

Cosmology and Being: Metaphysical Frameworks in the Worldview of the Tripuri Tribes

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Abstract: Tripura is known for many culture and historical places. Tripura has 19 different tribal communities along with Bengali and Manipuri communities which contribute to the rich culture tradition of Tripura. The culture of Tripura is a mixture of culture and tradition that these communities have evolved over centuries. Tripura is known for its hilly terrain and tribal population. Upon investigation, it transpires that the tribal people of Tripura, especially Tripuris, have unique metaphysical and spiritual beliefs. The tribal of India including those of Tripura have come in contact with the ancient faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism and they cannot but derive some metaphysical conception from these faiths. Most Tripuris have adopted Hinduism, and a significant number have embraced Buddhism. This also indicates their affinity for metaphysical and spiritual doctrines prevalent in these faiths. Thus there has always been a metaphysical and spiritual tradition among the tribals of Tripura from time immemorial. Traces of this tradition are found even in their tribal practices. Tripura is home to a diverse array of tribal communities, each contributing to the regions rich cultural tapestry. This study focuses on the Tripuri tribes, exploring their unique metaphysical beliefs that blend traditional tribal practices with elements from Hinduism and Buddhism. By examining the concept of the Supreme Deity Matāiktār and the role of spirits in Tripuri cosmology, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of how these metaphysical ideas have evolved and been integrated into the broader cultural and religious landscape of Tripura.

Keywords: Tripura, Tripuri tribes, Metaphysical beliefs, Hinduism, Buddhism

The tripuris believe in a Supreme Deity or God and a number of other deities. The Supreme Deity is called Matāiktār. He has a consort called Matāi Katārmā. This seems to be a reflection of the Hindu conception of Śiva - Śakti, Lakshmi - Nārāyaṇa, Rādhā - Kṛṣṇa etc., where Śiva, Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa are regarded as the Supreme Deity, and Śakti (kāli or Durgā), Lakshmi and Rādhā are their consorts, referred to as Śakti (energy). Although Matāi Katār is considered the Supreme God, it is unclear whether other Gods and Goddesses are subordinate to Him or what relationship exists between the supreme Deity and the other deities. The relation remains vague, and for the matter of that the idea of Supreme Deity (Matāi Katār) also becomes vague, so that Matāi Katār may be regarded as a great God only like Mahādeva of the Hindus Trinity but not the Supreme Being. Again in the famous caturdaśh devata Puja (worship of fourteen deities) of Tripura, the so - called Supreme Deity Matāi Katār is not included in the pantheon, where Hara or Śiva is number one. This also shows that Matāi Katār is just the name of a deity, but not the Supreme Deity, yet some regard Him to be the Supreme Deity. Probably this is a recent view not founded on sufficient ground. The position of the Matāi Katār (chief god) seems to be similar to the prominent Vedic deities, Indra, Varuna etc., none of whom were regarded as the Supreme Lord overall other deities but all were looked upon as Supreme by their devotees. The idea of an all pervading Supreme Being developed later on in some rare passages of the R̥gveda Samhitā and the unity and supremacy of god head was clear stated in numerous passages of the Upaniṣad texts. So, Tripuri Matāi Katār may be compared to Vedic Indra, Varuna and the like but not to the Upaniṣadic Ātman or Brahman.

The tripuris also believe in lesser super human beings usually evil in character. These spirits, they say haunt desert houses, some kind of trees, road crossings, old ponds, jungles and such other deserted spots. These spirits may be

compared to angels and evil spirits of other religions. Such spirits re - mentioned in the old Vedic theology also, who are called Āstu pati, Kṣestra pati etc. . the philosophically important fact here is that the Tripuris believe in a world of spirits which is a metaphysical or spirit world. This physical world is not all. There is a subtle spirit world too where the invisible and incorporeal spirits dwell. This is the suksma jagat or subtle world of the Hindu eschatology. This world is also called the bhuvarloka or the world of just beyond the material world or bhuloka. This is one of the seven succeeding world, one above the other of the Hindu cosmogony or scheme of creation of both the gross or material world and the subtler heavenly world. The spirits of the Tripuri conception, however, are small beings compared to the angelic beings of the semitic religions, who are often very powerful. The Tripuri spirits are not given any names, and are regarded as causing disease and other harms to man. So people especially, women and children have to avoid all haunted spots for fear of this spirit world.

The Tripuri is like the Hindu believe in the existence of a soul or Ātman in human body. The soul is called 'fala' in their language. The origin or derivation of this world is not clear. It can not be derived from Buddhism or Jainism for Buddhism does not admit the soul at all and Jainism was not preached in this part of the country. So far as can be assumed the word 'fala' (soul) and the conception of the soul are derived from Hinduism. 'Fala' may be a corruption of Vedic Prāṇa (soul, life) or SKT Phāla (a name of Śiva), probably a stone linga, of Prastara - Phalaka (a stone slab). Eng. Phallus, a deeper probe into the origin of this Tripuri term is highly essential and it is expected to bring to light such interesting religio - philosophical data about the Tripuri tribe and its absorption of the Aryan ideas. As to the invisible, imperishable and beyond all sense perception, as described in the Bhagavad - Gītā. But at the same time the Tripuris believe that the soul may assume any form, appearance or colour it likes. This however, is a common

belief among all mankind. It does not indicate that the soul has any form, colour etc. but a different fact that the soul exists even after death and can appear before mortals, when necessary in a visible form for man to see.

The Tripuris believe that the soul during sleep temporarily goes out of the body and later on returns to the body. But this belief is noted also in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Sage Yājñavalkya seems to have held this view. For there are verses cited by Him in this Upaniṣad to this effect (during sleep) “The soul leaves this body alive and roams about outside the body at pleasure and again arrives at its original place in the body”. (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 4.3, 11 - 12).

So, it may be assumed that the Tripuri belief of the soul's exit from and re - entry into the body during sleep was derived from the similar Aryan belief noted above. But at death the soul leaves the body for ever never to come back again into the body. The soul exists even after death. It goes to heaven or hell according to the quality of man's work during life on earth. In case of death by suicide or any accident the soul turns into an evil spirit after death.

After enjoying or suffering for a time in the next world the departed soul under goes rebirth. The quality of action in the previous life determines the soul's status in the next birth. A doer of good deeds in the past life is reborn in the human society. But one who committed black deeds has to be born as a lower animal. This is also common belief among the Hindus and is noted in the Upaniṣad, Bhagvad - Gītā and other sacred texts. (Vide - Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 5 - 10, 7 - 8, where evil deeds are said to be reborn as big and small animals or the lowest).

From the above it is clear that the Tripuri conception of soul is practically the same as that of the non - tribal Hindus. The Tripuris believe in the existence of the soul its eternity, enjoying the fruit of action and rebirth like other Hindus. Only a special name Fala is given to the soul by them as noted above. So much for the metaphysical ideas of the Tripuris the main tribe of Tripura. The metaphysical beliefs of the Tripuri tribes reflect a unique synthesis of traditional tribal practices with Hindu and Buddhist elements.

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