

# Modernisation and survival: a dilemma of the Toto tribe

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## Abstract

The Toto tribe, belonging to the Mongoloid racial group, inhabits a small and isolated village named Totopara, situated in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal, near the Indo-Bhutan border. Historically, the Totos were slaves of the Bhutanese and during the Anglo-Bhutan War, they were sent to Indian territory and gradually settled in Totopara. The Totos have long been regarded as one of the most underdeveloped tribal communities in the Dooars region. Their society was often characterised by unhygienic living conditions, low literacy rates, poor transportation facilities, and religious-magico practices for healing. With the impact of modernisation and development initiatives, the Toto community has started undergoing a visible transformation. This study attempts to understand the impact of modernisation that influenced the Totos' way of life and how far they have progressed in overcoming their age-old stigmas and socio-economic backwardness. The primary objective of this research is to examine the impacts of modernisation on various aspects of their lives while also exploring the ways in which they continue to maintain and safeguard their cultural identity. For this purpose, the study has adopted an ethnographic approach. Data were collected through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and participant observation. Respondents included secondary-level students, their parents, teachers, local folk artists, traditional ayurvedic practitioners, and resource persons of the community. The study followed the thematic analysis given by Braun and Clarke (2006). Based on the analysis, three major themes emerged that reflect the modernisation of the community—namely, **educational upliftment, socio-cultural shift, and economic development.**

**Keywords:** Toto Tribe, Modernisation, Ethnic Resistance.

## Introduction

The Totos are one of the primitive Mongoloid tribes of India (Sanyal, 1973; Roy Burman, 1959; Majumder, 1993; Biswas, 2009; Dutta, 2014). During the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–90), the Government of India identified the Toto, Birhor, and Lodha tribes of West Bengal as Primitive Tribal Groups (Majumder, 1993; Dutta, 2014; Daw, 2015). Historically, the Totos were enslaved by the Bhutanese and forced to work without wages under the “*Hui-hwa*” system (Sanyal, 1973; Majumder, 1993; Bishnu, 2012; Daw, 2015). After the Anglo-Bhutan War, they were relocated to India and gradually settled in Totopara, a small village in Alipurduar district (Dutta, 2014). Bhutanese ruled over the region till 1868, after which the British reserved Totopara exclusively for the Totos, freeing them from slavery (Roy Burman, 1959).

According to settlement officer Sunder (1895), Totopara, covering 3.12 sq. miles, was administered by the headman Dhonopoti Toto. The Totos were initially unskilled in settled agriculture and welcomed Nepalese cultivators for assistance (Roy Burman, 1959). Traditionally, anyone staying outside the community for over seven days lost their property and social standing. Therefore, initially they didn’t want to migrate outside for a better lifestyle (Roy Burman, 1959).

Pregnancy was the primary precondition for marriage in Toto society, which was often solemnised during the later months of pregnancy, although wealthier and more educated families sometimes married earlier (Sanyal, 1973; Sarkar, 2022). Polygamy and child marriage were once common, modern Totos now practise monogamy, and the average marriage age has increased: fifteen for boys and twelve for girls (Biswas, 2009; Bishnu, 2012).

Earlier studies noted unhygienic habits among the Totos, such as avoiding bathing and cleaning hands on the ground, which were culturally justified as customs by them (Roy Burman, 1959; Sanyal, 1973). Over time, hygiene improved, and many began using soap and bathing regularly (Majumder, 1993).

Traditionally, Toto houses were bamboo structures built on stilts, with a hole in the floor for waste, consumed by pigs below (Sanyal, 1973). Initially, they refused government-provided C.I. sheets for roofing, fearing higher taxes (Roy Burman, 1959). Housing conditions improved significantly through welfare schemes, such as the SC/ST Housing Program (1965–1989), Indira Awas Yojana, and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, which provided houses and latrines (Biswas, 2009; Dutta, 2014; Das, 2024).

Infrastructure development began in the 1950s with the construction of reservoirs and solar lighting systems, though most early projects became defunct due to maintenance issues. Later, biogas plants and rural electrification through the “Lokadeep” scheme brought electricity to Totopara, improving literacy and reading habits (Majumder, 1993). Water was earlier fetched from hill springs using bamboo tubes, and later, government and missionary projects improved the water supply through tanks and pipelines. However, many hamlets still lacked full coverage (Biswas, 2009; Das, 2024). Despite road-building and irrigation schemes, connectivity remains poor due to the area’s rugged terrain and monsoon floods (Chaudhuri & Deutscher, 1993; Dutta, 2014).

Healthcare in Totopara evolved gradually. The first modern medical intervention came in the 1950s, led by Dr. Ashish Dutta and Lutheran missionaries (Majumder, 1993; Das, 2024). The Primary Health Centre, established in 1993, provides basic medical services but lacks major facilities. Earlier, Totos relied heavily

on traditional healers locally known as *Paw*, who performed rituals and sacrifices animals to get rid of diseases and sometimes also use herbal remedies (Dutta, 2014). Superstitions related to pregnancy and diet caused widespread malnutrition among women (Majumder, 1993). Modern interventions like ASHA and Anganwadi centres have improved maternal health, and schemes such as *Janani Suraksha Yojana* provide incentives for institutional deliveries. However, being a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Totos are officially discouraged from adopting permanent family planning, though many secretly undergo sterilisation outside their village (Dutta, 2014).

Agriculturally, the Totos traditionally practised shifting cultivation, later encouraged to adopt settled farming under the influence of Gendra Toto (Roy Burman, 1959). Their primary crops are for subsistence rather than sale, as they lack modern irrigation or fertilisers and depend solely on monsoon rains (Das, 2024). A section also engages in animal husbandry, wage labour, small trade, and tourism-related work. Despite improved income, many remain indebted. Socio-economic backwardness persists due to geographical isolation (Sanyal, 1973; Biswas, 2009). Children contribute economically from an early age, helping in forests and fields, as they are viewed as family assets (Chaudhuri & Deutscher, 1993).

Weaving was once a rare skill, with only a few women practising it for household use (Roy Burman, 1959). Cotton was sourced from outside, and colourful yarns were imported from Bhutan. Each house owned a loom where women produced coarse clothes for family use (Sanyal, 1973). Modernisation and exposure have diversified Toto occupations; many now make bamboo crafts, run small businesses, or work as guides in nearby tourist areas (Sarkar, 2022).

In the case of religion, Totos have transitioned from Animism to Hinduism and Christianity. Earlier, animal sacrifice was a crucial part of rituals, but this practice has declined. Though they identify as Hindu, they still consume beef and pork (Bishnu, 2012). Conversion to Christianity began in 1997, mainly among poorer families seeking missionary support (Biswas, 2009; Dutta, 2014; Lhamu, 2018).

Formal education began in Totopara in 1951 through the Bharat Mahajati Mandali, followed by the Lutheran World Service Mission in 1967, which established Toto Kalyan Bidyamandir and Dhanapati Junior High School (Majumder, 1993). Missionary efforts were later restricted, slowing progress. Only a small proportion pursued education beyond the secondary level. Local initiatives such as the Toto Debo Group and Toto Kalyan Samiti promote literacy, health awareness, and cultural preservation (Dutta, 2014; Lhamu, 2018). The first male graduate emerged in 1999 and the first female in 2010, marking a turning point in educational development (Daw, 2015).

Several government and central schemes have been implemented for the development of PVTGs, such as the Totos, covering road and bridge construction, irrigation, education, livestock, and cultural promotion (Daw, 2015). The participation of the state government in tribal welfare programs has also increased, though cultural erosion due to Western influence is evident (Chakrabarty et al., 2019).

Biswas (2009) and Majumder (1993) observed that modernisation has largely replaced traditional Toto practices such as weaving, spinning, crafting coin necklaces, and bamboo handicrafts. Today, the community has adopted Nepalese and Western styles of dress and fashion. Majumder (1993) also noted that the Totos once maintained a strict taboo against playing their traditional musical instruments except during religious festivals. However, the importance of traditional music, dance, and religious rituals has gradually

declined, particularly among the youth, who now prefer Nepali, Hindi, and Western songs, considering their own folk music outdated (Biswas, 2009). Their traditional games, such as *Lota Khela* (water-pot play), *beja khela*, *golla chuut* etc. have disappeared (Sarkar, 2022).

Despite remarkable progress in education, healthcare, and housing, the Totos remain a small, vulnerable community. Their isolation, geographical challenges, and dependence on outdated agricultural practices hinder full integration into mainstream society. Yet, they have shown resilience and adaptability, embracing literacy, improving hygiene, and participating in self-help initiatives while striving to preserve their cultural identity amid modernisation.

## Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To analyse how modernisation has affected Toto's livelihood.
- To understand how Totos are maintaining their traditional culture in the light of modernisation.

## Methodology

This study adopted an ethnographic case study approach using purposive sampling. Data were gathered from ten secondary-level Toto students, parents, teachers working there from different communities, folk artists, traditional healers, and other resource persons through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and participant observation. After data collection, all responses were transcribed and reviewed several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context. Subsequently, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was applied to identify themes based on research objectives. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained before recording interviews. They were also given the freedom to withdraw at any stage of participation. All collected information was treated with strict confidentiality, and participants' real identities have not been revealed anywhere.

## Findings and Discussion

### Theme 1: Educational Upliftment

#### Sub-Theme 1.A: Parents Awareness

**Case 1:** Abhijit Toto, one of the teachers in Chittaranjan Toto Memorial School, said:

*It is quite common for parents in the community to send their children outside the village for better educational opportunities. Even families with limited financial means manage to do so, often by selling their livestock or relying on unstable income from their betel nut trade. But I must say their willpower is very strong.*

**Case 2:** Sebika Toto, one of the teachers in Totopara Primary School, informed:

*Now, Toto parents became aware of their children's education specially those who live in plain areas. Now they are trying to admit them to the Nagrakata-based Eklavya School. Each year, 10/12 Toto students get direct admission in the 6<sup>th</sup> standard as they come under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). So, first, parents are admitting their children in local English medium private schools and ensuring good private tutors as well. Consequently, the number of students enrolled in local government schools has been declining each year.*

**Case 3:** Every Toto parents cannot afford to send their children to private English medium schools, specially the poor ones. So, some of them also prefer reputed Bengali medium government schools such as Mahakalguri Mission High School, P. C. Mittal High School, Madarihat High School etc. Parents from plain areas such as Panchayet gaon and Mandal gaon are comparatively rich and more educated, whereas students from hill areas are mostly first-generation learners, mainly from Mitran gaon, Puja gaon and Dumchi gaon. Their expectations regarding education are comparatively modest, as they are not very aware. Many of them rely on luck and believe that their children will eventually succeed in life.

### **Sub-Theme 1.B: Language Preference**

According to UNESCO, the Toto language is critically endangered (Sarkar, 2022). Therefore, elderly Totos follow only their mother tongue at home. Generally, a Toto child must learn multiple languages: Toto for family, Nepali for community interaction, and Bengali for formal education.

**Case 1:** Those who study outside in reputed English medium schools, have to learn English at an early age without family support. Sohel Toto, a 15-year-old student of Cornerstone School (almost 30 km away from Totopara), said:

*Happy Child was my first school, which is in Madaraihat (almost 23 km away from Totopara). I must have been around four or five years back then when my parents were admitted there. Though my elder sister was already there and we used to stay at a lodge run by the school principal. So, there was no problem staying outside.*

As you said, you moved there so early. How comfortable are you with your mother tongue?

*Well... I can follow the language, but I am not as fluent as locals.*

It was seen that most students attend English medium private schools outside, struggle to find appropriate words while communicating in Toto. Usually, they cannot attend traditional religious and cultural events in the village, so they are not familiar with their socio-cultural life. During interactions with these kinds of Toto students, it was noticed that they often felt ashamedness due to their limited knowledge of the community.

**Case 2:** In 2013, Toby Anderson, an Australian linguist, and his wife, Mary Grace, arrived with their three children to assist in documenting and developing the Toto script. He devoted several years to this linguistic project. During the *Tunthungksmu* Festival of 2024, Toby Anderson shared his experience:

*When Lissa Devis established the Chittaranjan Toto Memorial Education Centre, she envisioned developing a Toto language-based curriculum; for this, she needed to have the Toto alphabet to write the language. So, she contacted a friend in the UK, who contacted my organisation, SIL International (Australia) and invited me to come and develop the Toto script here and I came (smiled). It took a long time... first I had to discover the sound of the language to develop the alphabet... now I am working on the grammar of the Toto language.*

This raises an important question: why was it an Australian linguist who developed the script for the Toto language? Does this imply that the Linguistic Department of West Bengal or even the Central Government of India lacked the initiative or capability to carry out such an important task?

**Case 3:** During the same festival, the organisers made efforts to translate all signboards into the Toto language along with English. However, only a few students from Chhittaranjan Toto Memorial Education Centre and Aariyom Muktaran Toto Memorial School, were able to read the Toto terms. These are the Totopara-based English medium private schools for primary level students, where the school authority teaches basic Toto script on a weekly basis. From the interaction with the locals, it was found that many locals remain unaware or uninterested to learn the script as they feel it is difficult and unfamiliar.



Figure 1: Hoardings written in English as well as Toto script during *Tunthungksmu* Festival (2024)

**Case 4:** It has been seen that the young Totos are demanding an English medium government school within their village. The present Pradhan of Totopara said in this regard:

*I don't support their demand because most of the parents will not be able to afford it or help their children anyhow.*

In contrast, the Padmasree awardee of the village has a different view on the same issue. He argued:

*Young Toto aspirants told me that at present, students need to study in English medium schools. They must know either Hindi or English, but not everyone can send their children to English medium schools. Although we are glorifying Bengali as a language. But when the government or private sectors recruit for any post,*

they demand or give extra advantages to those who come from an English-medium background. English is a global language. So, why are we lagging behind?

Meanwhile, it was understood that some Toto parents are trying hard to send their children outside. Gradually, their children are losing fluency in their mother tongue while doing well academically. On the other hand, those who attend the local schools struggle academically to follow the medium of instruction.

## **Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Shift**

### **Sub-Theme 2.A: Religious Change**

Under the disguise of health care service, the Swedish missionaries tried to convert Toto youths (Bishnu, 2012). In 1997, three Toto families were converted into Christianity for the first time; from then on, converted people couldn't participate in religious ceremonies (Biswas, 2009; Dutta, 2014). Due to poverty, thirty percent of Toto people have converted to Christianity to get relief funds from Christian missionaries (Lhamu, 2018).

**Case 1:** Padmasree Awardee of the village shared his view in this regard:

*I don't know exactly why people are converting. But I feel they are fascinated by Christians and they think they would become Sahebs like them, will speak fluent English and their socio-economic condition will be better eventually. Now they are getting subsidies as religious minorities as well as enjoying different schemes for primitive tribes. However, legally, they cannot receive two schemes at the same time. They are basically opportunistic, nothing else.*

**Case 2:** Sujan Toto, 45-year-old, one of parents shared another perspective behind the conversion. He said:

*I don't support conversion at all. They purposefully change their religion as per their convenience. They feel that Totos are impure as they follow Hinduism in the name of animism, still they consume Beef and drinking is their daily habit. That is why they convert to being pure and get rid of their excessive drinking habit. But I have seen they also start to consume Eu after some time as it's our daily habit. We cannot easily leave it by changing our religion.*

**Case 3:** Mukul Toto, the first converted Toto, said:

*It's a complicated issue to explain. Officially, we are Hindus, but as far as I know, cow slaughtering is a sin as per Hinduism. But in some of our traditional religious festivals, cow slaughtering is mandatory. Though some Totos like Hinduism and some like Buddhism, whereas some also like Christianity. There is no particular reason behind the conversion. I liked it, so I converted.*

### **Sub-Theme 2.B: Inter-cast Marriages**

**Case 1:** In Totopara, inter-cast marriage is very common between Totos and Nepalese as these two communities have lived together for many decades. Padmasree Awardee, whose own daughter married outside the community, said in this regard:

*Long ago, it was not allowed, but now many people are getting married outside of their communities. Those non-Toto women who married Toto men have to go through atonement and if any Toto woman marries any non-Toto man, we maintain a formal distance with them; they may come into the house, but the relationship will not remain the same, although we don't punish them like before.*

**Case 2:** The present Pradhan of Totopara gave his point of view on inter-cast marriage:

*Long ago, inter-cast marriages were not allowed, but not anymore. I cannot control my daughter that she has to marry only a Toto guy; she always stays outside. She may marry someone from another community, but if I have to protect my society and culture, I cannot allow her to marry outside, but I will not do that for the sake of my child. Women are the ones who sustain the society, see we talk about mother tongue, not father tongue, because as a child we first learn our mother's language. But when a Toto woman marries outside, she may not teach her children the language.*

### **Sub-Theme 2.C: Attire Adaptation**

Before 1956, Roy Burman (1959) attended the *Mayu* festival two times; the first time, he saw everyone wearing their traditional dresses. However, the second time, he saw some young Totos wearing pants and some elders wearing shirts, and even some Toto girls wearing blouses. Sanyal (1973) added that Toto women were not shy to keep their upper portion exposed. They often tie their children on their backs while working or going out. Majumder (1993) found that the traditional clothes lost their prestige because Totos were embarrassed to go outside in traditional dresses, as these dresses were very coarse and heavy, so they could not breathe properly.

**Case 1:** During data collection, Dilbahadur Lama, a 79-year-old Nepali man and ex-panchayat of Totopara, said:

*When I was very young, I noticed that Totos used to wear traditional clothes all the time. During the early 1990s, we all used to gather in Totopara bajar and watch Nepali movies on a small TV in the Totopara bajar area. Gradually, Totos started to adopt Nepali culture, but a few years back, all of them, from children to aged ones started to wear their traditional cloths, though they have changed the traditional attire a little bit.*

It was felt that mainly the educated Totos realised the importance of cultural pride and influenced others accordingly. The traditional dress of the community consists of *Ajaibya* for men and *Jaibya* for women, and during several cultural events, it was noticed that the young volunteers wear these. Though the traditional attire used to be white but they have now added maroon to *Jaibya*. However, it was also observed that they are also very fond of Nepali and Hindi songs compared to traditional Toto songs, though they enjoy the new Toto songs. Most of them wore Western clothes during performances and also in daily life.

## Sub-Theme 2.D: Cultural Acceptance

**Case 1:** Nowadays, young Totos have become culturally conscious and they are keep adding new events like *Ghero*, *Tunthungksmu* to celebrate the culture. One of them is Sunny Toto, a young folk artist who first started the trend to modernise old Toto songs, said:

*When I was a child, I used to visit Demsha (the Toto temple) with my mother during religious and cultural events. The elders used to sing and dance together, but I couldn't understand the meaning of their songs. In fact, most of us couldn't, as the songs were composed in an old, traditional form of the language that we no longer use. Later, I decided to write and compose new Toto songs that everyone could understand. When I formed a folk group in 2015, there were only five children, but now, we have more than thirty-five active members (smiled proudly).*

**Case 2:** Abhijit Toto, one of his associates, said:

*Many people had worked as folk artists before us, but they couldn't sustain their efforts or engage the younger generation. I joined Sunny Toto's cultural group at the end of 2015, but his songs had a slower rhythm, while mine are faster. At times, we also create new lyrics and blend them with traditional musical compositions.*

What musical instruments do you use?

*Traditionally, we use only Dhol and initially our Demsha was made of bamboo. So, when elderly people used to sing and dance while jumping on the bamboo floor, it created a nice rhythmic music. But now we include guitar, flute, Dhol, everything to attract young people and we succeed (smiled).*

It was heard that it's a sin for Totos to sing without a religious event.

*Yes, it's true even today. However, people have now understood that without regular practice, our traditional songs might be forgotten. As a result, the elders no longer object to it.*

**Case 3:** Sunney Toto and Abhijit Toto, both learned Toto songs from Kalinath Toto, a senior folk artist and traditional healer, who lives in Kangdung, a very remote area, informed that:

*I have travelled many places to perform our folk art, but some years back, my leg broke. So, I cannot move much and also young Totos are writing new songs and people invite them to perform. People are more interested in new songs, but we (he has three more members in his cultural group) know only the old ones.*

Alipurduar-based renowned writer and Banga Ratna awardee Promodh Nath once said that:

*The new age Toto performances are very fascinating and young people are enjoying it. However, the old songs are related to their religious aspects and one must respect them.*



Figure 2: Young Totos in their traditional attire

## Sub-Theme 2.E: Health Consciousness

Totos practice white magic to protect themselves from evil spirits during March–April by sacrificing a red hen along with plantain leaves and ginger. Toto *Paws* (traditional healer) performs black magic by imitating Nepali *Jhakris* (ayurvedic practitioners). They mostly use the root, leaf, stem, bark, bud, flower, and fruit of different herbal plants to prepare ayurvedic medicines. However, religious-majico performances have also been followed simultaneously with Ayurvedic medicine by sacrificing red hens along with *Eu*, some rice and ginger. Some of them have been cured within three or four months; otherwise, they take allopathic treatment and are cured gradually (Dutta, 2014).

**Case 1:** Kalinath Toto, an aged traditional healer, shared his experience here:

*I can treat broken bones, tonsils etc. and I have learned the broken bones treatment procedure from Nishiganj (the place is very famous for ayurvedic treatment in the entire North Bengal). Long ago, I fell from a tree and was there for a long time and learned the procedure there. Totos didn't have any tradition of ayurvedic treatment. We learned it from Nepali Jhakris. However, now, people have lost faith in such traditional methods and mostly prefer allopathic treatments instead.*

**Case 2:** Another Toto *Paw* said:

*There are two types of Paws in Toto society: one worship hills, rivers, streams and another one follows religious-majico procedures for a new born baby. And I am the second one. In our community, any one cannot be a Paw until Ishpa (their God) comes in someone's dream and teaches him the mantras, then only he can be a Paw. 22 years ago, I had a dream of Ishpa, but I never revealed it to anyone, as back then, if people died for some reason. People used to blame Paws and even beat them. Now we don't have much Paws in our society so, I have to become the one now. Though we suggest people not to rely on us blindly, as new health problems are arising. So, one needs to take allopathic medicine as well because we cannot heal everything.*

**Case 3:** 30-35 Totos died at the end of 2023 due to overconsumption of alcohol. Their *Kaiji* (head priest) said in this regard:

*Lots of people take alcohol during marriage ceremonies. We have discussed and decided to reduce the amount of alcohol consumption, including the whole night party.*

*Gapu (headman of Toto society) added, Totos have an excessive drinking habit and others are taking this advantage. We have decreased the availability of foreign alcohol since last year, as many of us died due to adulterated liquor and encouraged people to consume our homemade liquor if they have the urge to drink. It is not as harmful as adulterated liquor.*

**Case 4:** Sauvik Majumder, pharmacist in the local health centre, informed that:

*Generally, 20-30 patients came here (the primary health centre) on a daily basis, mainly for BP-related problems. People also came for injury related problems as they use sharp objects for farming. Totos from hill areas such as Puja gaon and Mitra gaon may follow ayurvedic or religious-magic treatments, as they don't visit here frequently due to distance. Although in general people have changed and now, they depend more on modern treatments than ayurvedic.*

### **Sub-Theme 2.F: Lifestyle improvement**

Earlier studies mentioned unhygienic habits among the Totos, but during data collection, it was noticed that they have improved a lot. Often, it was noticed that Toto men were bathing near the water storage using soap and shampoo. Usually, they maintain cleanliness in their houses, toilets, as well as the surroundings. After cultural programmes, it was observed that they cleaned the ground together. They also improved their daily habits and controlled excessive *Eu* (rice beer) consumption.

**Case 1:** Sebika Toto, one of the teachers in Totopara Primary School, a Santal lady from Samuktala, Alipurduar, who married a Toto man, shared her experience regarding Totos hygienic habits:

*When I moved here in 2007 after my marriage, I saw that Totos were not very hygienic and couldn't even cook properly. But now they have improved their hygiene as they have also educated and updated themselves gradually.*

**Case 2:** Sonal Chisim, whose parents were among the first teachers in Totopara, shared her childhood experience:

*When I was a child, I remember that the Totos often had an unpleasant odour when they visited our homes, as they didn't bathe regularly. However, now, when I visit there and meet them, I found they have improved their personal hygiene a lot.*

**Case 3:** *Eu* (rice beer) is an important part of Totos religious and cultural life and there is no age restriction regarding *Eu* consumption. Therefore, many Totos became *Eu* addicted at a very early age and later they died of serious health issues. But now educated people have become aware and they don't offer *Eu* to young kids. Toto women cook rice and different kinds of meats in the early morning of the *Mainka* festival and the young kids are usually sent to all their brother's houses to deliver the food. Long ago, they used to offer *Eu* to those children to welcome them, which increased their drinking habit from a very young age. But now the educated Totos offer them soft drinks like fruity, mazza, etc instead of *Eu*.

## Theme 3: Economic Development

### Sub-Theme 3.A: Sources of Income

Traditionally, Totos used to follow shifting agriculture and they learned settled agriculture later.

**Case 1:** The present Pradhan shared his view here:

*Totos used to do mainly animal husbandry and a little bit of agriculture, like marua, kaon, different types of pulses, corn and sweet potato. However, agriculture is not possible here due to soil conditions and often wild animals destroy our crops. So, now they have fully shifted to the betel nut farming, which became popular here after 2007; before that we used to plant betel nut for our personal uses, not economically. But gradually they realised betel nut could be a profitable business and therefore everyone is into this. Totopara's betel nut is also very famous due to its quality.*

**Case 2:** The Padmasree awardee shared his opinion here:

*Many Totos are leaving their home to work outside. They mainly work in Sikkim, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Kerala in construction sites, hotels, garages etc. Earlier, they used to work in Bhutan, which is quite near to us, but now the Bhutan government has locked the gates between India and Bhutan after COVID. So, they have to go to other states. Even Toto women are working outside. The educated ones work in different private sectors, beauty parlours, while the less educated ones work as house helps.*

**Case 3:** Totos generally follow multidimensional occupations, such as an educated Toto youth from a plain area who teaches in a local private school or gives tuitions, active member in one of the cultural groups, has a betel nut business, practices animal husbandry, rents a house to tourists or sometimes also has a small shop adjacent to his house. For example, Ramesh Toto, a caretaker in a government bungalow, has a betel nut business like others and owns a homestay which is the most famous there, said:

*26 Totos have received financial help from the BCW (Backward Classes Welfare) department to construct homestays. I have received 1.5 lakh from the department for my "Blue homestay". I kept it clean and that is why people love to visit here.*

Although people living in hill areas are not that privileged due to their inaccessible geographical location.

### Sub-Theme 3.B: Infrastructural development

The traditional Toto houses were known as *Nakosha*, constructed on bamboo or wooden poles, the roofs are made of thatched grass, the floor and walls are made of bamboo (Sanyal, 1973; Biswas, 2009; Bishnu, 2012; Dutta, 2014; Das, 2024). Very few people, mainly from Mitran gaon, the most backward place in Totopara, live in this kind of house. These kinds of houses are also found in the middle of their agricultural fields to keep watch. Traditionally, Toto houses were built on raised platforms with a small opening used as a latrine, where pigs kept below the house acted as natural scavengers (Sanyal, 1973). However, since the early 1990s, educated members of the Toto community have begun constructing separate toilets and designated shelters

for their cattle, reflecting gradual improvements in hygiene and living standards. Now all of them have separate toilets and many have pucca toilets which they constructed under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Totos from plain areas live in pucca or wooden houses with tin shades and a few also have roof houses. They are getting subsidies under the Geetanjali housing scheme and the Indira Awas Yojana to construct pucca houses.

Naren Shaiba, a 70-year-old retired school teacher of Totopara Primary School, said:

*First, I worked there as a Pradhan from 1978 to 1983 and then I became the Panchayet Samiti's Chairperson for the next 5 years. When I was the chairperson, I brought electricity to Totopara in 1984. Later, a new rule required government employees to quit their jobs to join politics. So, I left politics to secure my government job.*

In 2017-2018, electricity was delivered in each house at Totopara, marking an important step toward development and modernisation. At present, there are eight solar panels in different locations. The local authority tried to deliver water in each house under Jal Jibon Mission, but it was not possible in hill areas such as Mitran gaon and Dumchi gaon due to geographical reasons. So, some people living there set plastic pipes from the nearby streams.



Figure 3: one of Toto houses in plain area of Totopara

## Conclusion

Generally, modernisation comes with certain drawbacks; in the case of Totopara, it has significantly improved the community's standard of living. Most Toto families now emphasise their children's education and make sincere efforts to manage the related expenses. Their overall lifestyle has improved remarkably; now they take pride in their cultural identity, prefer modern medical treatments over traditional religious-magico healing practices. They are learning as well as teaching the newly developed Toto script to their children. However, it has also been observed that some Toto students are gradually losing fluency in their mother tongue, as they live outside the village to access quality education. Although some of them converted

into Christianity, inter-cast marriages became very common, which was not allowed earlier. They mainly deal with limited educational opportunities and poor transportation facilities, which hinder their overall progress. If they could receive quality education within their own homeland in their familiar language, which reflects their history, local geography, and way of living, it would help them remain connected to their cultural roots. Currently, they have to cross three large rivers and eight smaller ones, all without bridges, to reach the nearest town, Madarihat. Building bridges over at least on the larger rivers could solve their age-old problems and allow them to truly experience the benefits of modernisation.

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