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# **Reviewing the Festivals of Itu and Tusu: A Discourse on Nature Worship**

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## **Abstract:**

My paper is based on the study of natural elements and indigenous cultures of various traditions associated with the festival of Makar Sankranti which is a harvest festival celebrated all over India but it bears different names in different places. There are various folk celebrations associated with the event of Makar Sankranti. Folk Culture is also associated with the celebrations of nature and natural elements. In my paper I wanted to highlight the facts associated with nature as well as with women as Sun God (Itu) and Tusu respectively. I would like to focus my paper on the narratives associated with Itu puja and Tusu which is generally celebrated along the rural region of Bengal where the main occupation of people is agriculture. People for a long period of time are celebrating these harvest festivals by associating it with folk cultures. The narrative behind Itu puja deals with the story of two sisters Umno and Jhumno which deals with the background theme of disloyalty from father, shelter from earth, faith to the natural elements which I would like to focus on in my paper. On the other hand the narrative of Tusu is much more familiar as Tusu is considered to be the daughter of the household. In my paper therefore I shall try to focus on the elements of nature and other aspects of life as well.

Each and every country has certain indigenous cultures which they follow during various festivals or the culture itself is given the height of the festivals, which helps them to bind together with one another and the enjoyment gets doubled up by the celebration of these folk festivals. For every ritual there are certain narratives or stories behind the celebration. Folk culture the word itself can be divided into two parts. "Folk" means people and "culture" is the belief, custom or ritual that is generally followed by a small scale group of people. Therefore, folk culture can be considered as the ritual followed by a group of people and not an individual of similar belief situated in a locality. Folk Culture is generally celebrated as a sense of belongingness to one's tradition. These practices of various cultural events are carried on from one generation to another just by oral instructions and practices. For many such rituals people celebrate nature. Nature worship is one of the main way of following this folk culture. These folk cultures help in preserving the traditions and beliefs and help people in creating a special identity. These folk cultures help us to understand our roots from where we belong and helps us in understanding the real significance of these cultures in our life. If we look into these rituals deeply we will find that womanhood is celebrated from the perspective of nature. So in this paper, I would like to describe the ecofeminist or ecocritical concept carried on in folk rituals. I would like to give a detailed description of how the narratives of two folk cultures of West Bengal which revolve around the festival of Makar Sankranti and how womanhood is celebrated through nature.

“This earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am. How we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: We are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her.”

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Itu and Tusu both are women centric celebrations. India is an agriculture based country and the major population of India is still dependent on the farming profession. The sun plays a major role in agriculture. So in these folk cultures or narratives the Sun is considered to be the center. The chanting hymns or narratives of Itu Puja revolve around the story of two sisters Umno and Jhumno and how they are dedicated towards nature and natural elements for sustainance. If we look into the narrative of the background story of Itu we shall find that two sisters were born to a very poor family where their father was just a poor brahmin. Their father wanted to have “pitha” During Makar Sankranti a type of Indian homemade sweet is prepared with rice flour, jaggery and coconut which is known as “pitha”. The brahmin had hidden himself at the backyard of the kitchen and instructed his wife to prepare “pitha” and also strictly forbade sharing a single “pitha” with anybody else. When the wife of the brahmin was making “pitha” the sound that came from the kitchen made the old brahmin aware and he was tying knot in a rope with each sound so that he could keep a track of the countings of the number of “pithas” prepared . When the wife served the “pitha” he found two pitha missing by matching his countings. When he got furious the wife shared the truth with him about sharing just two “pithas” with their children Umno and Jhumno. He got furious and decided to send Umno and Jhumno to their aunt's house. Next early morning on the day before last day of kartik month (according to the bengali calendar) the brahmin took his daughters and left them in a dense forest while they were tired and slept off. This portrays a negative image of the father. Brahmin by his greed became too violent to leave his own children. With the dangerous sounds of the wild animals they woke up in the middle of the night. When they found themselves in the dense forest

they were crying in despair they found a Banyan tree. They requested the Banyan tree, comparing it with their own mother by saying that just as their mother gave them care inside her womb if the banyan tree would too protect them for a single night by allowing them to stay inside the trunk. Here we get an imagery of how nature is compared with a female entity as mother. This also provides another connotation where the home and the parent could not provide shelter but nature could. This shows the association of nature in livelihood. The banyan tree expanded her arms by getting divided in the middle. The sisters stayed inside the hole of the trunk for the night and the next early morning they bid her goodbye and started their journey through the forest.

After moving some distance they found a house where the women were worshipping using an earthenware plate. When the mistress of the house asked about them they narrated their painful story. While the sister asked her about the ritual the woman said that this ritual is of itu pujo and one has to fast the day before for performing this rite. The day was the last day of the month of kartika. The sisters joined and started worshipping Itu as they had already fasted the day before. Itu is actually the Sun God.

The sisters' faith towards the Sun God made the Sun God happy and asked them what boon they needed. Umno and Jhumno asked the Sun God to take away all the pain of their father. Sun God accepted their prayers and gave them the boon. From then onwards throughout the month of agrahayan each Sunday they worshipped the sun god on keeping fast on Saturday. On the other hand the house of the brahmin was filled with money. But the wife of the brahmin kept thinking about their daughters. One fine day Umno and Jhumno return back to their home. The condition of their parents was better now and so the sisters were given enough care. They didn't forget to worship Sun God, Itu even after returning and their mother too joined them. Therefore this Itu puja is basically an example of nature

worship. Even today in the rural bengal we find young girls to perform this folk ritual and carry forward the tradition.

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.

-Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

On the other hand, Tusu is considered to be the daughter of the household. This is another folk festival of rarb bengal. Tusu Goddess is worshipped from the last day of bengali Agrahayan month which is from mid december to the last day of bengali poush month that is mid January till the day of Makar Sankranti . Unlike other festivals Tusu is believed to be a secular harvest festival where the harvest goddess is worshipped. After cutting off the harvest of paddy or rice the stack that remains in the field is known as "dinimai." This "dinimai" is brought to the house. Young girls prepare Tusu on that very day. Tusu itself has no structure but is believed to be the structure of a woman. Holes on the wall known as kulungi are made where rice husks, cow dung balls and one small seedling of paddy are placed on earthenware pots and are worshipped in the evening throughout the month of aghrayan. It is commonly practiced that women worship Tusu and sing beautiful songs in her praise in the evening known as tusu songs. Then after a month a vehicle for Tusu immersion is prepared with jute sticks known as "choudal." Inside this "choudal" all the things used for worship are placed and are carried for immersion to any river or pond or any water body.

This "choudal" is actually the representation of the Sun. Chou means all the four sides and ural means flying. As the sun's rays could spread in all

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directions so This name suggests that sun. Again Sun plays a major role in this folk Festival too. Tusu on the day of immersion that is on makar sankranti is believed to be going to her marital home after she starts menstruating and is able to bear a child. As sun and water both play a major role in agriculture so during immersion it is prayed to Tusu for bountiful agriculture for the upcoming year.

"Ecofeminists focus on interconnections between the domination/oppression of women and the domination/oppression of nature."

-Lisa Kemmerer, *Sister Species: Women, Animals and Social Justice*. Women and nature both are subject to vulnerability. The way patriarchy exploited women in the same way the modernization of man had harmed nature and had also dominated society.

"In Western patriarchal culture, both women and nonhuman nature have been devalued alongside their assumed opposites--men and civilization/culture.

-Lisa Kemmerer, *Sister Species: Women, Animals and Social Justice* But nature can be very productive. The cultural ecofeminist generally try to invert the gender roles and oppression by accepting the binaries of the patriarchal society as power and accepted nature to be gendered to serve the mankind with care and love which is often generalised as a feminine quality and thus we consider earth as Mother earth which provides shelter and care. The folk cultural narratives which are associated with the sun are also related to the reproductive cycle or the vegetative cycle. Sun is the ultimate source of energy. The people following these folk cultures associated with the sun are trying to worship the ultimate source of energy for the perfect cycle of nature.

So, we can easily understand how nature nurtures mankind from generation to generation. These folk cultures create a bridge between mankind and nature by following various traditions. Therefore, nature is ultimately worshipped as it provides us with our basic needs for sustaining our lives. These folk traditions are ultimately a culture of being grateful towards the natural elements and nature by delivering a heartfelt thanks through the process of worshipping for sustaining our lives by providing our basic needs. Therefore before concluding, I would like to add that commercialisation of these folk cultures must be stopped so that the real essence of these folk traditions are not lost and these kinds of folk rituals must be carried on and on keeping in mind the actual reasons for the observation of these rites.