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# The Debbarma Tribe of Tripura: A Socio-Cultural Study of Tradition, Identity and Livelihood

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**ABSTRACT**

The Debbarma tribe, also known as the Tripuri or Borok community, is the largest indigenous tribal group of Tripura, possessing a rich historical and cultural heritage. The study examines the Debbarma tribe by analyzing its historical background, traditional attire, marriage system, cultural practices, food habits, and livelihood patterns. The study adopts a qualitative methodology and is descriptive and analytical in nature, based entirely on secondary data from books, peer-reviewed articles, government publications, and ethnographic studies. The findings reveal that the Debbarma community has preserved its distinct cultural identity through language, customs, festivals, traditional cuisine, weaving practices, and indigenous knowledge, despite modernization and changing livelihood patterns. The study concludes that the Debbarma tribe represents a unique example of cultural resilience, balancing traditional heritage with adaptation to contemporary transformations.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Historical Background of the Debbarma Tribe of Tripura

The ancient mythological legends have a deep foundation in the history of Tripura. Associating the name with a legendary figure called Tripur, a descendant of the Lunar dynasty, conservative historical dating places this around 1367 B.C. The kingdom finds mention in the Mahabharata and the Ain-i-Akbari, indicating its historical significance across different periods (Gan-Chaudhuri, 1980 & Debbarma, R. K., 2013). The ancient region was also known as Kirat Bhumi, comprising present-day Cachar, Sylhet, Tripura, and the Chittagong hill tracts. The tribes of Tripura, including the Debbarma, belong to the Tibeto-Burman racial and linguistic stock and are ethnologically of non-Aryan origin (Dev Varman, 2012 & Gan-Chaudhuri, 1980).

The Debbarma tribe, also known as the Tripuri or Tippera, are the largest and most dominant tribal group in Tripura. They belong to the Indo-Chinese stock with an admixture of Aryan blood and over centuries adopted the status of Kshatriyas, claiming descent from the Lunar Race of ancient Indian kings (Dev Varman, 2012; Debbarma, R.K., 2013). Their present title 'Barman' literally means 'armour', traditionally applicable to all Kshatriyas, and their family name was 'Pha' until 1279 A.D. The tradition and history of the Debbarma are preserved in the Rajmala, a royal chronicle written in Bengali considered one of the oldest compositions in the language, though historical data beyond the 12th century is largely lost in myths and legends (Debbarma, R.K., 2013). The kingdom reached its greatest power during the reign of Vijay Manikya (1528–1570 A.D.), and the 178th ruler, Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, finally acceded the state to the Dominion of India in 1947 (Dev Varman, 2012; Bhattacharyya, 1986).

The twelve groups or Hadas (or Huddas, meaning 'group' or 'divisions') of the Tripuris were formed based on the nature of work performed in the royal court. These were the Bachhal, Siuk, Koatia, Daityasing, Hujuria, Silatia, Apiya, Chhatratuiya, Deorai or Galim, Subenarayan, Sena, and Julai (Dev Varman, 2012 & Gan-Chaudhuri, 1980). The four groups were assigned specific work; while the Deorais were tribal priests who offered daily worship to the fourteen deities or Chaturdas Devatas, the Siuks served as hunters who supplied fodder for the royal food supplies (Dev Varman, 2012). Although the functional identity of the group has largely been diffused through time, these identities still have significance in community memory of the Debbarma.

Tripuri is spread throughout the districts of Tripura. However they are most numerous in Amarpur, Kamalpur, Khowai, Belonia, Udaipur and Sadar areas. The Tripuris living in the hill areas were accustomed to live in Tong or pile houses while in the plains they have to adopt the houses similar to those of their Bengali neighbours. A group of five to ten families is called Parahs or Punjis which is named after the head man or Sardar of the respective area (Gan-Chaudhuri; 1980). Tripuri language called Kokborok or Mrung is a member of the North-eastern Austro-Asiatic Tibeto-Burman language family and Tibetian language groups, specifically Kuki-Chin, and has many grammatical similarities with Cachari, Garo, Manipuri and Burma languages (Dev Varman; 2012). The very nature of the present study requires a detailed discussion of the historical origin, socio-cultural traditions, food culture and livelihood pattern of the Debbarma tribe in order to analyze the total entity of Debbarma community.

### 1.2. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based entirely on secondary sources of data. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical, socio-cultural, economic, and livelihood aspects of the Debbarma tribe of Tripura. Information has been collected from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, Census of India publications, official reports of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, ethnographic studies, dissertations, and other reliable secondary sources. The collected information has been critically reviewed, compared, interpreted, and synthesized using descriptive and thematic analysis to present a holistic account of the Debbarma tribe.

## 2. Attire and Ornaments of the Tripuri Tribe

The traditional clothing of this tribe of Tripuri people is a demonstration of their illustrious weaving culture and its strong association with their way of life. The traditional dress of Tripuri women consists of the rigwnai (or rignai) worn around the waist, and the risha or ria that is worn on the upper part of the body (Sarkar

& Bairagi, 2023). These two items are all known as Ri-Borok in Kokborok. While the fiber used to make the fabric were solely cotton fiber got by shifting agriculture, the fabric was also used to dye the fabric (Debbarma, 2018; G Roy, 2024).

As lower garment men wear the dhutiborok or dhutimikhomchok and kutai or kanchwliborok as upper garment (Debbarma, 2018). The weaving tradition is known for its design or bothai of the tribe, especially Lakhapati Rignai, comprising as high as twenty-six pola (steps of design), besides Chamathwi Bar, Thaipolog Bar, Sai Rongkho and Hengra Bar (Debbarma, 2018). The colours traditionally used are combinations of red, white and black; within each red and white is inserted motif of yellow and green (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023; G. Roy, 2024). Cotton collected from khool was main raw material for weaving (Debbarma, 2018). The women wear armlet or bajuban, bangle or buati, coin necklace or rang bwtang, earring or wakhum, hairpin or surang and multi-chain necklace or chandrahar with social connotation. They also wear ghomti made of coir (Debbarma, 2018).

The traditional dress has been significantly modernized, especially in West Tripura. In fact, research indicates that just as Western attire has generally displaced traditional dress, the informants found Tripuri women abandoning the risha, in favour of blouse-and-petticoat dress, in the post-twentieth century; eventually, a cloth called ri-kutur, wider than a ghagra, was styled like a saree palla (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023). A survey conducted in urban Agartala City showed that only 12 per cent of women wear traditional costume always, and 32 per cent never do so, and 80 per cent women express a preference for modern colours rather than traditional red, white and black (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023). Some of these changes could be attributed to Bengali influences, Christian missionaries, mass media, and urbanization, but traditional attire is still worn proudly on ceremonial occasions and institutions continue to work for its sustainable revival. (Sarkar & Bairagi, 2023; Debbarma, 2018; Roy,2024).

## 3. Marriage System of the Tripuri Tribe

Family ties and marriage hold significant roles in Tripuri society, representing not merely a union of two individuals but a bond connected with cultural values, religious beliefs, and community traditions (Debbarma 2026).

### 3.1. Traditional Forms of Marriage

Previous different kinds of marriage were practiced among the Tripuris. The marriage which was most legally right was the negotiated marriage which consisted of a male third party the Raibai who made a formal proposal to the bride's family. There was no special individual for the position of Raibai, any trusted person can function as Raibai (Akhanda, 2020). Bride service marriage or Chamari Ompa was a type of marriage in which the groom worked in the bride's house for a period of one or three years so as to demonstrate his responsibility on marriage (Debbarma, 2026). Other types of marriage included marriage by exchange called Nok Kaisa Kaimung, marriage by purchase or Phuisai Tubuma and marriage by capture or Koklam Kwrwi Kaimung with less access to any particular religious rites. Child marriage or Sikla Sogya Kaimani was also more prevalent in the time of the Tripuria (Tripuri marriage system) (Muthiaraman, 2020). (Debbarma, B. 2026).

### 3.2. Pre-Wedding Rituals

The marriage process begins with Chwrainaimoung, when the groom's family, accompanied by the Raibai, visits the bride's home to express consent (Akhanda, 2020). This is followed by Kaksungamani (Mangalacharan), the ceremony for fixing the marriage date, during which married women gather to cut betel nuts with a sacred lamp accompanied by the traditional ulu sound. Betel leaves and nuts are distributed door to door to announce the wedding. The traditional invitation custom, Khum Phunkma, involves the parents personally visiting each household, starting from the Chokdori's home, to offer betel leaf, areca nut, and flowers as formal invitation (Debbarma, 2026).

### 3.3. The Wedding Ceremony

The primary religious feature of the wedding is the Lampra Owathop worship. The traditional Tripuri priest, the Ochai, recites spiritual mantras and asks for divine graces for the marriage to be accomplished according to the traditional law (Akhanda, 2020). The bride and groom are on the Lampra Wathop, where the

Ochai solemnizes by sprinkling saint water on them; then the parents and elders pray blessings by touching their head with their hand (Debbarma, 2026). The bride and the groom are married on a high platform known as the Bedi which is built of bamboo with the assistance of the solder cloth called Chanduwa which is believed to be holy (Akhanda, 2020 and Debbarma, 2026). The Aya helps the groom and the Ayajwk to the bride in every procedure (Debbarma, 2026). An offering is done to betel leaf with nut as well as symbolic practices and exchange of gifts which symbolize and stabilizes relationship among the two families (Akhanda, 2020). The bridal dress holds the essential place with the traditional Rignai and Risa and the traditional outfit of the bride and the groom prevails even though the ceremony is held in the city. (Debbarma, 2026).

### 3.4. Changes in the Marriage System

Changes Education, urbanisation, Bengalisation, and Christianisation have brought: Many Dhwajas are eliminated and the family now takes the decision, love Marriages (Hamjaklai Kaijakmami) (Debbarma, 2026). Child marriages have greatly reduced (Debbarma, 2026). The Ompa Chamari has become almost non-existent, the Khum Phunkma (red wedding dress) has been replaced by printed invitation cards and mobile communication( Debbarma, 2026). Due to the influence of the Christian religion, many families have adopted church marriage ceremonies with prayer, invocation of blessings (Debbarma, 2026). However, the differences are negligible, the traditional red wedding dress is worn, the elders garland them with flowers, and the Ojake (priest) performs the ritual as usual. As Debbarma (2026) points out Tripuri marriage is still alive, vibrant with change as well as continuity.

## 4. Culture and Festivals of Tripuri Community

The tribal culture of Tripura reflects a rich combination of traditions, customs, and social practices rooted in daily life. Festivals play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity and strengthening community bonds. Both tribal and non-tribal festivals are celebrated, including Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Diwali, and Holi, while important tribal festivals include Garia Puja, Ker Puja, Kharchi Puja, and Wangala, characterized by traditional music, dance, and communal participation (M. S. Debbarma & Jain, 2024; Chakraborty & Saha, 2025 & Hossain, 2018).

### 4.1. Dance

There are 4 main types of dances in Tripuri, which are as below: Garia, Mamita, Lebangbumani and Mashak Surmani (Debbarma, S. 2017). The Garia dance is performed in groups, accompanied by the beat of the flute and drum; It is performed by both men and women. The dance would, beginning with slow steps that accelerate with the drum beat, and the arms waving and singing in the chorus. It is performed in a circular formation, representing the circadian movement or, the changing of season; At times the spectators participate in the communal celebration (Tripura & Debbarma, 2025; Chakraborty & Saha, 2025) Creating specific mudras, like Maikaimani (to sow paddy), Tok birmani (to fly like birds), Mayunghadulnakmani (to dust an elephant), Topsibahrmani (to jump like a parrot) (Debbarma, 2017). The Mamita dance is a lady's dance in Gay and Khowai areas. Lady dancers put on traditional attire and dance holding lit leaf torches in a circumferential movement with foot steps and songs in the context of thankfulness (Tripura & Debbarma, 2025). The Lebangbumani dance started as a dance of warding off harmful of Lebang insect from jhum crops, mainly performed by the young lads in long rows holding bamboo sticks with rhythmic sound, but now it is a recreational dance (Debbarma, B. 2017 & Hossian, 2018). Mashak Surmani is a dance which originated as the joy of deer hunters but deer hunting being banned, it is not seen now but can be developed as a folk dance. (Debbarma, 2017).

### 4.2. Folk Songs

Folk songs are composed in Kokborok and sung during shifting cultivation, festivals, and to express beliefs. Types include Jaduni or Sarbang (love and pleasure), Reser khakra (plaintive mood), Waying khilimani (lullaby), Mamita Rwmani (harvest), Goria Rwmani (Garia Festival), Chamari Tunmani (bride's party), and Hachuk Kamani (hill tracks) (Debbarma, 2017). During Garia festival, specific songs honor the deity, asking for fruitful sowing, metaphorically describing the cycle of life and nature, ensuring language, melody, and cultural meanings survive through oral tradition (S. Debbarma; 2017, Hilipi Tripura; 2025).

### 4.3. Rituals

The Garia Festival in early April marks the onset of jhum cultivation. The worship of the Garia deity represents the cult of jhum cultivation, as good crops are believed interwoven with the deity's blessing (Debbarma, 2017). Rituals center around a sacred bamboo pole planted in the courtyard, decorated with flowers, rice beer (zu), rice for abundance, eggs for fertility, and cotton threads for harmony (Tripura & Debbarma, 2025).

The Mamita festival is a post-harvest thanksgiving, Mamita Haphong, celebrated between September and November, giving thanks to Mother Earth (BwkhaBwthai) and deities like Mailuma and Khuluma for bountiful crops (Tripura & Debbarma, 2025). On the eve, fowls are sacrificed at the altar of Randak, a large earth rice-container symbolizing Laxmi (Debbarma, 2017).

Kharchi Puja is one of the most significant festivals, celebrated for seven consecutive days in honour of fourteen Gods and Goddesses. The word Kharchi means cleansing of sins, held annually in Ashada at the Chaturdasha Devata temple in Old Agartala (Bhowmick, 2018 & Hossain, 2018).

### 4.4. Musical Instruments

Common instruments include the Kham (wooden drum covered with cowhide), Sumu (flute), Sarinda (stringed instrument), Changpreng (indigenous stringed instrument), and Dangdu (bamboo mouth organ) (Debbarma, 2017, Hossain, 2018 & Chakraborty & Saha, 2025).

## 5. Food Habits and Traditional Cuisine of Tripuri Tribe

The food habits of the Debbarma tribe are deeply connected to their ecology, agrarian and socio-cultural traditions. In case of traditional Tripuri cuisine (Mui Borok - 'delicious food' in Kokborok language), fresh ingredients from natural sources are used and processed in a limited way which does not overshadow the attribute of tanginess, spices and earthy flavor (Debbarma, S., 2026 & Debbarma; B.). Food not only satiates hunger but also is their cultural identity, nostalgia and sense of belonging (Debbarma, S.K., 2019, Das et al., 2016 & Debbarma, B. 2024). Their staple food is rice (mai) which in almost all dishes is accompanied by vegetable, fish or meat (S Roy et al, 2024). Jhum cultivation is an important part of their culture as it's role goes beyond agrarian practice rather it influences their choice of life partner, their songs, dances and religious practices (Debbarma, S.K., 2019).

The Debbarma diet is non-vegetarian with fish, chicken, pork ( Wahan), and occasionally forest animals consumed in accordance with tribal traditions ( Debbarma, S., 2026). Tripuri cuisine is completely fermentation oriented, it also increases the nutrients and flavor ( Das et al., 2016; Uchoi et al., 2015). Berma, fermented and dried fish processed with small carp or punti fish, an important meal in everyday life, had an island flavor and salt content which lacks oils ( Debbarma, S. 2026; Uchoi et al., 2015). Bamboo shoot (Muya), a high-volume product from the hill lands, is consumed fresh, dried and fermented and gives a lot of flavor to the meal ( S. Debbarma, 2026; Uchoi et al., 2015 and Jamatia et al., 2025).

Chakhwi is a widely consumed festive dish of pork cooked with bamboo shoots, green papaya, jackfruit seeds, rice flour paste (Awandru) and alkali water (Chakhwtwi) (Jamatia et al., 2025). It is of immense cultural significance at feasts and marriages, served first in the dish mui okra, literally "first curry" (Debbarma, S.K., 2019; B. Debbarma, 2024). Chakhwtwi is prepared by women traditionally by mixing ashes from dried banana leaves, sesame stem or mustard plant stem (Debbarma, S.K., 2019; Uchoi et al., 2015). Gudok (or Godak) is a healthy, oil free, stew of fermented fish, vegetables, beans, potatoes, pumpkin and bamboo shoots slow-cooked to become extremely flavoursome (Debbarma, S., 2026; Dhar et al., 2012; S. Roy et al., 2017). Wahan Mosdeng is another community favourite, a spicy dish of roasted or boiled pork mashed with chilies, onions, garlic and berma, its popularity increasing in the winter season (Debbarma, S., 2026).

Preparation techniques comprise boiling, steaming in bamboo cane, smoking, and roasting without oil to give wholesome, low-fat foods (Debbarma, S., 2026; B. Debbarma, 2024; Uchoi et al., 2015 and Roy et al., 2017). Chuak or Chuwak is a rice-derived fermented beverage that is served during community gatherings and festivals, emphasizing community bonding and brotherhood or sisterhood (Debbarma, S., 2026; Debbarma, S.K., 2019; B, Debbarma, 2024; Das et al., 2016). Food has a political and cultural connotation for the TRB, with Muya Chanai Chakhwi Chanai becoming a slogan during the political movement for TRB's awakening of the Borok people in the 1960s with the Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity (TUJS) (Debbarma, S.K., 2019).

Traditional indigenous cuisine is kept alive through local festivals, household and neighbourhood food preparation, and community gatherings, with each as a living proof of indigenous peoples' ecological knowledge in the new spatial order of urbanization (Debbarma, S., 2026; B. Debbarma, 2024; Jamatia et al., 2025).

## 6. Occupation and Livelihood of Debbarma Tribe

Traditionally, the Debbarma tribe followed shifting cultivation known as huk, which formed the basis of their economic and cultural life. Huk cultivation brought economic self-sufficiency and maintained cultural transmission through folk tales, songs, and religious ceremonies (Debbarma, 2025). It was central to songs, dances, seasons, and religious ceremonies, with young men and women often choosing partners through singing exchanges between cultivation groups (Debbarma, 2019). Jhum is an advanced adaptive practice embedded with indigenous knowledge, nature's rhythms, and cultural values in a cyclical pattern of vegetation clearance, burning, tillage, planting, and fallowing that ensures ecological balance (Begum & Banerjee, 2025).

Shifting cultivation has long been recognized as the principal livelihood and social safety net for northeastern tribal communities (Datta, Gangadharappa, & Biradar, 2014). According to the 1987 Survey Report on jhum cultivators, 55,049 households with 2,88,390 people practiced shifting cultivation in Tripura, of which 21,677 were fully dependent and 33,372 partly dependent (Debbarma, 2025).

After Tripura merged with India in 1949, the influx of refugees disturbed shifting cultivation practices and the reduction in land caused farmers to look for new means of earning a living. To resettle shifting cultivators, the Government of Tripura founded the Tripura Rehabilitation and Plantation Corporation (TRPC) in 1983 with rubber plantation schemes (Kuki & Bhowmik, 2022 and Matouleibi, 2012). The replacement of shifting cultivation with rubber cultivation has not yet been achieved in a significant manner (Debbarma, 2025).

Today, Debbarma household pursuits include settled agriculture, rubber and tea estate work, handloom weaving, and small-scale commerce (Rana et al., 2025). Handloom weaving may be referred to as the most frequent occupation of all, with Scheduled Tribe (ST) households reaching nearly 49 per cent of all handloom worker households within the state (Sentiela & Debnath, 2025). Employment within the federal government has gained significance for its educated members, via reservation schemes (Paul et al., 2023). The literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes, which was 56.5 per cent in 2001, elevated to 79.05 per cent in 2011, leading to broader access to formal employment (Debbarma, 2025).

However, there continue to be a stark gap between urban, rural and TTAADC wards (Saha & Roy, 2020). Schools with 100% failure at Madhyamik examination increased from 12 in 2017 to 34 in 2019, indicating that educating children in the remotest corners has remained an issue (Debbarma, 2025). These students are now entitled to the Tripura Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TTWREIS, 1997) and Eklavya Model Residential Schools providing quality English medium schooling that prepares the students for competitive exams (Debbarma, 2025).

The shifting agriculture has been phased out and livelihood situation shows a shift from livelihood vulnerability to livelihood diversification. While land, educational, and employment problem continue; some distinction can be made in the overall economic condition of the tribe, where the traditional occupation knowledge and practices are still available to be harnessed. (Kuki & Bhowmik, 2022 and Rana et al., 2025; Debbarma, 2019 and Debbarma, 2025).

## 7. Conclusion

The Debbarma tribe of Tripura represents one of the oldest and most prominent indigenous communities of Northeast India, embodying a rich cultural heritage shaped over centuries through history, social structure, customs, festivals, traditional cuisine, and livelihood practices. The study reveals a profound relationship with nature, particularly through jhum cultivation, which continues to influence their social systems and religious beliefs. Despite modernization, education, urbanization, and changing economic patterns, the community actively preserves its identity through weaving, rituals, music, dance, language, and traditional attire. Although many have adopted modern occupations and lifestyles, much of their culture is upheld at festivals and through traditional ways of doing things. Government welfare schemes have created

opportunities for educational and economic advancement, yet persistent challenges regarding land, employment, and quality education remain significant. Ultimately, the Debbarma tribe exemplifies remarkable cultural resilience, maintaining its distinctive heritage while adapting to contemporary social transformations.

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