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REASSEMBLING ORIGIN AND IDENTITY OF UCHOI TRIBE IN TRIPURA, NORTHEAST INDIA

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**Abstract**

Uchoi tribe is one of the 19<sup>th</sup> tribes enlisted in the tribe list of Tripura, Northeast India. They assemble unique ethnic identity of origin and history, social institution, traditional administration, custom and economic activities. They have very tiny populations as compared to others tribes but they have richly maintained social structure. Educationally they are very much concerned and have high rate of enrollment in the school. For reassembling origin and identity of the Uchois we have selected highly located area of this tribe in the southern part of Tripura at Depachherra of Karbook Sub-division. Here, we have made an attempt to understand the history, Origin and Identity of Uchois in the present context.

**Keywords:** Identity, Origin, Uchois Tribe, Understanding Socio-Economic.

**Introduction:** Tripura is a tiny state situated in the north-eastern part of India. It shares 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of its border areas with Bangladesh. Tripura was Princely kingdom before merging with Indian union. The Tripura kingdom was ruled by 184 kings as recorded in the ‘Rajmala’<sup>1</sup>. *Rajmala* is a chronicle of the kings of Tripura, written in kokborok verse in the 15th century under Dharma Manikya. Tripura is known as land of the Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. At present, there are 19 tribes as per records of the government of Tripura.<sup>2</sup> The Uchoi tribe belongs to one of the 19 tribes. This tribe has very small population residing in Tripura and they also live in Assam and Mizoram of India and Bangladesh. Depachherra of Karbook Sub-division area is clustered of many villages where majority of Uchois lived in Tripura. The history of Uchois is a distinct in nature.

**History and Origin:** There is no specific historical evidence or opinions behind the naming of the term “Uchoi” and hence any information regarding it’s naming may be found from the legends of the kokborok speaking people like the Tripuras, Reangs, Jamatia’s etc, who lived beside them. According to Legends, the Uchois came to Tripura after the Reangs or believed to have followed the footsteps of the Reangs and therefore the kings had conferred the title “Ulchoi” to them. The term ‘Ulchoi’ is a combination of two kokborok terms ‘Ul’ means ‘later on’ and ‘choi’ means ‘in pursuance’. ‘Ul-o-phai-nai’ literally means ‘who came later’ or ‘who have followed the footsteps and came to the existence. This “ulchoi” later came to be known as “Ulchoi” or “Uchoi”. Other kokborok speakers began to call them “Ulchoi”, “Uchoi” or “Uchai”.

According to various sources, they are also called as the offspring’s of Uchha. While writing their names in roman script, many of them adopted “Uchoi” or “Uchai”. As the government records used the term “uchai”, the modern educated Uchois find the term “Uchai” to be logical in writing their surnames. However, the elder members of the tribe do not unanimously agree to the contention.<sup>3</sup>

Another historical legend says that once upon a time, the king of Tripura was defeated by the king of Arakan in a battle which resulted in the soldiers being held captive in the Arakan. These soldiers embraced the Arakan way of life and the king arranged for their rehabilitation. The captive soldiers’ prolonged stay in Arakan kingdom also initiated them into matrimonial alliances with the natives and further enhanced their population and settlement. Thus, the uchoi’s are the offspring of these captive soldiers. According to Kailash Chandra Sinha, the Arakans called the entire Tripuras as “Murungs” due to their settlements in the region called Mruhaung. The offspring of these captive Tripura soldiers returned to Tripura at a certain period of time and amongst these, the Uchois were the last to come to Tripura. Thus, they were referred to by the Tripura king or the Kokborok speakers as Uchois or the last ones to come.

The termed *Uchoi* is derived from the word ‘ushoy’ or ‘ushoi’. Philip Uchoi, retired headmaster and narrator of Uchoi history, according to him, historically the origin of Uchoi tribe came from the story of two brothers. There were two brothers named,

<sup>1</sup>Hunter, William Wilson. (1931), Hill Tippera-History, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Debbarma, S. B. K. (1971), *The Tribes of Tripura: A Dissertation*, Agartala: Directorate of Research, Department of Tribal Welfare, Government of Tripura, pp.11

<sup>3</sup> Author’s interview and conversation with Aradhan Uchoi the sarpa/leader of Uchoi tribe, PandiramUchoi, Retired Primary Headmaster and Jori Chandra Uchoi, Headmaster from Depachherra.



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'Reangsa' and 'Usha'. One day both the brothers went to a Kher mutai and unfortunately, they lost each other. Reangsa and Usha both the brothers were separated and started to live different place. The descendent of a brother name Usha later came to be known as Uchoi tribe. The incident took place during the reign of Manikya dynasty in the year 1889.<sup>4</sup>

Another narrator Aradhan Uchoi who is presently the Sarpa (Head) of Uchoi's, has opinion that in the year 1911 around 80 families of Uchoi arrived in Tripura. They settled in the Depacherra and later some of them moved towards south and North of Tripura. Those who migrated towards north they write their surname as Meska. The changing of surname Uchoi to Meska may be due to political influence or society bound them. Few of them also adopted the surname of Tripura, Noatia and Debbarma. The Meska of Uchois located at Dasdakanchenpur, North Tripura. After conversation with Philip Uchoi it came to know that according to him, there are near about 30,000 Uchoi's lived in Bangladesh, but their titles are not Uchoi, they write their title as Tripura, currently they use surname as Ushoy Tripura.<sup>5</sup>

**Numerical Terminology of Uchoi:** Kaiha(One), Kainoi (Two), Kaithan (Three), Kaibroi (Four), Kaiba (Five), Kaidouh(Six), Kaishni (Seven), Kaichah (Eight), Kaiskhuh (Nine), Kaichii(Ten)

**The Uchoi tribe use terminology in kinship relations as**

UCHOI	ENGLISH	UCHOI	ENGLISH	UCHOI	ENGLISH	UCHOI	ENGLISH
Among	Mother	Apa	Father	Mama	Uncle	Atoi	Aunty
Ayong(M)	Grand uncle	Ayong(F)	Grand Aunty	Achwi	Grandmother	Achu	Grandfather
Bachwi	Sister-in-law	Kmoi	Brother-in-law	Ata	Elder Brother	Abi	Elder sister
Komo/Matung	Younger sister	Gadu/Choufa	Younger brother				

**Demography:** As per 2011 census reported by Tribal Research and cultural Institute, Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura, the total population of Uchoi tribe in Tripura is 2,447.<sup>6</sup> The sex ratio is almost proportionate to per thousand male. The literacy rate is on a higher note as compared to other tribes of Tripura. The majority of Uchoi populations are also found in the states like Assam, Mizoram and country like Bangladesh. The Uchoi tribe is divided into 12 clans, they are 1) Painktoma, 2) Kheyang, 3)Jolai, 4) Wakchu, 5) Wareng, 6) Chongprai, 7) Kaisni, 8) TaumaYakcho, 9) TwimukYapha, 10) JolaiKwchak, 11) JolaiKosom and 12) SikamPainji.<sup>7</sup>This sub-clan had no official status till now. The mother tongue of the Uchoi tribe is Kokborok, and they are included among the Kokborok speaking tribe of Tripura.

**Religion:** This tribe worshiped the nature such as, stone, rain, thunder as their Gods and Goddesses. Uchoi's gives offering to Gods occasionally during ritual ceremonies and have different kinds of festivals involving animal sacrifices. They fear the nature power reflecting as Gods, believing in supernatural power is a strong phenomenon for this tribe. As they believe in nature who supplies them with sufficient foods and daily necessities, in return they offer the nature respect by worshipping.

**Education:** The Uchoi tribe gives much importance to Education, for them education is a top priority despite low per capita income. The literacy rate is seen to be increasing as a result many of them are also employed in government sector. The employment rate also increases with increase in literacy rate evidently. Majority of the parents from this tribe are concerned about the schooling of their children, the enrollment rate is seen very high.

**Housing:** The most conspicuous indicator of socio-economic status is habitation and housing condition which rather would provide better understandings of their social life. The area Depacherra can be called rural area, as there is a problem of transportation and other parameters. The houses are mostly built out of mud, bamboos and wooden.

**Housing condition of Uchoi tribe**

Types of houses	Percentage of household
Mud house	45%
Brick house	9%
Bamboo house	46%
Total	100%

Sources: Sample survey conducted in 2019<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Philip Uchoi, retired headmaster and learned among the Uchoi tribe has narrated the origin and history of termed Uchoi.

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview and conversation with Aradhan Uchoi, the sarpa/leader of Uchoi tribe from Depacherra, Tripura

<sup>6</sup> See Census report 2011, Government of India reported by Tribal Research and cultural Institute, Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura

<sup>7</sup> Narrated by the Philip Uchoi and Aradhan Uchoi.

<sup>8</sup> Survey conducted by the Author's in the Uchoi tribe inhabitants at Depacherra in the year 2019.



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Majority of this tribe lives in mud and bamboo houses situated in rural areas of Gomati districts in Tripura; this is due to low per capita income.

**Physical appearance:** The average height of this tribe varies from 5 to 6.2 feet, like other 18 tribes this tribe also has dark brown eyes and pale yellow, brown skin with broad nose and curly, wavy or silky hair. Their mother tongue is Kokborok, which is one of the official languages of Tripura. The appearance of Uchoi's are originated from mongoloids.

**Family:** The Uchoi families are classified into two types, namely: - Nuclear family and Joint family. Nuclear family consists of parents with 2 or 3 children. Joint family consists of parents, grandparents and children.

The household survey conducted is shown in the below table

**Distribution of household by types of family**

Types of Family	Number of Households	Percentage (%)
<b>Nuclear Family</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>28.8%</b>
<b>Joint Family</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>71.2%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources: Sample survey conducted in 2018<sup>9</sup>

The above table shows that out of 288 numbers of household, 205 households are joint family, making a total of 71.2%. The Nuclear Family consists of 83 Households making a total of 28.8%. It is observed that majority of this tribe live a Joint Family.

**Family size:** The Family size determination is important for the well-being of the individual; there is a difference in family size presently.

**Distribution of households by Family size**

Family size	Percentage of Households
<b>2 to 4</b>	<b>48.6%</b>
<b>4 to 6</b>	<b>45.4%</b>
<b>6 to 8</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources: Sample survey conducted in 2018<sup>10</sup>

The Uchoi's maintain and is aware of Family planning, the size of households maximizes at 48.6% of 2 to 4 family size followed by 45.4 %. The reason behind reducing birth rate is income factor.

**Status of Women:** The women enjoy equal social status with their Menfolk's, taking up responsibilities like maintaining social relation, raising family, and working in Government sector or independent women financially efficient to run the family.

**Marriage:** The common form of marriage among the tribe is through Negotiation. The first menstruation of a girl indicates the eligibility for marriage. Traditionally the Male and Female couple is wrapped together in a blanket before their actual marriage ceremony.

Their tradition mandates that, the groom have to stay at in-law's house for 4years, 4months and 4days. All household related work had to be done by him, from cultivation of crops to harvesting of paddy, including fetching of water. The motive behind this workload is to test the stamina, activeness, taking up responsibility of the family.

So, after completion of 4years, 4months and 4 days, the time has come for moving in Groom's house. The bride's parent bid them farewell and send along with them utensils like pot, plates, glasses, ornaments, etc.

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid



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**Divorce:** The divorce happens with the consent of husband and wife, village head and village members. If husband and wife are not happy with each other after their marriage, either husband or wife can claim for divorce with the consent of village head and village members. Both men and women are treated and respected equally in the society.

**Widow-remarriage:** There is a system of widow remarriage in this tribe, the decision to re-marrying lies solely and within a woman itself, nobody could or will force a widow to or not to re-marry. When a widow re-marries, normally marriage ceremony will be as normal marriage system. The women in their society are highly honored and treated equal to men.

**Dresses and Ornaments:** The dresses are simple, colourful and attractive like that of the other tribes of Tripura. Eventually the males wear ‘Pundri’ (Dhoti) which is just small enough for covering their lower portion, and ‘Kansoh’ (Towel) for wiping their sweats during work, the ‘Khutaitaubroh’ (Cloth) local made and wooden ‘Jatang’ (Foot wear).

The common dresses for Female is ‘Rignai’/’Rnai’ which is wrapped around the waist reaching just below the knee and ‘Risa’ for covering the upper portion of their body. The ornaments such as ‘Wakhonh’ and ‘Wari’ (Earrings), ‘Yauso’ (Bangle), ‘Loko’ and ‘Rangbauh’ (Necklace and Chain made out of coins), ‘Shrang’ which is used for tying their hair and lastly ‘Naphu’ (Nose-jewel), these are the ornaments which are worn eventually and also on a regular basis by the women of Uchoi tribe.<sup>11</sup>

**Food habits:** The food habits are quite homogenous with other tribes of Tripura; commonly Rice is the staple food. They are both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Besides, they have local alcoholic beverages which are produced by the womenfolk at home. Traditionally the Uchois mode of cultivating rice was mostly through Jhumming, not only rice was cultivated in the Jhum they also cultivate Tapioca, vegetables and some varieties of roots are included in the food items.

**Musical instruments:** The use of different types of music instruments are evidently known as they celebrate different kinds of festivals whether it is religious ceremony or family gatherings or village feast. The *Sendah* (Violin), *Chongpreng* (Guitar), *kshumu* (Fluid) and *Khaing kto* (Big Drum) are local made music instruments of olden days, which are widely used during various ceremonies.

**Folktale of uchoi tribe:** There is a popular folk tale of Uchoi titled ‘The Korangha’. Korangha was said to be a born worrier, the word ‘Ko’ means spear and ‘Rangha’ means expert/specialist. It was mentioned that even his spear can pass through the women earring, so sharp and focused in his aim. The Uchoi tribe honoured him as a legend of Uchoi.

During the year 1932, when Amar Manikya the then king of Twipra married with a Reang woman of Burma. One day the king told to his wife that since you got married with me, you can bring all of your relatives to Twipra. So, the queen (Reang Lady) was excited to inform her relatives, but since those days travelling is a matter of concern as Twipra and Burma travelling distance was to take weeks or months. As a matter of fact, during 1932 the Tripura name was said to be Twipra. So, the tale of Korangha originated from the journey between Burma and Twipra.

The journey happened during monsoon season, had to cross many hurdles like flash flood, landslide, rain and storms on their way to Twipra. While crossing the so called Rangamati River, around 5 thousand Reangs relatives of queen were stuck on the way for about 5 months waiting for the monsoon season to pass. One day while camping on a hilly area, landslide occurred near to their camps, so while Korangha was outside of his tent, a big rock fell on their camp site. Seeing the rock coming towards their camp he deflected the rock from their camp. So, the unintentional showcase of his strength, quick thinking and techniques had impressed the people stuck in the camps. So, the popularity of Korangha started spreading across many hills and mountains.

The tale about Korangha also spreads among people about his accuracy while hunting Masandoi (porcupine). The porcupine hides under the ground in groups, as the porcupines has the tendency to make two holes for their entry or exit, Korangha and his fellow hunters planned to block one hole by blowing smoke while guarding another hole and when the holes are smoked, the porcupine started to come out from the hole one after another. Korangha stood near the hole and killed 15 porcupines by himself out of 17; the other two tried to escape but went in vain as the accuracy of Korangha’s spear went straight into the forehead of the two porcupines who tried to escape.

The death of Korangha could not be narrated as there is different perception from different narrator.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Information shared by the elders’ women- Jayanti Uchoi, Karuna Uchoi, Karnati Uchoi and Victoria Uchoi of the Uchoi tribe.

<sup>12</sup> Narrated by Tennison aUchoi he is a Choudhury of Thanda Chandra Uchoi para and sub-divisional postal officer from Depachera. It was narrated since time immemorial among the Uchois and the folk tale he narrated was narrated by his Grandfather Late MotijoyUchoi.



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**Birth ritual:** When a new child is born, the mother along with her baby is confined inside a room near the bonfire. After few weeks of warm up near the bonfire, the mother has to take bath breaking two eggs, the *Ochai* (priest) offer prayer to their God. The celebration is done by serving drinks, playing music and organizing a big feast after a year.

The modern customary Law for safeguarding their culture, tradition is done through these organization, that is, ‘UchoiAtaibang’ which is called as ‘Uchoi-socio-cultural Organization’.

**Funeral rites:** The mourning or departing ceremony is held for one night with dance and music using ‘*Khaing*’(drum). Female cremation is done by placing 7 firewood onto her and in case of male, cremation was done by placing 5 firewood onto him.Seven days after the cremation they observed compulsory feast and after a year there is another big feast.

**Traditional Governance:** The Uchois have their distinct administrative and judicial system like their tribal counterparts. On the basis of this administration various villages are enabled to administer as well as settle the disputes of the community within themselves. The head of the administrative system of the Uchois is called “Chodory” or “Choudury”. At a later period, a person who was eligible to be addressed as the “Para Fang” (head of the village) or a person under whose guidance the village could develop could become a “Choudury”. He is assisted in his duties by a person called “karbari”. The post of a “Chouduri” was considered hereditary. However, if a “Chouduri” dies and leaves a minor son, then the “Karbari” shall perform all his functions and duties till the minor achieves maturity. Or in the absence of a “Choudury”, if the “Karbari” is also found to be unsuitable for the post, the entire villagers may elect the most eligible person for the post of “Choudury”.<sup>13</sup>

In times of disputes, the choudury arranges for a public hearing and if the offender is proven guilty, he or she is fined to some few cash or kinds as a punishment. He also settles the disputes regarding illicit affairs, divorce issues etc. Although it is believed that the social administration of the Uchois have been practiced since a long time, there is no authentic records as to when did this kind of administration started to be practised. However, it is illogical to accept that their local administrative system has not been controlled by other tribal communities.

**Socio-economic status:** The main occupation of this tribe was agriculture, *huk* (jhuming). With time, different types of occupation are also engaged in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. The primary sector includes agriculture, secondary sector includes industries and tertiary sector is called service sector, it may be either government service or private.

**Occupational distribution**

Sector	Percentage of Labor engaged
Primary sector/Daily wager	62%
Secondary sector	3%
Tertiary sector	35%
Total	100%

Sources: Primary survey conducted in 2019<sup>14</sup>

The labor engaged in different sector especially agricultural labor consists of 62% of total population in Depacherra, 35% are engaged as Government and private employee. Majority of this tribe own their land.

**In Conclusion,** the viewpoints of understanding the identity and origin of Uchoi tribe is a unique distinct identity, although they have small size of population. They have well organized society. Here, the argument stands with the nature of belief, they are worshippers of nature like sun, moon, stone, water, etc. in earlier Uchoi Society. It is in the year 1942, with the arrival of first Catholic Missionary at Mariam Nagar and Baptist at A.D. Nagar, Agartala, 99% of Uchoi tribe had converted into Christianity. The remaining 1% is neither Hindu nor Buddhist they still believe in nature. It is understood that Uchoi tribe is not only confined to the state of Tripura, they have also lived in Assam, Mizoram and Bangladesh.

<sup>13</sup> Author’s have conducted interview with Mr. Philip Uchai, Retired Headmaster who is one of the first headmaster among the Uchoitribe, AradhanUchoi who is the sarpa and eminent leader of Uchoi tribe, Amba Chandra Uchoi who government official (CDPO), Kamalesh Uchoi the first Pastor of Uchoi tribe and Surjya Kumar Uchoi, PGT.

<sup>14</sup> Survey conducted by the Author’s in the Uchoi tribe inhabitants at Depachera in the year 2019.

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