

Tusu Festival of the Kudumis of Northern Orissa: Origin and Causes

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ABSTRACT The Kudumi is an important agriculturist community of eastern India. They are mainly residing in Jharkhand, part of West Bengal (Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur) and Orissa (Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar). They celebrate different festivals and most of them are related to their agricultural activities. The *Tusu parav*, *Bandana*, *Karam* and *Jitua* are the most important festivals of the Kudumi community which are celebrated with equal joy and happiness. The present paper analyses the details of the *Tusu* festival of the Kudumi which is celebrated during *Makar Sankranti* which falls in the mid of January. There are different types of views, that is, historical, mythological and anthropological which are available regarding the origin of the *Tusu* festival. A brief discussion on all these views is made in this paper. Although earlier it was a community specific festival but now it is widely adopted by the neighbouring tribe and caste people and has become a regional level festival.

INTRODUCTION

A festival is an important aspect of the intangible cultural heritage which is closely associated with the human culture and is transmitted from generation to generation. Throughout the year the human being is busy in different activities. Therefore, to get leisure from the tedious life, man celebrates various festivals in different periods which are mainly associated to their day to day activities. As most of the rural folks are dependent upon the agricultural activities, their festivals are also associated with the agricultural work which falls within their agricultural cycle. The Kudumi (Kudmi / Kurmi) is a settled agriculturist community of eastern India. Most of the *Parab* (festival) of the Kudumi are associated with their agricultural activities which fall within their agricultural cycle, that is, from sowing to harvesting. Through festivals, they worship the different deities for the protection and increment of their agricultural production. The festivals of the Kudumi are set and calculated according to the solar movement. The calendarisation of Kudumi festivals begins with *Akhain Yatra* which falls on the first day of *Magh* (January-February) and continues up to *Tusu Parab*. The celebration of *Tusu* festival takes place in mid-January during *Makar Sankranti*. It is mainly celebrated by the female members and it can be termed as Women's festival. Traditionally, the *Tusu* (an idol made of mud and is treated as deity) worship begins in different houses a month

ahead of *Makar Sankranti* in the month of *Pausa* and the grand finale comes on January 14th every year when they immersed this deity in the nearby river or any water source. There is no specific temple for this deity. The Kudumis keep the idol of this *Tusu* in their house. It is a common practice found in the entire region where the Kudumis reside. The other major festivals celebrated include *Aghan Sankranti*, *Bandna* (*Sohrai*), *Chaitra Sankranti*, *Desh Sikar*, *Gram Puja*, *Jantal / Ashari Puja*, *Jirhul*, *Jitua / Jitua*, *Karam / Jawa*, *Nawa Nua Khiya / Khawa*, *Raja Shala*, *Rohin*, *Sarhul*, *Shiva Gajan* etc. All these festivals serve as the vehicle of transmission of the Kudumali (Kurmali) culture from generation to generation since the beginning and serve to maintain their identity. Although all these festivals are celebrated with equal joy and happiness, the *Tusu parav*, *Bandana*, *Karam* and *Jitua* are the most important festivals of the Kudumi community. The Kudumi were identified as an aboriginal tribe till 1931 but later on they were excluded from the list of Scheduled Tribes (Singh 2000: 6). In spite of their exclusion from the list of Scheduled Tribes, the 'Kudumi' still maintain their traditional culture which shows in their life cycle and annual rituals and festivals. Both the mythology and reality of *Tusu parab* in practice is supporting evidence to it. Recently, Mahato (2000), Mohanta and Mahato (2004: 74-86), Mahato (2005: 228-241), Mohanta (1996: 149), Naik (1999), Singh (1987:110, 1994a:360-361, 1994b:359-369) have worked on various aspects

of Kudumi life and culture including different festivals.

The data were collected by using different anthropological methods and techniques.

Aims and Objectives

The following are the main aims and objectives of the present paper:

1. To analyse the origin of the *Tusu* festival;
2. To highlight the cultural aspects associated with *Tusu* festival;
3. To study the wider adoptability of the *Tusu* festival;
4. To analyse the continuity and change in the *Tusu* festival.

METHODOLOGY

The data related to the *Tusu* festival have been collected by using different anthropological techniques and methods. Emphasis has been given to open-ended schedule, interviews and participation observation. The data have been collected mainly from the elderly members of this studied community. According to the requirement of the present work, the photographic, audio graphic and video graphic documentation are made to highlight the different aspects of intangible culture of the *Tusu* festival.

The People

The Kudumi is a settled agriculturalist community and therefore most of the Kudumi settlements are located close to their agricultural land. They are highly concentrated in the Chhatangpur plateau covering the area of Jharkhand, part of West Bengal (Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur) and Orissa (Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Sundargarh). But in the later period, some of the Kudumis migrated to other parts of West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and even to Bangladesh to seek employment (Mahato 2000 : 25-65). The social structure of the Kudumi is divided into several divisions. The *Paribar* (family) is the smallest social unit in the hierarchy of the social structure and the *Gotra* (clan), *Gosthi* (lineage) and *Jat* (ethnicity) comes next to that. The entire Kudumi community is divided into 81 *gotra*. The Kudumis practice *jat* endogamous and *gotra* exogamous (Mahato 2000: VI). A Kudumi groom or bride is permitted to marry outside of his / her

own *gotra*. Although monogamy is the common form of marriage practiced by the Kudumis, polygamy is also socially accepted by them. The *Aam Baha / Biha* (marriage with a mango tree) and the *Mahul Baha / Biha* (marriage with a *mahua* tree) for boys and girls respectively are very compulsory and are performed prior to the actual marriage. The practice of *kanyapaum* (bride price) is prevalent among them. A daily routine of Kudumi gives a clear cut idea about their economic life. Most of the Kudumi are dependent on the agricultural activities. An economically sound Kudumi family possesses minimum a pair of bull for their agricultural activities. The number of cattle and *puda* (straw rope made pocket for storing grains) and *Dimni* (a large basket made of bamboo flake for storing grains) are considered as a yardstick to measuring their wealth. Although the Mohanta, Mahato, Mahto, Singh, Chaudhury, Patel are the common surnames written by the Kudumi in different parts of the country, in Orissa they commonly use Mohanta as their surname. The *Burha-baba* or *Budha-baba* is the principal deity of the Kudumi. Apart from it, the Kudumi also worship *Bara Pahad*, *Bhaut Kudra*, *Dharam dewta*, *Duarsini*, *Ghatini*, *Jahir Burhi*, *Lilouri Devi*, *Panch Bahini*, *Rengha Haram*, *Renghhi Burhi*, *Sat Bahini* etc. The worship of these deities is always officiated by a *pujari* from their own community called *Laya* or *Naiya*. They do not appoint any Hindu priest for performing the worship of these above mentioned deities. Nowadays, the syncretism is clearly noticed among the Kudumi. They are very much Hinduised and worship number of deities like, Ganesh, Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, Laxmi, Saraswati, Jagannath, Tarini, Manasa, Durga etc. both in and out side of their house in a parallel way along with their own traditional deities. They also engage a Hindu priest for performing worship of these adopted deities (Mahato 2000; Mohanta and Mahato 2004: 74-86; Mahato 2005: 228-241).

Nomenclature

At the time of discussing about the origin and derivation of the word '*Tusu*', Girish Chandra Mohanta (1996: 149) stated that the term '*moni*' is widely used along with the name of a girl child in the said region, such as Raimoni, Joimoni, Birmoni, Sukurmoni, Goyamoni, Gangamoni, etc. On this basis, he thought that the

word 'Tusu' is the short form of the name "Tusumoni" which might have been derived from the word "Tusmin". The similar kind of statement is given by Naik (1999) who opined that the name of 'Tushmuni' is gradually changed into 'Tusmuni' and then 'Tusu'. The Mohanta people very widely used the word 'moni' at the suffix of name of their daughters, such as, Gurumoni, Birmoni, Joimoni, Sunamoni, Sukurmoni, Phulmoni, Sonamoni etc.

Origin of Tusu Festival

The origin of Tusu festival is under controversy. Some scholars tried to compare this Tusu worship with the 'Toshalabrat' of Bengal and the 'Khudurkuni Osha' of coastal Orissa and stated that it has some influence of 'Toshalabrat' and 'Khudurkuni Osha'. But, from the analysis of the earlier form of Tusu, it is evident that, this Tusu worship is neither influenced by the 'Toshalabrat' nor by the 'Khudurkuni Osha'. Different scholars have given various types of views regarding the origin of the Tusu festival which can be divided into three categories : (a) Mythological Explanation, (b) Historical Explanation and (c) Anthropological Explanation. Out of these, the second category is most popular where mention has been about the suicide of a very beautiful girl. A brief analysis of these views regarding the origin of Tusu festival is presented below.

(a) Mythological Explanation

Although it is not so popular but there are some mythological explanations available relating to the origin of the Tusu festival. At the time of discussion on the origin of the Tusu festival, Singh (1987:110, 1994a:360-361, 1994b:359-369) mentioned that,

"The origin of festival is shrouded in remote past, however, a number of views are scattered in the forms of myths, folk-tales and folk-songs. The Vedas and Purans do not provide any description of the land of Jharkhand. This land has been known to the people by different names at different times. The 'Vishnu' is a post-vedic legend and in this connection, in Vishnu Puran, we find the word 'Munda' who defeated the 'Tushar' or 'Tokhari' people. In H'Harshcharita' of Banabhatta, we again find the 'Tushar' as Atra Parmeshwaran Thshar Shailodbhuwan

Durgya Grihitkas'.....The Ganjamlekha of Madhavraj (Gupta Sambad 300) shows that it was ruled by "Shiladbhuwa" dynasty. Sailadbhuwa state was in the south of "Toshal". After Shashauk, Harshbardhan ruled this land and collected taxes too. From this we can infer that "tushar" or "Toshal" are synonym to each other. If this is accepted, it can be said, then, that "Tusu" is a festival of the people of "Tushal" and the tradition of "Tusu" is very old."

(b) Historical Explanation

Historians have tried to analyse the Tusu festival from historical point of views. According to them, the Tusu festival of the Kudumis a historic past. Supporting their arguments, here I would like present a few statements of some renowned historians relating to the attack of Muslims on the innocent people of Orissa as well as the neighbouring regions. Citing the reference from Sarangi (1978: 47), Das (1997: 59) has stated that,

"But there might be a historicity of the evolution of Tusu worship in Mayurbhanj also. The history gives evidence that this region was facing frequent foreign invasion. We may refer to the invasion of Firoz Shah Tughluq to Jajnagar (the modern Jajpur) in 1361 and on his way he invaded Khiching."

Panigrahi (1981: 176) has also mentioned about the Tughluq's attack on Orissa as,

"He marched towards Orissa with a large cavalry. He marched through Bihar, modern Pachet and Sikhar in the Manbhum district. He then pushed forward through the defiles of Manbhum and Singhbhum then he reached Tinanagar which has been identified with modern Khiching, the ancient capital of Bhanja rulers of Mayurbhanj."

During the attack there were plunders and rapes which is clear from the following statement of Panigrahi (1981:180), where he has mentioned,

"The massacre of innocent men, women and children ordered by the Sultan also present a woeful story. Even making allowances for exaggeration of the Muslim accounts, one has to admit that the lurid pressure of the massacre described by them constitutes a blot on the Sultan's character, which no amount of white washing can efface".

From these evidences, it is clear that the Muslims had attacked the life and culture of the innocent people of Orissa and its neighbouring regions. There are some folklore present which give some evidence about the attack by Muslims on the commoners of the region and the folklore relating to 'Tusu' is one of the best examples of it. There are numbers of folklore relating to 'Tusu' and 'Muslims' invaders. Although, there are some variations in name, place and character from one folklore to another, but all end with the suicide of 'Tusu' to protect the purity and chastity from a Muslim king. On the basis of the nature of this explanation, the historical origin of the *Tusu* festival is again sub-divided in to four types. Although, in all these views the different types of characters are attached with *Tusu* and presented in diverse forms, all these views conclude with the suicide of a beautiful girl. A brief discussion is made to get a clear idea about all these views.

(i) *Tusu- A Beautiful Kudumi Girl from Jharkhand*

According to a folk story, some Muslim soldiers came to Mayurbhanj in 18th century AD during the rule of a Nabab in Bengal. They tried to kidnap a beautiful Kudumi girl from Jharkhand. It was collectively opposed by the Kudumis and Santals of the region and the matter was placed before the *darbar* (hall of audience) of the Nabab. The Nabab was very much unhappy upon the matter. He punished those soldiers and returned *Tusu* to her parents. But, the then superstitious society did not accept her. Therefore, *Tusu* was forced to commit suicide and jumped into the river Damodar and lost her life. This pathetic story of *Tusu* led to much reaction among the people of the Kudumi community. The female members of the society specially felt very desolate and had sympathy for *Tusu*. Gradually, it became a tradition which is clearly evident from the *Tusu* songs (Mohanta 1998: 7).

(ii) *Tusu as a Daughter of Birbal who was Hidden in a Mohanta Family*

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 Chhitor. Birbal was his son, who had a very beautiful girl named 'Tushmuni'. Then the extremely greedy

eye of the Mughal ruler Allahuddin Khiliji got focused on her and he wanted to marry Tushmuni. Accordingly, he tried to capture her. When Birbal came to know of this plan of Allahuddin Khiliji, he immediately went to the hilly area of Paresnath along with Sitaram Mohanta and his daughter Tushmuni to conceal them from the army commander. But, the Muslim soldiers followed and attacked them. Birbal and the entire group could not escape from those Muslim soldiers. When Tushmuni came to know that she would not be able to escape from the Muslims, she jumped into the deep water of the river and committed suicide to protect her chastity. It was the day of the *Makar Sankranti* when Tushmuni committed suicide.

After the death of Tushmuni, the people of the Mohanta community tried to protect the life of Birbal and his family and he tried to maintain that relationship and for which he brought a bride for his son from that community. Because of the sacrifice of life to protect her chastity and purity, since that day the Mohanta people of that region consider her as a great woman as well as an ideal of their community. To memorize that incident of sacrifice, since that day, the Kudumi people of northern Orissa in particular and eastern India in general celebrate 'Tushmuni' (*Tusu*) festival.

(iii) *Tusu as a Daughter of Birbal Singh- A Kurmi King*

Admitting the importance of the folklores to establish the historical facts, Lenka (1997: 258-260) has tried to trace the origin of *Tusu* festival through folklore. He opined that the origin and development of *Tusu* festival is very controversial which exists only in different folklores. Undoubtedly he agreed that there are definitely some historical facts present behind this folklore of *Tusu* festival. According to him, in India there was a history of disgraced Sultan rulers of Mughal period. A number of pitiful incidents happened with the Hindu women during this period. The story of *Tusu* is related to the beauty of queen Padmini of Chittor of that time which is mentioned below.

The entire country was in alarm when Badasah Allahuddin Khiliji ruled Delhi. At that time Birbal Singh- a Kurmi king ruled Kashi state. He had a very beautiful daughter named 'Tusu'. At that time, Allahuddin was very much attracted

to the beauty of queen Padmini of Chittor and to get her he attacked Chittor. But prior to capturing her, she committed suicide by taking poison. Because of the anti-Hindu activities and misbehavior, the girls and women were feeling very unsafe. At that time Malik Kaffur was the army chief of Allahuddin Khiliji, who had targeted Tusu. To save the life of the family and followers, Birbal Singh left his palace along with his queen, daughter and followers. They reached Pareshnat hill, located in the present Giridih district of Jharkhand, where they stayed in the house of a Santal family. But they could not escape. Kaffur came to know about their location and followed them upto the hill of Parashnath and attacked them. Tusu did not want to surrender herself before a Muslim army chief and therefore she jumped into the river Kansawati and committed suicide. It was the day of the *Makar Sankranti* when this painful incident happened. Since that time Tusu became an ideal of the Kudumi people who started worshipping her as a goddess. Since then, the day of *Makar Sankranti* is celebrated as a festival.

(iv) *Tusu as a Daughter of Amar Singh Rathor*

Citing an unknown magazine published about 30 years back (which quoted from the Ethnology of Bengal written by Dalton), Girish Chandra Mohanta (1996: 148-149) mentioned that, Sultan Allahuddin Khiliji was ruling Delhi from 1296-1316 AD. At that time, Padmini - the queen of Rana Singh of Mewar's beauty was much talked about. Allahuddin tried very hard to see for himself how beautiful she was but Rana Singh did not allow him to do so. Once Allahuddin got a chance to see the beauty of Padmini in a mirror and since that day he tried to get her. Accordingly, he attacked Chittor fort to get Padmini but he was not successful in his mission. Padmini came to know about it and rather than getting captured by him, she committed suicide. Allahuddin was very disappointed. At that time Amar Singh Rathor, the son of Ratna Singh had a daughter named "Tusmin" who was equally beautiful as queen Padmini. When Allahuddin came to know about the beauty of Tusmin, he targeted her and made several plans to get her. Amar Singh came to know the plan of Allahuddin and to protect his daughter he hid her in the house of Sitaram Mohanta - a faithful who resided at Parasnath hill. Allahuddin's spy traced out

Tusmin and Allahuddin attacked the house of Sitaram. When Tusmin came to know about it, she left that place to save her chastity. But she could not escape from those Muslims who came along with Allahuddin. Finally, she jumped into the river Damodar and lost her life on the day of *Makar Sankranti*. Since that day the young girls started worshipping *Tusu*.

Das (1994: 8) has given a similar type of statement. According to him,

"As people's saying goes, in Rairangpur a village woman named Tusu could not tolerate the insultation her chastity and she plunged into the river to escape from the humiliation. Her self-sacrifice later on became a symbol of preservation of chastity and this took the shape of a festival."

(c) *Anthropological Explanation*

In the local language the husk of paddy is called '*tuso*' which is one of the important material offered to *Tusu*, during *Tusu* festival. Citing references of some critic, Lalit Mohanta (1998:7) mentioned that the term '*Tusu*' might have been derived from the word '*tuso*'. Apart from this *tuso*, the Kudumis also offer '*goboro*' (cowdung), turmeric, brass, *gendu* (marigold) flower (*Tagetes erecta L.*) to *Tusu*. The '*tuso*' and '*goboro*' are related to the fertility of land whereas the smearing of turmeric paste on the body, decorating with *gendu* flower and ornamenting with the jewellery made of brass by young girls symbolizes the fertility. Hence, from these offered material, it is clear that this worship of *Tusu* is somehow related to the fertility cult. Therefore, on the day of *Makar Sankranti*, the young girls wear new clothes and immerse the idol of *Tusu* in a merry mood. Gopal (1999) has also given similar kind of opinion regarding the nomenclature of *Tusu*. He stated that, the '*ogadi*' or '*tuso*' (husk) and fried rice are offered during the worship of *Tusu* and because of this the name '*Tusu*' might have been derived from this word '*Tuso*', that is, husk. According to Das (1997: 59),

"On the first day of Pousa, adolescent girls prepare the idol of Tusumini out of a mixture of "Tusa" (husk of the paddy) and cow-dung. They prepare two idols which represent male and female reproduction organs. These are known as symbolic deities. Every day the girls worship Tusu mother with profound devotion offering corn and marigold flowers.....On Makar

Sankranti the worshippers go to a nearby river in a procession carrying the deities in a decorated "chaudola" for immersion.

As they say, Tusu worship has a legendary background. The "dikus" (outsiders) made their forceful settlement in the basins of Subarnarekha. Mayurakshi, kansabati rivers by suppressing opposition of the local inhabitants such as Horos (its sub-castes being Santhal, Kurmi, Munda and Oraonso and Mitani Tribes (allied tribes of Horos. Sub castes being Kamar, Kolha-kamar, Bauri and Dom). The young girl "Tusu mini" of these local people had organized the tribals creating a pandal of friendship and solidarity between Horos and Mitani and fought out the invading dikus'. As the intensive fight was nearing, Tusu was betrothed to a Mukhia of local fiefdom whose name was also "Tus". But in the attack Tusu was seriously wounded and soon the end came."

Another anthropological explanation about the origin of Tusu festival is given by P.K. Singh in 1987. At the time of discussing about the reminiscent of a past tradition of the Tusu festival, Singh (1987:111-112, 1994b: 362) has mentioned that,

"It is felt that the "Tusu" is the reminiscent of a very remote barbarian tradition, when the males and females of particular band lived together and happened to be wives and husbands of each other. It started perhaps when the shackles of monogamy loosened and intra-contradictions developed in monogamy which ultimately resulted into 'Hetaerism' in males and adultery among females..... 'Tusu' is the evidence of those traditions. The 'Tusu' in fact, is a reminder festival of barbarian age, when tribes used to meet at a common place for free courtship. It reveals that this festival reflects to us mysterious reminiscent of those days of yore when all the males and females of one band happened to be husbands and wives of each other. The forceful carrier of Jharkhandi culture 'Kurmali' has saved this primitive culture from extinction through the Gala festival of Tusu."

DISCUSSION

This statement of Lalit Mohanta (1998:7) relating the origin of the name of Tusu is quite relevant to this festival. The Kudumi is an agricultural community and paddy is their main pro-

duct. They mainly harvest their paddy during October and November. Then the threshing and de-husking of paddy is usually done in December and January and after that they become free from this agricultural work for few days. The *Makar Sankranti* or *Tusu* festival falls in the month of January when the de-husking of paddy is done. And hence, probably the work 'tuso' is in the mind of these people. The people of the region gather the *gobora* (cow dung) in a pit and prior to tilling of land for sowing, they remove it from that pit and spread on the land as a compost. This bio-fertilize helps to increase the quantity of product. This work is usually done immediately after the completion of *Makar Sankranti* or *Tusu Parva*. Hence, the association of *gobora* with *Tusu* festival has great significance. In the Kudumi society, the process of searching of a bride for marriage is started from *Makar Sankranti* which is called 'Aakhan Yatra'. During this *Tusu Parav*, all the unmarried girls gather at the place of *Tusu Bhasani Mela* (a place where people gather to immerse *Tusu*) where they sing different songs composed relating to *Tusu* and dance in a merry mood. This gives a good chance to a person to see his expected bride. Here it is important to mention that, usually the Kudumis first of all see the expected bride in this fair and then place their proposal before the parents of their selected brides. With this searching of bride during *Aakhan yatra*, the marriage season of the Kudumis starts. The Kudumis do not perform marriage prior to the *Makar Sankranti*. Therefore, *Makar Sankranti* is also related to the fertility cult. Most of the *Tusu* songs are love songs and composed on the various activities of Lord Krishna and Radha. Therefore, *Tusu* worship may be taken as a symbol of love and marriage. As this *Tusu* festival is celebrated during *Makar parav*, some scholars opined that it is the worship of the 'Makarbahini' that is, Devi Ganga.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that the *Tusu* festival is very much attached to the life and culture of not only the Kudmis of northern Orissa but also the people of Eastern India. Although, *Tusu* is worshipped as a goddess, it has some historical and cultural significance. Both the historical and anthropological explanations relate to the origin of *Tusu* festival and have their own importance. Although, it might have started

during the historic period and transmitted from generation to generation and become an integral part of the life and culture of the Kudumis residing in eastern India. Presently, it has a wider adaptability and the people of both the tribal and the non-tribal communities residing in this area celebrate this festival with great joy.

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