



Research Article

Marginalised Tribal Women in Sundarbans: *Tusu Puja* and Related Social Sustainability

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Abstract

Sundarbans, the largest stretch of riverine mangrove forest, was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1987. Out of 4.5 million people, 5.56% belongs to the Scheduled tribe (ST) community in Sundarbans. During the British period, the Scheduled tribes people were the first migrant labour from various states of India. Munda, Santhal, Oraon, and Bhumij are the most prominent tribal communities in the Sundarbans region. Vulnerable economic position, social marginalisation, and extreme climatic changes force the tribal males to engage in various professions outside the Sundarbans, and then the females face more challenges to continue their livelihoods. Despite being the bearer of various indigenous skills, social marginalisation seems to be one of the major barriers to the socio-economic upliftment of tribal women. These marginalised groups continue their folk traditions and rituals like *Tusu Puja*, *Karam*, and so on. The objectives of the study are to explore the rituals related to traditional *Tusu Puja* and to identify links with social sustainability, if any. Data was collected by Semi-structured interviews, and after thematic analysis, it was found that traditional rituals related to *Tusu Puja* are linked to social sustainability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Scheduled Tribes (ST) constitute about 8.6% of India's population (Banerjee, 2024)^[1], i.e., approximately 10.45 crores, out of which 5.20 crores are women and 5.5 crores are men, which means half of the tribal population is women (Sahal, 2023)^[20].

Tribal Women

In recent times, the tribal women are increasingly seen at the forefront of various global movements while the world is facing immense challenges from climate change, economic disenfranchisement, and cultural erosion. Tribal women are performing greater leadership in advocacy, preservation of nature, protection of cultural ethnicity, and environmental stewardship, but unfortunately, these women continue to experience marginalisation and violence exacerbated by poverty and discrimination (Khan & Hasan, 2020; Manna, 2024)^[11, 19]. Besides, the tribal women take part in various economic activities, as labourers in industries and agricultural sectors. Their earnings provide a lot of financial support to their families. However, they remain an unprivileged group due to the double burden of social gender inequity and ethnic marginalisation (Kundu, 2019).

Underprivileged, marginalised tribal group in the Sundarbans and the traditional culture

Sundarbans is the world's largest and only tiger-inhabited mangrove forest. The name Sundarbans, meaning 'beautiful forest', is believed to be due to the dominant frequency of the Sundari tree (*Heritoria fomes*) (Joe, 2022)^[9]. The forest expands in Bangladesh (60%) and India (40%); the Indian part was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987. Under British rule, during the East India Company in 1757, the clearing of the forest and human settlement were started in the Sundarbans. At the initial stage of settlement, tree cutting in the forest of the royal Bengal tiger, clearing the marshy mud-flats, and converting the forest land to habitable was an act of tremendous hardship in the harsh environment of the Sundarbans mangrove forest. At that time, the poorest tribal peoples from Ranchi, Chhotnagpur, and Hazaribag regions of India were lured with some initial provisions and a small amount of land for residence and cultivation (Human Development Resource, 2009)^[15]. Gradually, the population of ST people increases, and as per the census, the population of tribes are 5.56% (Mukherjee & Bhattacharya, 2022).

In Sundarbans, tribal women mainly belong to communities - Munda, Oraon, and Santhal, who navigate a life of compounded vulnerabilities (Hembrom *et al.*, 2024; Naskar, 2022)^[8], shaped by their geographical location, gender, and indigenous identity. As they reside in a climate-change hotspot that is characterised by frequent cyclones and salinity intrusion, their traditional way of natural resource collection, such as fishing, honey collecting, and procuring non-timber forest products, is getting increasingly perilous and economically unstable (Dutta *et al.*, 2026)^[7]. The increasing crisis of forest resources, growing natural disasters, and ecological imbalance situations are

gradually increasing the frustration of marginalised locals. Though in this perilous situation, locals make a living through their traditional rituals, beliefs, and celebrate many festivals related to the local God and Goddess (Biswas, 2022)^[3]. People from Oraon tribes worship prevalent Hindu customs of worshipping Maa Manasa and Maa Shitala as the local deity of snakes and diseases (Hembrom *et al.*, 2024)^[8]. Based on the situation, tribal peoples are little converted, but their traditional festivals are women-centric festivals, such as the *Tusu puja* (Biswas, 2022)^[3], *Karam*, that express their traditions generation after generation.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marginalised Tribal Women

Marginalisation is a process that peripheralizes persons based on their identities, associations, experiences, and environments (Dodgson & Struthers, 2005)^[6]. In India, people from Scheduled Tribes (ST), who are referred to as 'Adivasis,' reside in implied distinct communities with marginalisation from mainstream society (Das & Jat, 2022; Sahal, 2023)^[5, 20]. 'Adivasi' communities are generally known as undeveloped due to their specific characteristics like geographical and social isolation, distinctive culture, and economic deprivation. In this tribal community, tribal women (TW) are more marginalised due to high levels of backwardness in healthcare, occupation, education, and political representation, whereas it is at a peak in social behaviour (Khan & Hasan, 2020)^[11].

Tribal women and Socio-economic status

The socio-economic status of TW is a critical area of inquiry for understanding global inequality. Research from the United States of America and Australia explored the colonial policies that were used to dismantle matrilineal as well as communal landholding systems and imposed patriarchal legal frameworks that are denoted as the root cause of economic vulnerability of TW (Simpson, 2017)^[21]. However, Mal & Saikia (2024)^[18] show how matrilineal women are more advanced in decision-making power and struggle for socio-economic opportunities than women from a patrilineal society.

In the modern World, tribal women are forced to depend on non-tribal occupations, making them more vulnerable in mainstream society. The economy negatively affects their poor health care system, early marriage, low formal education, high child death rate (Banerjee, 2024)^[1], and rights in society.

Tribal women and folk culture: Sustainable Indigenous practices

TW are more responsible for carrying and transferring indigenous skills. A study by Kurtkoti & Joshi (2024)^[16] highlights sustainable indigenous skill in agriculture, highly specialised traditional knowledge about medicinal plants, food preservation, and cultural rituals, in which TW are more specialised. Also, Mahato (2024)^[17] explains how TW sustain their cultural heritage through traditional arts and crafts and contribute to the community's socio-economic empowerment.

In the Sundarbans, migrated tribals have undergone severe changes in their ethnicity, in language, rituals, customs, religion, kinship, and marriage, through years of acculturation (Hembrom *et al.*, 2024)^[8]. As per Santhal folklore, they respect and worship *Baghut Bonga* as the tiger God who has similarity with the tiger god of Sundarbans 'Dakkhin Roy'. Among the Santhal community, there are many folktales that are women-centric, where women are depicted as diligent and responsible, using their wit and sacrifice to rescue men or mend relationships (Soren & Jamir, 2020)^[22]. The Oraon community is related to their traditional festivals like *Nawakhani*, *Sohrai*, *Sahure*, and worship of folk deities *Dogrib* (Hemrom *et al.*, 2024). In the Sundarbans, the Tribal or *Adivasi* Community mainly enjoys their traditional *Tusu Puja* (Biswas, 2022)^[3]. In Sundarbans, the *Tusu* festival is mainly arranged by the ethnic tribes who came from Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. And *Tusu* is worshipped as a farmer's wealth (Biswas, 2022)^[3].

3. OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the study are-

- i) To explore the rituals performed by ST women in their festival, *Tusu puja*.
- ii) To find out the link between the explored rituals related to *Tusu puja* and social sustainability.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study area was conducted in the Sundarbans, West Bengal, India. There are two districts in Sundarbans – South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas. In South 24 Parganas, the Gosaba block was selected first, then from the village Gosaba, 10 (n=10) women from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) were selected randomly as participants who are strongly related to the *Tusu puja*. The ages of the sample range between 35 years and 62 years. A mixed questionnaire including closed and open-ended questions was used to collect data. As a data collection method, a semi-structured interview was used. Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the collected data.

5. RESULT

Tusu Puja is a female-centric festival celebrated in the Sundarbans region mainly among the Scheduled Tribe community. Among this community, *Tusu* is depicted as Maa Luxmi.

'Tusu' worshipped as a daughter of the House.

In the Sundarbans, *Tusu* is worshipped as a virgin daughter to whom the women pour their hearts. Like Maa Durga, *Tusu* is the daughter of the household, and tribal women welcome her very cordially with their folk songs and dances. Women are decorating *Tusu* with ornaments and flowers by themselves.

Season of Tusu Puja.

Tusu puja is a harvest-related festival in Sundarbans, and the folk deity *Tusu* is worshipped in the Bengali month *Poush*, on the last day of the month, i.e., Poush sankranti or Makar

Sankranti (mid-January). Generally, in the Poush month, farmers harvest crops and bring them home. On this occasion, the tribal community arranges the *Tusu Puja*.

Rituals of Puja.

The puja is totally maintained by women. There is no need for any men as priests. The women who perform the puja eat a vegetarian meal for 3 days and worship a *shora* (earthen flattened pot) that is filled with Paddy, flowers, and *durba* (*Cynodon dactylon*).

A group of women goes to bring the idol of *Tusu* and welcome her with their folk songs and dances. They keep the *Tusu* in a clean and well-organised place and arrange their *Tusu* like a daughter with ornaments and various flowers. In the evening, *Tusu* worshipped, and all night, all the women sang their folk songs and dances together.

In some places of Sundarbans, after worship, women carry the "Tusu" on their head or lap and walk around the whole village with singing folk songs, and at every house tell- 'Tusu has come to your house, give something.'

Worship to ancestors

On the occasion of *Tusu Puja*, tribals maintain ancestor veneration and offer them special alcoholic drinks, locally called 'Hariya'. The drinks are made at home by women. Tribals believe their ancestors visit on that day to bless their family and protect them from misfortune.

Participation of non-tribal communities

Presently, non-tribe people from lower caste families or economically poor backgrounds join the *Tusu*, resembling Maa Luxmi worship and wish for an abundant harvest.

Tusu Puja is a female-centric festival celebrated in the Sundarbans region mainly among the Scheduled Tribe community. Among this community, *Tusu* is depicted as Maa Luxmi.

6. DISCUSSION

Tusu Puja mainly reflects worship of nature, and an awareness of taking care of plants, which reflects environmental sustainability. But with it, *Tusu Puja* promotes social sustainability by showing women empowerment, unity, social cohesion, and improving the quality of life.

Women's empowerment and quality of life.

The term empowerment refers to a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives". Women's empowerment means the process of acquiring greater control over their lives and becoming more self-reliant (Chand, 2024)^[4]. Women's empowerment plays an important role in social development, as empowering women enhances human capital, increases labour productivity, and reduces poverty (Koley, 2025)^[12].

In *Tusu Puja*, marginalised tribal women show their empowerment by taking total responsibility for their harvest goddess, *Tusu*. Here, women's empowerment improves quality

of life (Kundu *et al.*, 2022)^[13], which is one of the key factors for social sustainability (Wiesli & Hammer, 2022)^[25].

Bonding among generations

The ritual of 'ancestor veneration' strengthens the familial bonding, young generations feel respect for their ancestors, and connect families to their lineage. The way of family bonding is a positive sign for social bonding, also regulates the social existence (Van, 2023), which is deeply linked to social sustainability.

Social cohesion is the basis for achieving sustainability.

In *Tusu Puja*, other people, like other lower castes, economically poor people who live mainly as neighbours of the ST community, join in *Tusu* festivals. They are also familiar with rituals and folk songs. However, *Tusu* move each house of the villages and sometimes to the neighbouring villages also. Though *Tusu* festivals are tribal community-centric, they make a cohesive society that fosters strong social relations, accepting diversity and minimising marginalisation.

Social cohesion plays an important role in achieving sustainable goals (Li *et al.*, 2024)^[10]. Social cohesion and sustainability have a holistic approach to achieve ecological and social justice (Suarez *et al.*, 2025)^[23].

7. CONCLUSION

In the Indian Sundarbans, the *Tusu* festival remains a completely different form of 'little traditions' that preserved by tribal community, among 'great traditions'. These traditions show the way of sustainability and indicate that environmental sustainability is possible to achieve successfully through social sustainability. So, it is very important to take initiatives to conserve our traditions and the folk cultures that are under severe extinction conditions. The government should take initiatives to protect the traditional skills and practices of the indigenous community, and every person in society has to respect the knowledge and community.

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