



Weaving Identity: Reang Bamboo Craft, Textile Weaving, And Tribal Heritage In Tripura

¹PC Zothansangi, ²Dr Mun Mun Das Biswas

¹Postgraduate student, Master of Arts in Education, ²Assistant Professor in Education

¹ Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), ² IASE Kunjaban, Agartala, India

Abstract: This study explores the cultural significance of folk art among the Reang (Bru) community of Tripura, with particular focus on textile weaving, bamboo craft, ornaments, music, and dance. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kanchancherra village in Dhalai District, along with earlier observations and informal interviews, the research highlights how these art forms are deeply embedded in everyday life and identity rather than functioning as separate, purely aesthetic traditions. Weaving remains a central expression of Reang womanhood, and the rignai and risa are still worn with pride. While older women maintain traditional black- and-white designs, younger women increasingly adopt brighter colours and new patterns, reflecting both continuity and subtle change. Bamboo crafts such as baskets and mats continue to serve domestic, agricultural, and ritual purposes, though their everyday use is declining due to the availability of cheaper industrial alternatives. Ornaments retain cultural value, especially during festivals, but the shift from silver to aluminium and other metals signals changing economic conditions and evolving gender roles. Music and dance, particularly Hojagiri, remain vibrant and widely performed, supported by schools and cultural programmes. However, knowledge transmission is increasingly fragile as younger generations balance education, migration, and shifting aspirations. The study suggests that community-led initiatives, school-based cultural activities, and market-linked craft support could strengthen continuity while allowing creativity and adaptation. The findings emphasise that preserving Reang folk art is not only about safeguarding craft techniques but also about sustaining cultural identity, social memory, and community pride.

Index terms: Bru community, rignai, risa, bamboo craft, cultural identity, Tripura.

1. INTRODUCTION

India's North-East is widely recognised not only for its breathtaking natural beauty but also for the diversity and richness of its tribal cultures. Among the many tribal communities in Tripura, the Reang or Bru community stands out for its distinctive cultural practices, traditional art forms, and unique way of life.

The cultural identity of the Reang (Bru) community in Tripura is deeply interwoven with the practices of bamboo craft and textile weaving, two traditions that continue to define their daily life, material culture, and collective heritage. These crafts extend beyond utilitarian skill; they express social belonging, aesthetic values, and intergenerational knowledge embedded within the community. By foregrounding weaving and bamboo work as cultural heritage practices, this study examines how the Reang people construct and sustain their tribal identity through the making, use, and transmission of these crafts in contemporary village life.

The Reang, the second largest tribal community in Tripura and the only group in the state recognised as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), continue to sustain cultural practices centred on bamboo craft and textile weaving. These activities function not merely as household tasks but as expressions of cultural memory, skill, and identity that have shaped community life for generations. Although social and educational shifts have reduced the extent to which younger members engage in these crafts, weaving and bamboo work still hold cultural meaning and remain closely associated with Reang identity.

This study explores how bamboo craft, textile weaving, and related cultural practices such as ornamentation, music, and dance contribute to the cultural heritage and identity of the Reang community. By examining the meanings, techniques, and shifting patterns of participation within these traditions, the research highlights how cultural practices are maintained, adapted, or at risk in contemporary contexts. In doing so, the study adds to broader discussions on tribal heritage in Northeast India and underscores the importance of everyday artistic practices in sustaining cultural identity.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Textile weaving, bamboo craft, ornamentation, and performance traditions have long been central to the cultural identity of the Reang community in Tripura. While earlier studies have documented the symbolic and aesthetic features of these traditions, there is limited understanding of how they are practised and experienced in everyday life today. In recent years, changes such as reduced household weaving, growing dependence on market-purchased rignai and risa, and visible shifts in design and colour preferences have altered the contexts in which these cultural practices are produced and used. At the same time, practices like wearing traditional rignai during festivals and dance performances continue to express strong cultural attachment. This situation raises important questions about how Reang cultural identity is sustained amid changing participation, material choices, and social conditions. The present study addresses this gap by examining how traditional crafts and performances function in contemporary Reang life, with particular attention to everyday use, adaptation, and cultural meaning.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To document the present practices of textile weaving of rignai and risa among the Reang community.
2. To examine changes in the design patterns and colour combinations of rignai over time.
3. To study the everyday use and cultural significance of bamboo craft in village life.
4. To understand the role of ornaments, music, and dance in expressing Reang cultural identity.
5. To explore shifts in participation and practice across generations in relation to traditional crafts.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What kinds of folk art are still actively practised in the daily life of the Reang community?
2. How are traditional items such as the rignai, risa, and bamboo baskets made, and what materials and tools are used?
3. What cultural and social meanings are attached to these art forms?
4. In what ways are elders transmitting knowledge of weaving, bamboo craft, and performance to younger generations?
5. What changes and challenges are currently threatening the survival of these traditions?

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholars of tribal textiles and material culture note that weaving is a core expression of cultural identity. Studies on traditional attire describe how rignai and risa patterns carry symbolic meanings and reflect long-standing aesthetic values within the community (Bairagi & Sarkar, 2018; Debbarma & Koloj, 2018). While back-strap loom techniques remain stable, changes in colour, thread, and stylistic preference have emerged among younger women.

Scholarship on cultural change shows that textile traditions evolve alongside modern influences. Roy (2024) notes that shifts in costume styles among younger Reang women reveal both continuity and negotiation of identity, while work on design interventions highlights the potential of weaving to support cultural and economic revitalisation (Sarkar, Bairagi & Pandeya, 2022).

Parallel studies on performance traditions identify music, song, and dance as important sites of cultural expression. Dances such as Hojagiri communicate collective identity, with Hojagiri's balance-focused movements symbolising discipline and cultural pride. Traditional instruments like the Kham, Kshumu, Sarinda and Chongpreng also play a central role (Lincoln Reang, 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2021).

Research on bamboo craft further highlights its functional and cultural value. Bamboo baskets, mats, and storage items remain integral to domestic and agricultural life, and scholars argue that with training and market linkages, bamboo craft can continue to serve as a viable cultural and livelihood resource (Sil, Sarkar & Kumari, 2020).

Together, these studies frame weaving, bamboo craft, music, dance, and instrument-making as dynamic cultural practices shaped by both heritage and adaptation, offering essential context for understanding their role in sustaining Reang identity today.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature and adopts a descriptive ethnographic approach to examine how weaving, bamboo craft, ornamentation and performance traditions express cultural heritage within the Reang community. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study focuses on meanings, practices and lived experiences rather than numerical measurement.

Data were gathered through direct observation of craft-making, attire, household objects and cultural performances, along with informal conversations with community members who engage in weaving, bamboo work or traditional music and dance. These interactions provided contextual insights into techniques, symbolic meanings and changing patterns of participation.

As the study is based on naturally occurring conversations and observations, the findings offer a grounded understanding of cultural practices while recognising that informal data collection may not reflect every perspective within the community.

The study was conducted in Kanchancherra village, Dhalai District, Tripura. The sample was selected not based on random numbers or surveys, but through careful, purposeful engagement with individuals

who have real experience, memories and skills connected to traditional practices. Thus, the technique used for selecting the sample is purposive sampling.

4.0 FINDINGS& DISCUSSIONS

Weaving: Generational Variation in Design Elements and Contemporary Adaptation, and Shifting Participation

In the Reang community, weaving continues to be practised mainly by older and married women, many of whom still keep back-strap looms at home and weave rignai and risa as part of their routine work. The traditional patterns and techniques they follow have been passed down informally and remain largely unchanged, reflecting the strength of embodied knowledge among older generations. However, younger women are far less involved in weaving than before. Schooling, limited time at home, and changing aspirations have reduced opportunities to learn the craft, resulting in most households relying on market-purchased rignai and risa. Distinct generational preferences can be observed in the design elements of the Reang rignai, reflecting both continuity and evolving aesthetic choices. Elder women, particularly grandmothers and mothers-in-law, typically wear darker rignai with a largely plain surface accented by carefully woven motifs along the borders. These restrained designs signify maturity, cultural adherence, and respect for long-standing aesthetic traditions. In contrast, younger women commonly prefer striped rignai, a design historically associated with youth and everyday wear. While black-and-white striped patterns remain widely recognised as a cultural marker, contemporary usage shows notable diversification. Today, younger generations increasingly wear rignai featuring brighter colours, expanded stripe arrangements, and newly introduced motifs influenced by market availability, inter-community design exchange, and changing fashion sensibilities. These textiles may incorporate multicolour bands, stylised geometric forms, and decorative variations that extend beyond earlier minimalist styles. The coexistence of plain motif-bordered textiles worn by elder women and striped as well as vividly patterned variants favoured by younger women illustrates a dynamic process in which tradition is preserved while aesthetic expression evolves to reflect modern identity, mobility, and exposure to wider cultural influences.

Figure 1: Reang woman weaving plain dark rignai with border motif on back strap loom, Kanchancherra, Dhalai District.

(Photo taken by the researcher)



Figure 2: Contemporary colourful rignai worn by younger woman.



Bamboo Craft: Everyday Use and Changing Patterns

Bamboo craft remains closely tied to daily life in Reang villages, where bamboo baskets are made mainly by men and used extensively by women in everyday activities. Women carry bamboo baskets daily, not only to the garden or fields and to bring back firewood, but also for household chores such as carrying water jars, and vegetable marketing. Men, although less frequent users than women, still use bamboo baskets for specific purposes, such as carrying vegetables or materials while working in gardens or fields, while increasingly relying on plastic market bags or cloth cross-body bags for routine use. Although bamboo baskets remain widely used within the village and for certain agricultural tasks, their presence in broader rural settings has decreased as plastic and cloth alternatives offer greater convenience. These changes indicate that bamboo craft continues to hold functional value, yet its everyday relevance is gradually narrowing. The growing reliance on store-bought alternatives also limits opportunities for younger people to learn bamboo-splitting and weaving skills, suggesting that the craft is sustained mainly through older community members who continue to practise it. Taken together, this pattern reflects how practical needs, gendered use, and shifting lifestyles shape the continuity of traditional bamboo craft knowledge.

Figure 3: Reang man weaving a bamboo basket.



Figure 4: Reang women carrying bamboo baskets for daily fieldwork.



Ornaments: Contemporary Use and Cultural Significance

Ornaments hold an important part of Reang women's cultural expression, especially during festivals and dance performances such as Hojagiri. Women commonly wear coin necklaces (Rangbouh), hollow earrings (Wakhom), armlets (Taar), and multiple bangles (Yakso), all of which remain visible markers of identity and social pride. Although silver jewellery was widely used in the past, it has become increasingly rare due to rising costs, and lighter aluminium version are widely used while retaining traditional designs. Despite changes in material, the cultural symbolism attached to these ornaments remains strong, and women continue to wear them with pride during important occasions. These ornaments serve as visible markers of beauty, social belonging, and cultural continuity in the community.

Music, Dance and Instruments: Performance as Living Heritage

Music and dance continue to occupy a vital place in Reang cultural life, featuring prominently in festivals, community gatherings, school programmes, and public cultural events. Hojagiri, traditionally performed by young women executing precise balancing movements on pitchers, bottles, or lamps, remains one of the most recognisable expressions of Reang cultural identity. In contemporary settings, however, performances often present modified forms of the dance. Particularly in school programmes and staged events, movements may be simplified and the emphasis on complex balancing reduced, allowing broader participation and accommodating limited rehearsal time and safety considerations. Traditional musical instruments such as the *Kham* (drum), *Kshumu* (flute), *Sarinda*, and *Chongpreng* continue to be culturally valued for creating rhythm and ceremonial ambience. Yet in smaller functions and institutional programmes, recorded music is increasingly used in place of live instrumental accompaniment. Despite these adaptations, the continuity of familiar melodies, dance formations, and traditional attire sustains the cultural meaning of the performance. It affirms its role in preserving and expressing Reang identity across generations.

Figure 5: Reang young women performing hojagiri dance using recorded musical track.



CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that weaving, bamboo craft, ornamentation and performance traditions continue to shape cultural identity within the Reang community, even as everyday participation changes across generations. Older generations remain central to the continuity of weaving and bamboo craft, while younger members engage more selectively due to schooling, mobility and changing work patterns. The traditional rignai also remains central to cultural expression, as Reang women continue to wear it

widely during festivals, community functions and traditional dance performances, underscoring its importance as a symbol of identity and pride. At the same time, practices such as ornamentation and performances like Hojagiri continue to affirm a shared sense of belonging. These observations suggest that Reang cultural heritage persists not only through the preservation of traditional skills, but also through the community's ability to adapt them to present-day contexts. Recognising both continuity and change is essential for understanding how cultural practices survive in lived settings. Further attention to documentation, community-led initiatives and supportive platforms may help sustain these traditions for future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We express our deepest gratitude to the respondents and local artisans for extending their support to us in the completion of the research study.

REFERENCES

- [i] Bairagi, N., & Sarkar, P. (2018). Comparative study of traditional costumes of Tripuri and Reang tribes of Tripura. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5(3), 358–362.
- [ii] Bhattacharjee, S. (2021). Preserving indigenous cultural heritage of Tripura: A digital approach. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 7(1), 45–52.
- [iii] Debbarma, M., & Koloi, H. (2018). *Traditional dress and ornaments of the Reang (Bru) community*. Agartala: Tribal Cultural Society.
- [iv] Roy, G. (2024). Mapping tradition and modernization: A study on the evolution of costumes of the Tripuri and Reang women in Tripura. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(1), 516–532.
- [v] Sarkar, P., Bairagi, N., & Pandeya, A. (2022). Revival of traditional textiles: A study on Rignai of Reang community in Tripura. *Textile & Clothing Research Journal*, 40(5), 411–422.
- [vi] Sil, A., Sarkar, A., & Kumari, P. (2020). Traditional bamboo crafts of Tripura: Diversification and conservation. *Journal of Bamboo and Rattan*, 19(3–4), 95–108.