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## Socio-Economic Changes among the Toto Community in Modern Times

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### Abstract

*We all know that Totos are the smallest tribe of West Bengal. Geographically the village Totopara is located under Madarihat Police Station of Alipurduar district of West Bengal. The village Totopara is intercepted by twelve streamlets. The Census 1901 indicates that the total number of Totos were only 171. The present numbers of Totos are 1642. Only 1471 persons are increased during this period. They living isolated in their tradition bound life pattern for a long time. Now they are involved them within a network of a new socio- economic environment causing a breach with their attachment to traditions. Though the present period can be marked as the period of rapid progress, at the same time it can also be marked as the period of serious problems creating crisis of social identity and disintegration. Due to the modernization of their village, they suffered from some problems like population growth, land alienation and unemployment. With the collapse of the traditional structure, it has devolved upon the educated Toto tribal youths to find out a way for the survival of their community. Since the beginning of period of progress of the Totos the Government of West Bengal to taken various programme and projects for the socio- economic development of the Totos, besides this Government projects, there are several voluntary organizations have executed different developmental schemes for the socio- economic upliftment of the Totos.*

**Keywords:** Totos, ethnic diversity, Panchayati Raj, Demsha, Latchi-Jangoa

### Introduction

Alipurduar district is the land of ethnic diversity which reflected in its multi-ethnic and multiracial population that together forms a multicultural and multidialectal variation. Alipurduar district is the land of both the Mongolian and the Dravidian people. The Dravidians are widespread in the tea garden areas and Mongolians in the forest, villages and hill areas. Alipurduar district major population consist the both of the races. We all know that *Totos* are

the smallest tribe of West Bengal. Geographically the village Totopara is located under Madarihat Police Station of Alipurduar district of West Bengal.

### **Tribal Group of Alipurduar District**

As per the records of backward class welfare office: The races are: (1)Asur (2)Baiga (3)Badla, Bediya (4)Bhumij (5) Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, Tibetan, Yolmo (6)Birhor (7)Berjia (8)Chakma (9)Chero (10)ChikBaraik (11)Garo (12)Gond (13)Gorati (14)Hajang (15)Ho (16)Karmali (17) Kharwar (18)Khond (19)Kisan (20)Kora (21)Korwa (22)Lepcha (23)Lodha, Kheria, Kharia (24)Lohara (25)Magh (26)Mahali (27)Mahli (28)Malpahariya (29)Mech (30)Mru(31)Munda (32)Nagesia (33)Oraon (34)Pahariya (35)Rabha (36)Santhal (37)SauriaPahariya (38)Savar (39)Limbu (40)Tamang. ([www.adibasikalyan.govt.in](http://www.adibasikalyan.govt.in) Last accessed 29/05/2022)

Among the forty (40) tribal groups three groups considered as the particularly vulnerable tribal group in the West Bengal i.e. *Savar*, *Birjia* and *Toto*. *Toto* is a heritage and isolated tribal group residing only in a small village called 'Totopara' at Madarihat block under Ballalguri Gram Panchayat in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. Geographically location of Totopara is 89°20'E 26°50'N. Totopara is located at the foothill of Himalaya near to the border line between West Bengal and Bhutan, 23km away from the Madarihat Block Office.

Anthropologist agree that *Toto* culture and dialects is totally unique to the tribe and clearly distinguished from the other mongoloid race people with small eyes, flat nose, broad square cheeks, thick lips and black iris. Hodgson and Grierson classified the *Toto* dialects belongs to Tibeto- Burman family of sub-Himalayas groups. *Toto*'s were at the border line of becoming extinction in the year 1901. The population was 172. But the government safeguard measures and outsider help to pressure and conserve their unique heritage and also help to population growth. The population has increased in 1951, census was 321. In the year 1971, the population was 544. In 1981 the population was 721. 1991 their population was 927. In 2001 the census report states the growth 1195. In 2011 the population increased up to 1387 ([www.census2011.co.in](http://www.census2011.co.in)), last accessed on 29/05/2022) at present in 2024 the population increased to 1642 (As per record of Madarihat BDO office of Alipurduar).

**Households and Livelihoods of Totos** The entire land of Totopara measures 1,996.96 acres. In *Puja Gaon*, lives 24 families, *Panchayat Gaon* consist of 35 families and *Mandal Gaon*

consist of 28 families, *Dhumchi Gaon* consist of 37 families. The family hold the land of 333 acres as used for residence and cultivation. Totopara also has the settlement of Nepali people. The hilly streams are the main source of water.

Toto house or hut is called *Daisa*, made up of bamboo, catechu log and dry grass or straw. Generally, the hut measures 15'×22' and consist of open balcony. All parts of the house have their own name i.e. roof called *Ketraibu*, floor is called *Chepae*, pole is called *Gubaiten*, Wall is called *Badaie*, window is called *Chebyn*, door is called *Lapun*, stairs called *Kaibu*. In traditional Toto huts no metal nail or iron nail required. They use grass-rope or oodal tree bark to tie up the joints. The traditional huts are made by community people without any labour charges. But at the present time the traditional house or hut has vanished; only few replicas exist in the Totopara. In present time community-based house making is rare to observe.

Once upon a time *Totos* used the natural elements as home appliance. The water pot they called it –*Patong*, salt pot made of bamboo is called *PA-TO*, bamboo bucket-*SA-TI*, wood vessel- *PA-PAI*, and wood dish are called- *SIN-BRA*. These ancient or primitive appliances now become useless. Metal dish and other have taken place beside the antiques. At present *Toto* community used modern home appliances. Solvent Family have used Freeze, Rice cooker, liquid petroleum gas, T.V, music system and android Mobile also. Some family have dish T.V also.

Traditional male members of *Toto* community wear *Gappo* or *Gado*. Its looks like the male dress of Bhutanese. Female traditional dress is *zuia* or *mera*. It's the same to Bhutan traditional dress. But at the present female wear main stream dress and male also wear the main stream dress. Female of *Toto* tribe are good weaver. But now the handlooms have vanished from their society.

All kinds of flesh, roots, tuber and grain particularly maruwa, kawun, maiyuu, rice, wheat, are the staple food of *Toto* people. They never used oil and spice in their food. They used only boiled foods to eat or they roast the flesh or all kinds of fishes they consume. But at the present time they are habituated to eat rice, vegetables, roti, puri, fast food, and spicy food. The *Toto* used tuber as food. These are *Dang-Nin*, *KAI-Rin*, *Bu-Rin*, *Laira*, *Laka*, *Dhunsu*, *Dakahe*, *Acharin*, etc. Every tuber used as a staple food items. *Totos* also used fern plants as food the edible food turn plant is *Sin-Sai*, some wild creeper plant *Manu-Sai*, *Mai-Roon*, *Churu-Sai*, *Kerangla-Sai*, *Ber-Sai*, used as a food item. *Toto* also used the shoot of bamboo plant they

called it *Chin-Sai*. To make the bamboo edible process being applies for this. The edible wild fruit they used are *Ne-Ras*, *Mai-So*, *Woa-Se (fig)*, *Ja-Se*, *Yokun-Se* (Bengali-Latke). Toto are fond of chewing beetle leave and areca nut. Smoking and tobacco is not rare to them. Male or female both chew beetle leave and areca nut. Beside the areca and beetle nut they also chew some wild nuts such as Ram Gua, etc. Toto's are fond of drinking *EU*. *EU* is handmade liquor. It is also a part of this cultural and social bonding. In every occasion or ritual Toto's used *EU*. Toto prepare four kinds of *EU*. (1) *Kaun* (a kind of millet) used to prepare *Zonka-EU*, (2) *Marua* (a kind of millet) used to prepare *Naybay EU-Garko*, (3) A kind of Tuber called *Dhunu* (Semal Kanda) used to prepare *Losinka-Dhumse-EU*, (4) Distillation of germinated grain called *Kalini-Putku-EU*.

### **Cultural Identities of Totos**

*Toto*'s have their own language called *Toto* language or *Toto* dialect. Their language or dialects are classified by Hodgson and Grierson under the Tibeto-Burman language. Their language has been identified by UNESCO as critically endangered speaks 1642 people in the world. But the *Toto* can speak Bengali, Hindi, Nepali and English. Now *Toto* language is heavily influenced by Nepalese and Bengali. Most of the people can speak Bengali, Nepali, Hindi and even some *Totos* can write English too.

*Toto* community worship and festival divided into three segments- (1) Community based worship, (2) Clan wise worship and (3) Family worship. *Toto* community worship in season wise- In rain they worship- *Aanchu*, during winter they worship- *Yon-You* and in spring period they worship- *Sardy*. In all the festival very community member must present in *Dhems*a (*Dhems*a is a community base cultural centre) and participate in the rituals. In *Dhems*a there are two drum, named (1) *Cheegaimu* and (2) *Mugaimu*. Very *Toto* tribe respect the drum. The drum only used in the festivals of *Totos* in the *Dhems*a. The two drum are strictly prohibited to make sound outside of *Dhems*a. The drum plays only in the name of God *Sanja*. Generally same clan community worship it jointly in the interval of 2 years or 5 years. They sacrifice cattle during the worship. The family members worship the different God or Goddess. The worships are conducted inside the house or outside the house. Inside the house they worship- *Chaisun*, *Jerong*, *Kobay*, *Sanka*, etc. Outside the house they worship- *Satring*, *Ziding*, *Kung-Re*, *Bagaigan*. *Nu-chu* is the earth God, *Paduwa* is the hill God. They also worship the rivers and rivulets. They also worship the rock and trees.

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Toto family are nuclear type but joint family is not rare. Monogamy is common form of marriage among the community. Generally, two kinds of marriage notice in the community (i) *Taborehi* means marriage among negotiation (ii) *Tai-Pawa* means live together but inform both the family members. Widow marriage also accepted in the Toto community. No dowry system notices among their marriage system. But at the present period love marriage also notice. Divorce is very rare among the community. But any couple want to get separated from each other than the *Kai-Ji* takes the last decision. Now-a-days *Toto* community also accept the inter-caste marriage which was strictly prohibited few years ago. At present 46 boys and girl marriage is inter-caste. For example: *Toto* boy marry with Rajbangsi girl. *Toto* girl marry with Nepali boy.

After the independence, the first education light enlightens by non-government organisation. Mr. Jogen Sarkar took the initiative to educate Toto. In 1962 Mr. Santosh Bhattacharjee pressurised the Toto child to start their education. But at that period *Totos* are not able to understand Bengali dialects. But the school was running. After that Mr. Ghanprasad Sharma joined the school, he knew Bengali and Nepali. The *Totos* were familiar to Nepali language, so the school started running smoothly. Miss Devi Toto was the first child who had joint the school. Ravi Toto was the first student who have completed 4<sup>th</sup> standard in 1966. Mukta Ram Toto successfully completed 8<sup>th</sup> standard in 1975. Gouri Toto was the first female who have completed 8<sup>th</sup> standard from Dhanpati Toto Memorial School. First madhyamik pass out female was Suchana Toto 2003. First graduate female was Rita Toto in 2010. In 1991, Sanjit Toto became the first graduate among them. The percentage of literacy is increasing among the *Toto* tribe day by day. The average literacy rate is 67.871% among *Totos*. The percentage of male literacy is higher than female literacy. The male literacy rate is 75.631%. And 59.421% in the literacy rate among female. At present every child of Toto runs towards school. No dropout is noticed. In 2016, total 25 Toto student pass out higher secondary. Three completed their master degree and now 16 are studying their Bachelor Degree.

The *Totos* were nomad once. Hunting and food gathering was their profession. They learn to cultivate and start cultivating in jhum system. Up to 1968, *Toto* community grow paddy in the bank of Torsa River. But at the present time they cultivate within their kitchen garden. They grow marua, some kind of vegetables maize. Male and female both work hand. Head loader is common among them. Head loader means carrying goods on head. Maximum population are

labour class. They work in plantation garden or orange orchard in Bhutan. Thirty-three (33) Toto people do the government job. Beside the government job, business, whole seller, contractor, cycle maker, pork seller, poultry farmer, cattle rearing, boulder supplier, can driver, grocery seller, cattle trader. These kinds of profession Toto people acquired. Areca nut and black pepper, ginger, cardamom are the economy crops of Totopara.

### **Institutions and Authority of Totos**

There are thirteen (13) clan in Toto community among them five are in majority. They are: (1) Budu-Bei, (2) Boudu-Bei, (3) Banga-Bei, (4) DhiringChanko-Bai, (5) Nurinchenko-Bei, (6) Mantro-Chei, (7) ManchinChei (8) Nube-Bei (9) Rekonji-Bei (10) Nischanko-Bei (11) Degbei (12) Badanga (13) JantroBei. Every clan have their own *kuldevta* to whom they respect and worship. Besides the thirteen clans, there are ten sub clans also exist in *Toto* community.

At the top of the village organization of the *Totos* is a general council called '*Latchi-Jangoa*'. According to the traditional social custom of the *Totos*, an individual attaining adulthood is automatically included as the member of the '*Latchi-Jangoa*'. In exceptional cases the eldest son of a family may substitute his father even though he is not 18 years old. This '*Latchi-Jangoa*' or the community council is the supreme decision-making body of the Toto community headed by the '*Subba*' or '*Kazi*'. The religious organization of the *Totos* is headed by the *Subba* or the spiritual head of the Toto community. He is also entrusted to the office of *Kazi* of the village. Thus, he has two-fold duties, holding the office of the spiritual head and the post of judge. To run the society smoothly, *Totos* created the 5 (five) post i.e. *Kai-je* (priest), *Gappu* (settlement of the land dispute or judge), *Panchayat*, *Pao* and *Nam-Pao*. These are the respectable post of *Toto* society. Each post has its own function and power. Functions of the post are like: *Kai-je* (priest) - They determine the day and time of period of occasion. Beside these he plays the vital role to conduct marriage, he also organised the judgement system. The *Gappu* is the second most important person the '*Subba*' in the traditional Toto village set-up. He is responsible for supervision over the secular affairs of the village. Accompanied by the village elders he settles the disputes related to land, collection of capitation tax, quarrels among villagers etc. After the annexation of the village by the British Govt. the '*Gappu*' was entrusted

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with the task of collection of capitation tax and *Panchayat* is the assistant of Kai-je and *Gappu*. *Pao* plays a vital role in all the worship and festival. He also plays the vital role in the naming ceremony of Toto's infant or after the birth of Toto's children. *Nam-Pon* – He is a mediator; he announces the time period of any festival or worship among the *Toto* society. But at the present time some post such as *Panchayat* and *Nam-Pon* abolish.

Few decades ago, *Toto*'s were dependent upon the *Pao* for treatment. *Pao* considered as an herbal doctor or *Kabiraj*. He provides herbal medicines to *Toto* community people. *Pao* also conducted *jhar-phuk*. *Toto* community believe that diseases are caused by evil spirits and often they sacrifice cattle to satisfy the evil spirits. But now day's things have changed. They understand diseases are caused by virus and bacteria. They go to a doctor for treatment now. Some common diseases are ammonia, cold, malaria, T.B, jaundice, typhoid, fever etc. High blood pressure and sugar or diabetes also noticed in the community. Few decades ago *Toto* tribe use natural element as a diligent. The bark of *Sal* tree they collect and burn. The ash they collect and use to clean their cloth and body parts. They also collect the wild banana plant tuber and dry it up on sunlight. After then the dry tube burn and collect the ash. These ashes apply for body wash and clean clothes. Now a day most of them are using soap, detergent, etc for their daily needs.

### **Some changes in traditional administration of Totos**

The traditional organization is definitely under stress at present and is also undergoing fast changes particularly because of the introduction of *Panchayat* system and Parliamentary voting practices. After the introduction of *Panchayati Raj* institution *Totopara* came in the Jurisdiction of the *Panchayati Raj* Institution. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, it is made mandatory to introduced *Panchayati Raj* Institution in all over India except some scheduled areas. From the very beginning *Totopara*, the village of *Totos* was under the *Panchayati Raj* Institution. At present day *Panchayati Raj* Institution is called the vehicle of the rural development. All of the Central and State government projects and schemes are now implemented by the *Panchayati Raj* Institution in rural India. As same most of the developmental programmes and projects of *Totopara* are now implemented by the *Panchayati Raj* Institution. But nonetheless they are not completely extinct and sometimes both the old and the new function simultaneously making adjustments and compromises between them. Previously *Subba* was entitled to get one day's free labour from each family of the *Totos* during the farming operation and domestic help. To

some extent the government has also accommodated these practices within the fold of a changed situation. The *Subba*, and *Gappu* are exempted from rendering any free labour which the common *Totos* are obliged to provide to the Forest Department for five to six days annually for cleaning the jungles along the international boundary lines.

The *Totos* were left outside the preview of modern medical treatment till the country was free from British rule. Roy Burman (1957) mentioned that *Totos* are used indigenous treatment system. Even after the introduction of modern medical the *Totos* are much attached to their traditional practices of exorcism. The Baidangis or Exorcists still now play an important role among the *Totos*. The Exorcists use to put marua or mim-be in a flatebasket called cohering to ascertain the nature of the disease, the name of the deity or sprit responsible for it, and also the particular 'Sangai-Lawmei' (Penance) to be performed to appease the engaged deity or spirit. A Baidangi also prep aired folk- medicines from the locally available herbs. Dr. AshisDutta introduced the modern medicines among the *Totos* in 1956. In 1967 the Swedish Mission established a dispensary at Totopara and appointed a compounder. As a result the health situation of Totopara slightly improved. One Homeopathy doctor was posted by the Government at Totopara. But Homeopathy treatment not popularized between Totos for their lifestyle. At present there is one Primary Health Centre in Totopara. But introduction of modern medicine in Totopara the *Totos* still remain confined within the world of their traditional superstition due to lack of sincere and sympathetic efforts by the modern medical practitioners and welfare organizations. One thing is interesting to observe that the importance of the office of the *Subba* or *Gappu* is on the decline because much of their power or functions are gradually being usurped by the newly emerged institution of Constitutional Panchayat.

The '*Demsha*' was used in past for their annual worship and also as an assembly and court house for the disposal of intra community litigations. Two sacred drums are preserved there for being used during the performance of worship and also for calling the people to assembling or raise an alarm when necessary. The beating of these drums on occasions other than above or for fun is strictly prohibited. In recent years the traditional '*Demsha*' of the *Totos* has been replaced by a brick-built house with corrugated sheet roofing signalling a major departure from the past when it was customary to use only the locally available natural and craftsmanship for the construction of the *Demsha*. But *Demsha* is still play some important role in *Toto* society.

As a particularly vulnerable tribal group the *Totos* are intimately related to their surrounding natural environment. They were solely dependent on the mercy of nature in the past, with their pre- modern technology and primitive outlook. *Totos* are still highly dependent on various folk-beliefs. As animists they believe that each of the natural beings has got a soul or spirit. But after the introduction of modern administrative system and education eventually now believe the same. But due to the impact of modern education, some educated *Totos* are trying to out of this belief.

In *Toto* traditions *Subba* and *Gappu* are invited to participate in the marriage ceremony. On the day of marriage ceremony, the couple would be given new name in presence of *Subba* and *Gappu*. This has been for a long time an important part of the *Toto* marriage ceremony. But at present this ceremonial naming is losing its importance particularly in the case of educated persons. In case of an educated person his or her name is registered in admission book of the Primary School or admits card of Secondary examination is identified to everyone by the particular name. On the other hand, for the implementation of various developmental schemes, the name of a person once registered in the government record is taken as final for his future identity. As, such the importance of the ceremonial name has decline. It is a custom that, a *Toto* couple generally starts a separate household after marriage. This is the important pre-condition for getting the membership of the '*Latchi- Jangoa*', the General Council of the community. At the same time in the extended family the father leaves the dwelling house for the *Jhoom* house after the marriage of the eldest son. At present due to the modernization and also the implementation of the government housing schemes, which changed the housing pattern of the *Totos*, the traditional custom of the *Toto* community has been changed.

### **Conclusion**

Since the beginning of period of progress of the *Totos* the Government of West Bengal has taken various programme and projects for the socio- economic development of the *Totos*. Besides these Government projects, there are several voluntary organizations who have executed different developmental schemes for the socio- economic upliftment of the *Totos*. Bharat Mahajati Mandali one of the voluntary organizations of Totopara was works for spreading education among *Totos*. Swedish Mission, Cooch Behar had played an important role for the modernization of *Totos* and their socio- economic development. The *Toto Kalyan Samity* of educated *Toto* youths has taken initiative for the development of the *Totos*. Apart

from this voluntary organization at present there are so many non- governmental organization are engaged for the development of the *Toto* communities. The introduction of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural administration in India, Gram Panchayat has become the most powerful institution in connection with the socio- economic activities of the village Totopara. At the initial stage of the modern Panchayati Raj Institution after independence the centre of power has shifted in favour of the Panchayat office bearers. At present the emergence of participatory development in rural India people are directly engaged in developmental process. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act has made it mandatory for people's participation in developmental process. So, now *Totos* are directly engaged with the developmental process of Totopara, which rapidly changed their traditional institutional practices and progress to the modern society. It is the high time to rethink, so that they may sustain with their own culture and tradition with in the periphery of modernity.

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