



Understanding The Philosophy Of Tribal Life: The Ethnic Philosophy Of The Borok Community Of Tripura

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ABSTRACT

The Borok people, since ancient times have lived in Northeastern India, as well as in parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. They are also known as Tipra, Twiprasa, Tipperah, and Tripuri. Their native language is Kokborok. Ethnically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid origin. According to Dr. Suniti, a well-known historian, they are identified as the Tipperah or "Southern Bodos." The Borok people have their own distinct ethnic philosophy. There are nine sub-tribes within the Kokborok-speaking community, namely: 1. Tripura 2. Debbarma 3. Bru (Reang), 4. Jamatia, 5. Koloj, 6. Murasing, 7. Noatia, 8. Rupini, 9. Uchoi

The term "Borok" translates directly to "human being" and is used by Kokborok-speaking people to refer to themselves as Borok. However, it holds multiple meanings in ten distinct ways. They share a strong cultural and historical connection with the Bodo/Boro people of Assam, reflecting common traditions and Mongolian heritage. By nature, the Borok people are simple, kind, and warm-hearted, preferring to live in joint families.

It is important to note that Boroks form the largest indigenous tribal community in Tripura, comprising approximately 80% of the total indigenous population. Historically, the Tipras—who were the majority tribe in the state—were predominantly Borok. However, following the Tripura Merger Agreement with India on October 15, 1949, illegal migration from Bangladesh led to a demographic shift, reducing the Borok people to a minority. According to the 2011 Census, they made up only 31.08% of Tripura's total population.

Keywords: Borok people, Ethnic philosophy, Culture, Natural Worship, Morality.

INTRODUCTION:

According to Naphurai Jamatia, a respected historian and linguist among the intellectuals of Tripura, "Borok" can signify:

1. An identifier for the entire socio-cultural community of the Borok people
2. A general term for human beings
3. A name for citizens
4. A term for members of a group or society

5. A title for cultured, educated, or civilized individuals
6. A word referring to a crowd or population
7. A designation for a life partner
8. A name for people
9. A reference to a nation
10. A term for a group of people

In simple terms, the meaning of "Borok" remains consistent across these contexts, though its usage varies depending on the structure of the conversation. Ethnicity is commonly understood as the racial and linguistic identity that defines a group or an individual. In modern societies, it is also viewed as a socio-political phenomenon. Often, an ethnic group is considered interchangeable with a minority group. Broadly speaking, the ethnic identity of a group is perceived as an inherent, almost unchangeable trait.

Within community life, this sense of identity has gradually intensified among the Borok people, leading to heightened ethnic and cultural awareness and the formation of various Borok-based organizations. The Boroks in Tripura have organized several significant movements over the years. Some of these movements have even called for secession from India, while others have focused on achieving an autonomous district council, an autonomous state, or a separate state without complete secession.

Through these organizations, the Borok people are actively working to document and preserve their culture, language, traditions, and history. Significant efforts have been made to revive their ancient script, Koloma. The language movement, in particular, has strengthened unity among Kokborok-speaking groups, fostering a cohesive Borok identity in their ancestral land.

However, alongside this desire to preserve cultural identity, there is a growing trend among younger generations toward individualism and an uncritical adoption of Western values. Many young people are drifting away from traditional customs, including their cultural practices, religion, deities, morality, education, and politics.

In the Borok community, beauty is not an abstract idea but a concrete one. People are taught to embody beauty not just in appearance but in behaviour and real-life actions. Beauty is reflected in good work, a positive attitude, proper conduct, and ethical behaviour. The Borok community places a strong emphasis on moral values, including honesty and treating others with respect. They believe in doing what is right and strive to uphold these values within their society.

It is also worth mentioning that the Borok people have been worshipping nature since time immemorial. Water, fire, and air are integral elements of their natural environment, and they deeply respect and venerate these forces of nature. Family is regarded as a key pillar of Borok society, playing a crucial role in both cultural and social life. A traditional Borok family typically consists of a man, his wife, and their children. The society follows a patrilocal, patriarchal, patrilineal, and patronymic system, centring around monogamous marriage arrangements.

Forde says, "Culture intervenes as a middle term between the physical environment and human activity. The term culture is unique and has its origins in every aspect of human life. It encompasses the entirety of human behavior and is the result of social transmission rather than genetic inheritance. As such, it was the primary means of human preservation. A culture represents the social legacies of a particular people, whereas culture in general represents the collective social legacies of humanity."

In 1874, the father of modern anthropology, E.B. Taylor, defined culture as “a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society.” According to the conventional understanding of culture, information, beliefs, customs, and views are all passed down from elders to younger generations in human society. However, to fully comprehend the genuine meaning of culture, it is important to consider how the notion of culture has been used in modern times, starting in the late 1700s. The concept has been categorized in four different ways:

- (a) as “a general state or habit of the mind” with a close relation to the idea of human perfection,
- (b) as “a general state of intellectual and moral development in a society as a whole,”
- (c) as “the general body of the arts and intellectual work,” and
- (d) as “the whole way of life,” including the material, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of a given society.

In the Borok community, people go through four key rites of passage: birth rites, marriage rites, death rites, and puberty rites.

(i) Birth Rites:

In the Borok community, it is customary for a child to be conceived within the mother's womb intentionally. Pregnant mothers must practice what is referred to as sakkuplung in Kokborok, emphasizing the importance of carefulness during this crucial period. In this context, mothers must prioritize their diet, clothing, speech, conduct, and activities, ensuring a holistic approach to their well-being and the health of the child. The mother-in-law or other female relatives often offer constant guidance to ensure the mother's safety, both medically and from the threats of an evil spirit known as swkal mwtaï. According to Borok beliefs, this spirit can harm the child or drain the mother's blood, highlighting the importance of protection during pregnancy.

Notably, pregnant women in the Borok community are often surrounded by protective items such as brooms (known as Nuksi in Kokborok), knives, and lights to safeguard them. Women do not participate in performing any ritual or puja in the Borok community. Only the Ochai (priest) and tansarai (assistant to the priest) are responsible for performing the rituals. Additionally, Khuluma and Mailuma are two benevolent goddesses in the Borok community who play a significant role during childbirth. They are known as Kumajwk and Lobmajwk in Kokborok.

Borok Arts and Aesthetics:

The concept of beauty is highly valued among the Borok people. While physical appearance is an important aspect of beauty, they place greater importance on internal beauty, which is considered an abstract yet deeply understood idea. Internal beauty is associated with a good heart, kindness, and moral integrity. It is believed that if a person is internally beautiful, they will also reflect beauty externally.

In the Borok community, internal beauty is preferred over physical beauty. However, they still appreciate qualities such as a handsome man or a graceful woman. The Borok people strongly value moral principles, honesty, and treating others with kindness. They believe in doing what is right and showing respect to everyone. They work hard to preserve these values within their community.

Traditional Attire of the Borok People:

The Borok people, like other hill-dwelling tribes in Tripura, traditionally make their own clothes at home. Almost every household has a loom, where women spend their leisure time weaving garments. Different groups within the Borok community have distinct styles of wearing the traditional attire known as Rignai and Risa. These garments, worn by women, come in various colour combinations, each representing a specific sub-tribe's style.

The traditional dresses of older women are simpler compared to those of younger women. The origins of the garment called Risa date back to ancient times, and it was traditionally used to cover the breast, often carrying an air of mystery. Among the Borok people, there is a belief that the skill of making Risa peaked during the reign of King Trilochan, also known as Subrai Raja. The traditional design of Risa, passed down through generations, continues to hold cultural significance.

In Borok tradition, the mother-in-law presents something to the new bride as part of the Risa ritual, which holds deep symbolic meaning. Women in the community also maintain long hair, often decorated with khumpui flowers, and they wear a silver necklace called *Rang Bwtang* around their necks. Although kamchwlwibok, a jacket-like shirt, was also worn by women, it was a distinct feature of the traditional Borok attire for men. Made from naturally woven fabric, this garment was commonly worn by Borok men when returning from jhum cultivation, carrying a da-Borok (a sickle with a wooden handle). The uniqueness of this attire symbolizes their identity and connection to their land.

The national flower of the Borok people is the white khumpui, or hills lily blossom. White flowers are highly regarded and loved in the community, as they symbolize purity and virtue. People who wear white clothing and flowers are admired for their pure hearts.

Borok Ethics and Moral Code of Conduct:

In the Borok community, living a moral life is of great importance. Their concept of goodness is not just an abstract idea but a concrete principle rooted in their social beliefs and traditions. Moral values and personal conduct are deeply connected to the Borok community's identity and way of life. Women in the Borok community are encouraged to preserve their cultural identity by wearing traditional attire, while young individuals are taught to dress modestly and behave appropriately. Respect for traditions, honesty, and good manners are considered essential virtues, ensuring that Borok cultural values are upheld across generations. When people dress nicely and behave well, they are considered good. That's why, in their community, women play a crucial role in maintaining their cultural identity. They wear traditional clothing, which helps preserve their heritage. By dressing and acting respectfully, they contribute significantly to upholding their community's values. People who always follow the rules, never tell lies, and consistently speak the truth are regarded as morally upright, regardless of their age.

The Borok community deeply treasures moral values, placing special emphasis on upholding pure moral behavior. They prioritize safeguarding these values, ensuring they remain central to their way of life. This moral purity is highly esteemed among the Borok people. It is important to note that the Borok community has a deep-rooted appreciation for ethical principles, which they uphold and protect with great care. Among these cherished values are the principles of reverence and respect for elders. These values form the foundation upon which the Borok community thrives, fostering a culture of mutual trust, integrity, and social cohesion. Through their steadfast adherence to these principles, members of the Borok community demonstrate profound respect for their heritage and a strong commitment to the collective well-being of their society.

In a marital relationship, certain expectations regarding conduct must be observed. The wife is expected to show respect and support for her husband, maintaining appropriate boundaries in communication. The husband is regarded as the leader of the family, and as an expression of love and affection, the wife affectionately addresses him as "*Dongwi*". Folktales and myths within the Borok community serve as repositories of moral values and codes of conduct. These narratives, alongside folk songs such as jaduni songs, convey essential teachings about ethical behavior and societal norms.

Borok Cosmology, Ecology, and Polity:

The Borok community believes in God as the Creator of everything in the universe, including humans. They distinguish between the Supreme God and Subrai, who is considered the son of a Tripuri King. The Creator, known as Kaitor (God), is singular, while many assistants, referred to as *Sagri or Suari* (angels), exist in Kokborok belief. In Borok folklore and traditional religion, there is a story about the goddess *Mailuma-Khuluma*, who sought to examine the hearts of humans. One day, disguised as a wounded beggar, she visited

a rich man's house, asking for food and water. However, because the house was dirty, she was turned away. This revealed the true nature of the rich man's heart to the goddess. She then went to the house of a poor man, where she was warmly welcomed by a woman from the family. Despite their poverty, their house and courtyard were clean. When the goddess asked for food, the woman apologized, explaining that they had nothing to offer—not even a single grain of rice. This simple act of kindness and hospitality revealed the goodness in the poor family's heart to the goddess. The goddess then instructed the woman to check the rice pot. The woman found a single tiny grain of rice, cooked it, and suddenly, she had Plenty of tasty rice. They put some rice; it was not goddess but Mailman Khuluma.

They believe in worshipping natural elements such as rivers, mountains, trees, the sun, the moon, rocks, and other objects. They also worship various gods and goddesses, praying for good health, wealth, children, successful crops, and performing rituals for births and marriages. Additionally, they believe in the existence of powerful souls alongside these gods and goddesses. These souls are closely connected to human beings. It is said that the family leader decides where to farm and performs a special ritual called wakhok-kaiwa to keep the land safe. During harvest time, another ritual, Taktwi Tankhokma, is performed to ensure a good crop.

Borok Socio-Cultural Life:

The Borok people consider family the cornerstone of their socio-cultural existence. A typical Borok family consists of a husband, his wife, and their children. Traditionally, they uphold monogamous unions as the norm. It is a patrilocal, patriarchal, patrilineal, and patronymic family structure. The primary source of authority within the Borok family lies with the eldest male member, whose decisions influence all aspects of family life, including domestic, social, religious, and political matters. His authority is followed unquestioningly by all family members.

The structure of a Borok family may vary, encompassing different arrangements such as the matrilineal setup, where it consists solely of the mother and children; the nuclear family, consisting of the father, mother, and children; or the joint family, where multiple generations reside together. In traditional peasant societies worldwide, extended families were dominant, following a patrilocal and patriarchal system where women generally held subordinate roles. Marriage, governed by kinship rules rather than personal choice, was considered a familial concern rather than an individual one. In these societies, the family was central to everything—not just daily life but also economics, culture, religion, and politics. Since these societies had limited interaction with others, new inventions were uncommon. Most knowledge was passed down through stories, songs, and traditions. Age often determined a person's importance and rights within their extended family.

Social and Cultural Changes:

Emotional space is more limited in nuclear families compared to extended families. A child's emotional world fluctuates between deep connection and estrangement. The tension resulting from this dynamic fosters a personality type more capable of empathy. The existential context of nuclear families is found in "adaptive society" rather than in "established society," which is the dominant mode of peasant communities. Peasant societies emphasize personal dominance, whereas nuclear families increasingly seek a balance between independence and parental consent.

However, since the 1980s, intergenerational conflicts have increased, leading to a decline in respect, disagreements over economic and ideological issues, religious conversion, growing families, and a shift in family structures due to the shortage of agricultural land, among other factors.

The terms used to describe family relationships in different cultures serve as valuable clues for understanding historical connections. By examining linguistic similarities in how various societies refer to their relatives, we can gain insights into how these cultures interacted and structured their family units.

Because languages tend to evolve more slowly than social customs and practices, the words used to define kinship relationships often shed light on the specific customs of the period in which they were documented. This means they provide valuable insights into the traditions and values of past cultures. By analyzing these linguistic patterns, we can uncover important information about how people lived and interacted in the past.

Additionally, avoidance behaviours of various kinds can be observed in Borok society, similar to those found in other societies. For example, this is evident in the relationship between a karjwk and a hamjwksa (daughter-in-law). Similarly, though to a lesser degree, the relationship between a chamari (son-in-law) and his bwkraqwkw (mother-in-law) is also subject to particular limitations. Avoidance behaviors extend to interactions between a husband (bwsai) and his wife's elder sister (bukrajwk), reflecting cultural norms that discourage close kinship interactions. These customs prohibit physical contact, based on the belief that whenever people interact closely, there is always a potential for both cooperation and conflict. However, in other kinship types, antagonism is generally seen as a violation of cultural norms.

It is important to note that information obtained from interviews with specialists in the Borok community suggests that the satee system was not originally implemented by the Borok people. However, historical evidence confirms that the satee system was widely practiced in ancient times among the Brus and jamatiyas of the Tripura Borok community, particularly in the hill regions. Even after the oppressive satee system was abolished in British India in 1829, it continued to be practiced in certain areas of hill Tripura for a long time.

Conclusion

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According to the conventional understanding of culture, information, beliefs, customs, and views are all passed down from elders to younger generations in human society. In the Borok community, living a moral life is of great importance. Their concept of goodness is not just an abstract idea but a concrete principle rooted in their social beliefs and traditions. Moral values and personal conduct are deeply connected to the Borok community's identity and way of life.

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