They have passed down stories, legends, and myths from one generation to another, providing insights into their origins, customs, and beliefs. These narratives not only serve as a source of knowledge but also reinforce a sense of identity and unity among the Reang people.

Efforts are being made to document and preserve the Reang community's oral narratives, history, and migration patterns. These initiatives strive to raise awareness about their unique cultural heritage and ensure that future generations have access to this valuable legacy. The history, migration, and oral narratives of the Reang community in Tripura are crucial elements that shape their cultural identity. Understanding and appreciating these aspects of their heritage can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Reang community and their place in the region's history.

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