



Ker Puja of Tripura: History, Ritual and the Making of Indigenous Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

Ker Puja is one of the most significant indigenous religious festivals of Tripura and occupies a distinctive place in the historical and cultural life of the Tripuri people. Celebrated annually after Kharchi Puja, the festival is traditionally observed to seek protection for the community from diseases, natural calamities, and evil forces, according to indigenous belief. Historically, Ker Puja came to be closely associated with the royal traditions of the Manikya dynasty and was performed as an important state ritual for the welfare, security, and prosperity of the kingdom. Beyond its religious significance, the festival embodies indigenous beliefs, customary practices, social discipline, and cultural continuity. The present study examines the historical background, ritual practices, and socio-cultural significance of Ker Puja through a historical research method and a qualitative approach. Drawing upon primary field interviews and secondary sources, the study argues that Ker Puja is not merely a religious ceremony but also an important institution for preserving the indigenous cultural identity, collective memory, and cultural heritage of the Tripuri people. The paper further highlights the relevance of Ker Puja in sustaining indigenous traditions in the face of contemporary social and cultural transformations.

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Introduction

Tripura possesses a rich indigenous cultural heritage in which traditional festivals play a vital role in preserving the historical memory, social values, and cultural identity of its diverse tribal communities (Bhattacharjee, 1994). Among these festivals, Ker Puja occupies a distinctive position as one of the most important indigenous religious traditions of the Tripuri people. Traditionally celebrated after Kharchi Puja, the festival involves the establishment of a sacred boundary (Ker) and the performance of elaborate religious rituals under the guidance of the Chantai, the traditional priest. According to indigenous belief, these rituals are performed to seek protection for the community from diseases, natural calamities, and malevolent forces while ensuring collective peace, prosperity, and well-being (Bhowmik, 2003).

Historically, Ker Puja became closely associated with the royal traditions of the Manikya dynasty and was observed as an important state ritual for the welfare and security of the Kingdom of Tripura (Singha, 1999). The observance of the festival follows strict customary regulations governing movement, social conduct, and ritual purity within the sacred boundary. These practices reflect the intimate relationship between indigenous religion, customary law, and community life that has characterised Tripuri society for generations.

Although modernisation, urbanisation, and socio-cultural transformations have influenced many traditional institutions, Ker Puja continues to be celebrated as a living expression of indigenous heritage and collective identity. The festival not only preserves traditional religious beliefs and ritual practices but also serves as a medium for transmitting oral traditions, customary knowledge, and cultural values across generations (Debbarma & Debbarma, 2025). Consequently, Ker Puja remains an important symbol of the historical continuity, cultural resilience, and indigenous identity of the Tripuri people.

The present study examines the historical development, ritual practices, and socio-cultural significance of Ker Puja through historical and qualitative research methods. By drawing upon both primary field interviews and secondary sources, the study seeks to analyse the role of Ker Puja in preserving the indigenous cultural identity and historical heritage of the Tripuri community in contemporary Tripura.

Review of Literature

Although Ker Puja is one of the most significant indigenous religious festivals of Tripura, scholarly literature devoted exclusively to the festival remains limited. Nevertheless, several studies on the history, religion, and culture of Tripura provide valuable insights into its historical background, ritual practices, and socio-cultural significance.



J. B. Bhattacharjee (1998), in *A History of Tripura*, examines the historical development of the Kingdom of Tripura and discusses the relationship between the Manikya dynasty and indigenous religious traditions. His work provides an important historical framework for understanding the evolution of state-sponsored rituals, including Ker Puja.

Priyabrata Bhattacharjee (1994), in *Tribal Pujas and Festivals in Tripura*, offers one of the earliest systematic accounts of the religious festivals of the indigenous communities of Tripura. His study describes the ritual procedures, religious beliefs, and cultural significance of festivals such as Ker Puja and remains an important source for understanding indigenous ritual traditions.

Dwijendra Lal Bhowmik (2003), in *Tribal Religion of Tripura: A Socio-Religious Analysis*, analyses the indigenous religious beliefs, customary practices, and traditional institutions of the Tripuri people. His work highlights the close relationship between religion, social organisation, and customary law, thereby providing an important perspective for interpreting the religious significance of Ker Puja.

More recently, Debbarma and Debbarma (2025) have examined Ker Puja from a socio-cultural perspective. Their study emphasises the role of the festival in preserving indigenous traditions, strengthening community solidarity, and reinforcing the cultural identity of the Tripuri people in contemporary society.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies have primarily concentrated on the ritual and cultural dimensions of Ker Puja. Comparatively less attention has been given to its historical evolution, its association with the royal traditions of the Manikya dynasty, and its broader role in the construction and preservation of indigenous cultural identity. The present study seeks to address this gap by adopting a historical approach supported by both primary field interviews and secondary sources.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to:

1. Examine the historical origin and evolution of Ker Puja in Tripura.
2. Analyse the rituals, beliefs, and traditional practices associated with Ker Puja.
3. Explore the role of Ker Puja in preserving the indigenous cultural identity of the Tripuri people.
4. Study the social, cultural, and religious significance of Ker Puja in contemporary Tripura.



5. Examine the continuity and changes in the celebration of Ker Puja in the context of modernisation and social transformation.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts the historical research method and follows a qualitative research approach to examine the historical development, ritual practices, and socio-cultural significance of Ker Puja in Tripura. Both primary and secondary sources have been utilised to collect, interpret, and analyse the data.

Primary data were collected through field visits and semi-structured personal interviews with Budhi Charan Debbarma, Suna Lakshi Debbarma, Kartik Debbarma, traditional priests (Chantai), and other knowledgeable members of the Tripuri community in Lefunga, West Tripura. The interviews focused on the historical background, ritual procedures, indigenous beliefs, customary practices, and the contemporary significance of Ker Puja. Information obtained from these interviews was cross-checked with secondary sources to enhance the reliability of the study.

Secondary data were collected from books, peer-reviewed research articles, government publications, historical records, and other relevant academic sources relating to the history, religion, and cultural traditions of Tripura. The collected data were critically analysed using the historical method to understand the evolution of Ker Puja and its contribution to the preservation of the indigenous cultural identity and cultural heritage of the Tripuri people.

Historical Background of Ker Puja

1. Meaning of Ker

The term Ker is generally understood to refer to a sacred boundary or protected space within the indigenous religious tradition of the Tripuri people (Bhattacharjee, 1994). According to traditional belief, a temporary sacred boundary is established during the observance of Ker Puja to safeguard the community from diseases, natural calamities, evil spirits, and other misfortunes. The ritual symbolises purification, protection, and collective well-being. During the period of the festival, strict customary regulations governing movement and social conduct are observed within the designated sacred area, reflecting the community's commitment to ritual purity and traditional religious practices.



2. Historical Origin of Ker Puja

The precise historical origin of Ker Puja cannot be established with certainty because the festival evolved through oral traditions long before the availability of written historical records. Available historical and ethnographic evidence suggests that Ker Puja originated among the indigenous Tripuri communities and was subsequently incorporated into the religious traditions of the Kingdom of Tripura (Bhattacharjee, 1994).

Historical traditions further indicate that Ker Puja gradually received royal patronage during the reign of the Manikya dynasty and eventually developed into an important state ritual associated with the welfare and protection of the kingdom (Singha, 1999). The festival was traditionally performed to seek divine protection against epidemics, natural calamities, famine, and external threats. Over time, Ker Puja emerged as one of the most significant indigenous religious ceremonies in the cultural history of Tripura.

3. Ker Puja under the Manikya Dynasty

The historical development of Ker Puja is closely associated with the political and religious traditions of the Manikya dynasty, which ruled Tripura for several centuries (Singha, 1999). During the royal period, religion and governance were closely interconnected, and indigenous rituals received royal patronage as part of the kingdom's religious and administrative system. Within this framework, Ker Puja was recognised as an important state ritual intended to ensure the protection, prosperity, and stability of the kingdom.

According to historical traditions, the Manikya rulers performed Ker Puja under the supervision of the royal priests, locally known as Chantai. The ceremony was believed to invoke divine protection for the ruler, the kingdom, and its inhabitants against epidemics, natural disasters, famine, and other perceived threats. The observance of the festival was governed by strict customary regulations concerning ritual purity, movement, and social discipline within the sacred boundary. These practices reflected the indigenous belief that collective welfare depended upon the proper observance of customary religious traditions.

Although the royal administration ceased to exist following political changes in the twentieth century, many elements of the traditional ceremony have survived. The continued observance of Ker Puja demonstrates the enduring influence of the historical and cultural traditions established during the Manikya period.

4. Historical Development of Ker Puja

Ker Puja has undergone gradual transformation over time while retaining its fundamental religious and cultural significance. In its earlier form, the festival was primarily observed by the indigenous Tripuri communities in accordance with customary laws and oral traditions. With the consolidation of the Kingdom



of Tripura, Ker Puja gradually acquired official recognition and became an integral part of the royal ceremonial tradition (Singha, 1999).

During the colonial period, political and administrative changes influenced several traditional institutions in Tripura. Nevertheless, Ker Puja continued to be observed by indigenous communities, reflecting the resilience and continuity of their religious and cultural traditions (Bhowmik, 2003).

Following the merger of Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949, the administrative structure of the state underwent significant changes. Despite these transformations, Ker Puja has continued to be celebrated as one of the most important indigenous religious festivals of Tripura. In recent decades, government institutions and cultural organisations have contributed to the preservation and promotion of indigenous traditions through cultural documentation and public awareness initiatives.

Today, Ker Puja is recognised not only as a religious ceremony but also as an important component of the cultural heritage of Tripura. Although certain ritual practices have adapted to changing social conditions, the fundamental values of community welfare, spiritual protection, and cultural continuity continue to define the festival and its enduring significance in contemporary Tripuri society.

Rituals and Practices of Ker Puja

Ker Puja is characterised by a series of indigenous religious rituals that reflect the traditional beliefs, customary practices, and cultural values of the Tripuri people (Bhattacharjee, 1994). The ceremonies are performed according to long-established customs under the supervision of the traditional priest, locally known as the Chantai, who possesses specialised ritual knowledge transmitted through generations (Bhowmik, 2003).

One of the most distinctive features of Ker Puja is the establishment of a sacred boundary, known as Ker. According to indigenous belief, this sacred enclosure separates the ritual space from the outside world and symbolically protects the community from diseases, evil spirits, and other harmful influences (Bhattacharjee, 1994). During the observance of the festival, strict customary regulations govern movement and daily activities within the designated area. Community members are expected to observe these regulations with sincerity and discipline, as adherence to customary rules is regarded as essential for ensuring collective welfare.

The ritual ceremonies include prayers, sacred chants, and traditional offerings dedicated to protective deities. These rituals are performed with the objective of seeking peace, prosperity, good health, and



protection for the entire community. The collective participation of community members reinforces social cohesion, mutual responsibility, and communal harmony, which constitute important features of the indigenous social system (Debbarma & Debbarma, 2025).

The role of the Chantai occupies a central position in the observance of Ker Puja. As the custodian of indigenous religious knowledge, the Chantai performs the prescribed rituals in accordance with customary laws and oral traditions. This institution has contributed significantly to the preservation and transmission of indigenous religious practices from one generation to another.

Ker Puja also reflects the close relationship between religion, nature, and community life within the traditional Tripuri worldview. Many of its rituals symbolise respect for natural forces and express the indigenous belief that harmony between human beings, nature, and the spiritual world is essential for collective well-being (Bhowmik, 2003).

Beyond its religious dimension, Ker Puja represents an important institution of customary governance in which religious beliefs, social discipline, and collective participation are closely interconnected. Consequently, the festival functions not only as a religious ceremony but also as a significant cultural institution that preserves indigenous knowledge, customary values, and the historical continuity of the Tripuri community.

Ker Puja and the Making of Indigenous Cultural Identity

Ker Puja plays a significant role in preserving and strengthening the indigenous cultural identity of the Tripuri people. More than a religious festival, it represents a living tradition through which historical memory, customary practices, and collective values are transmitted from one generation to another (Bhattacharjee, 1994). The observance of the festival reinforces a shared sense of belonging and reflects the continuity of the cultural heritage of the Tripuri community.

The rituals associated with Ker Puja embody Indigenous beliefs concerning spiritual protection, communal welfare, and harmonious coexistence with nature. The active participation of the Chantai, elders, and community members facilitates the transmission of oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and customary laws, thereby contributing to the preservation of indigenous religious institutions (Bhowmik, 2003). In this way, the festival functions as an important medium through which cultural knowledge and traditional values are sustained across generations.



Ker Puja also promotes social cohesion by encouraging collective participation and adherence to customary norms. The observance of ritual discipline and shared responsibilities strengthens social solidarity and reinforces the community's collective identity. These practices illustrate the close relationship between indigenous religion, customary governance, and social organisation within traditional Tripuri society (Debbarma & Debbarma, 2025).

Despite the growing influence of modernisation, urbanisation, and socio-cultural transformation, Ker Puja continues to retain its cultural relevance. While certain aspects of the celebration have adapted to changing social conditions, its fundamental religious values, customary institutions, and symbolic significance remain largely intact. Consequently, Ker Puja continues to serve as a powerful symbol of indigenous identity, cultural resilience, and historical continuity, contributing significantly to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Tripuri people in contemporary Tripura.

Conclusion

Ker Puja is one of the oldest and most significant indigenous festivals of Tripura and represents an important element of the state's cultural heritage. Historical traditions associate the festival with the royal patronage of the Manikya dynasty, while its rituals continue to preserve the traditional beliefs and customary practices of the Tripuri people. Beyond its religious significance, Ker Puja functions as a symbol of indigenous identity, collective memory and cultural continuity. In the context of rapid social transformation, systematic documentation, field-based research and the preservation of oral traditions are essential for safeguarding this unique heritage. Further historical studies will contribute to a deeper understanding of Ker Puja and its place in the cultural history of Tripura.

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