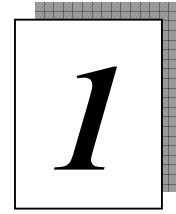


CHAPTER: 1

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

The opening chapter briefly introduces the Uchais of Tripura and the linguistic group within which they are subsumed. The introductory section while taking into account the socio-ethnic features furnishes the historical and socio-political background of the Uchai speakers. Highland life and dwelling, occupation and economy, social structures, religious and social customs, food habits of the Uchais are also discussed in this initial chapter. Moreover, it also takes note of the social transition that the Uchais had undergone during the ages and also the ethnic group and the language family to which the Uchais belong. Nonetheless, the concluding section highlights the organization of the present study.

1.1 ETHNIC GROUPS OF TRIPURA

The tribal population of Tripura comprises of nineteen recognized ethnic groups and many sub-groups, with diverse languages and cultures. The Tibeto-Burman stock can be divided into valley-dwellers and highlanders, the former having originally occupied the river valleys while the latter lived apart from them in the interior spaces of the hills (Debnath, 2010, p. 4). On one hand, we have the valley dwelling Tippera, Chakma, Sak, Marma and Tanchangya; on

the other we find the highland Kuki-Chin tribes, besides the Bru (Reang) and the Mru.

According to Census 2011, in terms of numbers 1,166,813 people in the state's total population of 3,671,032 are tribal where the male (588,327) constitutes 50.43% and the female (578,486) constitutes 49.57% of tribal population. The density of population of the tribes is 111/km². Out of the total tribal population, 1,117,566 (95.78%) live in the rural areas while the rest 49,247 (4.22%) reside in the urban areas. While 563,908 (50.46%) male and 553,658 (49.54%) female reside in the rural areas, in the urban areas it is 24,419 (49.58%) male and 24,828 (50.42%) female. The sex ratio among the tribal population of the state is 983 females per thousand males (for rural 982 and urban 1017); lower than the national ratio 990. The tribal population of Tripura remains largely Hindu; though, Christians registered a tremendous growth during 1991-2001, the population of Buddhists substantially declined during the same period. Demographically, the highland tribes of Tripura, including Uchai, comprise small, marginalised communities, living mostly in far-flung villages and hamlets with little access to the basic amenities of life.

1.2 THE TRIBE – UCHAI

The Uchai, spelt 'Osuie' by Thomas H. Lewin, (1869) is a small ethnic group living mostly in the southern parts of Tripura and having a population of only 2,447 souls in the Census of 2011. Some Uchais live in the Chittagong Hill Tract, in the Khagrachari Hill district, but they invariably refer themselves

as Tippera while their neighbour tribes generally refer to them as Mrung (Mroong), which incidentally is also the Mranma (Arakanese) appellation for Reang. Ethnically, however, Uchai is closer to Bru than to Tippera; their tradition makes Bru and Uchai brothers; and like the former, they too had undergone an early Tippera domination (Debnath, 2010, p. 31).

1.2.1 Ethnicity

The ethnicity of Uchai has vexed the researchers. According to R.H. Sneyd Hutchinson (1906), they are of Kuki origin while S. Debbarma (1983) considers them an admixture of Kuki and Tippera. As analysed by Debbarma (1983), the name ‘Uchoi’ has been derived from the title ‘Ulchoi’ as attributed to them by the then Tripuri king. ‘Ulchoi’ is a Kokborok word – /ullo/ meaning ‘after’ while /čoi/ means ‘to follow’ – /ul čoi phainai/ ‘one who came after following (someone)’. Later, with the passage of time, ‘Ulchoi’ was changed into ‘Uchoi’ and now as ‘Uchai’.

Again, Debnath (2010) gives us an interesting version of the Uchai migration as gleaned from their tradition, ‘. . . a certain king of Arakan captured their people and settled them in the hills around Maungdaw, where they live peacefully for a long time under their own kings. Then, one day, some people came from the west and their king sought to befriend the king of Maungdaw and invited him to a dinner. But the latter was served poison with his food, on eating which he dropped dead. In the meantime, a messenger was sent to Maungdaw to ask the people to show their allegiance to the new king,

failing which, they were threatened with a punitive expedition against them. When they refused to comply, several hundreds of men, women and children were ruthlessly murdered. Only two brothers, Ringsa and Uchya, managed to escape. But they were apprehensive of a pursuit; so, they divided the survivors in two groups. Ringsa, the elder reached Tripura earlier than Uchya. The present-day Uchais claim that they are descended from the younger brother, Uchya, while the Riangs originated from the group that went ahead of them.’ (p. 31).

Whatever may be the ethnicity of the Uchai, it can be comprehended that it was during the second decade of the 20th century, during the reign of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya, they migrated from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and first stepped into present day Tripura under the leadership of the Headman, Ramananda Uchoi whence the then king of Tripura rehabilitated them at Srakbai, or present day, Charakbai under Belonia sub-division of South Tripura district. Later on, they dispersed and settled into several other parts of Tripura, especially in south Tripura (Debbarma, 1983).

The villages where Uchais now inhabit largely are Kewai Uchoi Para, Dhanachandra Uchoi Para, Purna Uchoi Para, Punniham Uchoi Para, Sogoram Uchoi Para, Khumbaiha Uchoi Para, Thandachandra Uchoi Para and Mission Hathai Para under Karbook sub-division of Gomati district; they also dwell at Ratanpur, Muripara and Khahsingkho villages under Belonia sub-division of South Tripura district and in Dasda & Jampui villages in Kanchanpur sub-division of North Tripura district, they are sparsely populated.

1.2.2 Uchai Clan

Uchais are usually yellow auburn or of light auburn complexion. Like other Mongoloids, Uchais too have a muscular and well-built body, wide head, round-shaped face, thick lips, small eyes, flat nose and pointed black hair devoid of much body hair as well as beard and moustache. They are of average height and regardless of sex, they are extremely rigorous and hard-working tribe. The Uchai tribe can be divided into twelve 'panji' or 'clan'. The twelve clans into which the Uchais can be divided are:

1. Paingk'toma
2. Owauchu
3. Jawlai
4. Tuimoi Yaphow
5. Kaisni
6. Chongpraing
7. Paitokra
8. Meska
9. Dousoi
10. Skang
11. Towma Yaphow
12. Towma Yak'cho

However, only a few of the above clans can be found in Tripura and not all the clans inhabit in this state.

1.2.3 Highland Life

As with the other highlanders of Tripura, highland life and dwelling of the Uchai tribe has also changed with the passage of time. In earlier times, Uchai villages were built on the principle of expediency. There was no permanent abode for them as the mode of living favoured periodic shifting of village sites depending chiefly on the accessibility of jum lands. Moreover, the village sites were selected near a water-source to facilitate cultivation as well as carrying water for household purposes. These organised villages often managed the core activities of settlement, cultivation, warfare, supervision of village granary, etc. Today, however, that practice has been abandoned due to permanent settlement. (Debnath, 2010, pp. 50-55)

1.2.3.1 The Village

Uchai villages now vary in size and composition. Formerly, Uchai villages were named after a Chief or some headman; even a village was identified based on some distinguishable feature of the landscape — nearest water-source or a hillock. But today, naming of a village or hamlet is done after its original founder. The houses in a typical Uchai village are laid out in rows on either side of a pathway. Between the houses, there are open spaces; and each house has its natural backyard, a space for kitchen-gardening. Moreover, the houses in a distinctive Uchai village are devoid of fencing.

Organising feasts were part and parcel of the highland life. These feasts created a sense of belongingness to the village community. And the erstwhile feasts of merit were of greater social significance. Similarly among the Uchais, the buffalo-killing ceremony was celebrated as a community event. The celebration lasted a whole day and the meat of the sacrificed buffalo was eaten in a community feast on the same day. The Uchai observed those ceremonies outside the village, especially on a river bank. But the highland villages no more continue to exist as a compact and cohesive unit; as such, the feasts of merit are rarely held in these days. The traditional life-style of the Uchai, no doubt, along with the other highlanders, suffered a setback with the changing social norms. Moreover, the religious conversion led to the rejection of the age-old practices as the Christian section of the Uchai tribe keep them aloof from all Animistic and Hinduised practices (Debnath, 2010, pp. 58-59).

1.2.3.2 Village Administration

Uchais, like the other highland tribes, have their own structure of village administration as well as judicial system. The hereditary Chief who sits at the top of the village council to administer village administration and judiciary is popularly known as ‘Chowdhury’. Traditionally, all the administrative and judicial powers are vested with him who is assisted by a ‘karbari’. As mentioned earlier, the post of ‘Chowdhury’ is hereditary in Uchai society. In absence of him, it is the ‘karbari’ who looks after the governance of the village. However, if the Chief as well as his assistant ‘karbari’ seems to be unsuited, then the villagers can select a new Chief or his assistant. The Chief, who is

vested with all powers, has the authority to decide upon any dispute, theft, quarrel in the village, after consultation and consent with the village elders. All criminal cases and social injustice are dealt by the Chief in accordance with the customary laws prevalent in the Uchai society.

1.2.3.3 The Dwelling House

In building a conventional Uchai stilt-house, the regular materials used are bamboo, timber and thatch-grass collected from the rainforest environment. Stone or concrete blocks are never used in a traditional Uchai house. Bamboo floors are raised to a considerable height from the ground supported on bamboo upright. Timber may be used for house pillars. House walls are of matted bamboos whereas thatch-grass or bamboo leaves are used for the roof. While a part of the platform is extended to the front part of the house leading to a cosy portico, the open-air platform is retained in the rear part of the house. Debnath (2010, p. 62) notes that sometimes, a room on one side of that platform is constructed to give space and privacy to the newly married daughter and her groom during the latter's tenure of residential bride-service. Cooking is done in the central hearth of the undivided hall. Moreover, there is no provision for an in-house toilet in the Uchai stilt-house. However, due to the permanent settlement of the tribe there has been a great transformation in their dwelling pattern; and invariably, traditional Uchai stilt-house is rarely found existing today.

1.2.4 Occupation and Economy

The Uchai, like all other highlanders, are nourished and grown in the lap of Mother Nature. As such, the treasure of their economy lies deep amidst the green forests, woods and jungle. It is on these forests and hills that they highly depend for their sustenance. Therefore, Uchai traditionally had a swidden based economy which was essentially self-sustaining in character.

1.2.4.1 Cultivation

The Uchai, like other highland groups, practised slash and burn cultivation, popularly known among them as ‘huk’. The chief aspects of fire-fallow cultivation or ‘huk’ includes selection of a suitable site indicated by implanting a ‘wakhok’ or ‘wakha’ (a cross-sign placed diagonally at the top of a bamboo), offering of fowls to propitiate evil spirits followed by slashing of the jum plot. After a month or two, especially during spring, the dried jungle is put to fire and everything is reduced to ashes. When the fire eventually dies out, pieces of half-burnt wood are collected to be used as firewood and a ‘gairing’ (jum-house) is constructed.

The sowing begins just after the first spell of rain — tools like ‘chempai’ or ‘kasleng’ (bamboo-chopper) and ‘da’ or ‘damra’ (iron-chopper) are used to sow various seeds like paddy, melon, pumpkin, cucumber, beans, sesame, chilli, oilseeds, etc. The Uchais offer worship, named ‘Urikhung’ so that the germination remains unharmed.

The sowing is followed by painstaking weeding period — keeping the jums clear of weeds until harvested. Before cucurbits and other vegetables are harvested, ‘Balaka’ worship is held; and Uchais consume them only after the harvest is first offered to their Gods. As soon as the paddy starts ripening, the Uchais worship ‘Maiphang Khuphang’; and when it finally ripens, the whole family get into the act of joyous reaping. After the harvest of the paddy crop, the Uchais worship ‘Mairum’ — and on both occasions fowl is sacrificed as an offering to their gods. As the harvesting season comes to an end, the festival ‘Mai Kutal’ begins with the worship of ‘Rantak’ or ‘Randak’ (Goddess Laxmi); and the whole Uchai village goes frenzied in joyous songs and dance (Debbarma, 1983).

However, the traditional mode of cultivation is now under threat due to certain governmental rules and policies. Swiddening is now thoroughly condemned as being the reason of destroying vast areas of rainforests, arresting soil fertility and increasing soil run-off (Debnath, 2010, p. 74). As such, the primitive method has been swapped over by plough cultivation; hence, today, swiddening is seldom practised by the Uchais.

1.2.4.2 Hunting

In the past, group-hunting of wild animals like boar, deer and tiger took place and the meat of the animals hunted were shared and distributed equally among the group members and the whole village. Uchais generally used ‘pa’ and ‘pansu’ (bow and arrow), ‘ko’ (spear) and ‘koling’ (a kind of spear made of

bamboo) for hunting wild animals. Apart from hunting animals in groups, Uchais also used different kinds of traps like 'je', 'bura', 'batachaum', 'wakrakham' and 'mangkhung' for entrapping wild animals and birds. However, with government ban on hunting, the age-old tradition is now abandoned and the use of most hunting tools of yesteryear has been mostly forgotten by the Uchais.

1.2.4.3 Fishing

Fish is one of the staple foods of Uchais; and they use traditional tools such as fishing-net, basket traps and the fishing rod for fishing. Besides, a variety of the hill-growing creeper, known as 'rut' is used to tow fish from the stream. The technique used by the Uchais is simple: the root of the creeper is crushed and juiced out and soaked at several places of the stream so that any fish wandering in that area gets paralysed and floats up and thus procured easily. Apart from fish, Uchais also love to eat several varieties of crabs and tortoises found in the marshes. However, of late scarcity of fish is met by purchase from the local market.

1.2.4.4 Foraging

Foraging as a means of livelihood was extensively practised in earlier time by the Uchais, though now the practice has subsided quite a bit. Foraging is chiefly associated with women and children and also old males who cannot go for 'jum'. Collection of different varieties of yams, potatoes, tubers, roots,

and especially the tender shoot of bamboo are done by them. Mushrooms and cones of different species of wild banana are also relished by the Uchais. The only tool used for food-gathering is the 'da' or the iron-chopper; or else, pointed bamboo sticks are also used.

1.2.4.5 Husbandry

Animal husbandry is not an uncommon practice to the Uchais. Like other tribes of Tripura, raising pigs is the most popular practice among the Uchais. It is observed that under the bamboo platform, almost every house has its pigsty with strong fencing around it. The country pig is most preferred for meat but the hazards of rearing it has now compelled the Uchais to go for hybrids. For poultry, the free-ranging system is practised; during the day, fowls roam freely but are confined at night in fowl-cages or enclosed pens. In addition to pig and poultry, most plough-cultivating families now domesticate cattle chiefly for farming and occasionally for selling milk (Debnath, 2010, p. 77-78).

1.2.4.6 Manufacture

Each and every Uchai house is a manufactory, a cottage industry in itself. The things that they manufacture are used by the household members producing them; hence, the finished products of the Uchais can be seldom seen in the local market. It is also needless to mention that the question of purchasing raw materials does not arise at all — bamboos collected from forest

sources, cane from the bamboos, and cotton obtained from 'jum' serve as the raw materials.

Every Uchai household makes different types of bamboo and cane products for decorating their houses, carrying things, trapping fish, storing clothes, etc. As exemplified by Debbarma (1983, p. 18-19), some of the bamboo and cane products of Uchais are: 'nokhai' and 'dinggara' for carrying accessories to remote places; 'kaichani' and 'chempai' for carrying pitcher of water and firewood; 'bokhok', 'chapa', etc. for keeping precious things and clothes; 'khou' and 'moung' for storing seeds and paddy; 'baileng' and 'bailengkhu' for winnowing husk and drying things; 'changli' for drying meat and bamboo shoots; 'phokhuwai', 'swlam', etc. for entrapping fish; 'jangkhai', 'jamphra', etc. for sitting; 'simbu' which is used as rack for keeping clothes. It should be mentioned that though manufacturing of bamboo and cane products is chiefly a man's job, yet Uchai women are equally deft in manufacturing bamboo-cane products.

Like other tribes, Uchais too lead a simple life; hence, the garments they wear are needless to say quite simple. While Uchai men put on 'khutai' and 'kansa' for the upper and lower portion respectively, an Uchai women wear 'risa' and 'rignai' to cover the upper and lower part of the body — and all these are but home products of 'thanti' or waist-loom. Debnath (2010) gives us a detailed description of the waist loom process, 'Preparation for making the homespun begins at home ... cotton is ginned, dried, carded with a bow and spun into thread. From the leaves of the indigo plant and the barks of the jungle trees, various dyes — blue, green, red, black and yellow are obtained and the threads coloured accordingly. Weaving is mostly done on

the portico' (p. 81). In the past, all Uchai women were engaged in this waist-loom and they were assisted by their little daughter who eventually learnt the process. However, with the change in time, very few young girls now show interest in learning the traditional craft. Moreover, production of cotton has also decreased due to lack of land for extensive jum cultivation; hence, cotton has to be collected from the local market which is rather expensive. Thus, handloom or waist-loom craft of the Uchais is now under great threat and almost on the verge of extinction.

1.2.5 Social Structure

The Uchai tribe like any other community has their own social structure — their own way of living and leading their life. The foundation of Uchai society is based on lineage and clan system. The Uchais are known for their simplicity and hospitality; they are honest, courteous, and cheerful, and help each other.

1.2.5.1 Family Type

Without any distinction from the other highland tribes of Tripura, an Uchai family is patriarchal; the male head is the authority figure and the other members live and work with his lineage. The predominant family type in the Uchais is one connecting male members of three generation descended lineally from a common ancestor and includes their wives and unmarried daughters. They are all embedded in the male family head; and a daughter leaves her father's house on marriage and becomes a member of her husband's family.

Inter-clan marriage is also seen among the Uchais. Under such circumstances, a male child is known by the clan of his father, while a female child by the clan of her mother. Between the families, the members share strong ties and perform their individual roles according to age and gender. It is the duty of the head of the family, who is no doubt a male member, to maintain discipline in the household and to serve as a representative of the family to the society.

1.2.5.2 Property and Inheritance

The notion of property and inheritance did not exist among the Uchais like the other swidden-practising tribes of Tripura. Traditionally, they viewed cultivable land and ridges as common property. When Uchai villages migrated from one place to another, they took with them only such moveable belongings which were most indispensable for everyday use. On the other hand, the bulk of the moveable property like fowls, livestock, etc. besides social titles and endowments passed from father to the son. As a rule, women were not entitled to inheritance. Until recent times, property and inheritance were controlled exclusively by Uchai males.

1.2.5.3 Position of Women

As precisely observed by Debnath (2010), ‘... that the highland woman is a social personality — a daughter to one, a wife to another, a mother to a third, a sister to a fourth, etc. — balancing the male roles as son, husband, father, brother, and so on. But the actual picture is that she toils everyday from sunrise to sunset, and the

so-called division of labour allots to her more work and less leisure than to the men' (p. 107) — the position of women in Uchai society is not an exception to it. Though considerable liberty is given to an Uchai woman in matters of mate selection, marriage and divorce, yet gender asymmetry is evident in the collective process of socialisation where she is assigned to the tasks of child rearing, housework and assisting a male in the 'jum' thereby excluding her from all economic and political power sharing. Even, until recent times, she was excluded from property and inheritance.

1.2.6 Social and Religious Custom

Social and religious customs that the Uchais practise give them a sense of belongingness to the village community. For the Uchais, the life-cycle ceremonies invariably provide them with opportunities to reinforce the kinship ties. However, not only the closest kin are invited on occasions such as wedding or a child-birth in a family, but also the neighbours and sometimes, even the entire village is invited thereby providing a sense of compactness and cohesiveness.

1.2.6.1 Life-cycle Ceremonies

The Uchais perform certain rituals on the occasion of child-birth. While a woman becomes pregnant, Uchais worship 'tui chaumi' — an occasion for fowl-sacrifice by the 'owchai' or the priest. Before and during a child-birth, an Uchai woman is assisted by 'kumarjuk' or accoucheuse in her private room.

After seven days of birth, 'homkhai' or the umbilical cord of the child is cut off and both the mother and the child is considered chaste then which is followed by the 'name-giving ceremony' of a child. A worship known as 'bagcha' is held after five months of a child's birth, so that it can stand and walk properly. Moreover, the parents might go for a similar worship after one year of a child's birth for his or her all-round development. However, it is needless to say that such worship and rituals rarely exist today due to the present socio-economic condition of the Uchais (Debbarma, 1983, p. 32).

Among the Uchais, the ideal type of marriage comes through parental negotiations and the groom goes to live with the father-in-law and render 'chamari' or bride-service to his family for not less than three years. Though Uchai marriage by bride-service has now become clandestine, yet it is not quite obsolete in far-flung remote hamlets. After a suitable girl is found, the boy's family sends the proposal of marriage by sending an intermediary, 'rayba'. If the proposal seems to be an encouraging one, a day is fixed and the boy's parents go to the girl's house along with two bottles of rice-beer for the girl's parents to fix up the date of wedding. Such an occasion is popularly known as 'kau sungmi'. On the fixed date, it is customary for the groom wearing a new dress ('khuta taborok') and headgear and taking a big chopper ('daing') in his shoulder, accompanied by other relatives and friends to go to the bride's house. In connection to this, it needs to be mentioned that Uchais are neither purely exogamous nor strictly endogamous as far as the clans are concerned. Again, without exception, the general propensity is towards monogamy but a man or woman can always marry a second time after the demise of the original spouse.

Moreover, in Uchai custom, marriage payments take place when wealth of the bride is transferred from the bride-taker to the bride-giver. However, things are no longer the same in these days and educated Uchai males find the old type of wedding repulsive.

The Uchais believe in the concept of reincarnation. When an Uchai dies, the corpse is bathed in the courtyard and given a new dress to wear and taken inside the house. The relatives and the neighbours assemble and sit down circling the corpse for the whole night sometimes crying, sometimes singing funeral songs. In the next morning, the corpse, carried on ‘talai’ (a funeral bed made of bamboo and cane), is taken to a less frequented place outside the dwelling area of the village, generally on the bank of a river. While carrying the corpse to the cremation ground, coins are scattered in the name of the dead. Once reaching the crematory, the corpse is cremated on pyre made of five (in case of male) or seven (in case of female) layers of firewood (Debbarma, 1983, p. 38). However, in case of a child, the corpse may either be cremated or buried according to the wish of the parents. Besides, the Uchais who follow Christianity are buried in accordance with the Christian rules and principles.

1.2.6.2 Religious Practice

The religious practices and the worshipping of gods and goddesses by the Uchais are almost similar to that of the other Tibeto-Burman tribes of Tripura, viz. Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Koloï etc. Uchais take part in Ker Festival, which is one of the largest traditional tribal festivals of Tripura. The

festival is held during the month of July to honour ‘Ker’, meaning ‘austerity’, the guardian deity of Vastu Devata. This puja is performed to protect the interest of the people from any misfortune, disease and poverty and to save them from any external violence. Another popular religious festival practised by the Uchais is the ‘Worship of Rantak’ which is generally held after the completion of the harvesting season as a symbol of wealth and prosperity. Apart from Rantak and Ker Festival, Uchais also worship the god of water, near any bank of a river or beside a rivulet, for all-round prosperity of a household. The worship of ‘Naksu Mtai’ or the goddess of snakes is also very much popular among the Uchais chiefly for the prevention and cure of snakebite and also for fertility and prosperity. However, it needs to be mentioned here that the Uchais do not have any idol for the worship of their gods and goddesses; rather, they use bamboo as the symbol of different gods and goddesses, and this tradition of symbol-worship is famously known as ‘Iamprawathop’. Also the Uchais enthusiastically take part in the festivals of the Hindus; and those who are either Buddhist or Christian take part in their own religious practices and festivals.

1.2.7 Food Habit

The food habit of the Uchais, just as their way of living, is very simple and ordinary. Rice is their staple diet. Other than rice, they are fond of taking bamboo-shoots, wild potatoes, varieties of fish, and pork. The food that the Uchais consume are prepared mostly in three different ways — boiled, burnt or baked. The boiled curries that the Uchais relish include ‘godok’, ‘butoi’,

‘awanduru’ and ‘chakhui’. Uchais often burn wild potatoes, different kinds of fish and meat before eating them; the process of burning is specifically used in the preparation of ‘bharta’. The process of consuming food while baking is the most primordial technique and it is rarely found today in the Uchai society except when the meat is occasionally baked in an iron stick. The Uchais, like the other tribes of Tripura, are not very fond of oil and spices and use them very little in their cooking.

Most of the Uchais, irrespective of male and female, are used to the habit of smoking. Each and every household has a ‘hookah’ made of bamboo. Smoking in front of elders is not a social taboo in the Uchai society. Similarly, drinking is part and parcel of their social and religious customs; taking drinks in different feasts and festivals is but a way of their life and living. However, literate Uchai youths are now very much conscious about the ill-effects of smoking and drinking; hence, these age-old traditions are now looked down upon by the younger generation.

1.2.8 Dress and Ornaments

The dressing of the Uchai tribe is indeed very simple. The Uchai male prefer to wear ‘kansha’ for the lower part of the body; and ‘khutai’ for the upper part. On the other hand, an Uchai woman wears a ‘rignai’ and a ‘risa’ made by her for the lower and upper part of the body respectively. An Uchai woman also wears ‘khutai’ or blouse instead of ‘risa’. However, the Uchais claim that while the Reangs traditionally wear their clothes up to or above the

knees, they wear clothes beyond the knees. Moreover, younger women now wear 'pachra' covering their whole leg and up to the toe. Apart from her dress, an Uchai woman also wears certain ornaments such as, 'sigo' (necklace), 'tro' (bracelet), 'benge' (anklet), 'jauhstan' (ring), 'wakhon' (ear ring), 'naphu' (nose ring) and 'sanga' (clip). Though the older generation still maintains their traditional dress and ornaments, the younger generation rarely prefers them.

1.2.9 Transition in Uchai Society

Societal changes occurring along the line of historical progression steadily percolated novel elements in the existing socio-economic, cultural and political constructs of the Uchai tribe and society. The transition from the traditional to modern system is very much apparent and one cannot fail to notice them. One of the most significant dynamics for the societal changes is the conversion of a large section of the Uchais to Christianity.

As regards to economy, the primitive method of slash and burn technique has been swapped over by plough cultivation; hence, today, swiddening is seldom practised by the Uchais. Again, cottage industry has also suffered a setback during the recent years. It will not be an over exaggeration to say that most of the younger generation are ignorant regarding the craft of bamboo and cane. At the same time, handloom or waist-loom craft is also now under great threat and almost on the verge of extinction. Not only that the raw materials have become costly and difficult to procure, but also the younger generation now prefers modern dress rather than the traditional one.

Due to the permanent settlement of the tribe there has been a great alteration in their dwelling pattern and traditional Uchai stilt-house is seldom found today. The traditional family system of the Uchais has undergone a sea-change. In earlier times, the large joint family was given much importance; but today, most of the educated couple, in view of the economic consideration, prefers to have a small family with not more than two or three children. Again, cross-cousin marriages were not uncommon in earlier times, but with later socio-economic changes affecting the family structures, the older practice has over the years tended to fall out of general favour. Moreover, a change has occurred in terms of village administration as well. The post of ‘Chowdhury’ is now no more hereditary in Uchai society; rather he is selected on the basis of merit and efficiency. Nevertheless, an organization has been formed for socio-economic and cultural development of the Uchais headed by a ‘sarpa’.

The position of women in a family and society as a whole has also changed during the recent times. In respect of inheritance, there has been a change in the Uchai society; they now allow their women to become legitimate owners of parents’ property in families where the householder is denied biological sons. Women’s education received much encouragement from government agencies and missionary projects in the recent years. A section of educated Uchai women now work as teachers, clerks, etc. in some private and public sector offices. However, in terms of political power-sharing, Uchai males continue to dominate and there is hardly any female representative from the Uchai society taking part in active politics.

1.2.10 Language

Though ethnically Uchais are closest to the Bru, linguistically, Uchai belongs to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan languages. In the table given below, there are few words to show the affinity between Tippera, Bru and Uchai lexicon:

<u>Tippera</u>	<u>Bru</u>	<u>Uchai</u>	
/wa/	/wa/	/wa/	‘bamboo’
/ruŋ/	/ruŋ/	/ruŋ/	‘boat’
/imaŋ/	/imaŋ/	/imaŋ/	‘dream’
/ča/	/ča/	/ča/	‘eat’
/pha/	/pha /	/pha/	‘father’
/a/	/a/	/a/	‘fish’
/sai/	/sai/	/sai/	‘husband’
/korai/	/korai/	/korai/	‘horse’
/blai/	/blai/	/blai/	‘leaf’
/thapa/	/thapa/	/thapa/	‘oven’

Table 1.1 Tiperra, Bru & Uchai Vocabulary: A Comparison

No doubt, the vocabulary and the structural presumptions of Uchai correspond to Kokborok and Bru, but one does not fail to notice several variations in phonological, morphological and syntactical items. But so far, the

study of Uchai has remained unexplored and its deviations from standard Kokborok and Bru unrecorded. The following chapters, therefore, intend to make explorative research into the Uchai as spoken today by the native speakers, covering its phonological, morphological and syntactic structures.

1.3 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The present study is organized in six chapters, excluding Appendix and Bibliography. The chapters included in the present work are Introduction, Review of Literature, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax and Conclusion.

Chapter 1 – Introduction: The introductory chapter briefly introduces the Uchais of Tripura and the linguistic group within which they are subsumed. The opening chapter takes into account the socio-ethnic features and furnishes the historical and socio-political background of the Uchai speakers. Highland life and dwelling, occupation and economy, social structure, religious and other customs of the Uchais are also discussed in this initial chapter. Moreover, it also takes note of the ethnic group and the language family to which the Uchais belong.

Chapter Two – Review of Literature: The second chapter deals with the review of literature which is based on few books on ethnicity and socio-economic life of the Uchais and other related books on Kokborok language as no linguistic work on Uchai has been done elaborately till date. Thus, no

literature is available that could be comprehensively used for review or the purpose of the present work.

Chapter Three – Phonology: The third chapter describes the major features of Uchai phonology. The chapter highlights the phonetic inventory of Uchai and presents the Uchai Vowels, Diphthongs and Consonants. In each of this Section, the phonemic inventory of Uchai is identified and a list of contrastive minimal pairs or near minimal pairs is offered. Moreover, each of the phonemes is described while discussing the distributional pattern in a detailed manner. The chapter also discusses the syllable structure of Uchai, its syllabic pattern, division and syllabification. Moreover, the consonant clusters and sequences are traced out at the various positional occurrences. The chapter also deals with the supra-segmental phonemes, i.e., different tones perceptible in Uchai. The chapter concludes with the discussion on the morphophonemic features of Uchai.

Chapter Four – Morphology: The fourth chapter describes the major features of Uchai morphology. The chapter broadly discusses Uchai Nominal, Verb, Adjective, Adverb and Particles. Under Uchai Nominal, the formation and the different categories of Uchai Noun are discussed. Uchai Gender, Number, Case and Post-Positions are also discussed thoroughly in this chapter. The chapter also brings into focus Uchai Pronouns, Numerals and Classifiers. The fourth chapter also examines Verbal Morphology of Uchai where Formation of Uchai Verbs, Verb Classes, Uchai Tense, Aspect and Mood are discussed. Moreover, the chapter highlights Uchai Adjectives, Adverbs and

Particles in details. Finally, while concluding, the chapter focuses on the salient features of Word Formation in Uchai.

Chapter Five – Syntax: The fifth chapter describes the major features of Uchai syntax. The chapter broadly discusses Uchai word order having the characteristics of SOV language. The chapter also deals with various types of sentence-constituents like Noun Phrase and Verb phrase in Uchai. Different types of Uchai Clauses are also dealt upon in this chapter. Moreover, the chapter discusses the types of Sentences found in Uchai like Declarative, Negative, Interrogative, Imperative, Hortative, Optative and Exclamatory sentences. Nevertheless, the concluding section of the chapter throws light on Passivization in Uchai.

Chapter Six – Conclusion: The sixth chapter, which is also the final and concluding chapter, reiterates all that which have been attempted to study in the preceding chapters. The concluding chapter therefore, summarises the earlier chapters and initiates to integrate the findings of the research thereby trying to present a comprehensive idea about the linguistic and descriptive structure of Uchai.

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