The Reangs of Tripura

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Shri Chitta Ranjan Dev is familiar to the readers as his writing has also appeared in an earlier issue of ISHANI. He is the seniormost Gandhian worker of Tripura popularly addressed as Chitto da. He has also functioned as the chief functionary of Tripura Adimjati Sevak Sangha and Tripura Harijan Sevak Sangha.

This article on the Reangs of Tripura was written by him many years back but it got lost in the heap of other papers. Fortunately it surfaced unexpectedly a few weeks back and he decided to send it for ISHANI. We are happy to carry it below.

Though small in size, the article contains important and interesting details about the Tripura Reangs.

Tripura is one of the smallest States in North-East India with a geographic area of 10.491 Sq. km. The total population of the State, according to 2001 Census, is 31,99,203 out of which 9,93,426 are Scheduled Tribes. There are 19 Tribal clans in the State. The Tripuri or Tripura community form the majority with a population of 5,43,849 and the Reangs occupy the second position with a population of 1,65,103. Though the Reangs may not be as old as the Tripuris, yet they are living in Tripura for a long time. There is a current view that the Riangs belong to the aboriginal stock of TRIPURA.

About the original home of Reangs, there are different views. One view is that they migrated for the first time into Tripura from the Shan State of Burma, now Myanmar via Chittagong Hill tracts in the 14th century during the reign of Maharaja Ratna Manikya. Others hold the view that the Reangs came to Tripura from the plains of Mayanithlang in the Suseai State. The third view is that the Reangs are the aboriginal inhabitants of Tripura.

At one time the border of Tripura State extended from Burma (Myanmar) to the shores of the Bay of Bengal, and the Lusai (Mizo) district of Assam was within the geographical boundary of Tripura State. So, on the basis of these views, it can be said that the Reangs are the original inhabitants of Tripura. It also cannot be denied that the original habitation areas of the Reangs spread over the hill tracts of Mizoram and Chittagong, whereas these regions adjoined Burma (Myanmar). Some marks of Burmese culture and language were stamped on them, which is highly perceptible in Bengali culture, language and education of all the Tribal clans of Tripura.

As a matter of fact, it may be accepted that the Reangs come of Mongolian Kukis. Coming in close contact with the Tipras, the language of Reangs has become co-classed with that of the former. The stamps of the culture and the mode of life of the Tipras (Tripuris) are noticeable in the life of Reangs. Nevertheless, the social structure, religions performances, customs and usages have maintained independent status.

The Reangs are divided mainly into two communities, viz. Mechka and Malshui. These two communities are sub-divided into seven sections. The seven sections of the Mechka are (1) Tui Muiya fak, (2) Mechka, (3) Charki, (4) Musa, (5) Rai Kachak, (6) Takh Maiyachak and (7) Waiyeram. Those of the Malshui are (1) Malshui, (2) Apet, (3) Nakhyam, (4) Champrong, (5) Darbang, (6) Sagarai and (7) Reang.

Every chieftain of these fourteen sections has the right to earn a particular title. The social order that prevails among the different communities under the leadership of these
chieftains is highly praiseworthy, and it is for this reason that incidents of internecine dispute are very rare.

In order of merit the titles of the persons in authority among the Reangs are as under:–

Rai : The highest title of honour among the Reangs. He is the supreme authority.
Chapia Kha : The second man in power. In the absence of the Rai he is the arbiter of all social disputes.
Chapia : The third man in power.
Dalai : The Chief staff of the Rai.
Kanda : The companion of the Rai.
Kachakak : Rai’s adviser.
Darkalik : The priest of Reangs.
Bhandari : The store-keeper of the valuable treasures of the Reangs.
Dayahazari : The drummer of the community.
Muria : The piper of the community.
Dugaria : The Kettle-drummer of the community.
Dowa : The temple Sevayet.
Chiakrak : The distributor of the meat offered in the puja.
Yakchhung : The Accountant.
Khandal : The procurer of the food-grains and edibles.

Besides these, there are the titles of Hazra, Kangren, Karma, Kankali etc., for the subordinate followers of the Rai.

The Reang community would run under the guidance of one man, the Rai. Although the Rai maintains the semblance of social status quo, he has been bereft of all powers. Still the Reang chieftains (i.e. the Choudhury of the village) have great hold on their respective clans. They still settle social disputes. Reangs seldom go to the Court of Justice for settling individual or community-wise disputes.

Reangs in general are Saktas in cult. Christianity has of late widely spread among them. Some of them have adopted the Vaishnava cult. The custom of worshipping various deities is found in abundance.

The names of their tutelary deities are as under:–

1) Matai Katar – The supreme deity, (meaning Siva and Durga both).
2) Tuima – Streams, as they issue from mountain. They worship the rivers. This is also known as Ganga puja.
3) Garai & Kalai – This homage is offered to different streams on Poush Sankranti. A great festival is held at Tirthamukh (Dumbhur in Amarpur), the source of river Gumati.
4) Sangrangma – The protecting deity of the earth.
5) Buhnirak and Thumnirak – The deity of death (Jamraj).
6) Khulongma – The deity of cotton fibres.
7) Myloma – The deity of paddy crop.
8) Nakshu – The blind deity (Bishahari) i.e. the deity of the snakes.
9) Lampra – Homage is paid to this deity on the eve of every auspicious event.
10) Sivrai Raja (Bura devta) – The deity of Jhum cultivation.

Eggs, ducks, cocks, pigeons, goats and bisons are sacrificed in all the sacred offerings of Reangs.

Jhum cultivation is the chief means of the livelihood of Reangs. In modern days some people have taken to cultivation by plough, and they earn living by cultivating low lands. As a result of Jhum cultivation, many valuable forest products have been destroyed, and hence the Government have, by an Act prohibiting Jhum cultivation. Besides this, due to the increase of human habitations in geometrical progression, the scope of Jhum cultivation has narrowed down a great deal.

Today those who are unavoidably dependent on Jhum cultivation have still been clinging to the antique system.

In the social life also, Riangs have some particular features of their own. There is a sort of departure in respect of the wedding system and death rituals from those of the Hindus.

Reangs marry among their kith and kin. No dowry system is in vogue in the Reang clan. Child marriage also is not acceptable by them. There is one long established usage known as “Jamaikhata” in this clan. This system is also prevalent among the Tipra community of the tribals. This usage is, of course, found in some other tribal clans. Nevertheless, this “Jamaikhata” usage has noticeably diminished as a result of the spread of modern education and close contact with Bengali culture.

Conforming to this “Jamaikhata” usage, the groom has to reside in the home of the future father-in-law for an appointed period (from one to three years) before the wedding is formally solemnised. During this period, free conjugal life with the future bride is not objected to. If in case any misunderstanding or on any other ground the groom leaves the house of his future father-in-law, no objection is raised to the bride's marrying anyone else. On settlement of marriage, the guardians on both sides fix the date and time of the ceremony. The priest of the community (Ojha) performs the ceremony.

Some ceremonies in respect of marriage system in this clan are practised, which are rarely found in other clans. Widow or widower marriage is current with some reservations. Within one year of the death of the husband or the wife, he or she, as the case may be, cannot marry again. Secondly, if the widower desires to marry, he must marry a widow, and in similar manner, if a widow so desires, she must marry a widower. To marry for the second time while the husband or the wife is alive is strictly prohibited. Divorce also is not recognised in their society. Over and above this, it is impossible for an aged widower to get young wife.

For the welfare of the new-born baby, ceremonial s are held in this clan. In order to bear a brilliant baby, Reang female offers sacred homage to Tuichami on the very next to her wedding. This rite is performed through the medium of the priest. Reangs construct lying-in-room for child birth. On the birth-day three females accompany the would-be mother into the lying-in-room. The Reang female has to observe taboo for one month, as this period is considered unclean.

Baptism and christening are current in this clan. In conformity with the rites of Baptism, offerings are made to different deities. Christening is performed on the very day the babe
is born. The first rice ceremony is also prevalent in this clan and the Reang equivalent to this ceremony is “Afia Maitami”.

Reangs believe in re-birth and the next world. Hence they attach high value to honest deeds. They believe that the soul of the dead does great good to the family. If the annual rituals for the dead are not observed, the soul becomes villainous and hurts the family as a villain.

Reangs usually burn their corpses to ashes. But a baby aged less than a year, and a person who dies of infectious diseases (cholera, pox, etc) are buried.

Reangs are by nature mild-tempered and hard working. As warriors many legendary tales of their chivalry are current. In the battle of 1515 A.D. between Maharaja Dhanya Manikya, the ruler of Tripura, and Hussain Sha, the mighty ruler of Bengal, Rai Kachag was the General issue of the army of Tripura, and Rai Kachham, his younger brother, was the second in command. A lot of Reangs were in the army. Soldiers by lakhs, horses, elephants and naval soldiers by thousands of Hussain Sha perished in the battle. Reangs have not been able to make advancement in the sphere of education. However, their zeal for acquiring knowledge has increased.

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— **Editor**