



# Traditional Agriculture Practices Of The Tripuri People

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## Abstract:

The Tripuri (also known as Tipra or Borok) people, the largest indigenous community in Tripura, Northeast India, have a rich tradition of agriculture deeply intertwined with their cultural, spiritual, and ecological worldview. Historically, their economy revolved around jhum (shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation), a sustainable rotational system suited to the state's hilly terrain. In jhum, forested plots are selected, cleared by cutting vegetation in January, burned to enrich the soil with ashes, and cultivated with mixed crops for 1-2 years before being left fallow for regeneration, traditionally for 10-15 years, though shortened cycles due to population pressures have raised sustainability concerns.

Key crops include rice (the staple), maize, cotton, sesame, vegetables (e.g., sweet potatoes, cucumbers), pulses, and oilseeds, often intercropped for biodiversity and risk mitigation. Traditional tools such as daos (knives), hoes, digging sticks, and occasionally animal-drawn ploughs are employed, reflecting a labour-intensive, community-based approach. The Tripuri are noted for transitioning earlier than other tribes to settled plough cultivation in plains, combining jhum with permanent fields for greater stability.

Agriculture is not merely economic but ritualistic: festivals like Garia Puja mark sowing with prayers for bountiful harvests, while Mamita celebrates post-harvest gratitude to deities. Indigenous plant protection practices, using local herbs and natural methods, underscore eco-friendly knowledge. Despite modernization-shifting toward rubber plantations, horticulture, and cash crops-these traditions preserve agro-biodiversity, communal harmony, and resilience, though facing challenges from land scarcity and environmental changes.

**Keywords:** Jhum cultivation, Indigenous Farming Systems, Tripuri Tribal Culture, Traditional Agricultural Tools, Sustainable Farming practices.

## Introduction

The Tripuri people, also known as Tipra or Borok, are one of the indigenous tribal communities inhabiting the northeastern state of Tripura in India. With a rich cultural heritage dating back centuries, the Tripuris form the largest ethnic group among the 19th scheduled tribes in Tripura, comprising over 55% of the tribal population according to historical census data. They primarily reside in the hilly terrains of districts such as Dhalai, North

Tripura, and parts of West Tripura, where the landscape is characterized by dense forests, steep slopes, and heavy monsoon rainfall. Agriculture has been the cornerstone of Tripuri life, not merely as a means of sustenance but as an integral part of their social, cultural, and spiritual fabric. Traditional practices, particularly shifting cultivation known locally as 'Jhum' or 'Hukchalaima' have sustained generations, fostering a deep connection with nature and community.

Historically, the Tripuris were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers who transitioned to agriculture around the prehistoric era, adapting to the region's tropical climate and fertile soils. Their practices evolved in isolation, influenced minimally by external forces until colonial times and post-independence developments. Jhum cultivation, a form of slash-and-burn farming, remains the hallmark of their traditional agriculture, practiced alongside supplementary activities like fishing, horticulture, and animal husbandry. This system is not just economic; it embodies their worldview, where land is communal, labour is shared, and rituals honour the spirits of nature. However, in recent decades, pressures from population growth, land scarcity, and modernization have led to shifts toward settled farming and cash crops like rubber, raising questions about the sustainability of these age-old methods.

This article delves into the traditional agricultural practices of the Tripuri people, exploring their methods, tools, cultural significance, environmental impacts, challenges, and ongoing transitions. Drawing from ethnographic studies and historical analyses, it highlights how these practices have shaped Tripuri identity while facing contemporary threats.

### **Historical Context of Tripuri Agriculture**

The origins of Tripuri agriculture trace back to ancient times when the community migrated from regions possibly linked to Southeast Asia or the Tibetan-Burman linguistic group. Early records suggest that shifting cultivation was adopted as an adaptive strategy to the undulating hills and thick vegetation of Tripura, a landlocked state bordered by Bangladesh. Unlike the plain-dwelling Bengalis who practiced wet rice cultivation with plows, the Tripuris relied on primitive subsistence farming suited to slopes exceeding 30 degrees.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, interactions with neighboring communities introduced elements of settled agriculture, but Jhum remained dominant among hill tribes. During the colonial era and after India's independence in 1947, government interventions aimed at curbing deforestation led to policies discouraging Jhum. The 1950s saw rehabilitation schemes allotting land for permanent farming, yet many Tripuris clung to tradition due to cultural attachment and topographic constraints. As of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, approximately 27,000 households still practiced Jhum, supporting over 136,000 people, though numbers have declined.

Jhum's historical significance lies in its role as a resilient system in ecologically fragile areas. It allowed the Tripuris to cultivate diverse crops without external inputs, ensuring food security in isolation. However, demographic pressures—from a tribal population boom and immigration—shortened fallow cycles from 20-30 years to 2-3 years, marking a pivotal shift in practices.

### **Core Practices: Jhum Cultivation**

Jhum cultivation is the bedrock of traditional Tripuri agriculture, a rotational farming method where plots are cleared, cultivated, and then left fallow to regenerate. This practice is shared with other tribes like Reang and Jamatia but holds unique cultural nuances for the Tripuris.

### **Site Selection and Preparation**

The cycle begins in November-December with site selection, a ritualistic process led by the Ochai, the traditional priest. Through magico-religious ceremonies, the Ochai seeks divine approval for the plot, often in

deep forests. Once chosen, vegetation is slashed using basic tools, but burning is delayed until the monsoon onset in March-April. The debris is burned, and ashes mix with rainwater to naturally fertilize the soil.

### **Sowing and Cultivation**

Seeds are sown in April after the first rains, with families working collectively. The Tripuris plant 8-10 crop varieties in a single plot for diversity and risk mitigation. Primary crops include upland rice (paddy), maize, chilies, pumpkins, ladies' fingers, sesame, pigeon peas, cotton, potatoes, ash gourds, cucumbers, lemons, and bananas. No chemical fertilizers or pesticides are used; reliance is on natural soil fertility and ash enrichment. Weeding and maintenance occur throughout the growing season, with families building temporary huts (Gairing) near fields to guard against wildlife like elephants and monkeys.

### **Harvesting and Post-Harvest**

Harvesting spans September-October, involving communal labour. Crops are carried home using bamboo carriers (Langa). Rituals mark this phase, such as offerings to deities like Mailuma (Goddess of Paddy) and Khuluma (Goddess of Cotton). New rice (Maikwtal) is presented to ancestors in Agrahayan for blessings. The land is then fallowed, allowing secondary forests to regrow.

This cycle, once spanning decades, now shortens due to land pressure, affecting yields. Yet, it remains efficient, providing subsistence from small plots without heavy machinery.

### **Traditional Tools and Implements**

Tripuri agriculture employs indigenous tools crafted from local materials like bamboo, wood, and iron, reflecting self-reliance and adaptation to rugged terrain. These implements, passed down generations, are simple, cost-effective, and multifunctional.

#### **Clearing and Digging Tools**

Dao (Machete): A versatile iron blade with a wooden handle, used for slashing vegetation, felling trees, and even slaughtering animals. It's essential for initial clearing.

Daborok and Daseni: Sharp iron choppers; Daborok for heavy cutting of trees and branches, Daseni for bushes. These are handmade by local blacksmiths.

Digging Stick and Hoe: Basic wooden or bamboo sticks for soil preparation and planting holes, suited to hilly slopes where plows are impractical.

#### **Planting and Harvesting Tools**

Axe and Spade: For digging and weeding; axes double as weapons or for firewood collection.

Langa, chekra, Dingra: Bamboo sieves and baskets for winnowing, storing, and transporting grains. Langa is a large basket for carrying produce.

#### **Irrigation and Allied Tools**

Langa: Bamboo sling carrier for transporting harvests, slung over shoulders with fiber strings.

Allied sectors use similar tools; for example, in fisheries, bamboo traps integrate with agriculture. These implements embody Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK), emphasizing sustainability and oral transmission. They are culturally significant, symbolizing resilience and community craftsmanship.

## Cultural and Social Dimensions

Agriculture for the Tripuris transcends economics; it's a cultural tapestry woven with rituals, festivals, and social bonds. Jhum fields are venues for singing, dancing, and storytelling, blending work with leisure.

### Rituals and Festivals

Key festivals like Garia Puja, a seven-day ritual in March-April, seek blessings for bountiful harvests. It involves dances (Mamita), songs, offerings of eggs, fowls, rice beer, and worship of Garia (God of Good Harvests). The Ochai invokes ancestors for protection. Harvest rituals honor Mailuma and Khuluma, reinforcing spiritual ties to land.

### Community Involvement

Volunteerism, or "Yagu Khilmani," is central, especially in rice planting. Groups of 4-5 families rotate labor across farms during July monsoons, planting saplings manually under harsh conditions. This fosters equality, as all adults participate regardless of status, strengthening village cohesion. Labor division is gendered and age-based: men clear land, women plant and weed, children guard fields.

Socially, Jhum classifies practitioners into "pure Jhumias" (fully dependent) and others, preserving tribal diversity among 19 groups. It integrates with economy through bartering and supplementary activities like pig farming or horticulture.

### Environmental Impacts

Jhum has dual environmental effects in Tripura's ecosystems.

#### Positive Impacts

It promotes agro-biodiversity by mixing crops, controls weeds via burning, and avoids chemical pollution. Long fallow periods aid forest regeneration, maintaining soil fauna and preventing erosion partially. As a low-input system, it's ecologically sustainable in traditional forms.

#### Negative Impacts

Shortened cycles cause deforestation, soil erosion, nutrient loss, and biodiversity decline. Burning contributes to air pollution and climate change, leading to barren hills and invasive species. In Dhalai, rubber encroachment has reduced crop diversity from over 30 to 19 species.

### Challenges and Transitions

Key challenges include land scarcity from population growth (tribal numbers rose significantly), shortening fallows and yields. Cultural resistance hinders shifts to settled farming, while youth migration leaves elders to farm.

Government policies, like the 1953 rehabilitation schemes and rubber plantations since 1963, aim to replace Jhum. The Tripura Forest Development Corporation and World Bank projects resettled families, boosting rubber production to 1,873 MT by 2008-09. However, these transitions erode happiness; 92% of surveyed tribals report discontent from lost cultural practices and dietary diversity. Alternatives like bamboo missions and horticulture are promoted, but success varies. Revivals, such as volunteerism in planting seasons, show resilience amid economic pressures.

## Conclusion

The traditional agriculture of the Tripuri people, centered on Jhum, exemplifies harmony with nature and community. Yet, as modernization encroaches, preserving these practices is crucial for cultural identity and biodiversity. Integrating ITK with sustainable innovations could ensure their legacy endures, benefiting both the Tripuris and Tripura's ecology. As one elder might say, in the fields of Jhum, the past dances with the future.

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