



Tipra Folk Beliefs and Superstitions: A Study of Indigenous Traditions

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ABSTRACT

The folk beliefs and superstitions of the Tipra people constitute an integral part of their indigenous knowledge system and cultural heritage. These beliefs, transmitted orally across generations, influence various aspects of daily life, including agriculture, health, family relations, rituals, festivals, and interactions with the natural environment. They reflect the community's worldview, social values, and spiritual understanding rather than merely representing irrational practices. This study explores the nature, functions, and cultural significance of Tipra folk beliefs and superstitions through qualitative and descriptive analysis based on available literature, oral traditions, and ethnographic observations. It examines how these beliefs contribute to social cohesion, cultural identity, moral values, and ecological awareness while also considering the impact of modernization, formal education, and globalization on their continuity. The study argues that Tipra folk beliefs and superstitions should be understood as valuable expressions of indigenous traditions and collective wisdom that deserve systematic documentation and preservation. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on indigenous knowledge systems, folklore, and cultural sustainability.

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Introduction

Folk beliefs and superstitions are important components of the intangible cultural heritage of indigenous communities throughout the world. They embody collective experiences, traditional wisdom, and cultural values that have evolved over generations. Among the Tipra community of Tripura, folk beliefs and superstitions continue to influence everyday life, social relationships, religious practices, agricultural activities, and interactions with the natural environment. These beliefs are deeply rooted in indigenous traditions and have been transmitted primarily through oral narratives, customs, rituals, and community practices.

The Tipra people possess a rich cultural heritage characterized by traditional festivals, folklore, songs, myths, rituals, and indigenous ecological knowledge. Their folk beliefs are closely associated with ancestral spirits, sacred forests, natural phenomena, dreams, omens, healing practices, and seasonal cycles. While some of these beliefs are often described as superstitions from a modern scientific perspective, they perform significant social and cultural functions by strengthening community solidarity, promoting moral behavior, preserving environmental ethics, and maintaining continuity with ancestral traditions.

However, rapid modernization, urbanization, formal education, technological advancement, and globalization have significantly influenced the traditional life style of the Tipra community. Many indigenous beliefs and practices are gradually disappearing as younger generations become increasingly detached from their cultural roots. Therefore, documenting and analyzing these beliefs is essential for preserving the community's intangible cultural heritage and understanding the broader significance of indigenous knowledge systems.

This study examines the folk beliefs and superstitions of the Tipra community from cultural and anthropological perspectives. It seeks to understand their origins, meanings, functions, and relevance in contemporary society. By highlighting the cultural value of these indigenous traditions, the study contributes to the fields of folklore, anthropology, indigenous studies, and cultural heritage research.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the nature and characteristics of folk beliefs and superstitions among the Tipra community.
- To explore the relationship between Tipra folk beliefs and indigenous traditions.
- To analyze the social, cultural, and religious significance of these beliefs.
- To investigate the role of folk beliefs in preserving indigenous identity and traditional knowledge.



- Assesses the impact of modernization and globalization on the continuity of Tipra folk beliefs and superstitions.

Folk beliefs and superstitions often develop through a mix of supernatural explanations and real-life experiences. Even though they may stem from a complete lack of scientific understanding regarding the laws of the natural world, illogical beliefs and superstitions still find a place in the human mind. Such things can be seen in Tipra society even today. It would not be right to completely dismiss their beliefs as mere blind faith and superstitions. These have evolved in society over a long period through folk beliefs or lineage. Even if it is not known whether these had any realistic context in the past, numerous such folk beliefs and superstitions are observed in the daily lives of the Tripura's. A small portion of these is mentioned here.

If someone sneezes when a person is leaving the house to go somewhere else, it is considered an ill omen. It creates a hindrance to the journey. Right then, some people pause for a moment, consume tobacco, and then resume their journey, while many cancel the journey for that day entirely. Of course, this does not apply to everyone. Sneezing caused by a child's winter cold or a cough is not considered an ill omen. Regarding this, a Kokborok proverb says— "**Masing kongwrai cherai haikuga aboni baduwa kwrwi**" (**A child's sneeze or cough holds no bad omen**).

In their belief, it is also highly ominous if a hen crows like a rooster (rata). It is believed that this can cause harm to some family member. For this reason, the hen is slaughtered immediately. Similarly, a rooster crowing in the evening is also considered an ill omen. Out of fear that some kind of mishap might occur in the family, the rooster is usually thrown away or sold. If a domesticated hen lays an unusually small egg, that too is considered a bad sign for the family. To eliminate this ill omen, the house wife takes that egg, circles it around the bodies of the family members three times, and throws it towards the west. It is a common belief that doing so dispels the possibility of harm.

Similarly, '**Feyang Kobor**' or a mad fox is an object of fear in Tipra folklore. If this animal faces someone's house on a Saturday or Tuesday and makes a strange cry, there is a possibility of severe harm to that household. It can even lead to the death of a family member. Alternatively, there remains a constant presence of illness and diseases in the house. In short, someone or the other falls sick.

In Hinduism, the owl is considered the vehicle of Goddess **Lakshmi**. But there are sub-species among owls. Excluding the **Lakshmi** owl, the rest are viewed by the Tipra's as signs of misfortune. Some call them '**Takhuk swkal**' or witch owls. These owls look very ugly and terrifying; they even look scary. If those witch owls sit on a branch of a tree near someone's house or on the roof of the house on a Saturday or



Tuesday night during a new moon, and call out strangely, it is taken as an omen of misfortune. It is believed that there is a possibility of major danger for the people of that family or that neighborhood. If a rooster crows in the evening on the roof of a house facing west, it is considered a special sign of danger. The possibility of imminent danger to that family cannot be ruled out.

There is no end to the superstitions in Tipra (Tripuri) society regarding the dove or spotted dove. It is a long-standing belief among the Tipras that the souls of deceased relatives often come to see their loved ones by riding on a dove. There is also a belief that after death, a person's soul sits on a dove to inform their relatives. For this reason, if anyone hears a dove cooing early in the morning sitting on the roof of a house, they express concern that a relative might receive bad news. It could also mean someone in the family might suffer from a major illness or face a huge danger in the near future. That is why the Tipra's get restless upon hearing the call of a dove. They become gripped by the fear of bad news.

Hearing the call of a **kite** early in the morning is also an evil omen. It could mean hearing news of the death of a close relative or loved one. The Tipra's believe that the deceased person's soul rides on the kite to deliver the death news to relatives living far away. If a kite flies over the roof of someone's house, the anxious Tipra's say among themselves that they might hear news of a relative's death.

At one time, the menace of tigers was very high in this Tripura, which was full of forests and jungles. There is no account of how many people were eaten by tigers in those days or how many failed to escape them. Dying from a tiger attack is called "Wak wngmung". The Tipras believe that if anyone suddenly hears a whistling sound in their ears, they will surely die in a tiger attack. It is said that the source of this whistling sound is unknown. Their folklore suggests that some unknown god is behind this.

If any part of a granary collapses without cause, it is also considered an evil omen by the Tipras. It could cause economic loss to that family. Even the loss of a family member is not impossible. For this reason, careful attention is paid so that a fully stocked granary does not collapse.

The Tipra's also believe that if a branch of a tree suddenly falls in front of someone without any reason; it could mean the death of someone in that family or a person from that neighborhood. Many comment that they have witnessed such vivid incidents.

The Tipra's are generally very hospitable. To them, a guest is like a god. Therefore, they leave no stone unturned in serving guests. There are some folk beliefs prevalent among them regarding the arrival of guests. It is said that if utensils used during cooking-such as a pot, dekchi (cauldron), ladle, spatula, or any other item-slip from the hand and fall to the ground, or if a broom or stick falls from the hand, a guest will



arrive at that house within a day or two. If such an incident happens with any family member, it indicates the arrival of a guest. There is a possibility. It is said that their beliefs originated from some such past experiences.

Even if a bird drops excrement on someone's body, it is considered an auspicious sign. Many times, even if a bird flies away or drops excrement while sitting on a branch, it is considered auspicious. There is a popular belief that if that excrement falls on someone's head or any part of the body, the person faces immediate danger. As a result, it is known to have far-reaching effects on their social and national life. Consequently, harmful financial losses or accidents can also occur. For this reason, the Tipra's walk very carefully so that bird droppings do not fall on them.

If a lizard makes a "tik-tik" sound during an important conversation, that discussion is considered absolutely correct. At that time, matching the sound of the lizard, they utter the words "that's right" and slam their two thumbs on the ground instead of their fingers. This enhances the depth of the discussion, and these words are considered completely true.

If someone's cow dies, the owner of the cow must tie a rope around their own neck and beg for alms in the neighboring villages. During the begging process, talking is completely forbidden. A helper accompanies them, who explain the reason for adopting this form of begging instead of standard speech.

In the Tipra community, unmarried young men and women are forbidden from eating twin fruits. It is believed that eating twin fruits leads to the birth of twin children after marriage. For this reason, girls especially avoid eating twin fruits.

While parents are alive, children are generally not fed the head of a fish. People say doing so is equivalent to "eating the head" (harming/disrespecting) of one's parents or elders, and it brings misfortune upon them. Therefore, as long as parents are alive, children are restricted from eating large fish heads. However, if the father or mother passes away, the other remaining elder of the family or the eldest son earns the right to eat the large fish head. Even if a son gets married and establishes a separate household from his parents, he cannot eat the head of a large fish during his parents' lifetime. In this case, the parent socially enjoys that right. Apart from parents, uncles (kaka, jetha moshai), etc., may also live in the house. This is especially seen in joint families. They also reside in the same family. Examples of such joint families among ancient Tipra communities are seen by many. In those cases as well, this social custom is fully maintained. Heads are not given to us out of respect for elders. The custom is followed to the letter. Because of this, young boys and girls of ancient Tipra social families are always deprived of highly delicious food like fish heads.



Whether that custom is logical and scientifically sound is a different question. But since it is considered the ultimate expression of devotion and respect towards elders, there is no issue in assuming so.

Eggs that break or get damaged during incubation cannot be eaten by young people. It is usually seen that the eggs from which chicks do not hatch after the due date are called 'Toktwi kwpwlam' in the Kokborok (Tipra) language. In Tipra society, these eggs are also eaten after boiling. Generally, only elderly people eat them. Young people are not allowed to eat them. They believe that eating those eggs reduces eyesight. It is very harmful, especially for the soft eyes of young people. For this reason, younger Tipra people refrain from eating those eggs. Whether there is a scientific basis for this is a matter of research.

Social restrictions also apply to the burnt rice at the bottom of the cooking pot. In this case, the target is also young girls. In Tipra folklore, it is said that if children eat burnt rice, they become extremely shy and timid in their adulthood. They cannot speak up boldly in society. They always remain curled up in shame. This applies more to boys because they will grow up to be men and participate in various social functions. Therefore, if they stay curled up in shame, it turns into an unfortunate situation. For this reason, the young ones are not given this burnt rice.

Tripuris have a custom of picking up food and eating it if it falls onto the ground during a meal. While eating, food items can accidentally fall from one's hand at any time. Old women say that fallen food is just another name for the enemy's share-and one should not leave a share for the enemy. Thinking this, they are compelled to pick it up from the ground and eat it. It is believed that this protects them from the enemy's hands. This custom and belief are still fully present in Tripuri society today.

Belief in an imaginary deity named 'Narsing' is also prevalent. However, no puja or worship is performed for this imaginary deity. His name is remembered during times of danger. When Tripuris leave the house in the dark of night, they utter the name of this deity. They step out of the house pronouncing 'Thu Narsing' or 'Thu Nasing'. Especially when stepping out into the dark of night, the word 'Thu Nasing' automatically comes out of their mouth. It is believed that this helps avoid the evil gaze of malevolent spirits. Evil spirits lose their courage in front of 'Narsing'. If they suddenly face a frightening environment, they loudly pronounce the word 'Thu narsing' repeatedly.

Tipra's are worshippers of truth. Taking shelter in falsehood is unacceptable there. Yet, sometimes one may have to speak a lie to save a life or to escape from imminent danger. Such a need arises for the greater good. The truth-loving Tipra's then fall into a great dilemma. Tipra's society itself has prescribed the way and means of salvation. In such cases, they place their left hand on the genitals and touch a religious book with



their right hand while speaking. For this false statement, they do not incur any sin. Often, oaths are taken by touching fire or the ground, or by placing a hand on the head of an elder; these are meant for truth and falsehood. At that time, while taking the oath, the genitals are touched with the left hand. It is a Tipra's folk belief that even if one gives false testimony this way, the person does not sin and does not have to suffer bad consequences for it.

Another important custom is observed in Tipra's society. Before starting a meal, it is a custom to take a small amount of rice and salt from the plate and throw it around the plate. This is called 'hakachi Karmung'. It is a popular belief that this avoids the evil eye of non-human evil spirits. If this is not done, people believe that they often fall under the evil eye, resulting in stomach aches or indigestion. It can be observed and understood that this is why the 'Hakachi Karma' method is followed during meals. Moreover, if a domesticated pig is killed at home, or if deer, pig, etc., are obtained through hunting, or if a pig is killed for a ritual, then someone immediately comes and utters a mantra to perform the 'Hakachi Karma' ritual. He cuts the liver into pieces, mixes it with lard while chanting mantras, and finally, he eats a piece himself. After that, others can eat it. Otherwise, the mouth of an evil spirit might affect it, leading to indigestion or stomach upset.

Food or saliva can go down the wrong pipe while eating or swallowing. The Tipra's call this 'Mithikmung'. If such an incident occurs while eating, it is believed that the person's name is being remembered by someone who has passed away. Or it is assumed that they are being discussed somewhere else. This belief is observed everywhere. Therefore, whenever such a 'Mithikmung' incident happens, they immediately take a deep breath and say, "Who is discussing me at this improper time?" and so on.

Furthermore, those who have a slightly deep groove or hollow in the middle of their neck from the back are termed as stingy or calculative people. This is called 'Gwdna Kuthuk'. Such people are usually miserly and calculative. It is very difficult to extract or realize any goods or money from them. Because of this popular belief, people say—'Gwdna Kuthuk Manwi Khamrek.' Meaning, a groove in the neck is a sign of a miser.

It is known that if a deer gets bitten by any creature in any place due to an accident resulting from a mistake, it is forbidden to practice shifting cultivation (Jhum) in that place. It is also known that if a Jhumia family suffers a loss due to any accident, it makes the person aware of their helplessness. Even the eyewitness present there at that time does not cause any harm to that deer. There is no lack of pity and kindness towards that deer in Tipra's folk belief. This is termed as a sin by them. Therefore, they refrain from harming the injured deer.



There is no end to Tipra's folk beliefs regarding pigs. If a domesticated pig gives birth to only two piglets for the first time during delivery, and one is male and the other is female, it is considered ominous for that family.

If a fire breaks out in someone's piled-up straw stack and the stack gets completely burnt, it is believed that some member of that family might suffer some form of harm that year. Even that family could lose everything and become completely destitute.

If the 'Baka' or shelf constructed above a traditional country stove breaks down for any reason, it is assumed that the personal and family life of the members of that family may get disrupted. Not only is there a fear of danger, but such a loss can also happen to that family which is immense and....Cannot be prevented. Even if a tragic event like death occurs, it is believed there is nothing to wonder about. Aside from this, it is said in Tipra's folk belief that hearing a deer call at the start of any auspicious journey makes the journey unsuccessful instead of fruitful.

Conclusion

The folk beliefs and superstitions of the Tipra community form an important part of their indigenous knowledge system and cultural heritage. These beliefs, which have been passed down through generations, reflect the community's close relationship with nature, their spiritual worldview, and their collective experiences. Although some practices may appear superstitious from a modern scientific perspective, they have long served practical social and cultural functions by promoting moral values, social cohesion, environmental awareness, and psychological reassurance.

Rapid modernization, urbanization, formal education, and globalization have gradually reduced the practice and transmission of many traditional beliefs among younger generations. Nevertheless, these traditions continue to hold cultural significance, especially during festivals, rituals, agricultural activities, and important life-cycle events. Rather than dismissing them as mere superstition, they should be understood within their historical, cultural, and anthropological contexts.

This study highlights the need to document, preserve, and critically examine Tipra folk beliefs as valuable elements of the community's intangible cultural heritage. Future research may further explore regional variations, changing attitudes among younger generations, and the role of these traditions in shaping Tipra identity in contemporary society. Preserving this indigenous knowledge will contribute not only to safeguarding the cultural legacy of the Tipra people but also to enriching the broader understanding of India's diverse folk traditions.



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