

Colonial Representations of the Surjapuri Folktales in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District: A Cultural Study

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Abstract: *The current Islampur Subdivision is full of Folktales. Since ancient times, this folk culture has been an integral part of the local way of life. Drawing upon a wide range of colonial writings, as- Gazetteers, Accounts, administrative reports, and survey sources, the research critically examines how British scholars and administrators perceived, recorded, and interpreted the indigenous cultural traditions of the region. This paper aims to analyse the processes through which local folk narratives, Customs, rituals, foods, beliefs, and Folktales were documented. Many mythological stories are associated with this place, reflecting the religious beliefs of its people. The religious beliefs of the local people deeply influenced their daily lives. Colonial documents provides not only political history but also profound insights into social change. Historians often use colonial records to understand social evolution.*

Key Words: *Purnea, Kishanganj, Islampur, Surjapur Pargana, Colonial, Folktales, Mamu-Bhagna Ail, Surjapuri Language.*

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Introduction

This Islampur Subdivision under Uttar Dinajpur district was the North Eastern part of the undivided Purnea district of Bihar before 1956 AD. During the Mughal period the area was under the Bengal Subah, Tajpur Sarkar and Surjapur pargana. Also, the colonial period, this present Islampur Subdivision was under Kishanganj and Sadar Subdivision. The culture of the people in this area has a unique Identity, which distinguishes them from other places. This uniqueness is clearly reflected in language, foods, and customs. The people of this area identify themselves as 'Surjapuri' and their language of communication is also 'Surjapuri'. Historically, the Islampur Subdivision was an integral part of Bihar, so Bihar's influence is evident in its culture as well. The folk culture have been passed down through generations and influence people's daily lives. These folk customs are an important part of their culture and traditions. Traditionally, the largest population in the area is divided between Hindu and Muslims. Historically, there have been many instances in various regions where Hindus converted to Islam. The historical records indicate that even after conversion, their previous traditions remained strong, which is clearly highlighted in the writings of the Britishers.

Importance of the Surjapuri Linguistic in Surjapuri Folktales

Language is the main means of human expression, feeling, thoughts, and information exchange. Language strengthens human identity and group unity, and plays an important role in preserving culture. Within a language lies the history, folktale, songs, proverbs and beliefs of a society. It carries culture from generation to generation. The ancient language that prevailed in the present day Islampur Subdivision and north-eastern part of Bihar is known as 'Surjapuri Language'. According to historical records, the eastern parts of the Mahananda river were part of the Tajpur Sarkar and Surjapur Pargana since Medieval times. L.s.s.o' Malley mentioned in his gazetteer that— "The portion of the district east of the Mahananda fell in Sarkar Tajpur, which also contained the West Dinajpur and had in all 29 mahals, of which seven, assessed at about Rs.74,000, can be identified with the present pargana of Badaur, Bhaura, Dilawarpur, Kumaripur, Maldwar, Surjapur and Tajpur."¹ According to G.A. Grierson, the of this region had two name: Siripuria and Kishanganjia. What is known today as Surjapuri Language. This Surjapuri language is a variant of Kamtapuri language. About this language G.A. Grierson in his language survey report said that— "The western limit of Northern Bengali extends into the Purnea District. That language may be taken as occupying the eastern third of the District, that is to say, the whole of the Kishanganj and the eastern half of the Sadar Sub-division. In the Kishanganj Sub-division, and in the Kasba Amur and Balrampur Thanas, the Musalmans, who are said to be of Koch Origin, speak a mixture of Bihari and Bengali, closely resembling the Koch-Bengali of Malda. This dialect is called Kishanganjia or Siripuria, and is returned as spoken by 603,623 souls."² Also, L.s.s.o' Malley mentioned in his gazetteer about this language that— "Till on the east of the river Mahananda it is superseded by the Siripuria dialect of that language."³ The prevalence of the Surjapuri language in this area is mentioned in G.A. Grierson's linguistic survey report. The Surjapuri Folktales mentioned by G.A. Grierson give a vivid picture of the Surjapuri society. This Surjapuri Folktales highlights the family like of

Surjapuri society. This folktales are considered as one of the means to know society. In 2000, Priya Ranjan Das Munshi delivered a speech in parliament, highlighting the importance of this language and culture. As a result, in 2009, UNESCO registered the Surjapuri language. Also, in 2011, an organisation called "TASO" (Transferred Area Surjapur Organisation) conducted a linguistic survey of the present Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district. Out of the total population of Islampur Subdivision, 395138 people registered Surjapuri language as their mother tongue.

The Folktales of Islampur Subdivision in Colonial Representations

Therefore, the pre-1956 AD history of Islampur Subdivision is entirely Purnea and Bihar centric. In fact, the social and cultural fabric of this region was intricately linked with Bihar. Presently, many similarities in Folk culture are observed between Islampur Subdivision and the north eastern region of Bihar. This place is known for its historical importance. A Hindu ruler named Sukhdeo ruled the area before 1545 AD. Saiyad Khan Dastur was appointed the first regional Muslim ruler of this area. In this context, L.s.s.o' Malley mentioned in his gazetteer that- "According to its chronicles, the founder of the family was Saiyad Khan Dastur, who did good service under the Emperor Humayun in the war against Shershah and was rewarded, in A.H. 962, i.e., 1545 A.D., by the grant of a Sanad Conferring on him, together with the title of Kanungo, the Zamindari of Surjapur, which was formerly held by a Hindu Raja named Sukhdeo."⁴ Even before Hindu King Sukhdeo, this area was under Hindu rule. This area was part of the Khagra Estate which was later divided. J. Byrne mentioned in his 'Final Report On the Survey and Settlement operations' that -"In 1302, the Khagra share was leased out in Patni to a local man of considerable influence named khudan Lal."⁵ People of different communities have been living in this area since ancient times. L.s.s.o' Malley mentioned in his gazetteer about principal castes- "Sheikh, Goala, Rajbanshi, Musahar, Kaibarta, Dhanuk, Gangai, Tanti, Hari, Teli, Dosadh, Saiyad, Joloha, Brahman, Koiri, Baniya, Jewat "⁶ The arrival of Sufi-Saints and Muslim rulers converted the Hindus here into Muslims. G.A. Grierson mentioned in his 'Linguistic Survey of India ' that -"In the Kishanganj Subdivision, and in the Kasba Amur and Balrampur Thanas, the Musalmans, who are said to be of Koch Origin."⁷ According to historical data, the Muslim population in Islampur was greater than that of Hindus. In this context, L.s.s.o' Malley mentioned that -"The proportion of Hindus is greatest in thana Damdaha in the west, and decrease as we proceed towards the north east, until in the thana of Islampur in the Kishanganj Subdivision, there is only one Hindu to every two Muhammadans."⁸ There are many instances in history where people, even after converting, did not completely erase their old beliefs. The Muslim converts were following the earlier i.e. Hindu culture in various parts of their culture. J. Byrne mentioned that -" In every village can be found a "Kaliasthan" and Hindus and Muhammadans celebrate their characteristic festivals together. At the time of marriages, Muhammadans perform some ceremony at the Bhagwati Asthan , and put vermilion on the bride's forehead. Attached to almost every house, even of Muhammadans, is a little shrine called Khodai Ghar or God's house, and prayers are offered there in which the names of Allah and Kali both figure. When ill, even Muhammadans call a Hindu Ojha who recites some

mantras over the sick man. They freely offer goats, fowls, pigeons and the first fruits of trees and crops to purely Hindu deities, and especially to the village godling who generally lives in the most convenient tree. The actual sacrifice is done by a Hindu. Hindus and Muhammadans alike yoke cows in their ploughs in this locality.”⁹

Various mythological and historical stories are associated with various places in the present Islampur Subdivision. A Mahabharata incident is associated with Asuragarh village, under Chakulia police station, Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district. Francis Buchanan mentioned that this Asuragarh was the palace of Kichak, the brother-in-law of Raja Virat of Mahabharata era. Francis Buchanan Said of this Asuragarh that -”This part of the country is acknowledged to be in Matsya, and a ruin is pointed out as having been the house of Kichak. It is usually called the Asuragarh. What is called the Gar is a space of irregular form and about 1200 yards in circumference. It rises suddenly from the surrounding plain to a height of ten or twelve feet.”¹⁰ L.s.s.o’ Malley also mentioned in his gazetteer that- this area was under Raja Virat during the Mahabharata period. “Local tradition still speaks of the struggles and conquests of the Kiratas, and a kirata(Kiranti) women from the morang or Tarai is said to have been the wife of Raja Virat, who, according to legend, gave shelter to Yudhishtira and his four Pandava brothers during their 12 years exile. The site of his fort is Still pointed out at Thakurganj in the north of the district.”¹¹ Also, W.W. Hunter discussed that -”There are ample materials for archaeological researches, as rocks and portions of pillars with figures and inscriptions are to be seen lying about the sites. The story locally current as to the origin of these forts is that there were five brothers, Benu, Barijan, Asura, Nanha, and Kunha, who each built a garh or fortified residence, and named it after himself. The five brothers are said to have lived in Vikramaditya period, that is to say, about 57 B.C., and the forts, it is added, were all built in a night.”¹² Also, W.W. Hunter mentioned one more incident about this Asuragarh that -”The People on the spot state that some hundred years ago the place was covered with trees; and that no Hindu would venture to live on it, lest Asur Deo should be offended. At length a holy Musalman came, and killing a cow, took possession, which his descendants retain. They have cleared and cultivated the whole place, and enjoy considerable reputation. Hindus come occasionally and make offerings to Asur Deo. The Muhammadans, on the other hand, venerate the intrepid saint by whom the ruin was cleared; and about 1500 of the faithful assemble, after the fair of Nekmard, in Dinajpur, to celebrate his memory.”¹³

Mamu Bhagina Ail is a embankment in this Islampur Subdivision which has many old folktales. Mamu Bhagina Ail is extended from Nekmard in Dinajpur to Kishanganj district in Bihar. It is said that there is a long folktales behind the name Mamu Bhagina Ail. Hundred of years old stories about this embankment are still prevalent among Surjapuri people. The existence of this embankment can be observed even today. Similarities like these people and stories can be seen even today in Surjapuri society. The uncle and nephew created this Ail(Embankment) hence the name ‘Mamu Bhagina Ail’. L.s.s.o’ Malley mentioned in his gazetteer about this embankment that— “An embankment which runs across country, near the south of pargana Surjyapur in the Kishanganj Subdivision, from Nekmard in Dinajpur. Legend relates that it was constructed by an uncle and his nephew, rival suitors for the hand of

a lady, who lived at the village of Angorbasa. The suitors lived about 30 miles away in opposite directions, and to win the lady's favours, the each tried to erect a causeway so as to come to her house by a road untrodden before by any feet. Once form of the legend says that both arrived at the same time, having finished the roads by supernatural assistance in a single night; and the lady, unable to decide between them, committed suicide. Another, and a more likely version, is that the process of road- making proved so slow that the lady got tired of waiting and when at last the uncle and nephew arrived, they were only in time to assist at the celebration of her nuptials with a third and more favoured suitors. There is a similar legend about a sort of embankment traceable at intervals on the left bank of the Mahananda between Titaliya and Sonapur some 50 miles further north. A very conspicuous mound still exists there, which is said to have been the site of the lady's palace. Another story is that pargana Surjyapur was enclosed on the North and South by huge outworks built for defensive purposes."¹⁴

This tale sheds light on significant social facets such as love, rivalry, and social values. Two rival suitors endeavor to construct a road leading to a woman's home, each aiming to win her heart. This legend reflects human ambition, a competitive spirit, and the desire for honor and recognition within society. Furthermore, it demonstrates how social norms, emotions, and personal choices can profoundly influence people's lives and destinies.

The present Islampur Subdivision was part of the undivided Purnea district's north-eastern side. The language prevalent in the north-eastern part of Purnea district is known as Surjapuri Language. When G.A. Grierson did a linguistic survey of the region, he mentioned a few folktales in Surjapuri language in his survey report. The real picture of Surjapuri society has emerged through these folktales. Such incidents still frequently occur in families of Surjapuri society. It is a social problem. Two folktales mentioned by G.A. Grierson in Surjapuri language are-

"Ek jhanar dui chhua chil. Uha-se chhoto-ti apna bapak kahle, ke, 'bap, tor-dhaner hissa je mok mile, de. Se-khuna uh dhan bate dile, aor thorak din pichhu chhoto beta sab-kichhu le ek-durer mulakat chale-gel, ar uchha apna dhan bad-kamat urale. Ar je-khuna sab-ti kharach hae-gel u-khuna u-desat bara akal pol, ar uha kangal hae-gel. Se-khuna u-deser ek-baro-manuser gharat gel. Uha apna-khetot suar charao pathale, ar uhar man chhil, ki ula khusa jela suar khachhil apna pet bharae. Sah uhak koi dichhil ni. Se-ghari uhak phom pol aor uha kahle, ke, 'mor-baper katek jan janok bahut khaor chhe, ar mui bhoke morchhi. Mui apna-baper ligi jamu, ar uhak kohmu, ke, "baba, Khodaer ar tor sange gunah karaa-chhinu, ar ala tor beta kahlaor laek mui ni chhi. Mok apna darmahadar nokarer aesa ek jhan bana." ' Se-khuna uthe apna-baper ligi gel. Abhi durte chhil, ke uhar-bapak kadar bhol. Dekhle, ar daure uhak galla lagae like, ar chumle. Beta uhak kohle, ke, 'baba, mui Khodar ar tor khidmatat gunah kanu, ki ala mui hanman ni ki pher tor beta kahlai.' Bap apna nokarak kahle, ki, 'achha achha kapra niklae an, ar ihak pinha, ar uhar hatat angothi ar paot juta pinha, ar hamra khai ar khushi kari; kiae ki mor i beta mol chhil, ala jet bhol chhe; kaha gel-chhil? ala milel chhe ' Se-khuna uha khushi karao lagil.

Ar uhar baro beta kheter barit chhil. Je-khuna ghorer baglat ol, Se-khuna gaor o nachaor boli sunle. Se-ghuri ek jhan nokrak jaob-de puchhle, I ki hae?' Uha uhak kohle, ki, 'tor bhai

ol chhok, ar tor baba barka bhoj karaa-chhe, i dast ke uhak achha paa-chhe.’ Uha-e gosa bhol, o bhitra ni gel. Se-khuna uhar bap bahr ose uhak bujhale. Uha-e bapak jaobat kahle, ki, ‘atek baras se mui tor khidmat kanu, ar kadhi tor-kahnar baher ni chalnu; pher tui kadhi mok ek-ta bakrir bachcha mor-doster sane khusi karaor tane ni dilo. Je tor i-ta beta ol jaha-e tor dhonak kasbir sange, khae-gel, uhar tane barka bhoj Kali.’ Uha uhak kahle ‘beta tui sadae mor ligi rohlo ar je-kichhu mor chhe, sab tohre. I-khuna khusi karna, ar khos hona munasib chhil, kiae ki, tor i bhai more gel-chhil, se jet bhol; kaha gel-chhil? Ala milil chhe.’

One man’s two sons were. Them-from the-younger-one his-own father-to said, that, ‘father of-thy-wealth the-share which me-to is-got, give.’ Then he the-wealth dividing gave, and a-few days afterwards the-younger son evening having-taken of-a-distance to-country went-away, and there his-own wealth on-evil-work squandered. And when everything expended became then in-that-country a-great famine fell, and he poor became. Then of-that-country of-a-great-man in-the-house he-went. He in-his-own field swine to-feed sent, and his mind was, that (with)-those husks which the-swines were-eating his-own belly he-may-fill. That-even him-to any-one was-giving not. Then his memory fell-(happened) and he said, that, of-my-father how-many people servants-to much food is, and I by-hunger am-dying. I of-my-own-father near will-go, and him-to I-will-say, that, “father, of-God and of-thee with fault I-had-committed, and now thy son of-being-called fit I not am. Me thine-own salary-getting of-servant like one person make.” ‘ Then having-arisen of-his-own-father near he-went. Still at-a-distance he-was, that of-his-father compassion became. He-saw, and having-run to-him the-neck having-applied took, and kissed. The-son him-to said, that, ‘father, I of-God and of-thee in-the-service sin committed, that now I such am-not, that again of-thee the-son I-may-be-called.’ The-father his-own servants-to said, that, ‘good good clothes having-produced bring, and this-(person)-to put-on, and his on-hand a-ring, and on-foot shoe put-on, and (let)-us eat and merriment make; because that my this son dead was, now living become has; where had-he-gone? now hound is.’ Then they merriment to-make began.

And his elder son of-the-field in-the-enclosure was. When of-the-house in-the-vicinity he-came then of-singing and of-dancing the-sound he-heard. Then one person servant-to having-summoned he-asked, ‘this, what is?’ He him-to said, that, ‘thy brother come is, and thy father a-great feast has-caused-to-be-made, this reason that him well he-has-found,’ He angry became, and inside not went. Then his father in-outside having-come him-to explained. He The-father-to in-answer said, that, ‘so-many years from I thy service did, and ever of-thy-commands outside not went; but thou ever me-to a-single goat’s young-one of-my-friends in-company merriment of-making for-the-reason not gave. When thy this son came who thy wealth of-harlots in-company devoured, of-him for-the-sake a-great feast hou-madest.’ He him-to said, ‘son thou always of-me near wast, and whatever mine is, all thine. Now merriment to-make, and happy to-be proper was, because that, thy this brother having-died had-gone, he living became; where had-he-gone? Now found is.’¹⁵

This story reflects several significant aspects of society—such as family relationships, humanity, remorse, and forgiveness. In this narrative, a young son leaves home with his inherited share of the estate, only to squander the entire fortune through a reckless lifestyle.

After facing extreme hardship and poverty, he realizes his mistakes and returns to his father with deep remorse. Instead of punishing him, his father extends a warm welcome and grants him forgiveness. This demonstrates that, within the fabric of society, the family remains the ultimate source of love and support. The story teaches us that while making mistakes is human nature, relationships can be mended by acknowledging those errors and seeking forgiveness. Thus, the story powerfully highlights the values of empathy, compassion, and the unbreakable strength of family bonds.

Also, G.A. Grierson mentioned in his Linguistic survey report another Surjapuri Folktales that— “Basbarir bap, apna chhoto beta, Nagrur, Tolphal Maraler betir sange bihlal-chhil. Thorek din sab-koi bahut khushi-se rahil. Oi-beti-chhual chal achha ni rahe, ohi-dasti apna sas sasur-se apna khasmok alag kare apna nahiar ne-gel. Kuchh din bad ohi tirmat more-gel. Nagru apna-jorur soghe bimar hoe-gel. Ohi-bimarir haltat ohar sala o sasur ohak ghar-se niklae-dile. Nagru bimarir haltot apna-baper ghar chale-al. To admit samajhua chabi ke apna-moger batot apna-mae-bap-se ni-bigre.

Basbari's father, of-his-own youngest son, Nagru's, Tolphal Maral's daughter with had-caused-the-marriage. (For)-a-few days every-one much happiness-with remained. Of-that-daughter-child the-conduct good not was, for-that-reason her-own mother-in-law (and)-father-in-law-from her-own husband separated having-made (to)-her-own father's-house carried-(her)-away. Some days after that woman died. Nagru of-his-own-wife in-sorrow sick became. Of-that-sickness in-the-condition his brother-in-law and father-in-law him the-home-from drove-out. Nagru of-sickness in-the-condition his-own-father's house (to)-came. Therefore a-man-to understanding is-nesessary, that of-his-own-wife at-the-words one's-own-mother-father-with one-should-not-quarrel.”¹⁶

This story reflects the nature of family relationships and social control in rural society. It shows was strongly the in-laws influenced married life. The story conveys a moral lesson that family harmony should be maintained and quarrels should be avoided.

Conclusion

The Surjapuri Language is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in parts of Bihar and West Bengal in India. This language has a rich history and this language was written in the Kaithi script because it was popular at that time. This study demonstrates that Surjapuri folktales serves as vital vehicles for the social memory, cultural identity and historical consciousness of this region. Literary practice in the Surjapuri language is very limited because its speakers are closely intertwined with Hindi and Bengali languages. Originating from the multilingual and multicultural milieu of the Islampur Subdivision, these narratives reflect the beliefs, social structures, moral values and everyday experiences Surjapuri community. Various folktales of the Surjapuri community have emerged in the presentations by the British. However, the folklore of this area is the spoken words of the Surjapuri people, which the British have recorded in their language. Although, G.A. Grierson's folktales do not highlight the issue of family harmony in Surjapuri society. The presentation of the colonial contains references to many folktales of these Surjapuri people, which their own.

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