

# “Jamai Khata - An apprenticeship of a bridegroom”: An analytical study on an age-old tradition of the Tripuri community of Tripura

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*Abstract: Tripura is a small, charming hilly state, situated in the Eastern part of India. Tripura is a land of tribal and non-tribal people, but the aborigines of the state were tribes. Presently, there are as many as nineteen tribes in Tripura and every tribe has its own culture and customs. Tripuri tribe is one of the prominent aborigines of this state. Indeed, conventional practices are always visible in family ceremonial activities. “Jamai Khata, an apprenticeship of a bridegroom”, is such a conventional practice that prevailed in the Tripuri society of Tripura and this will be my humble attempt to analytically study the real essence of this social customs of the Tripuri community of Tripura from the present social perspective.*

Keywords: Tripura, Tripuri tribe, social customs, Jamai Khata

Every human society has been undergoing a process of social reformation. But that reformation depends on the willingness and its outlook. Whether social customs and rituals be reformed totally without compromising the age-old tradition of that particular society or based on its tradition and culture is a matter of great debate. But it is true that almost behind every social custom and ritual of society there was an underlying significance that was later on often being misinterpreted, misused or fabricated. *Jamai Khata*, an age-old tradition of the aborigines of Tripura was also later on misinterpreted, fabricated and considered as an evil practice.

Tripura is a small charming hilly state, situated in the northeast of India. It covered an area of 10,477, sq. km. It lies between 91°10' and 92°21' East longitude and 22°05' and 24°32' North Latitude. It is encircled by Bangladesh on three sides with long open borders of 839 km. Its only nexus with the Indian Union is only in its northeastern border where roughly 162 km of its opening forms a boundary line partly in the north with the Karimganj district of Assam and partly in the east with Mizoram. On the other side of its border, it was encircled by the districts of Bangladesh like Sylhet,

Comilla, Noakhali, and Chittagong Hill Tracts respectively and before its merger with Indian, Union was an independent princely state ruled by the Manikya Rulers. The aborigines of the state were mostly the tribal people viz, Tripuri, Chakma, Noatia, Jamatia, Mog, Halam, Reang etc. Each and every tribal community has their age-old tradition and culture. *Jamai Khata* was also one of those age-old tribal customs which was prevalent basically among in the Tripuri society.

*Jamai Khata* was chiefly a compulsory apprenticeship of the bridegroom as a farmhand at the house of the would-be father-in-law. It was a unique feature of that society where the would-be son-in-law has to remain a probationer for three to five years in the probable bride's house. Before marriage, the would-be son-in-law had to spend a certain pre-marriage period at the house of his would-be father-in-law where he had to undergo certain practices. He has to obey all orders of his father-in-law. He cannot just refuse anything. The rule is "just to obey".

During the period of *Jamai Khata*, he had to get up early in the morning, fetch water from the river or well for the family, clean the house, prepare food for all the members of the family including for his would-be wife. Still evening he had to process bamboo and wood for using these as fuel. Before sunrise, he had to serve breakfast to all the members of the family. But mainly he engaged himself with Jhum cultivation. He works hard in the field for his would-be father-in-law.

During the period of *Jamai Khata*, the conversation between the would-be couple was strictly prohibited. The would-be wife, however, would serve the dish to her would-be husband during dinner, arrange a bed for him and prepare for him bamboo *hookah* at night. But during that period, she cannot talk or even touch him and vice-versa. But if the bridegroom was up to her choice, she would keep secretly a boiled egg covered with rice on his dish beyond the knowledge of anybody. The bridegroom then could understand that she gave her permission. But on the contrary, if she would keep ashes on his dish covered with rice, then it means she did not like him and, in such case, the would-be bridegroom would leave her house in no time.

Also, it was found that free-mixing among the bride and groom is permitted though the marriage negotiations are conducted by the parents of both the parties. However, if during the period of *Jamai Khata* the bride and the groom fail to accommodate each other they can be separated from one another.

The young man during that period can occasionally visit his father's house and sometimes he takes his bride also with him. However, after the approved period of apprenticeship, he returns to his own house to live separately with his wife. If he prefers then he can stay with his wife in his father-in-law's house. During the *Jamai Khata* period, a formal marriage is staged after two or three months and after that ceremony, they live together and they may even beget children. However, if the groom divorces his bride he is severely punished by the chief and sometimes he is mercilessly beaten and pay a fine for his inability to prove himself.

This system of *Jamai Khata* prevalent in the tribal communities of Tripura was vehemently opposed by the *Mukti Parishad* in Tripura in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They considered it an inhuman and undignified practice. According to them, it was distinctly a cruel exposure of selfishness on the part of the would-be father-in-law. It was a practice of exploitation. Hence, they started campaigning against it and making the tribal people aware of that evil practices.

But at the same time, that practice was justified by some scholars. They highlighted the inner significance of that custom. It appears that a special significance in training up the young men and women in the art of *jhuming* and all its additional activities. *Jhuming* needs special training and hard work. The activities connected with *Jhuming* cultivation such as weaving baskets, building *tong-ghars*, processing of crops, prevention of seeds, laying of traps for wild animals need special skill and labour. During this process of *Jamai-Khata*, a young man makes himself fit for becoming a probationer for *Jhum* cultivation. The period of his adolescence become his period for gathering knowledge of survival. Hence, to overcome such a danger of future survival and for training up the young, the institution of *Jamai Khata* might have been created.

The boys know that unless they go through this test, they will not be entitled to have their mates which is sure to act as an incentive to learning the art of *Jhuming*. At this period, they undergo the most rigorous and practical training to become good and successful *Jhumias*. This not only gives them work training but also teaches them discipline. This is also the right period for the young girls to learn weaving and other household activities through practical training given by their mothers.

In the present modern-day, we may consider that practice as inhuman or a specimen of physical and psychological torturing, but if we think of it from their social perspective then that practice might be considered as the finest way to make a young tribal boy self-sufficient. If we talk about women interests, *Jamai Khata* was such a practice where maximum importance was given to a girl. She has the sole power to choose her mate. In this process, she could observe and understand her would-be husband very closely. Hence, we can say that a social practice or custom emerged from a social need. Not all the needs need to be for the betterment of society. But in *Sanatana* Indian society and especially in the tribal societies of India, almost all the social practises emerged from their basic socio-economic needs and hence from the present modern perspective we cannot consider those practices and customs as inhuman or undignified.

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