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**A PEEP INTO THE LIFESTYLE OF THE ENDANGERED TOTO TRIBE OF JALPAIGURI  
DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL**

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*Article History: Received 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2014, Accepted 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2014, Published 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2014*

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**ABSTRACT**

The Toto tribe residing in Totopara in the Madarihat block at the entrance of Jaldapara National Park of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal has been identified as one of the endangered tribes of India as well as that of the state. They have their distinct socio-economic and cultural peculiarities. Their population count is very low which has been a matter of concern for the survival of the group. This paper is an attempt to identify the constraints of their survival, study their distinctiveness among all other tribal groups of the state and to study the various issues that have contributed to their low population growth. However in recent years with tremendous support of Government and Non-Government Organizations the negative growth rate of the Totos have been controlled to some extent and they have registered a negligible increase in their population count.

*Key words: Primitive tribal group, Socio-economic backwardness, Constraints of survival, Endangered community*

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**INTRODUCTION**

A unit of socio-political organization consisting of a number of families, clans, or other groups who share a common ancestry and culture and among whom leadership is typically neither formalized nor permanent are called Tribes. They have their own distinct social structure, culture and economic activities. Some tribes across the world have come in contact with modern civilisation and have therefore adapted to changing lifestyles while there are some who prefer to live in isolation. The Toto tribe of Madarihat Block of Jalpaiguri District in Northern part of West Bengal is one of the endangered tribes of the state with very low existing population. Though they have come in contact with progressive population of the area but they have maintained a distinct identity of their own with their unique socio-economic and cultural life. This cultural distinctiveness of the Totos has made them distinguishable among all other tribes of West Bengal. They reside in a distinct enclave called Totopara near Jaldapara National Park. The backward economic activities, health problems and low educational status have emerged as some of the grave problems for the Totos which have further contributed to their declining population.

**Objectives of Study**

The study has been initiated to fulfill the following objectives:

- To study the distinctiveness of the Toto tribe among other tribes of the state
- To understand the various social aspects of their life
- To know about their economy and lifestyle
- To understand the intricate elements of their culture
- To assess the hardships and problems faced by them owing to backwardness.

**Area under Study**

The Geographical location of the *Totopara* is 89°20'E and 26°50'N. This village lies 22 kilometres from *Madarihat*, the entrance of the famous *Jaldapara National Park*. The Totos live in the northern edges of this forest. It is surrounded by the foothills of Bhutan to the north, River *Torsha* to the east, River *Titi* and *Titi* reserve forest on the southwest separated by the *Hauri* River. The village of the Totos is about 8.08 km<sup>2</sup>. The area is divided into six Gram or Gaon (Villages) namely: *Panchayatgaon, Mandolgaon, Subbagaon, Mitranggaon, Pujagaon* and *Dumchigaon*.

**DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY**

The work is mainly based on secondary data which has been collected from Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. Innumerable newspaper

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reports, published and unpublished articles, articles in journals, reports by UNESCO have been consulted for the purpose. The available secondary data has been analysed and processed on the basis of which an inference has been drawn. The primary data has been gathered through pre-designed questionnaires meant for the target groups of the Toto tribes in the Jalpaiguri district.

### Tribal Groups of West Bengal

As per the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes), 1950 the following tribes were listed as Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal: 1. Asur, 2. Baiga, 3. Badia, Bediya, 4. Bhumij, 5. Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, Tibetan, Yolmo, 6. Birhor, 7. Birjia, 8. Chakma, 9. Chero, 10. Chik Baraik, 11. Garo, 12. Gond, 13. Gorait, 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. Mal Pahariya, 29. Mech, 30. Mru, 31. Munda, 32. Nagesia, 33. Oraon, 34. Pahariya, 35. Rabha, 36. Santhal, 37. Sauria Paharia, 38. Savar, 39. Limbu and 40. Tamang.

### Toto Tribe of Jalpaiguri District: A Case Study

The Totos popularly known as 'forest dwellers' are a primitive Indo-Bhutanese tribe residing in a small enclave called *Totopara* in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Toto is listed as a critically endangered tribe and were once considered as the vanishing tribe though their population size is gradually increasing (Chaudhuri, 2004). They have become nearly extinct. Some recent measures have been taken to safeguard their areas and to preserve their unique heritage. According to the 2001 Census there are about 1,184 Totos all living in Totopara. Anthropologists agree that the Toto culture and language is totally unique to the tribe, and is clearly distinguished from the neighbouring *Rajbongshis*, *Koch*, *Mech* or the Bhutanese *Sharchop* Tribes. The Toto tribe has been identified as 'Primitive Tribal Group' (PTG) by Ministry of Home Affairs as their population growth is extremely low compared to the rest of the population and the level of literacy is low and lagging far behind the other tribal groups. There is practically little or no progress of education among such groups.

### Physical Identity and Peculiarities

The Totos are considered as Mongoloid people, with flat nose, small eye, broad and square cheeks, thick lips and small eyes and black iris. Their complexion is rather on the darker side, which reflects their nearness to the equator. They are generally endogamous and marry within their own tribe. They are generally divided into 13 exogamous clans or groups of families from which they choose to marry. Toto language belongs to Tibeto-Burman family of Sub-Himalayan group, as classified by Hodgson and Greisens. They do not have any script. Most of the young members can speak Bengali and Nepali, which are the mediums of instruction in the local schools.

### Socio-Cultural Distinctiveness

- **Language Spoken:** Totos speak Tibeto-Burman language. Their language has been identified by UNESCO as critically endangered with perhaps a little more than 1,000 speakers.

- **Food Habit:** The staple food comprises of rice, parched rice, milk and curd. They consume flesh of goat, pig, deer, fowl and duck. They eat fish of all kinds. They also eat meat, generally of goat, pork and poultry. Women eat the same food as men and there are no restrictions of any kind on the widows. Totos drink fermented liquor called *Eu*, made from fermented marua, rice powder and malt, which is served warm in *Poipa* (wooden glasses). *Eu* is drunk on all occasions.
- **House Type:** Totos live in elevated bamboo huts. These huts are placed on raised 'machas' or elevated platforms and have straw thatches. There is a single log placed to get to the hut and the log is removed during night.
- **Marital Life:** Totos generally do not have more than one wife. After the death of the wife a man can marry his wife's younger sister but a woman cannot marry her husband's brother. On the death of spouse, the husband or wife has to remain single for twelve months before they can marry again. Monogamy is a common form of marriage among the Toto but polygamy is not prohibited. There are various ways of acquiring mates' viz., (1) marriage by negotiation (*Thulbehoea*), (2) marriage by escape (*Chor-behoea*), (3) marriage by capture (*Sambehoea*) and (4) love marriage (*Lamalami*). There is no custom of divorce among the Totos.
- **Religion:** Toto tribes define themselves as Hindus. Apart from the Vedic Gods, the Totos have two main Gods viz. *Ishpa* and *Cheima*. Toto tribes believe that God *Ishpa* lives in the Bhutan hills and if he is unhappy then they would face sickness. Totos offer him animal and drink *Eu* to please him. On the other hand, the Goddess *Cheima* protects Toto tribes from all kinds of trouble and sickness. Totos offer rice, fowls and *Eu* to please her.

### Economic Activities

The main economic activity of the Totos includes cultivation of land. The Totos are not active farmers and hence do not cultivate a particular crop to a great extent. Every home has a kitchen garden surrounded by bamboo fences; in these gardens they grow vegetables, potatoes and bananas, among others. Sometimes they trade with traders from the outside areas. Some Totos practice animal husbandry by domesticating cows and pigs. At different stages of history, the Toto tribe has been moving away from a subsistence economy to market economy. Further, the transformations of the village from community ownership of land to individual land holding and from isolated tribal group to a multi-ethnic habitat have also taken place in the recent past.

### DISTINCTIVE FEATURES – I

- Majority of Toto main workers are day labourers
- During lean period and winter season they work as porters for carrying Oranges from Bhutan to Madarihat market
- Betel nut is a major cash crop which they cultivate and sell to traders often at lower rates

- Bamboo is another important cash crop cultivated which is sold in the form of handicraft products
- Subsidiary crops like Ginger, Black pepper, Turmeric, Sajina, Jackfruits and Pineapple are also grown
- Important economic activities - Collection of forest produces like wild Chillies, Roots, Tubers, Mushrooms, Honey, barks and special grasses for preparation of rope

#### **DISTINCTIVE FEATURES – II**

- Now a days, some Toto youth are engaged in service and small business like grocery shops or other types of shops
- One Toto Youth has joined as Veterinary Assistant after training
- Livestock population of the Toto households mainly consists of cows, bullocks, goats, sheep, pigs and country birds
- A Veterinary Centre has been opened with limited facilities of artificial insemination only.  
*Source: www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in*

#### **Status of Health**

The common ailments among the Totos include the Tropical Diseases like hookworm infection, cold and cough, dysentery, diarrhoea, ulcer, yaws, malaria etc. The deficiencies of vitamin A, D, B complex, iodine and calcium are common among them. Deficiency of nutrients and unhygienic way of life are the main causes for high prevalence of diseases. The sanitation system of *Totopara* is poor and ill-developed. Most of them have not yet accepted the scientific medical facilities due to their own traditional cultural practice. The Totos use medicinal plants for curing the diseases like ulcers and headache, stomach trouble, cold and cough, bleeding from wounds, diarrhoea, eye inflammation and night blindness, bleeding of gums, fever, small pox, scorpion bite, swelling, blood pressure, labour pain fever (Sarkar, 1993). Another severe health issue among the Totos is the huge prevalence of thalassemia. To conserve their ethnicity, they usually marry within their tribes which contribute to the spread of the disease. Nearly 40 per cent of the Totos are affected by the disease and their average life span is up to 35 years.

#### **Level of Education**

The percentage of literacy is comparatively low among the Toto tribe. The average literacy rate is 30.35 per cent. The percentage of male literacy is slightly higher than that of the female literacy. 36.36 per cent is the literacy rate among males and 23.53 per cent is the literacy rate among females. A quick glance at the composition of literate persons according to educational standard among Toto population reveals that the percentage of literate persons generally decreases with increasing level of education. In respect to level of education from class VI-VII, there are only 5.19 per cent out of total Toto population, 2.96 per cent have Secondary level of education, and 1.30 per cent has Higher Secondary level of education and only 0.79 per cent of the total Toto population has attended college so far. The female literacy rate is comparatively low than male literacy in every strata of educational level.

#### **Problems of the Toto Tribe**

The following problems have been identified on the basis of extensive study:

- The Toto tribe faces the problem of social isolation
- The tribe is characterized by socio-economic backwardness
- They cultivate at subsistence level with primitive implements
- The status of health is extremely poor among them
- They suffer from various diseases some of which proves to be fatal
- They are handicapped with low level of education
- The state of female literacy is extremely low compared to male literacy
- Work participation rate is fairly low for females than males
- They are in a state of declining population.

#### **Government Initiatives for the Totos**

- The State Government has decided to appoint the first woman graduate from the endangered Toto Tribe as a social worker in the Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal.
- The activities of the Government have also been praiseworthy in providing food grains to the members of the endangered community.
- Extension of support to educate every Toto child has been made by a number of Government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).
- Since drop-out rates are very high for girls they have been provided with government aids and scholarships.
- The Totos are also provided with jobs in tea gardens and *Grameen* bank situated in the area.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Toto Tribe has been identified as one of the 'Endangered Tribes' of West Bengal who are on the verge of extinction. They live in social isolation like most other tribes of the state. But in recent years some improvement in their lifestyle has been observed owing to their first-hand contact with the progressive population of the outside world. The status of health and education considered as key indicators of human development have always been in a poor state among them, though these aspects have now been taken up by the Government of the State and NGOs for improvement. Several efforts have been made by the Government to improve literacy rate especially the female literacy among the Totos. They were once in a state of declining population but with repeated efforts to improve their health conditions and to protect them against fatal diseases they have now registered a negligible growth in population which has proved to be a ray of hope for the existence of this unique primitive tribal group in the state.

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