

‘LANGI’, THE MAGNIFICENT HERBAL RICE BEER OF TRIPURA

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1. ABSTRACT

Tribal communities in Tripura, like elsewhere in northeast India, make their own beer and spirits. There generally is no taboo on consumption of alcoholic beverages by adults in tribal societies. This article describes some aspects of the herbal rice beer ‘*Chuwak Bwtk*’, briefly *Chuwak*, of Tripura known for its pleasant non-aggressive aroma and unique taste. *Chuwak* is popularly known amongst the non-tribal as *Langi* in the name of the small earthen pitcher wherein it is brewed and served. The write up includes documentation of ingredients used, processing and preparation of the yeast, brewing *Langi*; associated hygiene protocols as well as the way the brew is served and sipped. *Langi* is hugely popular amongst the local people both tribal and others; and it has a thriving market with hundreds of tribal women engaged in production and sale of the brew. The ‘illicit’ tag however leads to harassment and humiliation of processer-traders, all women, by the law enforcing personnel; and the civil society may deliberate on this sensitive issue for an out-of-the-box remedy. Appropriate government intervention with research inputs is crucial at this stage to promote *Langi* as a signature brand of Tripura, like *Feni* is for Goa.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 State: Tripura is the second smallest state next to Sikkim in the north eastern region of India; and its geographical area is 10491 km². The terrain consists predominantly of hill ranges and undulating uplands, the plains being limited to 19.8 percent of the geographical area. About 60 percent of the area of the state (6292.681 sq. km) is government forest. The territory enjoys a typical monsoon climate with annual precipitation between 2250 mm to 2500 mm. The minimum and maximum temperatures during winter range from 4^oC to 33^oC; and during summer from 21^oC to 38^oC. With a population of 3,673,917 (Density-350 per square km), as per Census 2011, it is the second most populous state in the north-east next to Assam. The percentage of tribal population in Tripura varied from 50.09 to 54.69 percent between 1921 and 1941 Census (Bhattacharya, 1992) as against 31.1 percent as per Census 2011. There are as many as nineteen ethnic groups among the scheduled tribes, each having their distinctive language or dialect and cultural tradition. These are Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatias, Noatias, Chakmas, Halams, Mogs, Kukis, Garos, Lushais, Uchais, Mundas, Orangs, Santals, Khasias, Bhils, Chaimals, Bhutias and Lepchas. The two prominent languages used in Tripura are Bengali and Kokborok. The tribes belonging to the ‘Bodo’ branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages in Tripura speak in Kokborok with certain variations in dialects (Murasingh, 2007); and these include the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia and Uchai tribes. Kokborok is spoken by around 80 percent of tribal population in Tripura.

The economy is primarily agrarian with agriculture providing 60 percent of employment. Tribal communities depended in the past principally on shifting cultivation, known locally as *jhum* was a way life influencing their socio-cultural, folk literature and religious life. *Jhum* continues till date, but at a

much lesser scale. A large majority has by now adopted alternative livelihood options like agriculture, horticulture, rubber plantations, animal husbandry etc. The National Forest Commission Report of 2006 cited 43000 households of shifting cultivators on the whole in Tripura covering an area of 22300 ha of forestland. 2007 survey of hardcore shifting cultivators by the state forest department reported 27286 households primarily dependent on *jhum*. Most of the tribal population also depend on non-timber forest products (NTFP) for edibles such as herbs, Tubers, flowers, mushroom, etc (Sharma, 2009) as well as non-edibles like bamboo, broom grass, cattle fodder, thatch grass, leaves of wild banana, etc from forests for own use as well as for sales with or without value addition. According to a survey in 2008 by NTFP Centre of Excellence at least 303 MT of edible NTFP was harvested for sale and 2250 MT for self consumption during the rainy season was worth INR 280.12 lakh (Sharma, 2009).

2.2 Herbal rice beer & tribal communities: Consumption of alcoholic drinks by adults is natural for tribal communities in Tripura barring a few exceptions. Use of alcoholic beverages 'practically seized to exist' amongst the Lushais following 'spread of Christianity' (Chakraborty, 2011). Some amongst the Tripuri and Reang tribes who take to Vaishnavism shun alcohol; but they constitute a very small minority. For the tribal communities in Tripura, alcoholic beverages are essential for all of their social and religious events. They brew their own herbal rice beer and also distil the stronger liquor. *Langi* is also an intermediate product in the process that culminates in the distilled varieties of the liquor, known in Tripuri as *Chuwarak*. Guests are served with homemade *Chuwak*, a safe and soothing drink, as a gesture of warm welcome. The Reangs, the second largest population of tribes next to Tripuris in the state, know *Chuwak* as '*Cha*' (Gan Choudhuri, 2011), the Kaipengs, know it as *Jokla* (Bhattacharya, 2002) and the Chakmas as *Jogara* (Mazumdar, 1997). Lack of official recognition and resultant persecution by law enforcing personnel could not in any way wipe out or even diminish the production and consumption of these traditional beverages. This calls for an out-of-the-box for a remedy.

2.3 Methodology

Relevant literature was scanned for an overview of the subject matter of this study. Primary information on herbal rice beer of Tripura was derived through interaction with processer-traders, consumers as well as other individuals and organizations conversant with the subject during field visits. The paper is based on processing, in-depth analysis and interpretation based on inputs from the primary and secondary sources.

3. CHUWAN, THE YEAST FOR BREWING LANGI

3.1. Ingredients for Chuwan: *Chuwan* is the catalyst or yeast for brewing the popular herbal rice beer of Tripura known as *Chuwak* or *Langi*. It is a dry cake made of numerous plant/herbal products and of raw rice (not parboiled). A few plant ingredients used for preparation of *Chuwan* differ from community to community, and at times from locality to locality. Vernacular names of these plants have not been standardized with resultant confusion. The following table with some details of plants and plant ingredients required for producing *Chuwan* was assembled based on field visits, inspection and

interaction with the Tripuri community in Khwmnlg, HQ of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and a knowledgeable TTAADC official of Tripuri tribe.

Table 3.1
Plant/herbal ingredients for Chuwan making

Sl. No.	Name of the species	Common name	Requirement per kg of dry rice
1	<i>Erioglossum rubiginosum</i>	Chuwanti sikaam (KB)	Bark & tender leaves from 3 branches
2	<i>Thunbergia grandiflora</i>	Duk mang khong	5-6 leaves
3	<i>Oroxylum indicum</i>	Tokharung(KB)/ Kanai Dinga(B)	3-4 leaves. Excess quantity will spoil the brew
4	<i>Markhamia stipulata</i>	Chuanchela (KB)	5 leaves for improving taste
5	<i>Allophylus racemosus</i>	Chinrama (KB)	10-15 leaflets & bark from 2-3 branches
6	<i>Engelhardia spicata</i>	Tokhiseleng (KB)	10-11 leaflets and 1 surface root
7	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Jackfruit tree	10 tender leaves
8	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>	Sugarcane	3 tender leaves
9	<i>Ananas comosus</i>	Pineapple	3-4 tender leaves
10	<i>Capsicum annum</i>	Red chilly	3
11	<i>Citrus reticulata</i>	Orange	The exocarp of one fruit
12	<i>Holarrhena antidysenterica</i>	Kurcha (B)	150-200 grams of bark

PS: 'KB' for Kokborok and 'B' for Bengali 'in the table above

3.2 Variation in choice of ingredients for Chuwan, an example: A thriving processer-trader of *Chuwan* from Anandanagar village of Mohanbhog Block in Sepahijala District of Tripura disapproves use of *Tokharung*, exocarp of orange and leaves of Jackfruit (Table 3.1). Exocarp of orange would, according to her, retard the brewing process for *Langi*. She also showed a twig of a climber *Bwtk Blwi* (*Tricosanthes spp.*), two leaves of which would be added per kg of rice as an ingredient for making *Chuwan*; and this species is not listed in Table 3.1. She reported further about a tree species known as *Kalfu* in Kokborok, the sweet and aromatic bark of which she had used in the past as one of the ingredients for preparing *Chuwan* for enhancing the flavour and taste of *Langi*. She informed further that the species was no longer available in her neighbourhood as natural forests had been replaced by plantations of commercial timber yielding species and rubber. Based on her description of the species, one specimen of *Kalfu* tree was located in nearby Jibandeeep Joint Forest Management (*Angshidari Banayan Prakalpa*) project in Melaghar and that was identified as *Cinnamomum obtusifoliaum*. The authors requested the Centre for Forest-based Livelihoods & Extension (CFLE) for conservation and propagation of the tree species.



Eriglosium rubiginosum



Allophyllus racemosus



Thunbergia grandiflora



Engelherdia spicata

3.3 Collection of Plant Ingredients for Chuwan: Jackfruit, sugarcane, red chili and excocarp of orange in the list (Table 3.1) of ingredients are easily available from homestead gardens or nearby markets. The others in the list are gathered generally from natural forests. Due to large-scale conversion of natural areas into artificial plantations using a few commercially important species since mid-1970s coupled with extensive deforestation and degradation of forests, the stock of these naturally occurring species is generally on the decline. *Chuwak* processors have to devote considerably more time now in search of these plant ingredients, thus affecting profitability adversely. Some plant ingredients, leaf of *Allophyllus racemosus* for example, can be used even when dry and processors prefer to collect and stock such plant products from forests and natural areas in advance after drying.

3.4 Chuwan making

a) Hygiene: Several social taboos are associated with preparation of *Chuwan* and of course for brewing of *Langi* as well as distillation of *Chwarak*, which interestingly are the exclusive preserve of women. 'It is believed that if a man brews, the liquor would lose its proper taste.' (Gan Choudhury, 2011). They take a thorough cleansing bath and put on freshly washed and properly dried clothes before taking up the task of *Chuwan* making. Women in their menstrual cycle and during the first month of their natal period do not participate in preparation of *Chuwan*. All containers, grinders and other utensils are cleaned and dried thoroughly prior to use. The room where *Chuwan* is to be prepared is cleaned and aired before starting the process; and the same protocol is followed religiously for brewing *Langi* as well as in the process for distillation of *Chwarak*. Impact of this a healthy tradition for ensuring hygiene is evident from the fact that there is no report of death or adverse effect on health resulting from consumption of *Langi* or even *Chwarak*, and this is no small achievement.

b) Processing: Raw rice (not parboiled) is soaked in water for 4 to 6 hours. Meanwhile plant ingredients like, leaves, barks, roots, etc. are washed, dried and finely chopped. It is added in proportion to the quantity of rice used, but it is not too rigid and may differ from processor to processor

based on their experience and local preferences. Excess water from soaked rice is drained. The next step is to start grinding the soaked rice in a grinder and to add all the chopped plant/herbal ingredients for further grinding and mixing with the ground rice. The mixture, after it is reduced to a fine powder, is transferred to a large pan. Water is sprinkled on the mixture and it is made into a pulp or dough by hand. Balls of around 100 grams (dry weight) are then rolled out from and pressed gently between palms, thus flattening the cakes to 1 cm thickness.

Often a few flattened cakes of around 200 grams are rolled out and flattened into elongated oval shapes. These are known as *Chuwan chwla* meaning male *Chuwan*. The flattened cakes are then kept on clean and dry paddy straws spread on a round bamboo mat for slow removal of the excess moisture. The cakes are kept for 3 days under shade and transferred thereafter to the open sun for 2-3 days for further drying. *Chuwan* is then ready for use; and it is stored in a cool and dry place in a closed container. This can be preserved thus for about a year (www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm).

3.5 Use and market of *Chuwan*: *Chuwan* is an important market commodity that sells round the year. Apart from the principal use as yeast for brewing *Langi*, most tribal households and many non-tribal rural families keep a stock of *Chuwan* for cure and relief from bone fracture; sprain, joint pain, etc. It is made into a paste by mixing with water for such use. *Chuwan* comes in different categories on the basis of the variety of rice and the number and proportion of plant/herbal materials used and also on the actual process of its making. *Chuwan*, sold in the market for medicinal purpose, is usually of an inferior grade as only essential plant ingredients are used for making those; whereas several other additives go in to making the *Chuwan* for brewing *Langi* for enhanced flavour and taste. The 1st & 2nd category are used for brewing *Langi* for rituals and occasions like marriage, whereas the third category is generally sold in the market at the rate of INR 5 per cake for medicinal use. The 1st and 2nd categories sell for double the rate or more.

4. BREWING CHUWAK BWTK OR LANGI

4.1 Implements required for brewing *Langi* from 6 kg of rice:

- i. Small earthen pitchers made specifically for *Chuwak Bwtk* known as *Langi*: 5
- ii. Large cooking pan: 1
- iii. Large banana leaves: 5
- iv. Bamboo or cane slivers or rope for tying: 3 meters
- v. A large mat made of bamboo or cane slivers or a plastic mat
- vi. A clean rug or a sheaf of clean/washed clothes

(www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm)

4.2 Brewing *Chuwak*: To prepare *Chuwak* or *Langi*, rice is boiled with just enough water needed to cook the rice but not to make it too soft. The rice used must be raw and not parboiled. *Mami*, a *jhum* variety of rice with a sweet fragrance is used for the best brew. *Chuwak* brewed from this special variety of rice is the most prized *Mami ni Chuwak* used only for special occasions like for offering to the Lord *Garia* and for elites. (www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm). This exclusive variety of *jhum* rice is either too rare now or extinct. For brewing the next best product, *jhum* rice of the *Guria* variety with a

sweet fragrance is used. *Chuwak* is classified principally according to the variety of rice used for its preparation, e.g. *Mami ni Btwk*, *Guria ni Btwk*, *Khasa ni Btwk*, *Maisa ni Btwk* (www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm).

The cooked rice is spread on a mat and is stirred gently till that cools down uniformly to the ambient temperature. Two *Chuwan* cakes are powdered and one fist full of the powder is sprinkled over the cooked rice and mixed thoroughly; and this process is repeated till all the *Chuwan* powder is used up. The rice and *Chuwan* mix is thereafter made into a hump, and is covered entirely by freshly cut and washed banana leaves. The hump of rice covered with banana leaves is covered additionally with a clean rug or a sheaf of clean clothes and left as such overnight. The covers are removed next morning, and the mix is spread out for cooling for 5 to 10 minutes. The mixture is then filled into 5 earthen pitchers slowly one by one, pressing down the mix gently into the pitchers till the mixture reaches the neck of the pitchers. It is important to note that the earthen pitchers must be thoroughly cleaned and dried by keeping those over a fuel wood *chulha* for 3 to 4 days prior to use. The pitchers are sealed thereafter by banana leaves tied firmly around the neck of the pitchers with bamboo or cane slivers or ropes. The pitchers are kept in a dry and warm place on a traditional shelf, known by Tripuris as '*Baka*', set over a wood fuel *chulha* in the kitchen. Thus kept the mixture matures in 3 days during summer and 5 days in winter into *langi*, ready for the sip.

5 DRINKING PROTOCOL, LIFESTYLE RELEVANCE & MARKET OF LANGI

5.1 Drinking protocol: On maturity as discussed above, the pitcher with *Langi* is brought out from the shelf and mopped with a piece of wet cloth. The top cover is removed and the brewed rice mix is pressed gently down the bottom. Potable water at room temperature is poured slowly thereafter into the pitcher till the level rises to its neck. Two cleaned slim bamboo pipes, known by Tripuris as *Chungi*, are then inserted into the pitcher. The end of the pipe that goes into the pitcher is tapered and a circle of fine holes are drilled above that. The level down to which *Langi* is sipped is set by a devise in the shape of a 'T', known as *tengi*. *Langi* is now ready for drink. The brew is offered first of all to the eldest person by age, relation or social status in the assemblage. *Langi* is sucked through *Chungi* slowly and leisurely bit by bit down to the level set by the *tengi*. Water is poured again up to the edge of the neck of the pitcher and the process continues with the person next in hierarchy one by one till the alcohol content in the brew become insignificant (Adapted from: www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm).



Chuwak in typical earthen pitcher



Chuwan, the yeast for brewing Chuwak

Courtesy: www.tripura.org.in/brews.htm

5.2 Lifestyle & social relevance: *Langi* with its low alcohol content of 5 to 7.5 per cent (source: email dated 23rd June, 2013 from Tripura Organisation, *Tripura Kshatriya Samaj*) is sipped leisurely after a day's hard work for relaxation both by tribal men and women in Tripura. It is brewed in large quantities for all important social and religious events; and for such events in any household the guest families contribute one pitcher of *Langi* each to the host signifying community participation. It is difficult to imagine tribal life without *Langi*; and it provides them stimulation for work. *Langi* is also accepted as the medium for 'Nanki Fem' meaning 'friendship' that binds communities in pact for Peace (Bhattacharya, 2002). It is customary for tribal households to honour their distinguished guests with *Langi*.

5.3 Market: *Langi* has a ready market both amongst tribal and non-tribal population in Tripura. Hundreds of women in tribal villages, therefore, brew *Langi* for sale as a means of livelihood. The usual price for the product in a single pitcher is INR 100. The details of cost of production and benefit are shown below:

BENEFIT TO COST RATIO IN RESPECT OF LANGI

A. Cost

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. Cost of rice 6 kg @ INR 20: | INR 120 |
| 2. Cost of purchase and collection of plant ingredients: | INR 30 |
| 3. Labour charge for 3 hours @ INR 22: | INR 66 |
| 4. Chuwan cakes 2 numbers @ INR 10: | INR 20 |

Total cost: **INR 236**

B. Sale proceeds from 4 pitchers of Chuwak @ INR 100: **INR 400**

C. Benefit to Cost ratio: **1.69: 1**

6. RECOMMENDATION

6.1 Potential of Langi as a signature brand of Tripura: *Langi* is hugely popular as a soothing drink with a pleasant non-aggressive aroma. That it is a safe drink is evident from the fact that there has not been a single report or record of death or adverse effect on health resulting from its consumption. But the 'illicit' tag leads to harassment and humiliation of the processors, all women, by the law enforcing personnel; and the civil society may deliberate on this sensitive issue on priority for an out-of-the-box remedy. Appropriate government intervention with research inputs is crucial at this stage for promoting *Chuwak Bwtk* or *Langi* as a signature brand of Tripura, like *Feni* is for Goa.

6.2 Documentation & conservation of plants used for making *Chuwan*: Scarcity of several forest plants needed for making *Chuwan*, the indispensable catalyst for brewing *Langi*, is a major concern of the day. Plant materials used for *Chuwan* making mostly have medicinal value. Many are known only by their vernacular names, which vary often from tribe to tribe and often within a tribe in different localities. There is need for documentation of these plants and their habitats may develop a strategy for their regeneration and conservation for ensuring sustainable harvest; and the Forest Department may initiate a project accordingly involving local communities, as the livelihood of thousands of tribal women depend on this trade. Such an initiative is even otherwise equally important for sustaining this cherished heritage associated with knowledge, skill and community wisdom passed down from generation to generation of tribal communities.

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