

# Life-Cycle Rituals of the Totos: A Small Tribe in the Sub-Himalayan West Bengal

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**ABSTRACT:** The present paper is an endeavor to present a brief profile on the life cycle rituals of the Totos, a primitive tribe living since long past in a tiny enclave, Totopara, located at the foothills of the Himalaya in close proximity to Bhutan in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India. This vanishing tribe is one of the most primitive tribal groups (PTGs) of India. The present account on Totos is a modest attempt to delineate the various eccentric traditional socio-cultural and religious practices, some of which are typically unique, associated with the life-cycle rituals observed by the Totos. The authors have also given emphasis to study the trends of change that have occurred in this tribe owing to various internal and external forces playing the role in the sub-Himalayan region. .

## INTRODUCTION

A small isolated tribe known as the Totos has been residing at the foothills of the Himalaya closed to Bhutan in a small village named Totopara in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal since time immemorial. It is said that Totopara is the only place in the world where this tiny group of tribe is concentrated. Totos are one of the most primitive tribal groups of the world and are considered as vanishing tribe with a population strength of 1184 individuals as per 2001 Census Report of Government of India. They have been retaining their many traditional customs, cultural traits, rites and rituals due to their confinement in complete isolation. Their various unique customs and rituals related to their various stages of life are also enduring. A number of researchers have conducted investigations on the various socio-cultural aspects

of the Totos, mentioned may be made of Das ('69), Sanyal ('72), Sarkar ('93), Bhowmick ('94), Bhattacharya ('98), Hossain (2012), among others.

This Indo-Bhutanese Mongoloid stock is not only one of the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) of West Bengal but also among one of the six underdeveloped tribes of the State (Das, '69). . As Mondal (2001) points out, "Only one primitive tribal group the Toto are found in one pocket of North Bengal. They are mainly confined in Totopara, a small village under Madarihat police station of the district of Jalpaiguri which lies between 89°20'2" East latitude and 26°50'2" North longitude. The Totos are considered as not only a primitive tribe but also a small and vanishing tribe of the State." It is believed that these indigenous people have been living in their area for at least seven generations from today and according to the linguistic researches of Dr. Grierson and Prof. S. K. Chatterjee, they speak in Sino-Tibetan language and do not have any script. Most of the youth can

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Speak Bengali and Nepali which are the medium of instruction in the local schools. As Mitra ('51) states, "Excluded from the President of India's list of seven Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal the Totos suffer an anonymity which is wholly underserved. The tribe has the unique distinction of belonging to a very rare race; it lives in only one village in the wide world, has a spoken language of its own and numbers only about 325 souls." Some scholars have conducted research among the Totos, on their culture, society and economy, as by Das ('69); Majumdar ('91, '98); Toto (2001); Hossain (2012); among others.

### DISCUSSION

Life cycle is a typically used metaphor denoting the passageway of a human being through the successive stages of life from birth to death through childhood, adolescence, adult life and old age. With regards to the rites of passage of Indian tribes, Vidyarthi and Rai ('77) have pointed out that the diverse *sanskars*, mostly on the event of bath, marriage and death, are also part of a tribal's life. The parents, elders and friends facilitate him in order to acquire a mate and a ritual of marriage is performed. The songs and dances of marriage enthuse him to the new wedded life. The coming and resent of relatives on the event connect him in a close kinship relation. When he is blessed with a child after a lapse of time, it is the good grace of the spirit and ritual of birth is crucial for propitiating the gods and the ancestors. This is also taken as the wish of spirit when his parents attain old age and depart this life and the ritual of death becomes a must to satisfy the deceased for the benefit of the living members of the family. Therefore, all these *sanskars* lead to the ritualistic socialization of a tribal individual. The mythologies behind the diverse rituals, gods and deities give him a psychological sanction in order to lead his life and behave in the way of his community members. While talking about the life of the tribal, Vidyarthi and Rai ('77) state, "The tribals observe different *sanskars* mainly on three occasions, viz., at birth, marriage and death. A few other *sanskars* like the ceremony to approve socially a man as father of a child (without taking note of the biological factors), name given ceremony, etc., are also observed. Each of these tribal *sanskars* is preceded or followed by a sacrifice of either an egg, fowl or animal. Like Hindus the tribals

also worship and invoke their *kul* or *Gotra devata* (god of clan or lineage), Family deities, *sthan-devata* (god of the place) and *gram devata* (god of the village) during different ceremonies of the *sanskars*. . . . . An individual proceeds from one experience to another in the course of his life, in order to that he may feel himself more and more at one with his people of which he is part. A tribal child (male or female) first experiences all love and affection in the lap of his mother. He is mostly near her or on her back. He learns a few modes of behavior from his elder brothers and sisters who take care of him in their mother's absence and in their leisure hours and in this way he comes in contact with friends, older boys and girls, neighbourhood and so on. He gradually comes of age and gathers new experiences and behaves accordingly. The different rituals or *sanskars* only signify that the individual is being entrusted with certain obligations and responsibilities for his own welfare as well as for the welfare of the community." Therefore, the study of life-cycle means the study of incidents happened in different stages of life of every individual.

#### *Birth Rite of the Totos*

The birth rite of the Totos is very interesting and also strange. They consider children are the reborn of their deceased grandparents or parents or any other immediate kin who dies. With reference to the birth of a child among the tribe of India, Vidyarthi and Rai ('77) point out, "In every tribe of India, we find a certain degree of knowledge about the secret of birth of a child. Though the father and mother are held directly responsible for the birth still the supreme Bonga, Dharmesh or God is supposed to be the sole and ultimate authority. The birth of a child which satisfies the natural eagerness of parenthood is joyful occasion for them, whether the child is male or female. But as the girl in most of the tribal societies of India fetches a bride price for the parents, the father of a female child feels slightly exalted." Generally, there is no any proper care taken during pregnancy among the primitives under study. The pregnant individual is involved in household activities, agriculture, fetching water and also goes to the jungle to collect fuel as she would act before. But before and after delivery about two months are taken intended for the care of the mother. During that time the newly become mother does not go out even her parents' house.

Delivery takes place in the groom's house and during that time relatives including one or two oldest and also experienced women from bride's house come in order to remain present at the house of the groom. One of those women cuts the umbilical cord by a typical knife which is called as '*Lengtosey*' in Toto term. Then the detached umbilical cord is buried into a hole under the ground. After birth up to about a month the husband lives separately outside his wife's room. For the healing of wound, that particular knife is rubbed on the injured area several times for few days. Sanyal ('72) states "After a child is born the mother spins out some thread (*Shang-de*) herself and colours it with turmeric and ties it round the hand of the child. It is usually done on the seventh day. Sometimes on the ninth, eleven or fifteen day this is done. In any of these days the village Chowkidar, a Government employee, or the headman (Mondal) or any priest comes to the house at dawn and gives the child a name.....The Chowkidar, the headman, or the priest, whoever happens to come for the purpose at first, drinks a bowlful of liquor and then the members of the house-hold drink. The child must have a drop in its mouth. Then the child gets the blessings '*Janwalla*' (God be pleased with you). The Chowkidar or the headman or priest moves round the village to tell everyone he meets the name of the new born. In naming the child usually the name of the great grandfather is repeated. " They keep a name given ceremony after seven or nine days or when the umbilical cord is detached from the new born or birth, a name is given by the village priest and consecutively worship is organized on this day which they call '*Madingpapoua*'. For this occasion they clean the baby and dress up the baby new cloths. On behalf of the family where the baby is born, they invite their relatives from different neighbouring villages or places to join the ceremony. This feast period is performed as per their financial status. Usually the financially weak family is not capable to do so while the family who is financially sound performs the activity of feast period which is called '*Badilangpapua*' in their local terminology.

#### *Marriage Rites of the Totos*

Marriage is a societal union in which two adult persons of both sexes are bound together for an eternal

relationship. As Majumder and Madan (1956) state, "Marriage is generally considered a contract by the tribals. This gives rise to a certain pattern of selecting mates which is generally followed when both boys and girls are still adults. Due weight is given to the views of both the boys and the girls in the selection of a partner. The tribal marriage is generally regarded as a civil contract and not a religious sacrament and, therefore, religious solemnization does not take place." Among the Totos the main notion behind marriage is that it is the way by which one can become appreciated in the society. These people are monogamous in nature and possess single spouse at a time throughout the life. The Totos can remarry and remain monogamous again in case of the death of the spouse or divorce although the cases of divorce are hardly found in their society. Despite the fact that this endogamous tribe does not permit exogamy but in few cases exogamy is come about due to fall in love. Preferential cousin marriage is the most prevalent form of marriage practiced by this indigenous people. Mostly cross-cousin marriage is formed among the Totos of Totopara. In case of such marriage, the bride is to be a daughter of either groom's father's sister or groom's mother's brother and vice-versa. Although in some cases, marriages outside cross-cousin were also found. There are two prevalent ways of acquiring a mate found among the Totos, marriage by negotiation and love marriage or marriage by elopement.

Marriage by negotiation is the traditional way of marriage practiced among the primitives. In this case, the parents from the groom side come to the house of the bride first and talk to the bride's parents on the subject of the son's marriage with their daughter and if the bride's parents agree with the groom's parents, then marriage is settled which is called betrothal. But the fixing of date of the ceremony depends completely on the financial capabilities of both the parties. The financially sound family organizes the ceremony instantly whereas the financially weak family or who is unable to do so at the same time due to some unavoidable circumstances like chronic or fatal diseases, heavy work pressure during that time or some other sort of problems at that moment, they take some more times to organize the ceremony. But the duration of time should not be more than one year or

one and a half years and must be before the birth of a first child. Finally, they must have to organize the marriage-ceremony and invite all the villagers along with their relatives for the social recognition of the newly married couple. As Sanyal ('72) points out, "In recent years marriage customs of the Totos have undergone some changes. The father of the son goes to the house of the girl with the proposal of marriage carrying with him some pan-gua. If the marriage is settled either the girl comes away with the father of the groom or she is allowed to stay on with her father till she grows sufficiently older. She then goes to the house of her father-in law and lives with the boy. During her stay in her father's house she may be married elsewhere provided due compensation in the shape of one pitcherful of liquor and rupees five only are paid to the father of the boy. But after the girl comes away to the house of the boy no question of marriage elsewhere arises."

Love marriage or marriage by elopement takes place when two lovers are not allowed to get married by each or either of their parents, they run away and get married. In such case both of their parents' consent does not perform any role. The circumstances of divorce, though very rare among the people under study, when come up in their life, the administrative committee comprising the members of both the families of bride and groom and also the villagers who act as a medium in order to look after the matter when divorce is going to be formed. The committee, at first, give advice to both the groom and bride to compromise each other's mistake or guilty. Next to this step when they come to realize one's guilty, the committee gives punishment to the culprit but if the culprit denies his or her blame, the offender is assaulted and beaten by hand and sticks. After giving such punishment to the offender, ultimately divorce is happened between the couple.

Remarriage is allowable among the Totos in case of both the widower and widow respectively. But in order to remarry, it takes at least one year after the death or separation of the former spouse to get remarried. After the death of the wife, the husband usually marries his deceased wife's younger sister which is commonly known as sororate but in case of the death of the husband, the wife is not permitted to marry her husband's any sibling which is known as

levirate. Therefore, sororate is permitted but levirate is prohibited among the Totos. But it should be worth mentioning here that neither the widow nor the widower is compelled to remarry which is up to their respective choices.

Totos are eligible to keep pre-marital relationship only in case of those who are unmarried and in the meantime are bound and determined to get married with the fixed or same individual. These two persons are socially allowable to keep pre-marital physical relationship between them and also are allowed to live together for a long or short period of time. But they cannot bring new born unless or until a marriage ceremony is organized inviting all the community members at that ceremony as per their norms. Incest marriage is strictly forbidden and it is a taboo among the Totos. In their marriage applying turmeric and cosmetics or any such formalities are not usually maintained. Practice of dowry is absent in this primitive group.

#### *Death Rites of the Totos*

Death is the ultimate ending of the life of an entity. It is one of the expected phenomenon occurred with every individual at a certain point of life due to some certain explicit reason. As Vidyarthi and Rai ('77) observe, "Like other men of the world, the tribal people also have no definite knowledge about the nature of death, but they take it as a mystic terror. They have a conviction that death is an accidental event and the anger of the so-called gods and deities, the ancestral souls, sorcery, witch-craft, etc., are responsible for the same. In the case of suspicious death, the sorcerer or witches are punished directly by beating them to death or indirectly by the magic with the help of special witch diviners.

As in other societies, the tribals also have a set of actions to deal with the death of their people. When a death occurs a series of customs are observed at different stages like before the funeral, after the funeral, etc. All the activities and rituals performed after the death of a person are called death-rites prevailing in a particular community to which the dead belonged. The tribes of India have a pattern of dealing with the dead and various rites associated with it are performed at different stages like: (i) Observances in the house of the deceased; (ii) Mode and place of

disposal of corpse, *viz.*, (a) Cremation, (b) Burial, (c) Exposure, (d) Preservation, (e) Disposal in water; (iii) Mourning period and ceremonies, *i.e.*, mourning rites and purification; (iv) Funeral Feast; (v) Annual death ceremony or Final death ceremony or Ancestor worship.” However, the Totos believe that death occurs as a result of ill-treatment of diseases and malevolent spirit attack. There is a belief regarding the occurrence of death among them that when anybody goes to the hill or mountain or jungle to collect fuel or anything else or goes outside the village where the individual sees any supernatural being in the journey and she or he becomes shocked and afraid dangerously owing to which the person may be died shortly and suddenly after coming back to home.

When the any of the family members first realize the incidence of death of the individual, the news is first informed to the head of the family and gradually others and afterward to the neighbours. At this time, an old man belonging particularly to ‘*Dantrodey*’ clan who is called ‘*Leimy*’ must have to come to utter the word ‘*Dineampura*’ which means that the person is dead. The role of ‘*Leimy*’ is very crucial in this regard. They cannot bury the dead body until the ‘*Leimy*’ comes. The ‘*Leimy*’ along with some neighbours make a ‘*Topa*’ by bamboo stick with the help of which they bring the corpse which they call ‘*Limu*’ in their local term at the burial ground. They place the body on the ‘*Topa*’ without removing the cloths from the corpse or without departing any objects of the individual which she or he had possessed with her or him at the time of death. The four persons either from the family members or from the neighbours and the ‘*Leimy*’ bring the corpse by the ‘*Topa*’ carrying on their shoulders to the burial ground along with a small group of 12-15 people who are the relatives or/and the neighbours of the deceased but among them at least 3-4 individuals must be ‘*Leimy*’ who dig a hole about 2-3 feet depth for lying of the body comfortably by them. After digging the hole the corpse is placed along with a compulsory of some rupees and a meal. In the former days, the Totos had the tendency to burry all the hard earning deposited money, any expensive object or a big amount of money or ornaments of the deceased along with the corpse. The four men give sand on the hole and after fulfilling the hole with sand, some medium to big sized stones of about 1-4 feet are

technically placed around the buried place so that the wild animals cannot take away the dead body from the hole easily.

Pollution period is observed by this primitive. They purify themselves by washing their hands and legs with warm water after returning from the burial ground. This period is observed whole the day by the male members and it lasts up to a week in case of the female members of the family. During these days they feel very mourning. The widow of a deceased person maintains pollution period for about a year obeying some taboos and it is same in case of male but some extra customs are maintained by him, such as he does not use wrist watch, bracelet, he won’t climb the trees and he will carry a stick for one year. Husband or wife, as the case may be, is not permitted to attend any ceremony, festival or occasion and also do not cross any cutting tree or rope and will carry umbrella during this period. With regards to hair, the female can only apply oil but does not comb over it. She is again not allowed to go outside her husband village. She is to refuse all type of ornaments or any objects made of iron. Even she is also prohibited to make up herself with cosmetics and to wear new cloths. The husband is to avoid his hair cutting for one year from the death of his wife.

When one year is over, people belonged to the same community come to the spouse of the deceased and they take the stick away and throw it in the name of the same diseased person. Someone from them also cuts the hair of the widower. On the other hand, the same people also tell the widow to accept the ornaments and break all the taboos. After completion of the pollution period of one year both the widower and the widow are allowed to remarry and lead conjugal life again if the individuals desire to do so.

There is a myth prevail in the Toto society concerning the death. They believe that the soul of the deceased person returns to the house of the deceased through the birth of a newborn and also comes in dream of its widow or widower or parents or any immediate kin of the deceased person. They would believe in the former days that if they fail to burry any objects or things that had regularly been using by the deceased when it was alive, the departed soul of the death enters into its house where it would live and taking the things it goes back.

### CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion marks out the rites and rituals of the Totos marked by three distinct stages of birth, marriage and death. Different socio-religious functions are associated with these three phases of life of the Totos. With the influence of the external world and different forces, the traditional way of thinking and perception of the Totos with reference to their birth, marriage and death is now undergoing a change. In consequence of the impact of different factors like urbanization and modernization some attitudinal changes are now taking place in the society of the Toto tribe. Their notion concerning the birth of a newborn is that the child is a gift of God. Although most of the families call mid-wife for the purpose of child delivery, but in complicated cases the expectant woman is also admitted to the nearby health centre. They are also taking some precaution now before and after delivery of a baby, as advised by the local health-care providers.

It was found that the average age at marriage is around 18 years for the girls and it is about 21 years in case of the boys. Preferential cousin marriage is prevalent among this endogamous primitive tribal group but at the present time they are also getting married with their non-kin groups.

In course of time many traditional customs and rituals of this primitive tribal group have undergone change in consequence of various internal and external factors. They believe today that the death occurs largely due to ill-treatment of diseases. They believe that the departed souls return to their houses through the birth of a new born baby and also believes that it comes through the dream of the widow or widower, or parents, or any other immediate kin of the deceased. This notion among them still prevails that death is an accidental incident which is caused owing to the anger

of the so-called gods and deities. They have a conviction that different ancestral souls, witch-craft, sorcery and the like are responsible for the same. They further believe that the sorcerer or the witches can be punished directly through the practice of magic by the special witch doctors or shamans. However, things are changing as the younger generation is becoming more aware of the societal change around them.

This preliminary observation made on the Toto tribe would be further studied in-depth in due course of time by the authors.

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