

Religious Belief and Practices of the Toto Tribe of West Bengal

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Abstract

The Toto tribe is one of the primitive tribal groups in West Bengal. The child of nature, the forest-dweller Totos are animist. Nature is their deity. They believe that there is life in rivers, mountains, forests, sky, paths and rocks. But Toto does not have idols of gods and goddesses. Toto once believed that various natural disasters or catastrophes are caused by the wrath of nature. They were completely ignorant of any correct idea about this. So the Totos worshiped various deities under the influence of blind believe. Toto believes that if the gods are satisfied, the crop production will be good, there will be sufficient rain and it will protect them from evil forces and the overall welfare of the Toto community. This conventional notion is still present in Toto society today. Religious festivals bring joy and happiness to Toto's busy life. Not only that, they communicate with each other and forget all differences and build strong social bonds among them. But with the passage of time, Toto's religious life has been touched by modernity. As a result, their religious life has undergone many simplifications and changes. This article attempts to highlight various aspects of Toto's religious life.

KEYWORDS- primitive, animist, religious, festival, modernity

The Totos, a primitive tribe, live on the border of Bhutan in the Madarihat block of Alipurduar district in West Bengal. The Totos are one of the three primitive tribes of West Bengal and a very small primitive people of North Bengal. Anthropologically, the Toto tribe is a branch of the Tibetan-Mongoloid ethnic group¹. Their physique is good, their hair is strong, their beards and mustaches are rare. It is also noticeable in the structure of nose and eyelids. They are naturally innocent and love to be different from any other human group around them. The area inhabited by the Toto people has been named Totopara in official documents. They were completely dependent on the forest for their livelihood and were isolated from the light of civilized society.

The Torsha River flows east of Totopara, the Pidua Hills to the west, the Hipsa Hills to the north and the Hauri River to the south, these are the geographical boundaries of Totopara. At present Totopara has been formed with six villages like Pujagaon, Dhumsigaon, Mitrangaon, Subbagaon, Mandal gaon and Panchayatgaon. The descendants of the thirteen Totos who first settled in Totopara are divided into thirteen tribes and live in Totopara.

Objectives of the study

1. Provides an informative idea of Toto's religious beliefs, practices, and festivals.
2. To highlight on the characteristic features of the religious festivals of the indigenous Totos.
3. Highlighting the differences between the religious beliefs and festivals of the indigenous Totos and the religious festivals of other communities.

4. To give a clear idea of whether modernity has touched the religious life of the Totos and what changes have taken place in the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the tribal Totos under the influence of modernity.

Methodology - Preliminary information is collected mainly through field surveys and interviews. Secondary information has also been taken from various books such as Charu Chandra Sanyal - 'The Meches and the Totos' (1973), Amal Kumar Das - 'The Totos' (1969), Bimalendu Majumdar's 'The Totos' (1998), Devendranath Dhali's 'Toto'. (1986) (Bengali book), Amitabh Sarkar - 'Toto Society and Change', (1993), Bulletin published by Cultural Research Institution, Pramath Nath and Jeevan Rana ' Ekush Satake Toto Samaj O Sanskriti (Bengali book) 2018, Mahendra Debnath – Uttarbanger Prantabhumir Janajati, (Benagali book) 2014.

Religious concept of the Totos

Their primitive culture is still alive and well in Toto's religion and beliefs. They believe that there is life in rivers, mountains, forests, sky, paths and rocks.

A song by Totos pray to the sky

সাজিং যাইমু সংমো তো জাদো
ইপাইদে ইউমা ইচুং ইপাইদে কে গাগো
ইউমাচুং কে জাগো, ইউমা দাজুং যাইমু ।
লুই জুগো চুম্মে, নিংখে অজ্জাকো
নদা যাইপু লইমো টেংকালেই জাগো ॥²

Meaning of the song - We are going to plant *Kaun* again. Our baby *Kaun* saplings died without getting water. The sky, please give us some rain so that these baby saplings survive.

The chief deity among the Totos is *Ispha*. To outsider the chief deity is known as *Mahakal*. The senior priest is called as *Kaiji* while to assist a *Kaiji* there are some priests (*pau* or *deisibei*) from these clan groups like *Baudhbei*, *Badubei*, *Nurunchangobei*, *Dhirenchangobei*, *Nububei* and *Bangobei*. Therefore ,these clan members think that they are superior than others who have no *pau*. It is also reported that each clan has own *Kuldev* whom they worship twice in a year.³

During worship days the *pau* is supposed to cook his food and eats once in a day. He would not touch any food even if his wife cooks it. The priest or *pau* is permitted to marry and carry out normal livelihood like his brethren fellow.

It is found that *Mahakal* or *Ispha* is represented by two sacred drums. One drum is represented as female and another is male. The drums hang from a wooden beam of a desolate hut of the village. The female drum is placed in the east while male is in the west. If a non-Toto touches it or beats it then he/she has to go through *Sangailami* (a compensation) by a cow sacrifice. The goddess *Mahakali* is represented by two sacred drums. The puja is performed with flesh and wine. They dance during the worship. There is separate arrangement for male and female and never male and female dance together. It is worshipped once in a year at the last week of *Bhadra* (August-September) according to Bengali calendar. The drums are called as *Bakung* and both the drums together is represented as *Ispha* who is otherwise known as *Mahakali*. It is most powerful deity among them. The items of worship are plantain leaves, rice, liquir (*Yu/eu*) and flesh. Animals like cow, pig, hen and birds are killed.⁴

The Totos do not believe in life after death. According to *Kaiji* (Purohit) human birth and death is related to the sun. Even now they believe that the sun arises from a place

where people are born. The human soul dissolves after the death, where the sunsets. Many Toto people still believe that, 'Badu' hill in the north is the origin at place of origin of the Totos.

Totos believe that 'Pidua' is the god of the ghosts and demons. Sometimes he enters into human bodies. If he is dissatisfied with someone, he damages his eyes and head. If 'Pidua' is not worshiped, the wild elephants and other violent creatures damage crops of the Totos, cow's milk will be depleted, the whole society of the Totos will be ruined and destroyed. So Totos worship the 'Pidua' in a deep forest.

Totos also worship some folk gods. Now they trust on the charms and incantations of Ojhas, to protect them from danger (like snake bite, Ghost etc.)

There is a chief priest for the Toto worship and festival. He is a priest as long as the worship is going on. Then they are all ordinary people. There are no restrictive rules in these matters. Priests really care about the welfare of the society, not any individual or class of society. In Toto society, the chief priest is not only the priest, but also the chief justice of Toto's religious and social affairs.

Main Religious Festival of the Totos

The main annual and religious festivals of the Totos are 'Omchu' and 'Mayuu' puja.⁵ They believe that the welfare of the community throughout the year depends on the success of these two festivals. Both are worshipped by *Ishpa*. They celebrate 'Omchu' puja after 14 days of new moon between the second half of July to the first half of August (*Shraban* month according to Bengali calendar). Comparatively *Omchu* is called small puja. This is a kind of *Kaleswar* puja. Whole Toto community observes it and in this ritual each Toto family donates some money according to their ability and *Yu/eu* for the worship. In the month of *Shraban* they harvest *Kaun* (a kind of millet) in their field. They make *Yu/eu* (liquor) from *kaun* and offered to the deity *Omchu*. They also sacrifice chicken to the deity. They satisfy the deity to get bumper crop, sufficient rain and to protect the village from evil eye. For this reason this puja is called *Kauni puja*.⁶

Another important festival of the Totos is known *Mayuu* puja (worship of orange). It is held in the month of August- September (*Bhadra* month according to Bengali calendar). *Mayuu* puja is celebrated after 22 days of *Omchu* puja. *Mayuu* is a deity of orange.⁷ Usually they put on new dresses on the occasion of the puja. All the community members participate in this ritual and come close to each other. They exchange food and drinks to their relatives in this occasion. This custom is their social observance. Every Toto family must offer some animals for sacrifice to appease the deities. Every clan has to participate in the community worship to the *Ispha* and pray for the welfare of the whole community.

During the puja they prepare 'Yu' in their house and they also dedicate a fowl to the deity of *Omchu* and *Mayuu*. There is no images in the 'Demsha' (Puja Mandir) but there are two old 'Bakung' (Sacred drum) which are symbols of deity.⁸ One is 'Sainja' (God) and another is 'Sainjani' (Goddess). The 'Bakung' are played during the time of festival. They sacrifice many animals like – cow, goat, sheep, hog etc. to the Gods and Goddesses during different religious ceremonies and later they offer meat of the

sacrificed animals and *Yu* to the deities. At last those are distributed to the general people of the Totos. During the first day of the festivals they assemble at the bank of the river for worship then they collectively meet at the *Demsha*. During the puja both the male and female members of the Totos get together in the '*Demsha*' and gap period of chew a bettle role. The Totos dance during the puja. Males arrange themselves on one side and the females on the other. They stand face to face at a distance and dance. Never the males and the females dance together.⁹

There is a legend that, '*Sainjani*' (Mahakali) became unaccompanied in the deep forest where the *Titi* river is flowing. Water of the river was clean like as a crystalline mirror. She saw her beautiful image in the water of the river and make preparation for bath. At the moment '*Pidua*' (leader of evil spirit) was attracted for her soft beautiful body and later *Pidua* catches her body for violation of modesty. *Sainjani* understood her endangered and she cut out the head of *Pidua* from his body with the Knife. *Pidua* ask for forgiveness to *Sainjani* and then she attached the head with body. But she sets the eyes on the back of the *Pidua* as his punishment. So the worship of *Pidua* is running in the Toto society for the fear of evil spirit.

'*Sarde*' puja festival celebrated during spring, is performed on the bank of '*Goati*' river. During this time various fruit trees bloom and the Totos pray to God for very good fruit production.¹¹ Many animal sacrifices are made on the occasion of this puja. Soup of pork fluid is consumed at the end of puja. In the evening, young boys perform dance and music in front of '*Demsha*'. *Sarde* puja is mainly celebrated on the stone dias which is situated in the bank of '*Goati*' river. There was arrangement of variable foods specially '*Yu*' at the end of the puja. All Totos participate in this puja and enjoy it with much pleasure.

Another important festival of the Totos is '*Aarsing*' festival.¹² When *Durgapuja* is celebrated in the plain, at the same time the Totos take preparation to enjoy the '*Aarsing*' festival at Totopara. The Totos are excited with enjoy this puja for three days, when the catkin (a species of grass) is blossom in the bank of *Hauri* river. *Aarsing* festival is known as '*Janmasthan*' (birth ceremony of lord Krishna) festival also. It is a *Parab* (festival) of fondle of Son-in-Law of the Toto community. When Son-in-law and daughter are come to home on the occasion of the puja and they give new wear. When the sun sets on the Bhutan hill, then there is started music tune and beat a drum with a stick. After that, there is running dance, music and clamorous amusement for whole night.

They also observe *Fagua* and *Grampuja*. The *Grampuja* is communally performed for the welfare of the village, where women are not allowed to attend. Moreover, they still have a strong faith on ghost, named *Pidua* who lives in the north of their village adjacent to Bhutan. To get rid of the said evil eye they also try to appease him time to time in the deep forest, otherwise wild elephants and other ferocious animals may destroy their life and agricultural products on the field.¹³

Worship of the river gods is an important part of Toto's religious life and folk beliefs. The Totos worshipped the major rivers of the district in connection with their '*piche-ko-hwa*' (long trade tours). Besides worship of some large rivers like Teesta and Torsha the Totos offer regularly worship or penance to one waterspot and fifteen streamlets, which located within the territory of Totopara. The Totos offer worship or

penance to the deities of the streamlets to save themselves from the curse of these rivers.¹⁴

Similarities and differences religious system between the Totos and non- Totos

In comparison to other religious thoughts, the Toto religion is very simple. The Totos worship without image. They have a few myths in connection with cosmology and activities of the deities. The deities of the Totos are both benevolent as well as malevolent in nature. They belong to the supernatural world. Most of the Toto deities are denoted by a piece of rock, tree, hill, a water spot and river and rivulets surrounding their habitat. The Totos used to live in their traditional world of religious, which again is under the grip of supernatural and superstitious beliefs. Pig or chicken sacrifice is an essential part of the religious festivals of the Totos. The worship or penances of the Totos are very expensive and it causes of their indebtedness and poverty. They worship other gods besides the river Gods. The very motif of worship of the river Gods by the Totos is similar to that of *Teestabudir Puja* (deity of river Teesta, who denoted by an old woman), Which is widely observed by the local people of North Bengal.¹⁵ The difference is that the *Teestabudi* is both malevolent as well as benevolent in nature, while the river Gods of the Totos in most cases are malevolent and revengeful in nature.

Impact of modernity on Totos religious activities

Due to Globalization, the religious life of the Totos has undergone many changes. The impact of modern civilization has reached to the grassroots level of the Toto society. As a result, various simplifications have been taking place in every field of human religion as well as the Totos. In the past, Toto's *Omchu Puja* was held for a full five days, now due to financial reasons, the festival lasts for only three days. On the other hand, their *Mayuu Puja* used to be held for nine days but now it is held for only five days. In the past, almost every Toto family used to spend at least 15 kg of rice (corn rice) and 11 fowls. Now, for financial reasons, Toto's religious rites have been relaxed. Those who are financially well off spend according to their traditional customs as before. On the other hand, those who have financial problems offer worship according to their financial situation. There is no obligation to perform the rites of worship.

Earlier, every family of Totos used to leave their homes and come to the premises of *Demsa* (worship place). They would stay here for full five or nine days and return home after worshipping *Kaleshwar*. Now no one stays here for five or nine days. Earlier, Toto men and women used to dance to their traditional songs in separate rows in religious festivals. But nowadays they are seen dancing to modern Bengali, Hindi and Nepali songs along with traditional dance songs. Not only that, on the occasion of religious festivals, night music festivals are held in Totopara and local artists as well as outsider artists are hired to perform songs.¹⁶

Religious festivals and culture are the identity of the people of each community. However, in some cases, similarities and differences can be observed in the religious customs and practices of one community with another. The Totos continues to carry religious beliefs and festivals with considerable devotion. Although there has been a lot of simplification in their religious affairs and there has been a relaxation in the observance of religious rites, only time will tell how long they will be able to maintain their own traditions. Because of the way globalization is spreading everywhere, it is

very difficult to maintain the uniqueness of anything from the direct and indirect effects of modernity. Currently, the number of Nepali community in Totopara is increasing rapidly. The trend of mixed culture is increasing at Totopara. As a result, the Totos are facing an existential crisis. In this case, if proper government initiatives are not taken, the Toto, a small primitive tribe of West Bengal will be lost their identity.

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