

## Chapter - 2

### **The Land and the People of Tripura**

In this chapter I have discussed about the state of Tripura, especially some of the historical, geographical, demographic features which would help "locate" my problem of research in a context. Besides discussing the people of Tripura in general I have specifically focused on drawing out the history of the Molsoms and the story of their emergence as a distinct community, with its own history, society and culture.

The tiny and hilly state of Tripura is situated in the North Eastern region of the country. About sixty percent of the total area of the state is covered with hills and jungles and the rest is plain-land. Opinions differ regarding the origin of the name Tripura. Of the views, the view of Sri Kailash Chandra Singha (1985 ed :8) appears to be quite probable and significant. The name Tripura has been coined, opined Singha, from the Tripuri words – *tui* and *pra* . In Kokborak, the dialect of the Tripuris, *tui* means water and *pra* means meeting point. In this regard it is believed that originally the land was known as *tuipra* meaning a land where a number of water sources are present. " It is a fact that", writes Menon (1975:1) " in the days of yore

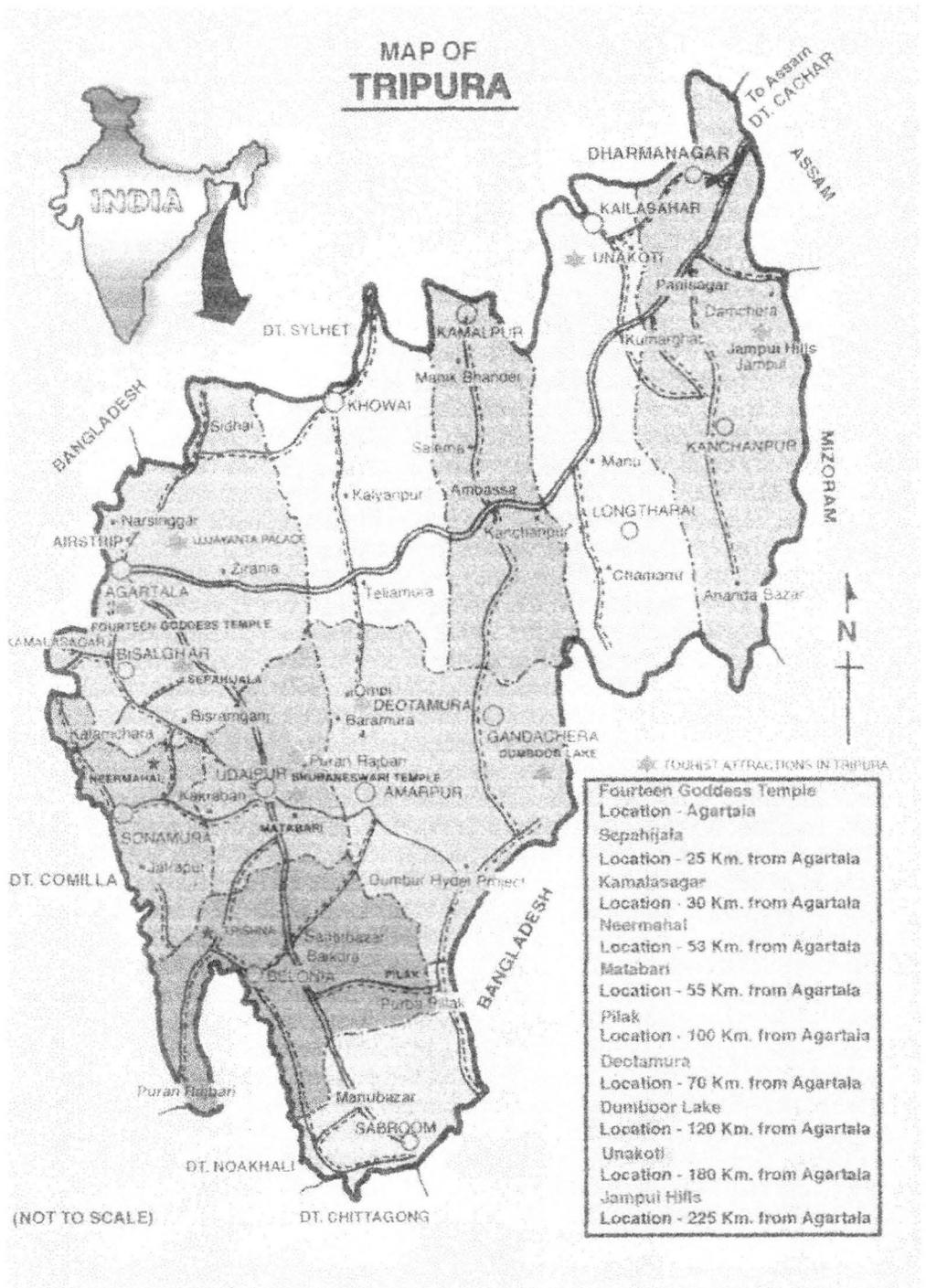
the boundaries of Tripura extended up to the Bay of Bengal when its rulers held sway from the Garo Hills to the Arakan. It might be that the name appropriately derived its origin from its nearness to water." The word *tuipura* has subsequently been corrupted into *tipra* and from it to Tripura. It is relevant to note that even today the hill people pronounce the word as *tipra* and not Tripura. To the hill people, the water, which is the most essential thing for life to survive, is a scarce material due to the high altitude of their habitat. Naturally, for inhabitation the hill people prefers a hilly place where water is near and abundant. This is why amongst other favourable conditions the availability of water in the locality might have been specially considered and highlighted in the case of settlement in Tripura and subsequently this advantage of the land might have lent the area its name.

The present state of Tripura, as its history tells, was a princely state. A state of great antiquity, Tripura claims to be the most ancient of all the princely states of India. Its recorded history is supposed to go back to the days of the Mahabharata. It has been claimed in *Rajmala* that the reference to the Frontier Kingdom in the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the Ashoke Pillars are reference to the state of Tripura. The state has been ruled by the Maharajas for an unbroken period of thirteen hundred years before it acceded to the Indian Union on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1949 and subsequently became a part 'C' state under the Indian Constitution. Tripura was, in fact, a union territory till 1972, and was granted statehood on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972. The cultural activities of a community are largely guided by its economic setup and the latter depends mostly on the physical environment of the land. Hence, in order to understand the social and cultural life of a community, its surrounding environment has to taken into consideration. In the late tertiary age that is about four cores of years ago, the patch of land, known as Tripura, rose from a sea bottom. At present it is largely mountainous with hills and plains situated almost alternately and rivulets, brook, streams, etc. cutting across its length and

breadth. There are seven long ranges of hills namely, *Jampui, Sakhangtang, Longthorai, Atharomura, Baramura, Devtamura and Sardeng.* *Gomati, Manu, Haora, Longai, Juri, Deo, Dhalai, Khowai, Muhuri and Feni* are the principal rivers, all of which flow into the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh. These rivers are neither broad nor deep enough for heavy navigation. The climate is, more or less, moderate – not too hot nor too cold. The average maximum temperature is 35 degree centigrade in May-June and the average minimum temperature is about 10 degree centigrade in December-January. The territory receives a heavy rainfall. The Summer, spreading over March to May, the Rains, lasting from late May to September, Autumn, bring October and November, Winter, covering December to January and the Spring, breezing through February, are the main seasons found in the state.

At present the state covers an area of 10,486 square kilometers. The records, however, show that earlier the area of the state was quite large and it was 74,000 square miles that is 1,20,000 square kilometers. At that time the boundary of this state extended to many other adjacent areas, namely the present Lushai Hills, the South-West part of Manipur, the central and southern part of Cachher, the southern part of Sylhet, the southern part of Maimansing, the eastern part of Dacca, Chakla Roshanabad of Comilla, the whole of Noakhali and Chittagang district of present Bangladesh (Singha 1985 :9). At present, three sides of the state are surrounded by Bangladesh covering a total international boarder of 845 kilometers and only by its north- eastern part the state is connected with the rest of the country through

a part of the Cachher district of Assam, and the state of Mizoram.



Broadly, there are two groups of people, namely, the tribal and non-tribal, who constitute the population of the state. The tribal communities of the

state have been classified, as per order of the President India in 1956, into nineteen scheduled tribes. Among these tribal the Tripuris, Reangs, Noatias, Halams, Jamatias, Lushais, Kukis, Chaimals, Uchois and the Mogs have been residing in the state since long past. They together form the autochthonous group. The other tribes, namely, the Garos, Mundas, Oraons, Santals, Bhils, Bhutias, Lepchas, and the Khasis have come later. The tribes like the Bhutias and the Lepchas came from Bhutan, Sikkim and North Bengal; the Garos and the Khasis from Meghalaya; and the Bhils, Oraons, Santals and the Mundas from Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. The latter four groups actually came only when tea plantation started on a commercial scale in the state in 1916-17 to work as plantation labour.

Among the autochthonous groups, the Tripuris, Noatias and the Jamatias may be classified under a common group because of a great degree of similarities in their life and culture. In fact, the Noatias and Jamatias, as mentioned in the Tripura District Gazetteers (1975:148-155), have originated from the Tripuris. On the other hand, the tribes like the Chaimals, Kukis, Lushais and the Halams may be brought under a common group due to their cultural similarities. The Chaimals, Halams and the Kukis, as stated in the Gazetteer, follow the same culture. In fact, the Chaimal and Haram are a branch of the Kukis. Those of the Kukis who had surrendered to the Maharajas of Tripura later came to be known as Halams. The Lushais also racially belong to the Kuki stock (Ibid: 150-158).

The Reangs and the Uchois believe that they have originated from a common ancestor. Based on this belief they address each other as *takhuk* which means brother. Besides, the life and culture of these two tribes also are, more or less, similar (Deb Burman 1986: 8). So the Reangs and the Uchois may also be classified under a single group.

The non-tribal communities of the state are mainly the Bengali Hindus, the Muslims, and the Monipuris — both Bisnupriyas and Meithis. The majority

of the tribal people have been residing in the hill areas whereas most of the non-tribals have settled down in the plains.

### **The Molsoms in Tripura**

The name Molsom has been commonly recorded in government documents and census reports as Murchum or Mursum which is, in fact, a corrupted form of the original name. During the fieldwork for the present study, it has been found that the members of this community refer to themselves as Molsom. Some of the educated members of the Molsom community were upset to find that the name has been corrupted in government records as well. Hence in this study I decided to retain their original name in order to honour their sentiment. As an official of the Tribal Welfare Department I took up the problem of the nomenclature of the Molsoms with the Director of Tribal Research Department who, convinced with my arguments, took steps to correct the name and after that the term Molsom is being used in government documents and other correspondence related to this tribe. In the census reports, except for the 1931 census, the Molsoms were treated as one of the sub-tribes of the Halams and there was no exhaustive study on its sub-tribes. Therefore we do not find any information exclusively on the Molsoms from the census reports.

The Molsoms form a small minority of the tribal population in the state. In 1931 the total population of the Molsom tribe in the state was recorded to be 3499 of which 1817 were male and 1682 were female. They were at that time concentrated in Udaipur, Amarapur, Sadar and Khowai Sub-divisions (Census 1931). Another idea of the Molsom population can be obtained from the language census of 1961 which recorded Mursum and Mulsom as two separate language groups. The census shows that there were 4486 (2356 male and 2130 female) people who spoke Mursum and 289 (153 male and 136 female) who spoke Mulsom (Menon 1975 : 408).

This may of course be an understatement because it is likely that several Molsoms might not have recorded their language as Mursum or Mulsom. A comparative study of the 1931 census and the language census of 1961 shows that there was an increase of only 1276 people in the community during the period from 1931 to 1961, if we consider Mulsom and Mursom as one tribe. But there might have been further increase in their population which had not been recorded. Since no datum is available after 1961 only an approximate estimation of the population of this community can be made. We have therefore tried to make this estimate based on the population of the villages which are predominantly inhabited by the Molsoms.

**Table 2.1: Distribution of the Molsom population in the state in 1931**

Name of Sub-division	Total Molsom population	Male	Female
Udaipur	1865	965	900
Amarpur	918	487	431
Khowai	626	320	306
Sadar	82	43	39
Dharmanagar	8	2	6
Total	3499	1817	1682

Source : Census 1931

The Molsoms are, at present, mainly concentrated in the Udaipur and Amarpur sub-divisions of the South Tripura district, where there are about 32 Molsom villages. Besides, some of them have been residing in Kamalpur and Sadar sub-divisions of North and West Tripura districts respectively, where about eight Molsom villages could be identified. So, roughly there are forty villages which are predominantly inhabited by the Molsoms. In trying to estimate the Molsom population the total number of their households in these villages have been taken into

consideration. These data were available at the Block offices. The total number of households have been multiplied by the average household-size of the sample villages covered by the present study. The average household-size is six and the total number of households in forty villages is 1433. Therefore the total Molsom population can be approximately estimated to be 8598 (1998). Nine villages were selected for field study, of which five, namely, Kalabon Molsom Bari, Thali Bari, Raia Molsom Bari, Monithang Bari and Atharobhola Boro Bari are situated in Udaipur Sub-division, and four, namely, Raipasa Molsom Bari, Patabiri Molsom Bari, Dhanchera Molsom Bari and Shib Bari are in Kamalpur sub-division. Villages were selected on the basis of their geographical location, population size etc. Of the nine villages, five are located in the interior hill areas and four are closer to some townships. Attention has also given to the population size so that it would not be too small or too large. Another consideration which also had to be made, was the accessibility of the villages selected for the study. The terrorist activities of the outlawed T.N.V extremists had made it difficult to carry out field study in the interior villages and therefore only such villages were selected which had proximity to the main roads.

**Table 2.2: Distribution of the households and population of the sample villages**

Name of Village	Number of household	Population
1. Kalabon Molsom Bari	42	253
2. Manithang Bari	38	226
3. Thali Bari	33	197
4. Raia Molsom Bari	32	193
5. Atharobhola Borobari	40	238
6. Raipasha Molsom Bari	No quantitative data collected	-----
7. Patabiri	36	217
8. Shib Bari	30	175
9. Dhanchera	39	231
Total	290	1730

Out of nine villages ( see table 2.2 ), the villages, namely, Kalabon Molsom Bari, Manithang Bari, Atharobhola Boro Bari, Patabiri and Dhanchera are situated in the interior hill areas. The remaining four villages are closer to some townships. It is observed from the table 2.2 that the villages situated in interior areas generally have larger number of households. This is

because of the availability of the larger quantity of cultivable plain lands close to the settlement areas of the villages away from the townships. On the other hand, the villages situated close to a township have comparatively smaller number of households due to the higher land-man ratio of the locality which results into the paucity of cultivable plain land. This also indicates to the fact that the agriculture-based Molsoms are not yet prepared to try out urban based economy in a significant way.

On an average, there are 6 members in a household ( $1730 / 290 = 5.97$ , say 6) and the average number of households of the sample villages is 36 ( $290 / 8 = 36.25$ , say 36). There are about 40 Molsom villages in the state. Therefore, the total Molsom population would be around 8,640 (40 (total Molsom villages) X 36 (number of households in a Molsom village on an average) X 6 (average number of members of a Molsom household)). It is to be noted here that the estimation done on the basis of data collected from the Block offices regarding the total Molsom population almost tally with my estimation following the above method. A difference of only 42 (8640 - 8598) persons is found in the two estimations. In order to reach at a more realistic figure we have taken the average of the two estimations (8598 and 8640). Thus the total population of the Molsoms in the state is 8,619. The Molsoms constitute only 1.01 per cent of the total tribal population (total tribal population is 8,53,000 as per 1991 census) and 0.31 per cent of the total population of the state.

### **The origin of the Molsoms**

Paucity of the written documents on the background of the Molsoms makes it difficult to trace their origin. There is no recorded evidence to show where the Molsoms came from, how they came and when they settled in Tripura. All we know is that the Molsoms had settled in Udaipur and Amarpur sub-divisions of South Tripura several generations ago. Some of

their families migrated to the Kamalpur sub-division of North Tripura (present Dhalai) district about fifty years ago.

Perhaps one of the reasons why no one has studied this community separately is the general belief that it is a sub-group of the Halams. There are only a few studies available on the tribes of Tripura and the Molsoms are rarely referred to in these studies. This is so partly because of the taken for granted view that the Molsoms are a sub-group of the Halams. It is more or less well established in the concerned circles that the culture of the Molsoms must be similar to that of the Halams and hence no separate study is required. Our findings show, on the contrary, that the little information that we have on the social life of the Halams is, in many cases, at variance with that of the Molsoms. We have not studied the Halams and therefore any comparative picture of these two groups can not be produced here. However, an attempt has been made to present a comparison of the various aspects of the social and cultural life of the Molsoms and those of the Halams, wherever data were available on the latter.

There are two things that one has to consider while trying to fit the Molsoms into the Halam group. Firstly, whether there are adequate empirical support by which one can equate the Molsoms with the Halams or is it simply based on the popular belief. One has to raise this question because there is no clear knowledge even in the administrative records regarding what the sub-groups of the Halams are. Different government records give different pictures. The manner in which the sub-groups of the Halams have been traced and grouped appear to be highly casual. Had these been fixed on the basis of certain criteria or had the Halam themselves been certain about the number of their sub-groups this confusion in the number of sub-groups would not have arisen at all.

The second point is about the way the Molsoms react at the idea that they are a part of the Halams. Our findings show that a large number of

Molsoms believe that they are an independent group with a separate language. It is found that a large number of Molsoms are unable to speak or even understand the language of the Halams. Similarly, they claim, the Halams too do not understand their language.

Another point worth mentioning here is that the earlier records show that the Halams were a part of the Kuki tribe which was in constant conflict with the ruling Tripuri tribe. The group which is known as Halams, as mentioned earlier, had broken away from the Kukis and accepted the sovereignty of the ruling family of Tripura. Even though the Halams broke away from their parent stock and became loyal to the royal family of Tripura with which the Kukis were at enmity, there is nothing on record to show that the Halams did ever fight against their parent stock, the Kukis. But there are several folk-tales among the Molsoms which narrate their conflicts with the Kukis. These tales also try to establish the fact that the Molsoms were different from the Kukis. These points need to be dealt in greater details and perhaps when we have more ethnographic studies on the tribes of Tripura it will be possible to come to a definite conclusion. The scope of the present study is limited to the Molsoms and it is not possible here to provide any definite answer to the points raised. However, coming back to the question of the origin of the Molsoms, a folk-tale is stated below which is very popular in this community. It deals with how they came to the state.

According to the folk-tale, the Molsoms were originally living at a place called Bolpuitang, adjacent to the present Lushai hills. The particular village where they were residing consisted of ten hillocks from which the name Molsom was coined. In Molsom *mol* means hillock and *som* means ten, Molsom thus means the inhabitants of ten hillocks.

After coming from under the earth, their folk tale-tells, the Molsoms had been residing in the village named Arshiemkhosak which was situated at Bolpuitang. In this connection it may be mentioned here that the

Molsoms believe that all human beings were once under the earth. The area of Arshiemkhosak was so large that had any one traveled all over the village with a wet wrapper made of raw cotton which is locally known as *ponpui* the wrapper would have dried up by the time the walk was complete. In that village all the Molsoms were under the control of the community chief named Kamchikao. Along with other activities, the Kamchikao had to collect subscriptions for the annual Sangrak worship. Besides, he had to arrange for daily worship of Sangrak.

Once the Kamchikao was so busy in collecting subscription that for several days he had forgotten to arrange hens for the daily Sangrak worship. The Sangrak became angry since no hen was offered to him on all those days and in anger he left the village and went to the nearby hill. By that time an evil spirit named Rurangnu entered the village and started killing one person of the village every day. The villagers were unaware of this in the beginning. Due to the density of the population in the village, the loss of one person every day was unnoticed by them. They became seared when one day the daughter of the Kamchikao was missing. Kamchikao ordered all the villagers to apprehend the person or thing responsible for the missing of his daughter. Every youth of the village then started searching day and night for the abductor. In the mean time the Sangrak came to know, by the exercise of his supernatural power, all about the Ruregnu. He then got himself converted to a snake and entered the village to punish the Ruregnu. But as soon as Sangrak entered the village in the form of a snake, the watch party killed it by cutting its head. The Sangrak, however, could save himself due to his supernatural power. The watch party then distributed the flesh of that snake among the villagers. An old widow got its head as her share which she kept above the hearth to dry it up for future consumption.

Next day, early in the morning, the snake-head cried out like a hen and then in clear human voice told the widow to flee elsewhere because

an earthquake would destroy the village. The widow conveyed the forecast to all the villagers.

All people of the Arshiemkhosak, accordingly, fled the village that morning with their belongings. They had to cross a river on their way to another hillock. The river was too deep and its water too cold to cross. They made a rope-bridge with the fiber of a local tree known, as *ronsoi* and started crossing the river. The Kamchikao was supervising the safe movement of the villagers across the rope-bridge.

After all the villagers had crossed, the Kamchikao started crossing the bridge and as soon as he stepped on to the bridge, it broke down. He cried out for help. The widow then declared that it was because of the sin committed by the Kamchikao to Sangrak that he failed to cross the river. She advised him to worship the Sangrak by sacrificing a hen, which has lost no feather from its tail part and having long nails. The Molsoms call such a hen *archangphir*, which means a mature hen. The widow then told the Kamchikao that only after worshipping the Sangrak he would be able to cross the river. After that the widow and other villagers left the place. They then reached a hill named Rhili Champhai where they settled down for some period.

The settlement area of Rhili Champhai of the Molsoms was also scattered over ten smaller hillocks and, as per their saying, it was situated near present Mizoram. The area of the Rhili Champhai, as their folk-tale tells, was consisted of a large quantity of plain areas on the hill tops. From Rhili Champhai they shifted to Rangdil of present Mizoram and then came to the Dumbur area of Amarpur sub-division of Tripura while searching for better *jhum* land. From Dumbur they got scattered to different parts of Amarpur and Udaipur sub-divisions.

It is interesting here to note that the hearsay relating to the migration of the Bongchers, one of the sub-groups of the Halams, especially the name

of the original place of settlement, root of migration etc. are similar to those part of the folk-tale of the Molsoms narrated above. As per the Bongcher's hearsay, they were also inhabiting in Rilhi Champhai area of present Mizoram. Rehli, which is a big lake, lies on the east of Mizoram just within Burma and Champhai is one of the towns of Mizoram lying on the eastern side bordering Burma. Champhai has a good paddy land and is known as the granary of Mizoram. Reh lake also has good paddy fields in its surroundings ( Sailo 1992 : 4).

From the Rehli Champhai the Bongchers, as per the hearsay, moved to the North West side of Mizoram and reached the village called Buarpui in the Lunglei district of Mizoram. On their way, at one place, they crossed one deep river with bamboo rafts stringed together with jungle creepers. While some of them had crossed over the river, the jungle creepers broke down and the bamboo rafts capsized. Due to that mishap, some were left behind on the other side of the river and those who could cross the river proceeded further and settled on a nearby hill for some period ( bid : 5).

So far as this record goes, the Molsoms and Bongchers are sub-groups of the Halams. The Molsoms have, on the other hand, some folk-tales which indicate to their relationship of enmity and rivalry with the Halams. The Bongcher too, as per their hearsay, had a hostile relationship with the Hmars. The Kukis call themselves Hmar. According to a story narrated by them, when they were staying at *Parsonship* village under the control of their chief *kawrpua*, a war occurred with the Hmars or the Kukis where the Bongchers were badly defeated and their chief was killed (Ibid : 5).

## **Relation of the Molsoms with other tribes and non-tribes of the state**

The Molsoms are, by nature, very simple, peace loving and hospitable people. They have friendly relations with other tribal and non-tribal population of the state, though in the long past, at times, some rivalry was there especially with the neighboring tribal groups. In those days, the trespassers into a Molsom village or *jhum* area were severely punished, sometimes with capital punishment, by their village council. In fact, such strict restrictions were also observed by other tribal groups of the state which resulted, sometimes, in inter-tribe conflicts. But those days are gone. Every community is at present very much acceptable to the Molsoms. Thus many matrimonial relationships are developing with the members of other communities and they are permitting the people of other communities to be a part of the Molsom society as well. The Molsoms had good relations with the rulers of Tripura as some of the men of the royal family had married Molsom girls. The Molsom girls are well known in the state for their beauty. Regarding the marital relations of the Molsom girls with the members of the royal family there is a hearsay popular among them which goes as follows.

In the long past there was a king in Tripura who had two queens - one Tripuri and the other Molsom. The prince born of the Molsom queen was elder. There was deep intimacy between the princes. But after the death of the king dissension arose between the queens regarding succession to the throne. Both the queens wanted to make her son the successor to the throne. At last the royal priest found a way to solve the deadlock. He arranged for a test and decided that the worthier would be the next king. The priest let loose a white elephant into a forest nearby and told the queens that the princes who would first come back to the palace by riding the elephant next day before sun set would succeed the throne. The next morning the two princes went to the forest and started searching for the elephant from two different sides of the forest. Within a few hours, the elder prince found the elephant but he could not ride on it as he did

not know how to command and drive an elephant. He then decided to ride on it with the help of a ladder and went to a bamboo-clump to collect bamboo for making ladder. In the mean time the younger prince came there and found the elephant and rode it. He thus came back to the palace riding the elephant and was declared the successor to the throne. However, the relation between the brothers remained cordial. The new king provided the traditional throne to his elder brother in the royal court and made a new throne for himself. He used to take advice from his elder brother on matters of royal duties. Since that period, the Molsoms believe, they have been getting warm reception from the royal families. And thus in the customary tribal gathering (known as Hasam Bhojan) in the palace they used to be provided with the first seat in the community dinner.

The interrelationship between the Molsoms and the other tribal communities of the state is also healthy. This may be evidenced from the fact that a number of Molsoms can speak and understand some other tribal dialects such as Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang and Kuki. In case of interaction with the members of an unknown language group, they talk in Bengali. In this regard it is worth mentioning that a good number of people of all of the tribal groups in Tripura can speak Bengali.

An intimate relation between the Molsoms and the non-tribals especially with the Bengalis, had been prevailing ever since the first Molsom-Bengali interaction. In fact, this close relations of the Molsom with the Bengalis could have helped the former to accept the techniques of settled cultivation.