

The Route To The Root: Exploring The Socio-Cultural Evolution Of The “Tusu Porob”

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Abstract:

This paper explores the socio-cultural evolution of Tusu Porob, a major harvest festival observed by the Kurmi, Santhal and other communities of the Rarh region across West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. It studies the origin of the festival, the etymological history of the word “Tusu,” and the cultural practices associated with the month-long celebration from Aghrahayana to Makar Sankranti. The paper analyses Tusu as a fertility-centred agrarian festival rooted in paddy cultivation, communal worship, song, dance and ritual immersion. It also examines folk narratives surrounding Tusu, including stories of Tusu as a historical or legendary female figure, and highlights the role of unmarried girls in preserving this oral tradition. By connecting ritual practices, folk songs, marriage customs and regional variations such as Tusho-Tusholi Broto, the paper argues that Tusu Porob reflects the intersection of agrarian life, gendered devotion, folk memory and evolving community identity.

Keywords: Tusu Porob; Rarh Region; Harvest Festival; Folk Tradition; Kurmi Community; Gender and Ritual

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“Tusu Parob,” a harvest festival, is one of the three major festivals celebrated by the members of the Kurmi, Santhal and other communities of the Rarh region in West Bengal, Orissa, and Jharkhand. The other two important festivals are “Karam” and “Bandna.” It is annually celebrated by the women of the community, starting from the middle of November, and continuing till the middle of January. It follows the Bengali calendar, starting from the last day of the month of “Aghrahayana” to the last day of the month of “Poush,” culminating on “Makar-Sankranti,” which is the last day of the month of “Poush.” According to Gopendrakrishna Bosu, in various areas of 24 Pgs., Howrah, Nadia and so on, various people worship “Tush-Tushali,” which has a resemblance with the “Tusu” Festival. It is possible that the change in spelling “Tusu” (the festival) or “Tushu” (the one celebrated in Howrah, Nadia and so on) is due to the dialect and socio-cultural influence, resulting to a change in the nomenclature. While analysing the origin and derivation of the word “Tusu,” Girish Chandra Mohanta (149) stated that the term “moni” is widely used along with the name of a girl child in the Rarh region, such as Sukurmoni, Joimoni, Raimoni, Birmoni, Gangamoni, and so on. Hence, he thought that the word “Tusu” is probably an abbreviated version of the name “Tusumoni,” which might have been derived from the word “Tusmin”. The similar kind of statement is given by Naik (1999) who suggested that the name of “Tushmoni” has gradually changed into ‘Tusmuni’ and then into “Tusu”. The aim and objective of my paper is to analyse the origin of the “Tusu” festival as well as to analyse the cultural aspects associated with it. Furthermore, I intend to study the etymological history of the word “Tusu” as well as the various versions of the “Tusu Parob” or festival that are still practiced. I have self-translated the “Tusu” songs into English.

Tusu is a harvest festival; and the main components of this festival are paddy and rice. After cutting off all the paddy stacks, the last stack that remains in the field is called “*dinimai*”. This “*dinimai*” is Tusu. The head of the family brings the “*dinimai*” from the agricultural field and on that same day the young girls establish Tusu. It marks the beginning of the celebrations of a month-long festival. In his interview, Sadhan Mahato describes it:

“Since Tusu has no structure, we make “*kulungi*” or a hole in the wall. The main ingredients for Tusu are tush or rice husks. Some rice and flowers are placed inside the “*kulungi*.” They (unmarried girls) worship the “*kulungi*” for the whole month in the home altars, in the wall niches decorated with “*alpona*” (designs painted on walls and floors with a semi-liquid paste made of soaked rice). The “*choudal*” is something like *tazia*, but smaller than that, it is made of jute sticks. Inside the “*choudal*”, all the things required for worship are placed, and then carried in a procession for immersion in the river, pond or any water body. (Mani 167)

Choudal or *choural* is used as the vehicle for the immersion of Tusu. This “*choural*” symbolizes the sun, as the Kurmi activist Siripada Bansriar suggested that “*Choural*” is not Tusu. Rather, “*choural*” is the vehicle by

which Tusu could go towards her marital family from her father’s house. “*Chou*” suggested four sides while “*Ural*” means flying. “*Choural*” suggested that something that moves in all direction, such as the sun rays. According to the tradition of the Kurmis, it is a great pride to send their daughters to her marital family after her puberty and menstruation. It suggested that she was capable of pregnancy and to bear a child. “Tusu” is worshipped with this same feeling and Tusu finally leaves the house for immersion.



(Image 1, Women celebrating “Tusu Porob”, Source: Google)

The “Tusu” festival is generally an event of dance and song, generally conducted by the unmarried girls of the community. The festival lasts generally for a month, followed by song and dance programmes in the evening. One must note that communities like Kurmi, Santhals and son on are agricultural communities and paddy is their main crop for cultivation. Generally, they harvest their paddy during October and November, while the threshing and de-husking of paddy is usually done in December and January. After the de-husking, they get a chance for leisure. Interestingly, the *Makar Sankranti* or *Tusu* festival falls in the month of January when the de-husking of paddy is done. The husk of paddy is called ‘*tuso*’ in the local language and is one of the most important materials offered to goddess Tusu, during the Tusu festival. Nail explained that the term ‘Tusu’ might have been derived from the word “*tuso*.” Apart from this *tuso*, the Kurmis as well as Santhals offer ‘*goboro*’ (cowdung), turmeric, brass, *gendu* (marigold) flower (*Tagetes erecta* L.) to Tusu. Hence, the word ‘*tuso*’ is important in understanding the etymological significance. The people of the region gather “the *gobora*” or the cow-dung in a pit, prior to the cultivation of land for sowing. They remove the cow-dung from the pit and use it as a compost for cultivation. It is used as a source of bio-fertilizer. Hence, the association of “the *gobora*” with Tusu festival has great significance. Among the Kurmi society, the process of searching a bride for marriage begins from the *Makar Sankranti* which is called “*Aakhan Yatra*.” During the “*Tusu Parob*,” the unmarried girls of the community gather at the place of “*Tusu Bhasani Mela*” (a place where people gather to immerse Tusu), sing various songs composed relating to Tusu and dance in a joyful mood. It gives a good chance to the prospective grooms to select their brides. According to the tradition of the Kurmi community, the Kurmis select their bride at the fair and then place their proposals before the parents of their selected brides. “*Aakhan yatra*,” or the marriage season of the Kurmis begin from the “*Tusu Bhasani Mela*.” In fact, the Kurmis are not involved in marriage prior to the “*Makar Sankranti*.” It must be noted that “*Makar Sankranti*” is further related to the fertility cult.

I. Folk-History:

Among some of the popular folk stories associated with the “Tusu” festival, two are very popular. I have tried to mention them in brief.

(i) “Tusu” - A Beautiful Kurmi Girl from Jharkhand:

It is believed that some Muslim soldiers came to Mayurbhanj in 18th century AD during the rule of a Nawab in Bengal. The Kurmis and Santals of the region collectively opposed their desperate effort to kidnap to kidnap a beautiful Kurmi girl from Jharkhand, and the matter was placed before the *darbar* (hall of audience) of the Nawab. The Nawab punished those soldiers and returned Tusu to her parents. However, the society refused to accept her. Hence, Tusu was forced to commit suicide by drowning into the river *Damodor*. The female members of the society specially felt very desolate and had sympathy for Tusu. Gradually, the annual showcase of sympathy soon became a tradition. (Mohanta 7).

(ii) “Tushmuni”, the daughter of Birbal:

According to Uddab Charan Naik (1999), there is historical evidence behind the celebration of this Tusu festival. About seven hundred years back, Raja Ratan Singh ruled Chittor. Birbal was his son, who had a very beautiful girl named ‘*Tushmuni*.’ However, Alauddin Khilji’s lust and rage forced “*Tushmuni*” to commit suicide in order to protect her chastity. In fact, “*Tushmuni*” had committed suicide on the day of “*Makar Sankranti*.”

Since that day, the people of the Mohanta community had tried to glorify the act of “Tushmuni” through the festival of “Tusu.”

II. The Celebration During The “Tusu Porob”:

The figure of “Tusu” deity is very beautiful and has a resemblance with Goddess Lakshmi. She has a crown, often made of tin-foil, a lotus in each hand, and various decorated jewellery. Sholapiths and decorated papers are used to create a halo for the deity. The figures are often small, measuring around one foot in height. The community members begin their rituals and prayers from the “Sankranti” night of the Bengali month of “Aghrahasan” and continues throughout the Bengali month of “Poush,” coming to an end on the day of “Makar Sankranti.” Generally, “Tusu” puja is not conducted during the day. Although the community members come together to celebrate the “Tusu” puja in various localities, individuals always worship their personal “Tusu” deities in the household.

In certain areas, goddess “Tusu” is worshipped either in a village temple or in an open place at the centre of the community. It must be an open place and could be accessed by all the members of the community. Generally, the idol of goddess “Tusu” is placed on a raised platform or on a “kansa” (copper) plate. The idol placed at the centre of the community is generally bigger in size. Every evening, the unmarried girls carry their individual idols of goddess “Tusu” and come together for performing various rituals associated with the “Tusu Parob.” Generally, various offerings are placed in front of the larger and common “Tusu” idol, which include Rice-flaked jaggery, fruits, vegetables and so on. Next, candles are lighted around the raised platform and the women start singing together, as a part of the ritual. The lyrics of one such song is:

*“Aamra j Ma thaapi Aghan Sankraitye go,
Tel dilam, solte dilam, swargye dilam bati go.”* (Basu 137)
(We pray our Mother Tusu in Aghrahasan-Sankranti
We offer oil, candle, and worship the heavenly beings.)



(Image 2, “Tusu Porob” celebration, Source: Google)

The ritual of the “Tusu Parob” goes on throughout the night. Generally, the songs are composed by the pastoral poets. Another popular “Tusu” song, suggesting the night-long celebration is:

*“O Bhai Malati, aajke Tusu gaan gaibo sara raati,
Prethomete amra sobai lo, korbo Tusu Aarati.
Abala, Sarala asbe lo, aar asbe Bharati.
Tusu jagorone amra lo, poabo sara raati.”* (Basu 137)
(Hail sister Malati, tonight we will sing Tusu’s song.
At first, we will worship goddess Tusu.
Abala, Sabala and sister Bharati will be here,
We will sing all night and pray goddess Tusu.)

In fact, Gopendrakrishna Bosu wrote that during the “Tusu Parob,” all songs were not dedicated to goddess Tusu. Many songs were about the domestic affairs and the daily lives of the community members. Songs were often dedicated to other village deities. In various parts of Medinipur and Bankura, a certain characteristic feature could be noted in the music of the Tusu songs. It has a uniqueness and probably reminds us of the “Ramprasadi” and the “Bidyasundar Yatra” songs, which are, at times, remind us of the tunes of “Kirtaniya”. On the other hand, in various parts of Purulia and Rarh region, the “Tusu” songs bear a resemblance with the Santali songs.

Another interesting feature of “Tusu Parob” is that often the women consider goddess Tusu as a member of their household or a relative. At some places, goddess Tusu is worshipped as a daughter of the community. In one of the “Tusu” songs, the language is informal in tone and has a tone of direct communication with a family member:

*“Amar Tusu dakhin jaabe. Khida pele Khaabe ki?
Aan go Tusur gayer gamcha – bedhe di Jilipi.”*
(What will our Tusu eat if she is hungry?
Bring Tusu’s gamcha, let me tie a Jalebi.)

Again, in another song, the singer requests goddess Tusu to enjoy a fish-meal as a daughter:

*“Haate gelam, Bajare gelam, kine aanlam rui-pona;
Bhalo kore kheyo Tusu, golaye jyano kata bede na.”*
(I went to the market to buy a Rohu-fish;
Be careful of the fishbone Tusu and enjoy the dish.)

Such conversation with a goddess is only possible when she is considered as a close relative or a daughter of the house. Furthermore, there is often a musical-duel between the members of different communities to desperately uphold the beauty of their respective Tusu idols. One such popular song sung during the “Tusu Parob” is:

*“Hamader Tusu muri bhaje, saat kopater bhitri,
Toder Tusu jongli masi, Anchal pete loy muri.”* (Basu 138)
(Our Tusu puffs up rice within the household,
Your Tusu is uncivilized and begs for the puff-rice.)

There is always a deliberate musical-battle between various village-communities to uphold the virtues and beauty of their respective “Tusu” deities. To fully understand the nature of such musical battles, one can take reference from the Durga Pujas in and around Kolkata. Various societies and clubs are almost engaged in a cold-war to showcase their creative skills and thematic superiority during the Durga Puja.

Besides the musical-duels, “Tusu-Parob” is also known for the coming together of various communities. In fact, there is a ritual among the community members to arrange a wedding between their “Tusu” deities. Although both the “Tusu” idols are of a goddess, it does not prevent the girls from arranging a marriage ceremony. Such a “queer” marriage celebration is a rare event in the history of Bengali folk tradition. Surprisingly, inverting the social norms, the mother of the “Tusu” considered to be the “husband” arranges a dowry for the mother of the “Tusu” considered to be the “wife.” Despite giving the dowry, the mother of the “Tusu” considered to be the “husband” is subjected to harsh criticism through musical notes.

III. The “Tusho-Tusholi Broto” And Conclusion:

In various parts of 24 Parganas, Nadia, Howrah and other districts, the deity is not always referred to as “Tusu”. Rather, the “Tusu Parob” is known as the “Tusho-Tusholi Broto.” On the day before the “Tusho-Tusholi Broto,” which is generally the day before the “Aghrahyayan-Sankranti”, the women collect “Alochaler Tusho” (the husk of boiled rice seed), cow-dung, mustard flower and “durba” (scutch grass). Next, they prepare one hundred and forty-four “naru” or laddoo “tusho” and the cow-dung. The 144 “naru” is then placed on an earthen pot along with the “durba” as an offering. After the completion of a month-long “Tusho-Tusholi Broto”, those “narus” are immersed in the water.



(Image 3, “Immersion of “Tusu”, Source Google)

The song-offering is:

*“Tusholi gelo bhese, amar Baap-bhai elo hese.
Swami-putro elo hese ba taka-kori elo hese.”* (Basu 139)
(Tusholi is immersed in the water, my father and brother have returned with joy.
My husband and son have returned with a smile and I got my wealth.)

Interesting to note that the song offerings are from the perspectives of a married woman, praying for the well-being of the patriarchs of the family. On the other hand, the women were also concerned about the wealth of the family. In various places, instead of "a naru", women worship "a pot" which is called "a ghot" in Bengali. In various parts of Medinipur, various people come together to celebrate the day of the immersion of the Tusu idol. Around five to seven thousand people come together for the celebration. In certain places, goddess "Sini" is worshipped along with goddess "Tusu." Finally, the "Tusu" idols are immersed in the water with song-offerings.

Various critics believe that the word "Tusu" or "Tusho" may be connected with Goddess Lakshmi as well. The phrase "Tusho" suggested the husk of the paddy. The month of "Poush" is often considered to be the month of harvest and has an integral connection with agriculture and fertility. Furthermore, the "Tusu Porob" is organised at the time of harvest, Hence, many critics believe that Goddess "Tusu" has a resemblance with Goddess Lakshmi. Many even consider Goddess "Tusu" as another form of Goddess Ganga.

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