



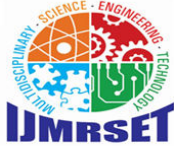
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The Role of Ochai in the Tipra Community: An Overview

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ABSTRACT: The paper describes in detail about the role of the Ochai (Priest) of the Tipra Community. Tripura is a small state of north-east Indian state. Tripura has mixed population of tribal and non-tribal people. Total 19 tribes are there in Tripura but among them, Tipras has their own unique social structures especially in maintaining its culture, religious traditions and ritual practices. Within their traditional religious framework, Ochai plays a vital role in guiding and conducting various rituals and ceremonies.

This paper makes a critical analysis on the three social structures of the Ochai(Priest)- Chontai represents as national or Community Ochai, Moyal or Luku Ochai represents at the regional level and Chokdiri or Nukhung Ochai at the village level and how is social structure practice in the Tripuri community. This paper shows that how is the role of Chontai, Moyal Ochai and Nukhung Ochai or Chokdiri at their level and how is these three organ playing the significant role for the protection and safeguard of their culture and practices.

KEY WORDS: Ochai, Chontai, Deodai, Galim, Moyal Ochai and Chokdiri or Nukhung Ochai Tripuri is one of the important tribal groups of Tripura. They speak kokborok language like the other tribes of Tripura which is a language of Tibeto-Burman family. Being the largest community in the state, the Tripuri tribe arrayed in almost all the districts such as Sepahijala, West Tripura, Unokoti, Teliamura, Noth Tripura, Dhalai, Khowai, Gomati, South Tripura, and in some other parts outside the Tripura. Tripuri or Tipra is the largest tribe of Tripura among the nineteen tribes. Different scholars have different views about the origin of Tripura. According to Kailas Chandra Sinha the name of Tripura was derived from the Tipra word (In Tripuri dialects "Tui" means water, Phra-pha God). And from Triphra the people have known as Tiphra¹.

Another view is that, "Tripura is the land of the God Shiva who is also known as Tripurari or Tripuresha. The people who settled in the land of Tripuresha Shiva came to be known as Tripuri and the land as Tripura². Tripura tribe originated from greater Bodo tribe. And there is no room for controversy or ambiguity over it. Because number of reputed ethnographers namely N. Vasu (Social History of Kamrup), Capt. Pemberton (Jalpaiguri District Handbook), Hooker (Himalayan Journal), Beverly (Census Report), Dalton (Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal 1872), Hadgson (Miscellaneous Essays 1880), Gait (Census of India 1891), Grieson (Linguistic Survey, 1903), Sunder (Survey and Settlement of Western Duars, 1895), Buchanon, F. Hermans and Anderson studied and discussed about it. According to them "The Bodos are known with different generic names at different places. And therefore the present ethnic groups have known as Cacharis, Dimasas, Koches, Rajbansis, Meches and Tripuras living in different regions though possess some variation of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic traits they all belong to one race-the Bodos³. Many scholars and foreign travellers had been written Tipra term as Troipur, Tipperah, Tipura and Tripura in different periods. Tipra term is also mentioned by K. D. Menon, IAS, State Editor of Tripura District Gazetteers, Chapter-I, General: Introduction, Origin of the name of the District, Page-1, published in 1975. Few lines of the gazetteers may be quoted: "A common belief is that the name Tripura has originated from Tripureswari' the presiding deity of the land. But this is not correct. The country had been known as Tripura even before the installation of the deity which took place at the time Maharaja Dhanya Manikya in the first half of the sixteenth century. What is more probable is that the deity took the name of the land. Apart from this traditional view there is another opinion which states that Tripura has been coined from two Tripuri words tui and pra. In Tripuri tui means water and pra means near: It is believed that originally the land was known as Tuipra, meaning a land adjoining the waters. It is a fact that in days of yore the boundaries of Tripura extended up to the Bay of Bengal when its rulers held away from the Garo Hills to Arakan. It might be that the name appropriately derived its origin from its nearness to water: This Tuipra has subsequently been corrupted into Tipra and



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from Tipra to Tripura. It is relevant to note that even today the hill people pronounce the word as Tipra and not Tripura".⁴

I. THE OCHAI (PRIEST)

The priest is known as Ochai in kokborok. The Ochai has ancient origins and can be traced back to various cultures and religious traditions. In general, Ochai is a religious leader or officiant who performs sacred rituals, conducts religious ceremonies, and serves as an intermediary between people and the divine or spiritual realm. Traditional priests were considered the most enlightened and influential persons in the Tripuri community. This was because they were the soothsayers, the doctors, the exponents and organizers of the mysterious systems of religion which prevailed in their society. In Tripuri community, the role of Ochai is very crucial in performing of various rituals and social activities. From religious ceremony to social ceremony in every where the role of Ochai is important. Without the presence of Ochai no ceremony can be performed in Tipra community even from birth ceremony to death ceremony of a person can be performed by Tipra Ochai. One thing needs to be mentioned here a female or woman does not become an Ochai in Tipra Community. A person does not become an Ochai (priest) simply by expressing the desire to enter the profession and finding a tutor to direct his training in Tipra community. There are two main ways for choosing an Ochai. The first is by divine calling, and the second is selected by the villager or traditional owners and the profession of Ochai is not hereditary in the community. The concept of Ochais (priests) or religious leaders has ancient origins that date back to the human civilizations. The precise origin of ochais is difficult to pinpoint, as it is intertwined with the development of religious beliefs and practices in diverse societies across the world. The term Ochai is found in the Rajmala. The Rajmala, the old chronicle of the Tripura dynasty gives a detailed account of the origin of priesthood of the tribal people of Tripura and the images of their early deities. The earliest reference to a Puja (worship) in the Rajmala is in the Tripura Khanda¹ The tribal people of Tripura performed worship of siva when their king Tripur was killed.² and the people were living in anarchy. They performed this worship in the Kirata way.

Kirater mate save Puja arambhila.

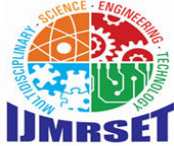
They started the worship in the manner of the Kiratas. But what that manner was not made clear. We may surmise that the Puja was conducted by the tribal Priest known as Ochai, Ochay or Ojhai⁵. This Priest performs most for the tribal rituals even duty. The religious outlook of the Tipras is centred round ceremonies and worship of the god and goddesses and spirits. Their religious beliefs and outlook are based on tradition. Like most of the tribes in other parts of the country as well as the world their religious beliefs concerns with the supernatural world. In chief, to overcome calamity or sufferings, they bank upon the deities or spirits with the observance of worship. There are numerous well deities and malevolent deities worshiped as household deities pertaining to persons concerned in Tipra community. Some traditional deities of Tipras are Mwtai Kotor and Mwtai Kotorma(Supreme deity and his consort), Akhatra and Bikhitra or 'Lampra'(sons of Supreme deity), Twima(Goddess of water), Mailuma(goddess of paddy), Khuluma(goddess of cotton), Burasa(A deity stands for diseases), Haichukma(wife of Burasa) etc. The worship of all these deities is performed by the Ochai of the Tipra community to overcome the calamity and sufferings and for the enhancement of prosperity and security of household wise or community wise.

II. THE OCHAI IN TIPRA COMMUNITY HAS THREE-TIER LEVELS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

1. National or Community level is headed by Chontai(Chief Priest).
2. Regional or Moyal level is headed by Luku or Moyal Ochai(Regional priest). He is called so because he can move from regional to regional for his profession.
3. Village level is headed by chokdiri or Nukhung Ochai(Family priest).

It is believe that the social structure of the Ochai community in Tipra is existed a long past ago. Thus, the three-tier levels of social structure of the Ochai in Tipra community are discussed below-

1. The Chontai: The national or community level priest is known as the Chontai in Tipra community. Earlier Chontai (Chief Priest) is nominated by the royal families. The evidence of Chontai is recorded in the Rajmala. He is assigned for the performance the worship of the Kharchi Mwtai(fourteen Dieties) of Tripura. He is attended with some assistants known as Deodai and Galim. As regards the Contai-deodai Priests, it is stated in the Rajmala that they never take forbidden food.¹³ they do not take food cooked by woman-folk.



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Narir randhan tare
Nahi kara bhak sa.¹³

They bathe daily, wash clothes and dry them in the sky i.e. on a rope or some-thing else put above the ground. They cook their own food. They are highly interested in officiating as Priests in worships⁶.

Functions of the Chontai: As the Chontai is considered the chief priest or National Priest of the nation of Tripura. Basically he is only responsible for conducting the events such as the Kharchi Puja, the Ker Puja and the pujas related to Royal families. The Kharchi Puja and the Ker Puja are the significant figures in the Tripuri indigenous religion and culture. The Chontai is the chief priest or officiant responsible for conducting the Kharchi Puja as well as Ker Puja, which is a major festival in Tripura. This annual festival is dedicated to the worship of the Kharchi Mwtai (fourteen deities) of the Tripuri pantheon. The Ker Puja is held just after the seven days of the Kharchi Puja. The Chontai's role is highly respected within the Tripuri community. He is assisted by a group of helpers which are included assistant Ochai, Galim and deodai in conducting the events successful. The roles and responsibilities of Chontai are discussed as follows:

- **Chief Priest:** The Chontai serves as the chief priest or officiant of the Kharchi Puja as well as in Ker Puja too. He is responsible for conducting the rituals and ceremonies with precision and adherence to tradition.
- **Custodian of Tradition:** The Chontai is the custodian of the religious and cultural traditions associated with the Kharchi Puja and the Ker puja as well as pujas related to royal family. He ensures that the customs, chants, and practices are followed correctly.
- **Leadership:** The Chontai is a spiritual and community leader of the Tripuri community. The Chontai directs his assistances to guide the devotees, answer questions about the rituals, and provide spiritual counsel.
- **Maintaining Sanctity:** It is the Chontai's duty to maintain the sanctity of the Kharchi Puja as well as other national's pujas. They oversee the cleanliness and orderliness of the temple or sacred space where the rituals take place.
- **Offering Prayers:** The Chontai leads the prayers and offerings to the fourteen deities of the Tripuri pantheon. He along with his helpers often performs rituals involving sacrifices, music, and dance.
- **Blessing Devotees:** The Chontai blesses the devotees who come to participate in the Kharchi Puja. This is an important aspect of their role as a spiritual leader.
- **Community Engagement:** They engage with the community, help resolve religious or spiritual concerns, and foster a sense of unity among the devotees.
- **Preserving Cultural Heritage:** The Chontai contributes to the preservation of the Tripuri cultural heritage by passing down knowledge and traditions to the next generation. Knowledge Transfer: They pass down their knowledge of the rituals, traditions, and cultural heritage to the next generation, ensuring the continuity of the Tripuri culture.

Overall, the Chantai's role is central to the successful and meaningful observance of the Kharchi Puja and the Ker Puja and the spiritual well-being of the Tripuri community as well as whole of the state.

Functions of the Deodai and Galim: In the context of the Kharchi Puja, Ker Puja and other traditional Tripuri festivals, the Deodai and Galim are important assistants to the Chontai (the chief priest). These individuals have specific roles and functions that support the successful conduct of the puja and the religious activities. Here are the functions of the Deodai and Galim:

- **Deodai(Chief Assistant to Chontai):** The Deodai is typically the chief assistant to the Chontai and serves as a right-hand person during the entire puja.
- **Ritual Performance:** They actively participate in various rituals and ceremonies alongside the Chontai. This includes offerings, sacrifices, and prayers to the deities.
- **Musical Accompaniment:** Like Galim, Deodai also often plays musical instruments or sings traditional songs and chants that accompany the rituals and dances performed during the puja.
- **Dance Performances:** In some cases, the Deodai may be involved in traditional dance performances that are an integral part of the puja. These dances often have religious significance.
- **Supporting Chontai:** They provide support to the Chontai by helping with the preparation of ritual objects, maintaining the sanctity of the sacred space, and ensuring the smooth flow of the puja.



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- **Assisting Devotees:** Both Deodai and Galim may assist devotees with their offerings, guide them in the correct procedures, and facilitate their participation in the puja.

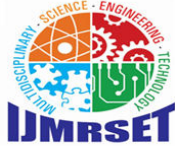
Both the Deodai and Galim play crucial roles in supporting the Chontai and ensuring that the Kharchi Puja or other traditional Tripuri festivals are conducted with precision, devotion, and adherence to age-old customs and traditions. They contribute to the overall spiritual and cultural significance of the event.

2. Moyal or Luku Ochai: The Moyal Priest or Luku Ochai holds a significant and respected position in the Tripuri community, a prominent tribal group from Tripura in Northeast India. Luku Ochai plays a crucial role in the Tripuri community's life-cycle rituals, guiding and performing ceremonies from birth to death. These rituals reflect the community's spiritual beliefs, emphasizing harmony with nature, ancestors, and deities. The Moyal Ochai is not confined to a single village or district. They travel extensively, reaching different parts of the Tripuri community to offer their services, whether for healing, conducting rituals, or other spiritual needs. That's why he is called Luku Ochai in Kok Borok. Luku ochai is assisted by a man is called 'Barua'. In some occasions another man helps the 'Luku Ochai' and 'Barua' whom they call 'Khandal'. There are some important roles and responsibilities of the Luku Ochai which is given below—

- **Birth rituals:** The Luku Ochai conducts a ritual to welcome the newborn and protect them from evil spirits. They use chants, sacred threads, and herbal smoke to ensure the baby's well-being. The priest suggests auspicious names based on traditional practices and blesses the child for a prosperous life.
- **Childhood and Growth Rituals:** The priest oversees this traditional ritual, believed to protect the child from harm and enhance spiritual growth. The Luku priest performs rituals when the child eats solid food for the first time, invoking blessings for health and vitality.
- **Marriage Rituals:** The Luku Ochai purifies the couple through rituals to ensure they begin their marital life free of bad omens. The priest leads the main ceremony, reciting chants and invoking deities to bless the union. Rituals often include offerings to ancestors and prayers for fertility and happiness.
- **Harvest and Seasonal Ceremonies:** The priest performs rituals during harvest festivals or seasonal events to thank nature and deities for prosperity. Without performing these rituals no one can take new foods in Tripuri community. These ceremonies are essential for maintaining harmony between humans and nature.
- **Illness and Healing Rituals:** The Luku Ochai uses traditional herbs and spiritual chants to treat illnesses. In cases of suspected possession or spiritual disturbance, the priest performs specific ceremonies to drive away harmful spirits.
- **Death and Funeral Rituals:** The Luku Ochai conducts the funeral, ensuring that the departed soul transitions peacefully to the afterlife. Rituals include offerings to ancestors and deities to protect the soul's journey. The priest performs additional rituals to purify the family and honor the deceased after the funeral.

3. Nukhung Ochai (Family Priest): The Nukhung Ochai (family priest) is a key figure in the Tripuri community, tasked with performing religious and spiritual duties for a specific family or within the confines of a village. While their role is similar to that of the Moyal Ochai, the Nukhung Ochai is distinct in being limited to a particular family or village and in their more personal involvement in familial rituals. There are some important roles and responsibilities of Nukhung Ochai which is given below-

- The Nukhung Ochai is dedicated to the spiritual needs of a particular family.
- They are responsible for conducting ceremonies and ensuring that familial traditions are upheld.
- In smaller villages, the Nukhung Ochai may serve as a spiritual guide for the entire village.
- Their influence rarely extends beyond the village, unlike the Moyal Ochai.
- They perform rituals for various life-cycle events such as birth, marriage, and death.
- They also conduct seasonal and harvest-related ceremonies within the family or village.
- Like the Moyal Ochai, the Nukhung Ochai acts as a healer, treating illnesses through traditional medicine and rituals.
- Their knowledge of herbs and spiritual healing is essential for their family or village.
- The Nukhung Ochai ensures that ancestral and cultural practices are maintained.
- They act as a bridge between the living family members and their ancestors through rituals and offerings.



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Despite Luku Ochai and Nukhung ochai share several similarities in their roles and responsibilities within the Tipra community. There are also some differences in scope, influence, and specialization between them which is given below:

Aspect	Luku Ochai (Moyal Ochai)	Nukhung Ochai(Family Ochai)
Scope of Influence	Luku Ochai Serves the entire community or tribe.	Nukhung Ochai is limited to a specific family or village.
Mobility	They move freely across villages, districts, and regions to perform rituals.	They primarily stay within the family or local village.
Role	They act as a community priest with broader responsibilities, including resolving communal issues and leading public ceremonies.	They serve as a family priest, focusing on private rituals and family-specific traditions.
Knowledge and Expertise	Possesses a deeper and more extensive knowledge of rituals, chants, and traditional medicine due to community-wide exposure.	Knowledge is specific to family customs and localized traditions.
Healing Practices	Known as a healer for the entire community, often treating illnesses using spiritual methods and herbal remedies.	Primarily heals within the family or local village and is less involved in community-wide healing.
Types of Rituals Performed	Conducts large-scale ceremonies, including festivals, harvest rituals, and community healing sessions.	Handles birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, as well as rituals specific to family well-being.
Historical Importance	Plays a vital role in the preservation and transmission of Tripuri cultural heritage at a community level.	Focused on maintaining family- specific customs and traditions within a smaller social unit.

III. CHALLENGES FACED BY OCHAI IN THE TRIPURI COMMUNITY IN MODERN SOCIETY

The ochai plays vital roles in preserving traditional practices within the Tripuri community. However, modern societal changes have introduced challenges that threaten their practices and relevance. They are as follow:

- **Impact of Modern Education:** Increasing access to modern education has led many to question or move away from traditional practices.
- **Shift in Religious Practices:** Some members of the community are adopting mainstream religions or modern spiritual practices, reducing reliance on the Ochai..
- **Loss of Cultural Roots:** Urban migration has disrupted traditional family and village structures, reducing the need for Ochai-led rituals.
- **Community Disconnection:** Ochai often find it difficult to connect with younger generations living in urban areas that are less familiar with traditional customs.
- Many families face economic challenges and cannot afford elaborate rituals, limiting the involvement of the Ochai in ceremonies.
- The Ochai themselves may struggle financially, as their role often depends on voluntary contributions.



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- Younger generations are less interested in becoming Ochai due to the lack of financial incentives and the perception of the role as outdated.
- The oral transmission of knowledge is breaking down as fewer people are willing to learn and carry on the traditions.
- The rise of modern healthcare systems has diminished the role of Ochai as healers, as people increasingly seek medical treatments over traditional remedies.
- Herbal medicine and spiritual healing, once central to their role, are now seen as less effective or outdated.
- Modern society often labels traditional practices as superstitions, undermining the respect and importance of Ochai.
- This has led to a decline in their social status within and outside the community.

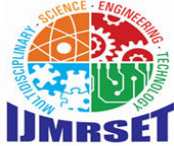
IV. SUGGESTIONS TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES FACED BY OCHAI IN THE TRIPURI COMMUNITY

To preserve the role and significance of Moyal Ochai and Nukhung Ochai, efforts must be taken to adapt their practices to modern contexts while maintaining their cultural and spiritual relevance. Below are practical suggestions:

- **Educational Campaigns:** Conduct awareness programs in schools and communities to educate people about the importance of Ochai and their role in preserving Tripuri traditions.
- **Cultural Festivals:** Organize festivals and events highlighting traditional rituals and practices to foster community pride.
- **Written Records:** Document the Ochai's knowledge of rituals, chants, and herbal medicine to prevent the loss of oral traditions.
- **Digital Archives:** Create digital platforms or repositories to preserve and share their practices with future generations.
- **Training Programs:** Introduce training for interested young members to learn the practices and skills of the Ochai.
- **Financial Incentives:** Provide stipends or incentives to encourage young people to take up the role of an Ochai.
- **Collaboration with Modern Medicine:** Encourage Ochai to work alongside modern healthcare practitioners to combine traditional healing with scientific methods.
- **Simplified Rituals:** Adapt rituals to fit modern lifestyles, making them less time-consuming and more affordable.
- **Community Contributions:** Establish community funds to support the Ochai financially.
- **Government Schemes:** Advocate for government recognition and financial assistance for traditional healers and spiritual leaders.
- **Promote Respect:** Encourage respectful dialogue to reduce misconceptions about Ochai practices being "superstitious" or "backward."
- **Highlight Value:** Showcase how Ochai rituals contribute to the spiritual, emotional, and cultural well-being of the community.
- **Collective Responsibility:** Involve the entire community in preserving the traditions, emphasizing that it's not solely the Ochai's duty.
- **Cross-Generational Dialogue:** Organize interactions between elders, Ochai, and the younger generation to pass on cultural knowledge.
- **Cultural Tourism:** Introduce Ochai-led ceremonies to tourists as part of cultural tourism, generating income and spreading awareness.
- **Collaborations with Researchers:** Partner with anthropologists, herbalists, and historians to study and promote Ochai practices globally.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above circumstances, it is clear that the Ochai, including the Chontai, the Luku Ochai and Nukhung Ochai, play a vital role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Tipra(Tripuri) community. Traditionally, these figures have served as spiritual guides, healers, and custodians of cultural heritage, promoting community unity through rituals that honour nature and ancestors.



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In today's society, however, their significance faces challenges from urbanization, modern education, organized religion, and a growing disinterest among younger generations, which may lead to a decline in their roles and cultural identity.

To navigate these challenges effectively, it is essential to engage in preservation efforts that focus on documentation, education, and the adaptation of practices. Enhancing community support, seeking government recognition, and fostering youth engagement will be crucial in sustaining the Ochai's connection to the past, which is vital for the preservation of Tipra traditions.

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