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## Folksong and Rituals: The Role of Garia and Mamita in Preserving Tripura's Culture

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 19-04-2025

**Published:** 10-05-2025

**Keywords:**

*Garia, Mamita, Tribes,  
Indigenous Culture,  
Agricultural Rituals,  
Cultural Preservation, Folk  
Song and Dance*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cultural significance of the Garia and Mamita festivals among the indigenous communities of Tripura, emphasizing their role in preserving tribal identity, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge. Through the lens of Ongkhor, a Kokborok term representing the living expression of folk traditions including songs, dances, rituals, and storytelling, the study highlights how these festivals function as both spiritual ceremonies and social frameworks for cultural transmission. Garia, celebrated at the onset of the agricultural season, symbolizes prayer, hope, and renewal, while Mamita, observed post-harvest, represents gratitude, unity, and fulfilment. Together, these festivals serve as cultural archives, embodying the values, history, and worldview of Tripura's tribal societies. In an era of rapid modernization, their continued observance reflects the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and the vital importance of community-based traditions in sustaining cultural continuity.

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15642446>

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## Introduction

The northeastern state of Tripura, home to a diverse range of tribal communities, is a vibrant mosaic of languages, beliefs, and traditions. The state was once ruled by Manikya Dynasty for around Thousand years. With more than 30% of its population belonging to various indigenous groups such as the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, and Noatia, Mog, Chakma, Lushai, Halam, Kukis etc the state boasts a cultural heritage that is as rich as it is ancient. Unlike many parts of the world where folklore has faded into obscurity, in Tripura, it remains a living and breathing part of everyday life. Tripura once was known as “KIRATDESH” in ancient time. It is also known as Tipprahs or the Tipperahs which originally came from Bodo home in Central Asia. According to Kailas Chandra Sinha the name of Tripura was formed from the Tipra Word, which literary in the dialects of Tripuri, Tui means water, phra means God. And from there Tiphra people were known as Tiphra. According to K.C Singh the term Tripura is derived from the word TWIPRA, which means Water and Near and it together kno wn as TWIPRA.

Since the beginning of time, tribal people have performed art and culture, such as folk song and group dances, on many occasions. These include marriage, community festivals, and work in the Jhum field. A folk sogs melody combined with a lovely string instrument tune has a powerful impact on the listeners. The cultural continuity are the folk traditions and rituals that shape the collective identity of the people. These customs are not merely celebratory, they are vital tools for the preservation of language, values, knowledge systems, and social structure. Folk expressions such as storytelling, music, dance, and ceremonial rites form the core of what is known in local terms as ‘Ongkhor’, the embodiment of community spirit and cultural memory. The two major festivals, Garia and Mamita, stand out as emblematic representations of Tripura’s tribal ethos. Celebrated with deep reverence and festive enthusiasm, these occasions are intimately tied to the agricultural cycle and the rhythms of rural life. Garia, observed at the beginning of the sowing season, and Mamita, celebrated post-harvest, both offer a window into how ritual and folklore blend seamlessly in Tripura’s tribal society. Through the music, dance, rituals, and communal gatherings, these festivals preserve ancient traditions while continuing to evolve with time.

## Research Objectives

1. To explore the cultural and spiritual significance of the Garia and Mamita festivals in preserving the heritage of Tripura’s tribal communities.
2. To analyse the role of folk expressions, such as songs, dances, and rituals in transmitting indigenous knowledge and values across generations.



3. To understand how these festivals foster community bonding and reinforce tribal identity within the context of ecological and agricultural traditions.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative and ethnographic approach to examine the cultural significance of the Garia and Mamita festivals among the indigenous communities of Tripura. The research is based on secondary sources, scholarly articles, cultural documentation, and recorded folk traditions. The particular attention is given to the oral and performative elements of the festivals, such as folk songs, dances, and rituals, which are central to the concept of Ongkhor (Bless the crops). These elements are analyzed through thematic content analysis to understand their symbolic meanings and their role in preserving tribal identity, agricultural knowledge, and spiritual beliefs. A comparative framework is used to highlight the distinctions and connections between Garia and Mamita in terms of timing, purpose, and cultural expression. Furthermore, the study contextualizes these festivals within the larger socio-ecological landscape of Tripura, exploring how community participation, intergenerational learning, and seasonal cycles are embedded in ritual practices. This methodology provides a culturally grounded lens to understand the resilience and relevance of tribal traditions in the face of modernity.

## **Understanding ‘Ongkhor’ and Folk Traditions**

The term ‘Ongkhor’ in the context of Tripura’s tribal communities refers to the folk expressions that encompass a wide range of oral and performative traditions, such as folk songs, dances, storytelling, chants, rituals, proverbs, and symbolic customs. These are not just art forms, they are the living soul of tribal identity, often practiced during festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings. Ongkhor is deeply intertwined with nature, spirituality, and daily life. Folk songs often narrate myths, agricultural practices, or reflect gratitude toward deities. Dances represent natural elements or life events, such as planting, harvesting, or marriage. Ritual chants and oral narratives serve as historical records, preserving genealogies, migration stories, and local wisdom. In tribal societies, where written records were traditionally rare, Ongkhor has functioned as a cultural archive, holding centuries of ancestral knowledge. It reflects the values, emotions, struggles, and hopes of the people, often using symbolism to depict themes of fertility, harmony, community, and spirituality.

## **Role in Social Bonding, Cultural Transmission, and Storytelling**



Ongkhor plays a vital role in social life, acting as a medium for: Intergenerational learning, social bonding, cultural transmission. Elders teach children through participatory storytelling, folk songs, and ritual dances, ensuring the preservation of language, customs, and beliefs. Festivals like Garia and Mamita bring people together in shared cultural practices. The preparation for dances or songs involves group effort, fostering unity and collective identity. Every performance of an Ongkhor during a festival is an act of remembering and retelling, passing down essential agricultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and ethical frameworks.

For example, in the Garia festival, a specific set of songs is sung to honor the Garia deity, asking for a fruitful sowing season. The lyrics often metaphorically describe the cycle of life and nature. These songs are remembered and sung year after year, ensuring that the language, melody, and cultural meanings survive through oral tradition. Similarly, during the Mamita festival, which is a post-harvest thanksgiving event, communities perform dances that symbolically express joy, gratitude, and unity. Traditional costumes and musical instruments are used, adding layers of cultural symbolism and aesthetic continuity. Beyond entertainment, Ongkhor is a social glue and a pedagogical tool, helping communities remain connected to their ancestral roots, land, and language, especially in the face of modern influences and cultural homogenization.

### **Garia Festival**

The Garia Festival is one of the most prominent traditional festivals of Tripura, celebrated mainly by Jamatia, Tripura and other indigenous tribes. It is held in early April, coinciding with the Bengali month of Baishakh, marking the onset of the agricultural cycle particularly the beginning of jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation). This timing is significant because it reflects the community's deep connection to nature and the land. As agriculture is the primary livelihood of many tribal families, this festival is not only religious but also agriculturally symbolic, setting the tone for hopes of a prosperous farming season ahead. The rituals of the Garia festival center around the worship of the Garia deity, believed to be the protector of crops, livestock, and prosperity. A sacred bamboo pole, known as the Garia bamboo, is planted in the courtyard or community space and decorated with flowers, rice beer (zu), and symbolic items. This bamboo represents the deity's presence. The traditional rituals include Animal sacrifices (often chickens or goats) to appease the deity. Offerings of rice, eggs, cotton threads, and rice beer. Invocations by priests or community elders using chants and prayers in the tribal language. Every item in the ritual has symbolic meaning, rice for abundance, eggs for fertility, and cotton threads for harmony. The spiritual



rituals are followed by vibrant cultural performances, including Garia dance and Garia songs, which form the core of Garia Ongkhor. These expressions are lively, rhythmic, and celebratory, often performed by young boys and girls in traditional attire. The Garia dance is performed in groups, often in a circular formation, symbolizing unity, and the cycle of seasons. The songs include chants and lyrics that honor nature, request blessings from the deity, and narrate tales of agricultural life. These performances are interactive and inclusive, spectators often join in, making it a communal celebration rather than a performance for an audience. The song is identified as:

**Bisi Kwtalni Goria Mwtai**

**Hamari rwna phaio**

**Baba Goria Rajawi**

**Ehu-hu-hu balore balore balo**

Garia is more than a religious occasion, it is a social event that strengthens community bonds and cultural identity. The entire village, regardless of age or status, participates in the rituals and celebrations, reinforcing collective values. The cultural values reflected in the festival includes gratitude toward nature and deities for sustaining life. Collective responsibility and harmony, as preparations are done together. Hope and renewal, as the sowing season begins with prayers for rain, fertility, and a good harvest. The Garia Festival helps to preserve traditional knowledge systems, sustain oral traditions, and in still a sense of belonging and pride in the younger generation.

### **Mamita Festival**

The Mamita Festival is a significant agricultural and cultural celebration observed primarily by the community and several other tribal groups in Tripura. It takes place after the harvest season, typically between September and November, when the year's agricultural labor is complete, and the granaries are full. This post-harvest timing makes Mamita a festival of thanksgiving. While Garia marks the beginning of agricultural activities, Mamita celebrates their fruits. It is a moment of relief, gratitude, and communal joy, signalling a time when people can rest, share food, and honor the forces of nature and spirit that ensured a successful harvest. Mamita is the heart of indigenous people rituals of gratitude and spiritual offering. Villagers gather at a designated sacred spot, often near a large tree, a shrine, or a communal space, to worship their ancestral deities and nature spirits. The ceremonies include offerings of rice,



vegetables, meat, rice beer, and other harvested produce. Rituals conducted by priests (Ojhas or elders), who chant prayers in the tribal language, asking for continued blessings and protection. Animal sacrifices, like chickens or pigs, in some communities, to honour the spirits of the land. These acts are performed to show respect for nature's bounty, and to spiritually cleanse and prepare the community for the next agricultural cycle. One of the most distinctive features of the Mamita Festival is its rich folk expression through dance, music, and costume. Unlike the high-energy dances of Garia, Mamita performances are more graceful, solemn, and symbolic, reflecting a tone of gratitude. The Mamita dance is typically performed by young women, dressed in bright traditional clothing, adorned with ornaments, flowers, and woven shawls. Folk songs accompany the dance, sung in the native dialects, often describing the beauty of the harvest, ancestral blessings, and tribal myths. Musical instruments like the drum (kham), flute (sumui), and gong are used, adding rhythm and depth to the performances. These art forms are not just for celebration, they are cultural expressions rooted in centuries of tradition, passed down orally and preserved in performance. The song of Mamita is as:

**Aisiri siri nogo kaphaima**

**Samung humung da nangjak**

**Rajabo kaio Osani mwta**

**Kangal Mamita rio**

**Rajabo tano Misip mothona**

**Kangal Tok Thakum tharo**

Mamita strengthens communal identity and encourages solidarity among villagers. Every household contributes to the festival, whether through food, labor, or participation making it a collective expression of joy and thanksgiving. The cultural values embedded in Mamita include: unity, gratitude, cultural continuity. The entire village gathers to celebrate as one, bridging generational and social divides. The festival centers on giving thanks, not only to deities but also to the Earth, ancestors, and each other. Through songs, dances, and rituals, the younger generation learns and participates in their cultural heritage, ensuring its survival. Mamita is a festival that balances joy with reverence, teaching respect for nature's cycles and promoting the sustainability of traditional ways of life.

### **Difference between Mamita and Garia Festival**



The Mamita Festival, known in Kokborok as Mamita Haphong, is a post-harvest festival celebrated mainly by the Tripuri, Jamatia, and other indigenous communities of Tripura. It usually takes place in October or November, after the harvesting of crops. The word Mamita itself refers to the harvest. This festival is a way for the people to give thanks to Mother Earth, called Bwkha Bwthai in Kokborok, and deities like Mailuma and Khuluma, for blessing them with a bountiful crop. During the celebration, people wear traditional attire (such as rignai and risa), prepare chuwarak (rice beer), and perform the Mamita dance, known locally as Mamita bwla. Women typically lead the dance, moving in a circle with rhythmic steps and songs. It is a time of joy and unity, where the whole village comes together to honor the bond between nature, ancestors, and the community.

In contrast, the Garia Festival, or Garia Haphong in Kokborok, is celebrated in April, during the end of the Bengali month of Chaitra, and it marks the beginning of the agricultural season. The main deity worshipped is Garia Bwthai, the god of livestock, crops, and prosperity. The festival begins with the installation of the Garia bamboo pole, known as Garia Kwthar, symbolizing the deity. Offerings like eggs (bwthai phwk), rice beer (chuwarak), and flowers (khum) are made to seek blessings for a successful farming season. Young boys and girls perform the Garia dance, or Garia bwla, moving energetically in groups, singing folk songs, and playing traditional instruments like the flute (sumui), drum (kham) and string instrument (sarinda). Elders bless the youth by placing rice grains on their heads (bwthai kham), symbolizing fertility and prosperity.

Therefore, Mamita Haphong is a thanksgiving festival for the harvest already received, Garia Haphong is a prayer for future abundance. Both festivals carry deep spiritual, cultural, and social meanings, reflecting the close relationship between the tribal people and nature in Kokborok-speaking communities.

## **Conclusion**

The festivals of Garia and Mamita are more than religious or seasonal observances; they are dynamic cultural institutions that preserve and transmit the soul of Tripura's tribal heritage. Rooted in the agricultural calendar, these festivals reflect the profound relationship between the indigenous communities and the natural world one based on reverence, interdependence, and gratitude. Through rituals, songs, dances, and symbolic offerings, these occasions uphold the essence of Ongkhor, the living tradition of oral knowledge, performance, and collective memory.



In a world increasingly driven by globalization and homogenization, such indigenous festivals become essential sites of resistance and resilience. They act as guardians of tribal languages, belief systems, and ethical values, many of which are in danger of being lost. The Garia Haphong, with its joyful dances and prayers for prosperity, reflects hope, renewal, and the start of life's cyclical journey. In contrast, Mamita Haphong, celebrated with grace and gratitude, symbolizes fulfilment, unity, and the spirit of sharing.

Both festivals also serve critical social functions. They create spaces for intergenerational learning, where elders pass down sacred knowledge, while the youth take on the responsibility of keeping traditions alive. They encourage community participation, where every household, regardless of status, contributes to the celebration, reinforcing values of equality, unity, and cooperation. Even the folk songs sung during these festivals, many of which have been preserved for centuries through oral tradition, are cultural texts in themselves, encoding local history, environmental understanding, and spiritual beliefs.

Garia and Mamita are not relics of the past, but vibrant, evolving expressions of Tripura's tribal identity. They keep alive a worldview that honors nature, cherishes community, and values harmony above all. As long as these festivals continue to be celebrated with authenticity and pride, the cultural roots of Tripura's indigenous communities will remain strong, offering future generations a rich and meaningful connection to their heritage.

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