

Harvest, Ritual, and Femininity: The Tusu Festival among the Kurmi of Bengal

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Har–Bitang Culture in Eastern India:

In the eastern part of India, under the vast geographical territory of the Chhotanagpur Plateau, which includes the northern part of Odisha, the entire Jharkhand state, and the western part of the West Bengal districts, the Har-Bitang culture is prevalent. This culture is deeply embedded in the agrarian lifestyle that this culture observes. The culture is related to human beings who are associated with the cultivation of the earth and the

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rearing of the soil for the purpose of agriculture. The term "Har" denotes human beings, especially the agriculturists who toil for cultivation of the soil. Alongside these individuals, there are others who contribute to the cultivation of the soil by providing the relevant resources that are necessary for agriculture, including ploughs, iron-based tools, wooden tools, etc. These groups that assist the farmers are called *Bitang*. The term *Bitang*, which stands for 'friends,' illustrates the association these two groups share with one another in their interaction with the Har. Rather than having a relation of 'service,' *Bitang* assist the Har farmers as 'partners' in agriculture. This partnership between these two groups ensures the successful continuation of agricultural activity on one end and supports the economic growth of the area as a whole. The Har *Bitang* cultural system symbolizes an association that prioritizes cooperation, interdependence, and mutual responsibility in society.

The Kurmi Community, the Origin of Tusu and the Time and Duration of the Tusu Festival :

Among these ancient agrarian societies, the Kurmi are one of the most distinguished groups. Significantly, the Tusu festivities originated in the Kurmi society, in which these ceremonies possess particular cultural significance. Tusu is considered the final function in the series of Kurmi ritualistic events that stretch over time, thus denoting considerable importance. It is initiated on the last day of the Bengali month of *Agrahayana*, usually in mid-December. Subsequent to this, the Tusu festivities continue over the whole period of the Bengali month of *Poush* until the final day, coinciding with *Makar Sankranti*. This way, the Tusu festivities extend over a continuous period of about thirty days. The duration of the festivities reflects considerable significance in the lives of the Kurmi society because these festivities gradually stretch over time.

Ritual Practices: Harvest and Worship of Paddy:

One of the major ritual practices of the Tusu festival is the ceremonial treatment of the last bundle of paddy harvested from the field. It is treated as most sacrosanct and is worshipped in accordance with established ritual tradition. After the ritual is performed, it is being brought from the field into the house very carefully and gently, often being carried on the head as a sign of respect and then installed within the house. After such ritual mobility, the paddy is threshed and then deposited in the house to mark its entry into the household store of food. In this process, the paddy undergoes a series of symbolic transformations and takes different names according to its spatial and ritual status. When it stays in the field, the paddy is called *Dhani Thakuran*, *Thakuran* meaning a goddess. When, in this ritual procession, it is carried upon the head, the name given to it is *Dini Thakuran*, and after being finally kept inside the house, it is called *Dimni Thakuran*. Successive naming thus

marks the journey of the crop from the field to the house as a sacred one. A proverb well known in the Kurmi dialect goes like this: “*Je Dini sei Tusu Moni,*” which means that “she who is Dini is none other than Tusu Moni.” The equation of Tusu with this sacrosanct form of paddy is, therefore, overt. It is from this belief that Tusu has come to represent the crop goddess and, more importantly, the presiding deity of paddy, the central input in the Kurmi agrarian economy.

Preparation of the Tusu Structure:

Tusu does not take any anthropomorphic shape, nor does he have any idol representing him. The last of the paddy gathered, however, is instituted in the home and worshiped in the form of Tusu. During performances of this festival, young girls and lasses go to the fields, cook rice, and then have a joint meal of this rice. After this, they collect, in a collective manner, paddy grains that have fallen in the field and then transport these grains to

their homes. These grains are then used to obtain rice, which is further ground into a fine powder. The rice powder is then mixed with a liquid form of cow dung gathered from a calf, poured into an earthen container, and then kept in a room in the home, where a clean and purified space is designated by drawing a qualitative *aalpona*, using a solution of cow dung, and then filling this area with a mixture of rice powder and water. Similar designs of "aalpona" are also depicted on the earthen pot, which consecrates the pot itself. Moreover, rice husks, called "tush" in Bangla, mixed with cow dung and rice powder, are dried and made into the form of balls, which are kept inside the pot. Finally, the paddy is kept on top of the contents of the pot, and the earthen pot is covered with an earthen lid. This structure prepared inside the pot is worshipped as "Tusu," representing the sacred dimension of the crop and emphasizing the association between the crop, religious practice, and space.

Symbolism and Offerings:

The structure of the ritual in the concept of Tusu is also symbolically connected to the womb of the woman, emphasizing the concepts of fertility, rebirth, and the potential for creation. Tusu is treated as the goddess of crops, yet in the cultural concept of the Kurmi people, it is exclusively understood as a young lass rather than a pregnant woman or an elderly woman. The word *Moni* in the language of the Kurmi people means young lasses, and thus the goddess Tusu is called *Tusu Moni*. The importance of the youthful approach to the god is the potential for plant growth and the fertility in the agricultural cycles. The goddess is offered the *Bandu* flower, which has a specific color, red, and is located on the Sal tree, whereas the part from which the flower emerges is different in form from the rest of the tree. The *Bandu* flower is considered indispensable to the worship of Tusu and occupies a central place in the ritual offerings. Alongside it, five additional types of vegetable

flowers—such as eggplant flower and tomato flower—are also offered, further reinforcing the agricultural symbolism of the ritual. Throughout the month of *Poush*, Tusu is worshipped regularly with lamps, flowers, and other ritual items. Each evening, following the daily *puja*, members of the Kurmi community gather to sing devotional and festive songs, making collective singing an integral component of Tusu worship and an important medium for expressing communal devotion and cultural continuity.

Songs as Rituals:

Singing songs during the Tusu festival is the main act of worship and is presumed to be the real *puja* of the deity. The songs are ritual utterances, akin to mantras, in the context of Tusu worship. It is during this collective singing that the Karmaiti-young working girls of the community-become fully immersed, carrying on until well past midnight. The songs are thematically arranged

around a variety of themes that reflect the imaginative and relational ways in which Tusu is conceived. Some songs describe:

A) the establishment of Tusu, for example, '*Amra je mai Tusu khapi ho/ Aghran Sankranti diney go*'

B) playful interaction with Tusu, who is envisioned as a young girl; others describe

C) feeding her or adorning her with jewellery, for example, '*Aaso Tusu bosu Tusu Mon shanto kori go/Mon bhoriye khabe Tusu chira gur ark hoi go*' and '*Mai ke kobo mai ke kobo moner kotha/ Humro loge aani de mai prem churi kajol lata*'. Certain songs narrate

D) taking Tusu on a journey, drawing on the idea that she has come to her father's house from her in-laws, thereby evoking the social experience of married daughters returning to their natal homes, for example, '*Amar Tusu kashi jabe palki chori u-bela/bihan belay dekhay aanbo maraporir koyla tola*'.

E) There are also songs voiced from the perspective of Tusu's mother, expressing maternal concern and emotional resistance to any negative remarks made about her daughter, for example, '*Ke bole lo ke bole lo amar Tusu kalo lo/ Bishnupurer holud aani ga koribo aalo lo*'. Through these varied thematic expressions, the songs articulate affection, care, social roles, and emotional bonds. Together, they form an oral repertoire that sustains the ritual, emotional, and cultural dimensions of Tusu worship.

Immersion and Cosmological Significance:

On the last day of Tusu puja, which coincides with Makar Sankranti, a ritual structure of Tusu is reverently placed on a brightly decorated structure formed by bamboo stick decorations and colored papers, which is referred to as 'Choudol.' The 'Choudol' serves as a symbolic medium for Tusu, representing her departure as well as return to her in-laws' house. Decorations on the

'Choudol' consist of flowers prepared using colored papers, which symbolizes the five primary elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether, with an emphasis on providing a cosmological context to the rituals as well. Tusu is then immersed in a river, i.e., in moving water, but not in a pond or stagnant water of any kind. Moving water is symbolically equated with the 'in-laws' house' of Tusu, reinforcing notions of 'flow' and 'continuity' in ritual practices. Moreover, a symbolic similarity between the duration of Tusu Porob, i.e., thirty days, and the 'menstrual cycle' of a woman, which lasts for twenty-eight days, serves to emphasize the close association between fertility, regeneration, and Tusu being a ritual related to nature itself.

Tusu Festival and the Reflection of Women:

The significance of Tusu as a festival is also best described as deeply embedded in the theme of women, especially in terms of its content as well as the substance

of the celebration. First and foremost, the image of Tusu herself can be understood in terms of a young daughter returning home to her father's house during the course of the celebration, which makes reference to the theme of families as well as the position of women in agrarian society. Second, in terms of the participants of Tusu worship or puja, it is best understood that the primary participants are little girls who play the relevant roles in the worship as well as the songs that are sung during the course of the Tusu celebration. Additionally, it is older women who play supportive roles in the appropriate conduct or consummation of the puja. This is also in consideration of the fact that the subject matter that defines the songs sung during the course of the Tusu celebration is exclusively the theme of women, especially in terms of play, care, or nurturing.

Based on a lecture by Binapani Mahato.

Transcription: Abhik Sarkar