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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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VILLAGE ORGANISATION OF THE TOTOS: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The Toto tribe, one of the smallest indigenous communities of North Bengal, exhibits a distinctive system of village organisation grounded in customary norms, ritual authority, and collective decision-making. This paper examines the structure, functions, and transformation of the traditional administrative framework of the Totos, with particular reference to the institution of Latchi-Jangoa (village council). Using historical and analytical methods based on secondary sources, the study analyses the roles of key functionaries—Kaiji (Subba), Gappu, Pao, and Nampan—and evaluates the impact of the Panchayati Raj system on indigenous governance. The paper argues that, despite institutional changes, traditional authority continues to shape the socio-cultural life of the community, producing a hybrid governance structure.

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INTRODUCTION

India's tribal societies demonstrate a wide range of indigenous governance systems that operate alongside formal state institutions. The Totos of Totopara in North Bengal constitute a particularly small and relatively isolated community whose social organisation has historically been regulated by customary practices and collective authority. Their village administration reflects a close integration of religious leadership, judicial authority, and social control. The geographical isolation of Totopara, located near the Indo-Bhutan border, has played a significant role in preserving the traditional socio-political structure of the Totos. Unlike many other tribal communities that experienced rapid transformation due to external contact, the Totos maintained a relatively stable institutional framework for a long period. The present study seeks to analyse the institutional structure of traditional Toto governance and to assess the transformations brought about by the introduction of modern political institutions. It further attempts to highlight how continuity and change coexist within the community's organisational framework. The study also emphasizes the relevance of indigenous governance systems in understanding grassroots democracy and cultural sustainability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a historical and analytical approach to examine the traditional village organisation of the Toto community. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including ethnographic

accounts, government reports, census data, and scholarly works related to the Toto tribe and other Tibeto-Burman communities. In addition to descriptive analysis, a comparative perspective has been used to understand how the Toto system of governance differs from other tribal administrative structures in North-East India and the Himalayan region. Interpretative methods have been applied to assess the transformation of traditional institutions under the influence of modern governance systems. The study also relies on contextual reading of classical works such as Grierson (1967) and Sanyal (1972), along with later interpretations, to construct a coherent understanding of the socio-cultural and linguistic features of the Totos.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the Toto village organisation reveals a well-defined institutional structure that integrates administrative, religious, and social functions. These institutions operate not merely as governance mechanisms but also as instruments for maintaining cultural cohesion, moral regulation, and collective identity. A notable feature of the Toto system is the absence of rigid bureaucratic hierarchy. Instead, authority is distributed among functionaries whose roles are defined by tradition and community consensus. This ensures flexibility and adaptability within the system.

Latchi-Jangoa: Structure of Village Governance: The analysis of the Toto village organisation reveals a well-defined institutional structure that integrates administrative, religious, and social functions.

These institutions operate not merely as governance mechanisms but also as instruments for maintaining cultural cohesion and social discipline. The traditional administrative system of the Totos is centred on Latchi-Jangoa, which functions as the highest decision-making authority within the village. It regulates religious practices, social conduct, and certain economic activities through established customary norms. Historically, the council included five principal functionaries: Kaiji (Subba), Gappu, Panchayat (now largely obsolete within the traditional system), Pao, and Nampan.

Kaiji (Subba): Religious and Judicial Authority: The Kaiji occupies a central and highly respected position in Toto society, functioning simultaneously as the spiritual leader and the chief judicial authority. His role is not limited to ritual performance; rather, it extends to maintaining social order and moral discipline within the community. He is responsible for fixing the dates of major festivals, supervising religious ceremonies, and ensuring that traditional customs are properly observed. In judicial matters, the Kaiji presides over disputes related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and violations of customary norms. Decisions are generally made through consultation with elders, reflecting a participatory mode of governance. Historically, the Toto community avoided external legal systems and relied entirely on the Kaiji and the village council for dispute resolution. This practice not only strengthened internal cohesion but also reinforced the legitimacy of traditional authority. Scholars such as Roy Barman have emphasized the dual religious and judicial role of the Subba in maintaining community stability.

Gappu: Executive Head of the Village: The Gappu serves as the executive head of the village and is primarily concerned with secular and administrative matters. His responsibilities include supervising land-related issues, resolving disputes among villagers, and ensuring the smooth functioning of day-to-day activities. During the colonial period, the role of the Gappu acquired additional significance as he acted as an intermediary between the Toto community and British administrative authorities. In some instances, community land was recorded in his name, which further enhanced his importance in the eyes of the administration. However, with the introduction of modern governance systems such as the Panchayati Raj, the authority of the Gappu has gradually diminished. Despite this decline, the position continues to hold symbolic importance within the traditional structure.

Pao (Ojha): Ritual and Healing Specialist: The Pao performs important ritualistic functions, including naming ceremonies for newborns and conducting religious observances. In addition, he is associated with traditional healing practices, combining herbal remedies with ritual incantations. Such practices remain integral to the cultural life of the community.

Nampan: Communication and Mobilisation: The Nampan acts as a messenger responsible for disseminating information related to meetings, festivals, and collective activities. This role is essential for maintaining cohesion and ensuring participation in community affairs.

Social Norms and Regulation: The village council enforces a set of customary laws governing social behaviour. Marriage practices are strictly regulated, and inter-community unions have traditionally been discouraged. Violations of established norms may result in social exclusion or denial of participation in religious activities. In some cases, customary sanctions may also affect inheritance rights, indicating the strong authority of the council over individual lives.

Language and Cultural Identity: Language plays a crucial role in preserving Toto identity. The Toto language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family (Grierson, 1967) and is primarily oral, lacking a formal script. It serves as the medium for oral traditions, ritual chants, and everyday communication. Scholars such as Sanyal (1972) have noted similarities between Toto and other sub-Himalayan languages, reinforcing its place within the broader linguistic framework of the region.

In recent years, efforts have been made to document and preserve the Toto language through the preparation of primers and educational materials. However, the increasing influence of dominant regional languages poses a challenge to its survival. The preservation of language is therefore closely linked with the survival of cultural identity among the Totos.

DISCUSSION

The traditional governance system of the Totos represents a coherent and functional model based on customary law, collective participation, and moral authority. Unlike modern bureaucratic systems that rely on codified laws and formal procedures, the Toto system is rooted in shared values and community consensus. One of the key strengths of this system is its ability to maintain social harmony without the need for coercive enforcement mechanisms. The authority of leaders such as the Kaiji is derived from cultural legitimacy rather than political power. This ensures a high degree of compliance and respect for decisions. However, the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system has significantly altered local power dynamics. Elected representatives now control developmental resources and administrative functions, leading to a shift in authority away from traditional leaders. This has created a dual system in which traditional and modern institutions coexist, sometimes complementing and sometimes competing with each other. The increasing influence of political parties has also introduced new forms of leadership and competition within the village. While this has opened up opportunities for political participation, it has also challenged the traditional consensus-based decision-making process. At the same time, the persistence of traditional roles, especially that of the Kaiji, indicates that cultural and religious authority continues to play a vital role in the community. The emergence of organisations like the Toto KalyanSamiti further demonstrates an ongoing effort to balance tradition with modern development. From a broader perspective, the Toto case illustrates how indigenous governance systems adapt to external pressures while retaining their core features. This adaptability is crucial for their survival in a rapidly changing socio-political environment.

CONCLUSION

The village organisation of the Totos provides a valuable example of an indigenous governance system that integrates religious authority, social regulation, and community participation. Although modern administrative structures have transformed certain aspects of village life, traditional institutions continue to exert a strong influence. The study highlights the importance of recognising and preserving such systems, particularly in the context of policy-making and rural development. Indigenous institutions offer insights into alternative models of governance that are more participatory and culturally rooted. Future research may focus on field-based studies to further explore the changing dynamics of Toto society and the interaction between traditional and modern institutions. Such studies would contribute significantly to the understanding of tribal governance in India. The village organisation of the Totos provides an important example of indigenous governance rooted in tradition, collective responsibility, and socio-religious authority. Although modern administrative systems have transformed aspects of local governance, traditional institutions continue to influence the cultural and social life of the community. The study highlights that indigenous governance systems are not static; they evolve in response to changing socio-political contexts while retaining their core values. Therefore, any developmental policy concerning tribal communities must recognise and incorporate these traditional institutions. Understanding such systems is essential not only for preserving cultural heritage but also for promoting inclusive and participatory models of governance in contemporary society. The village organisation of the Totos provides an important example of indigenous governance rooted in tradition, collective responsibility, and socio-religious authority. Although modern administrative systems have transformed aspects of local

governance, traditional institutions continue to influence the cultural and social life of the community. Understanding such systems is essential for developing inclusive policies that respect tribal identity and autonomy.

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