

Importance of bamboo in religious rites and rituals of the Tipra community of Northeast India

Rwdwmsri Brahma¹, Bhupen Narzaree²

1(Research scholar, Dept. of Bodo, Gauhati University, India)

2(Professor & Head, Dept. of Bodo, Gauhati University, India)

Abstract: Bamboo is an important part of the life of the indigenous people of northeast India and the Tipra community is one of them. They are one of the major indigenous communities of Tripura state of North-eastern India. The Tipras are largely dependent on bamboo in their day-to-day life. The present paper describes the importance and uses of bamboo in the traditional religious rites and rituals of Tipras of Northeast India. The use of bamboo is mandatory during religious festivals and rituals and on social occasions among the Tipra community. Ker and Gorja are one of the major religious festivals celebrated by the Tipras and during the religious ritual, they made an altar by using a specific bamboo called wathwi (a kind of bamboo) as a symbol of the deity. The structure of the altar is a little different depending on the festival to festival or deities to deities.

Keywords: Tipra, Bamboo, religion, Festival, Ker, Gorja, Lampra, Wathob.

Date of Submission: 20-03-2023

Date of Acceptance: 04-04-2023

I. Introduction

Bamboo is an important part of living in Indigenous society for a long time. It is used in many different ways for example tools for work, used as an arrow, in building houses and as a boundary wall and as a source of food. It is very important for the people living in northeast India as it is available in that area and uses in so many ways from building houses to cooking food used as fuel, and firewood.

Bamboo, a tropical plant is one of the fastest-growing plants in the world. Although it is mainly grown in tropical regions, different species of bamboo are found in diverse climatic conditions. It has great potential and importance for a variety of people in different parts of the world, especially in East and South Asia, and South-East Asia. Bamboo is the most extensively used plant associated with all spheres of life (e.g. food, medicines, crafts, agricultural implements, house-building materials etc.). It is commonly used by the Tripuris to construct a house. North-eastern India is rich in varieties of bamboo. According to scholars "58 species of bamboo under 16 genera is found however 63 species of bamboo belonging 15 genera is reportedly available in the region". (Borthakur, 2012)

The Tipras are largely dependent on bamboo in their day-to-day life. In the present paper importance and uses of bamboo in the traditional religious rites and rituals of Tipras of Northeast India have been discussed.

Tipras of Tripura inherited a rich knowledge of art and crafts which are reflected in their material cultures such as designs on garments, pottery, wood, cane and bamboo works and musical instruments, etc. Necessity and Requirement may have compelled them to utilize forest resources for their daily needs. The incorporation of plants and plant products in their social life is due to long uses. The needs of day-to-day life became today's religious and social requirements. Because the use of specific materials is mandatory during religious as well as social ceremonies.

Methods: A field study is undertaken among the Tipras in different parts of Tripura where the Tipra community are densely populated, mainly the district of West Tripura, Khowai and Sipaijala from 2016 to 2019. Information was collected from elders followed by unstructured interviews because the informants were illiterate and by observation method. Religious rituals were also attended to observe the actual uses of bamboo during the religious festival through personal observation.

II. Introduction on Tipra

Hill tribes, an ethnic community of northeast India, belong to the Mongoloid Bodo group of people. Here, Tipra suggests the Debbarma clans of Tripura known as Puran Tripuri. They are the Indigenous tribes of Tripura, who settled in the large area of northeast India. They are migrants but also the inventors of this land. Many historians agree that the Bodos invented this land around 500 B.C. when the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

took shape, particularly in the pre-Christian era, and occupied the southern tracts of the Himalayas and the whole of northeast India. (S.K. Chatterji, 1951, p. 36-37) It is also said they came from Mongolia via China and Tibet to India. Their language is known as Kokborok, a part of the Bodo language of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Linguistically the Sino-Tibetan family of languages have been classified into two groups. One, Sinitic, consists of just 14 (fourteen) languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese (Yue), Hakka, Northern Min, Southern Min and Gan etc. The other group, Tibeto-Burman has some 350 languages, mainly spoken in China, Nepal and India. According to the census report of 2011, the Tripuri population was 592,255.

Tripura State is now the only areas where the Bodo people still retain a good deal of their medieval political and cultural milieu, although Hinduisation has made rapid strides among them. According to the history of Tripura, the 186 kings had ruled Tripura, a princely State for about a few thousand years before merging with the Indian Union on 15th October 1949. The Tripuri king Dharma- Manikya is said to have inaugurated the Early Bengali history of the Tipra royal house, and work was created, the first version of the Raja-mala, in 1458, through the joint labours of the Comtawa (or Cantai, in present-day Tipra), i.e., Tipra priest Durlabhendra and two Brahmin scholars Sukresvara and Banessvara. (Chatterji, 1951, p.131) He is the 102nd king of the Tipra dynasty. The successors of the Dharma Manikya have continued the task of Rajmala year by the year until we have now one of the oldest, continuous chronicles of any Indian reigning family. (Sandys, 1915, p.9).

The Tipras are mainly cultivators. The Jhum, shifting cultivation, is cultivation that takes place in the hills the Jhum cultivation consists of many different crops and vegetables. Paddy and cotton is the main crop of the Jhum field, along with other vegetables like ginger, turmeric, cucumber, pumpkin etc. are also cultivated in the Jhum field. The festivals are also related to their cultivation.

III. Uses of bamboo in religious rites and rituals:

The religion of the Tipras: There is no name of their religion but, they follow ancient traditional religion along with ancient religious beliefs and faith of their community. They believe in many Gods and goddesses. The God and Goddesses of the Tipras have no concretised visual therefore, the abstract of the deities are made with the help of bamboo poles, leaves and cotton thread etc. Among many deities of the Tipra community, a few principal deities are- Matai katar, matai katarma, Twima, Mailooma, Khulooma, nakchuma, Akatra, Bikatra, Burasha etc. The Tipras offer rice, flowers, fruits, battle nut and leaves, rice beer, water, eggs, chicken and goat etc. to the deities.

Ker puja: A religious festival organised and celebrated in the village, organised by the village community. It is an important as well as a popular religious festival among the Tipras, held for the welfare of the villagers in the Bengali month of Chaitra (March/April). Every Tipra village celebrates this religious festival for the welfare, safety and prosperity and also in the hope to get a good quality product of crops from the Jhum cultivation. But nowadays, this puja is not being held in every village due to the influence of modern society and other factors.

On the day of the Ker puja, one or more bamboo splits are posted on the ground in a bow shape at the entry point of the village covering the road. It is a symbol of forbidding the entry of outsiders to the village and also forbidding exit from the village for those who are already in the village. The sick people and pregnant women are taken out of the village beforehand. If anybody happens to violate the rule of the Ker puja, they are charged with a fine as a penalty. This is a kind of passage rite of the Tipras. Now a day, the taboos are not strongly followed as earlier, some taboos are relaxed, like the taboos which started the night before the festival now starts on the day of the festival and end by the afternoon, as soon as the religious rituals end.

Goria puja: One of the very important religious festivals of the Tipras. Generally, the Goria festival starts on the first day of Baisakh (April/May) and continues for seven days. Although, it starts on the first day of the Baisakh month the actual religious ritual of the Goria is performed on the seventh day by the Tipra community. In the early period, it was celebrated for a week starting from the first day to the seventh day of Baisakh month. In this festival, the Goria deity is worshipped for the good agricultural production and welfare of the family, and villagers and for a good and healthy life. They pray to the Goria deity with the hope of good agricultural production, prosperity, blessing and peace throughout the year.

The Ochai (priest) and Barua (helper of the priest) take the main role in this puja. On the day of the Goria festival, the householder prepared the symbol of lord Goria with bamboo. He brings an upper portion of a young bamboo along with its branches and leaves and plants it on the north or east side of the house according to the instruction given by the Ochai. The planted bamboo is the symbol of the Goria deity, in front of the symbolic Goria, the Ochai performs religious rituals and prays to the deity. During this festival, every member of the family, a senior or a junior, visits their relative's houses. Youth groups carry the symbol of Lord Goria from house to house singing and dancing together. They put the Goria in the middle of the yard and dance around it, after dancing the house owner asks for a blessing. The members of the family give eggs, fruits, wine, coins or money according

to the financial condition of the householder. They dance all around the village and finally immersion of the Gorias arrives. Usually, this immersion will take place at the midnight near a river. During the immersion everyone goes to the river, after immersing the symbolic Gorias in the river, they take bath in the river and go to their respective home. In this way, the Gorias puja ends.

Lampra Wathob puja: A religious ritual observed by the Tipras. The Tipras perform this ritual before a marriage ceremony. According to K.P. Sen, “the royal family performed this puja before any auspicious ceremony or on the eve of tour or expedition”. (Bhowmik, 2003). To perform the Lampra Wathob religious ritual, bamboo is used to make an altar. To make the structure of the deities, two pairs of bamboo poles measuring 61 cm. in height are planted in the ground in the courtyard. Afterwards, two other bamboo poles are tied to these planted bamboo poles horizontally. The bamboo poles are a symbolic representation of the deities.

The Tipras celebrate many different kinds of festivals around the year. Other than the religious festival they also perform religious rituals of deities like Mailooma Khulooma (deity of paddy and cotton), Burasa, Thoomnairok Bonirok, Twima (deity of water) etc. These rituals are also performed by making an altar with bamboo in different shapes for different deities.

IV. Importance of bamboo in religious festivals of the Tipras

The main religious festivals of the Tipras are – Ker and Gorias. Besides these religious festivals, they also observe many other small religious festivals related to their household or family religious festivals in the different seasons of the year.

Bamboo is the essential material to perform any kind of religious ritual among the Tipras. Without bamboo, any kind of religious rituals and practices can not be performed among the Tipras community. Bamboo is the most essential part of the Tipras religious worship and performances or activities related to religion and religious rituals. Bamboo is one of the most used jungle or natural materials of the Tipras, not only of the Tipras it is the most used natural material in Tribes of Northeast India. They use bamboo in their day-to-day life. Along with the use in their daily life, now a day they also use it as an economic source. Some of them cultivate bamboo just to use it as an economic source. Indeed, they are not a big producer of bamboo but they sell it in the market just for financial support for their family. With the impact of globalization, some tribes or indigenous communities are now aware of the demand for bamboo so some of them are cultivating different types of bamboo just for commercial use.

Concentrating on the rising demand for bamboo globally, people are now more aware of nature and trying to become more and more conscious of the things they use in their day to day life, because of the awareness about nature now a day people are trying to use natural materials and things that are made of nature-friendly materials in their day to day life. Because of that, there is a rise in demand for natural products. Bamboo is a natural forest resource which is why there is a rise in the demand for bamboo in the market. They use bamboo-made materials in their daily life, everyday work morning till night. The bamboo is also an important part of their rites and rituals. To perform their religious rite or any other social rites there is always a need for bamboo. The religious performances of the Tipras are not complete without using bamboo.

Altar making: The altar to perform a religious festival or to worship the deities the Tipras make or construct an altar with bamboo. They only use ‘Wathwi’ a specific kind of bamboo to perform or to celebrate religious rites and rituals. No other kind of bamboo is used for religious purposes. Apart from religious purposes, in the other kind of social rites and rituals also the Tipras use the Wathwi. The bamboo-made altar is called Wathob in the Kokborok language. To perform any kind of religious festival and rituals a Wathob is constructed as a symbol of the deities.

To worship the deities and to perform religious rites and rituals the Tipras prepare an altar of bamboo. The structure of the altar is a little different to a festival to festival or deity to deity depending on the deity or the festival they are going to perform. Generally, a typical view of the altar constructed by bamboo is as follows-

To construct an altar a wathwi bamboo is essential. The bamboo should be with an upper part, it should not be without an upper part or broken bamboo. The bamboo should be a whole bamboo with an upper part. The bamboo is cut and brought by the instruction of the Ochai (priest). The upper part of the bamboo along with the leaves is used to plant in the ground as a symbol of the deity. The middle part of the bamboo is also used to plant in front of the planted bamboo. Two bamboo poles about 1.5 feet long are prepared and planted parallel to each other and two other bamboo poles are tied horizontally to these planted bamboo poles. A white cloth or a Richa (Tipra traditional cloth used to cover the upper part of the Body) is kept in between the tied bamboo poles, two bamboo poles are used one is to keep water and the other one is for arag (rice beer). The whole planted bamboo structure is called Wathob (an altar place made only to perform religious rituals).

Offering ritual: In every religious festival the Ochai takes the main role, he performs all the religious rituals and offerings. A banana leaf is kept in front of the altar, Wathob or the planted bamboo and a small amount of raw rice is put on the banana leaf, in present-day flowers and fruits are also kept along with the rice and an offering to the deities. Afterwards, the Ochai chant the mantras and partially cut the neck of a chicken and pour some drops of blood then completely cut the neck and puts the head of the chicken on the banana leaf and with that the offering ritual to the deities comes to an end.

V. Conclusion:

Bamboo is one of the most used jungle or natural materials of the Tipras, not only of the Tipras it is the most used natural material in Tribes of Northeast India. They use bamboo in their day-to-day life. Along with the use in their daily life, now a day they also use it as an economic source. Some of them cultivate bamboo just to use it as an economic source. Indeed, they are not a big producer of bamboo but they sell it in the market just for financial support for their family. With the impact of globalization, some tribes or indigenous communities are now aware of the demand for bamboo so some of them are cultivating different types of bamboo just for commercial use.

Concentrating on the rising demand for bamboo globally, people are now more aware of nature and trying to become more and more conscious of the things they use in their day to day to life, because of the awareness about nature now a day people are trying to use natural materials and things that are made of nature-friendly materials in their day to day life. Because of that, there is a rise in demand for natural products. Bamboo is a natural forest resource which is why there is a rise in the demand for bamboo in the market.

Importance and uses of bamboo in the Tipra society are countless from social to religious, in their daily life and from birth ritual to death. The Tipras are also experts in bamboo crafts. The tools and materials used in cultivation work are also made of bamboo. The symbol of the deities and the altars are constructed of bamboo. The process of altar making and bamboo crafts and other bamboo works are not written in Tipra society, the knowledge is passed orally from father to son, to grandson and so on from one generation to another generation. In the present day apart from using bamboo materials at home some of the Tipras now use bamboo as a commercial plant by making bamboo crafts and selling them in markets.

We thank all the informants for sharing their knowledge and information on the importance and uses of bamboo in religious rituals and practices. We also thank all the local guides for their assistance and hospitality during the fieldwork.

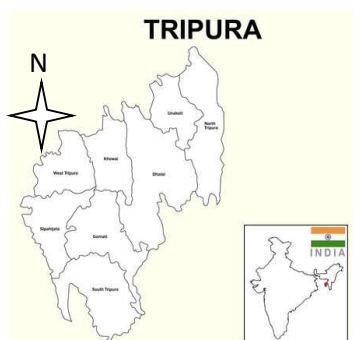


Figure 1. Map of India showing Tripura.



Figure 2. An altar.

References:

- [1]. Chatterji, Suniti Kumar, (1951), *Kirata Jana krti*. The Asiatic Society, fourth reprint 2014.
- [2]. Borthakur, S.K., (2012), Traditional uses of bamboo among the Karbis, a hill tribe of India. *Bamboo science and culture. The journal of the American bamboo society* 25(1).
- [3]. Sandys, E.F., (1915), *History of Tripura*. Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Govt. of Tripura, 3rd reprint, 2008.
- [4]. Bhowmik, Dwijendralal, (2003) *Tribal religion of Tripura*. Tribal Research Institute, Govt. of Tripura,

Rwdwmsri Brahma. " Importance of bamboo in religious rites and rituals of the Tipra community of Northeast India." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 28(4), 2023, pp. 05-08.