

Tracing The Historical Roots Of The Marginalised Surjapuri Community In North Bengal And North-Eastern Bihar: A Socio-Historical Analysis

Khagesh Singha

Research Scholar of History

University of North Bengal, Darjeeling

Abstract: *The Surjapuri community is an important community in North Bengal and North-Eastern Bihar. Surjapuri community also lives in some parts of Bangladesh and Nepal. The origin of the name Surjapuri is the Surjapur Pargana. The Surjapur Pargana originated in Medieval India. This paper attempts to explore the historical origins of the Surjapuri community. Also, an attempt has been made to investigate the ethnic, linguistic origins, social stratification, family structure, folk culture, traditional occupations etc. of the Surjapuri community. Both colonial and independent Indian writings form the core basis of this research paper. An attempt has also been made to highlight the social life philosophy of this community through a few songs, short stories, and proverbs in the Surjapuri language. The Proverbs reflect their moral values and social teachings. The life struggle of the Peasants at the time is reflected through the songs. Family events are reflected through short stories.*

Keywords: *Surjapur Pargana, Surjapuri, Language, Songs, Folk culture, Society*

Introduction

In the North-eastern part of the undivided Purnea district of Bihar, Muslim rulers in medieval India formed the 'Surjapur Pargana' for administrative convenience and revenue collection. Many researchers have estimated that the area of this Surjapur Pargana was vast before its formation, because Surjapuri speaking people are scattered throughout this Pargana. Apart from the undivided Purnea district (present day- Purnea, Katihar, Araria, Kishanganj district), parts of Malda district, Jalpaiguri, parts of Darjeeling district, parts of Nepal and parts of Bangladesh speaking this language and refer to themselves as Surjapuri. The origin of the Surjapuri community was Surjapur Pargana, which was located in the north eastern part of undivided Purnea district. Research has shown that today, a large number of people identify their Surjapuri

and their language of communication as Surjapuri, which is proof of the living existence of this language. Although many researchers consider this Surjapuri language to be another form of Kamtapuri language, there are distinct differences. Because this Surjapuri language contains a mixture of many Hindi words. In 2011, an organisation called "TASO" (Transferred Area Surjapur Organisation) conducted a language based survey of the present Islampur Subdivision. According to the report of this organisation 395138 people registered this Surjapuri language as their mother tongue. Also a large number of people in Bihar speak in Surjapuri language. All these reasons make it important to explore the past history of the Surjapuri community.

Origin Of The Marginalised Surjapuri Community

The naming of a nation is associated with its place of residence. Before tracing the origin of the Surjapuri community, it becomes essential to explore the history of Surjapur Pargana. The exact history of this area before Muslim rule was unclear. The history of this area began to be recorded from the time of Muslim rule. W.W. Hunter mentioned, "The authentic history of Purniah commences with Musalman times. It is impossible to unravel the tangled web of Hindu and aboriginal myths belonging to an earlier period."¹ There is no doubt that Surjapur Pargana was formed with a vast area. About the area of Surjapur Pargana, Francis Buchanan mentioned, "Which in the divisions of Haveli, Dulalganj, Kishanganj and Udhraih may contain between 14 and 15 lakhs of bigahs or 500000 acres."² In course of time the boundaries of this Pargana may have been limited. Because L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned in his gazetteer about the area of Surjapur Pargana, "A Pargana in the north-east of the district, extending over 729 square miles."³ The position of Surjapur Pargana was on the east bank of the Mahananda River. This Surjapur Pargana was included in Tajpur Sarkar and Bengal Subah. L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned that -"The portion at the district east of the Mahananda fell in Sarkar Tajpur, which also contained the west of 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."⁴ Researchers have given various opinions behind the name of this region being 'Surjapur'. No specific information has yet been found regarding the origin of the naming of Surjapur Pargana. It is said that the Suryabanshi kings ruled this region, which lasted for many centuries. King Janaka or Videha of Mithila ruled the region between 1100-500 B.C.E. According to the history of the dynasty, he was a Suryabanshi king.⁵ Evidence that this region belonged to the kingdom of Mithila is found in Shyam Narayan Singh's description -"The boundary of Mithila comprises the modern districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran and parts of the district of Monghyr, Bhagalpur and Purnea."⁶ It is assumed that the people of this area started identifying themselves as Surjapuri from this time. It is not impossible that the tribes had a strong influence in this region.

These tribes worshipped the Sun and the Moon. Surjapur maybe named from this Sun.⁷ Even today, the Sun god is worshipped in this area with Deep reverence, known as "Chhat Puja". Also, at one time this region was ruled under Raja Adisur of Dinajpur. Many believe that this area was named after king Adisur. This area has a very ancient village called Surjapur at Chakulia police station of Islampur Subdivision. Many people believe that the origin of the Surjapur Pargana came from this Surjapuri village.⁸ The original inhabitants of this area believed in Sanatani Hinduism. Raja Sukhdeo was the last independent Hindu ruler of this region. During the reign of Mughal emperor Humayun, Raja Sukhdeo was removed and the administration of this area was given to Saiyad Khan Dastur. L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned in his gazetteer, "According to Chronicles, the founder of the family was Saiyad Khan Dastur, who did good service under the Emperor Humayun in the war against Sher shah and was rewarded, in A.H. 962, i.e., 1545 C.E., by the grant of a Sanad Conferring on him, together with the title of Kanungo, the Zamindari of Surjyapur, which was formerly held by a Hindu Raja named Sukhdeo."⁹

Many mythological and historical stories are associated with this area. The ancient indigenous inhabitants of this area believed in nature worship as well as sanatani Hinduism. Ancient sanatani Hindu religious directives are scattered in various places in this area. Historian believe that the spread Islam in this region began right from the eve of the Muslim ruler's invasion. According to historical data, the people of this area originated from the Kock community. Historical research shows that three reasons can be observed behind the conversion other indigenous people of this area to Islam. The first was the unequal treatment of upper caste Hindus towards lower caste Hindus, the second was the harsh rule and oppression of Muslim rulers towards Hindu religious people and the third was liberal treatment of the pirs of Islam towards the Hindus. Dr Atul Sur mentioned in his book, "In 1204 C.E., Bakhtiyar Khilji entered Bengal with a Quran in one hand and a sword in the other. Therefore, from the very beginning, there was a frenzy among the incoming Muslims to demolish Hindu monasteries, temple and idols, and to convert people. Many of course, were forcibly converted."¹⁰ On the other hand, the Kaulinya System brought tremendous complexity to the Hindu society. The Kaulinya System paved the way for many Hindus to convert to Islam. The Kaulinya System was prevalent in this region during medieval time. In this context, Dr. Atul Sur said, "The Kaulinya System brought an extraordinary complexity to the medieval society. This system was particularly prevalent in Bengal and Mithila. According to legend, the Kaulinya System was credited in Bengal by Raja Ballal Sen of the Sena dynasty, and in Mithila, Hari Singha, the last king of the Karnat dynasty."¹¹ Lower caste Hindus were attracted to Islam's communism and voluntarily converted to Islam. Many were again attracted by the glory of Pirs, Fakirs and Muslim Saints.¹² These lower caste Hindus were exploited and oppressed by upper caste Hindus - this oppression made it easier for them to convert to Islam. In this context, G.A.

Grierson mentioned that -"In the Kishanganj Sub-division, and in the Kasba Amur and Balrampur Thanas, the Musalmans, who are said to be of Koch Origin."¹³ Also, P. C. Roy Choudhury mentioned about the original inhabitants of this area,

*"Muhammadans predominate in Kishanganj Subdivision forming about 80 per cent of the population. The majority are believed to be descendants of aboriginal Kochs or hill tribes. The other castes are Saik, Sadgope, Rajbanshi, Musahar, Dhanuk, Gangai, Tanti, Hari, Teli, Dusadh, Saiyad, Jolha, Brahmin, Koiri, Bania and Santhal."*¹⁴

The Surjapuri community speaks their own Surjapuri language. This Surjapuri language is a form of the Kantapuri language, which is mainly prevalent in North Bengal. Phonetics, Syntax and vocabulary are all almost similar to Kantapuri language of North Bengal. The language family of Surjapuri language is-Indo-European>Indo-Iranian>Indo-Arya>East Bangali-Assamese>Kantapuri>Surjapuri.¹⁵ Surjapuri language is a form of Kantapuri language, but it also has its own distinct characteristics. In the Colonial period, language based survey, this Surjapuri language has been called Kishanganja or Siripuria. G.A. Grierson said about this language,

*"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 Kishanganja or Siripuria, and is returned as spoken by 603,623 souls. Although in the main a Bengali dialect it is written in the Kaithi character, which is one of those used for Bihar."*¹⁶

Surjapuri community are the original inhabitants of this region. The similarities between the Surjapuri and Kantapuri language, do not create any barriers to their exchange of ideas. In 2000, the late MP Priya Ranjan Das Munshi spoke in Parliament on the subject of this language and culture and in 2009, UNESCO registered the naming of the Surjapuri language.¹⁷

Social Structure And Cultural Traditions Of The Marginalised Surjapuri Community

The people of Surjapur Pargana were hospitable and kind. Historically, the inhabitants of Surjapur Pargana were known for their generosity. These people of Surjapuri believe, "I was cheated, but the one who cheated me committed a sin."¹⁸ The aboriginal people living in Surjapur Pargana were descendants of the Koch community. Although traditional Hindu scriptures refer to the people of this area as Kirata. In medieval India, many people from the Rajbanshi community converted to Islam and became known as 'Nasya Sheikh Muslim'. Among these Surjapuri people were-Sheikh, Goala, Rajbanshi, Musahar, Kaibartta, Dhanuk, Gangai, Tanti, Hari, Teli, Dosadh, Saiyad, Jolaha, Brahman, Koiri, Baniya, Kewat.¹⁹ Before 1901 many people started entering this Surjapur

Pargana from other places. L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned in his gazetteer that-

*"According to the statistics obtained at the census of 1901, only 2 per cent of the population are emigrants, i.e., natives of the district who were enumerated elsewhere, while 5.8 per cent, are immigrants, i.e., natives of other districts who were in this district at the time of the census."*²⁰

Francis Buchanan mentioned the harmony that existed between the Hindus and Muslims of the area.

*"Although the Hindus are not behindhand in paying their respects to the Saints of the Moslems and especially to the grandsons of the prophet, yet there is a good deal of ill-will between the two sects. The mutual offerings to the objects of each other's worship or respect are here more confined to the ignorant in Ronggopur, although many examples of this laxity of thinking may be found among even those dedicated to religions; and a good many even of the highest Hindus defray the expense of a pageant in honour of the grandsons of Muhammed, and during the rites performed in honour of their memory entertain all those who apply with Sherbet (Shurbut) and parched grain. This custom was probably introduced when the fury of the Moslems in celebrating these rites was without check, and it was probably meant to screen the wealthy Hindu from the dangers of bigotry, inflamed by tumult."*²¹

J. Byrne said about the Muslims of this area that-"The Muhammadans of Kishanganj Sub-division are a degenerate lot. It is almost certain that they are the descendants aap Hindu converted to Islam."²² The village elders say, the glory of Goddess Kali is spread in every corner here, which many Still believe in. Historically, Muslims also attended this Devi Kali temple during weddings, and the bride would apply vermilion to her forehead, indicating cultural syncretism. J. Byrne mentioned about it-

*"In every village can be found a "Kaliasthan" and Hindus and Muhammadans celebrate their characteristic festivals together. At that time of marriage, 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."*²³

Many old documents mention the communal harmony of the undivided Purnea district. Hindus used to eat pan and drink tea at Muslim Shops, which was a symbol of goodwill between them. Hindus and Muslims worshiped together at a few Devi places in Purnea and Kishanganj. In this context, P. C. Roy Choudhury mentioned in his gazetteer that-

*"In this Subdivision (Kishanganj) there is a very faint distinction between Hindus and Muslims. Here Hindus eat pan or drink tea freely, from a Muslim shop. In Purnea there is 'Bhagwati Sthan' where Muslims also offer worship. Muslims freely offer goats, Chickens, Pigeons and the first fruits of trees and crops to Hindu deities. In Pachim Pali there is a 'Kali Sthan' where both Hindus and Muslims perform Puja and make offerings."*²¹

When a family member fell ill, Muslims would go to Hindu Ojha or Tantric.

For the well-being of their family, they used to offer oblations to Hindu gods and goddesses. J. Byrne mentioned that -

*"When ill, even Muhammadans call in 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."*²⁵

Humans preserve their culture through language and script. As a result, new generations can learn about their heritage. According to historical records, the people of Surjapur Pargana spoke surjapuri and had their own Kaithi script. G. A. Grierson recorded a short story of the Surjapuri community in Surjapuri language, Kaithi script and English in his Linguistic Survey report that-

"Basbarir bap, apna chhoto beta, Nagrur, Tolphal Maraler betir sange bihlal-chhil. Thorek din sab-koi bahut khusi-se rahil. Oi-beti-chhhuar 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 soge bimar hoe-gel. Ohi-bimarir haltat ohar sala o sasur ohak ghar-se niklae-dile. Nagru bimarir haltot apna-baper ghar chale-al. To admik samajhua chahi ke apna-moger batot apna-mae-bap-se ni-bigre."

Basbari's father, had caused the marriage of his own youngest son, Nagru's, with Tolphal Maral's daughter. (For) a few days every one remained with much happiness. The conduct of Maral's daughter was not good, for that reason her own mother-in-law (and) father-in-law separated her from her own husband and made her own father to carry her away to his house. After some days that woman died. Nagru became sorrow of his own wife's death. In the condition of that sorrow, his brother-in-law and father-in-law drove him out from the home. Nagru came to his own father's house in the condition of sickness. Therefore a man of understanding is necessary, that one should not quarrel with his own wife at the words one's own mother and father.²⁶

The people of the Surjapuri community celebrate festivals through their traditional songs and dances. A few wedding songs of Surjapuri community are mentioned that -

*"Haldi Batite ge Bubu
Ki Ghasan Ghasilen ge.
Ki ki Geet Mangalen ge Bubu
Chhuyar Taane Mangalen
Dudher Baati Aar
Suyamir Taane Aanlen
Shantipurer Dhuti."*²⁷

This song is sung targetting the women who apply turmeric to the bride and groom during wedding ceremonies. During the traditional turmeric application, this song is sung playfully, creating humor among the women.

*"Ida Dular Pithkhan Khar Karuyar Pirakhan
Chhiko Chhiko Mui Mariya Jaam."*

*Ida Dular Haat Khan Tarkari Ghatuyar Chhinni Khan
 Chhiko Chhiko Mui Mariya Jaam.
 Ida Dular Chulla Chiriya Bojhuar Khonda
 Chhiko Chhiko Mui Mariya Jaam.
 Ida Dular Kanla Chaul Pachhruar Kulakhan
 Chhiko Chhiko Mui Mariya Jaam.
 Ida Dular Nakto
 Dhyat Kauar Thot Khan
 Chhiko Chhiko Mui Mariya Jaam.”²⁸*

At that weddings, the women of the bride's house tease the groom through this songs, which is a traditional custom of Surjapuri community.

Surjapur Pargana was mainly agricultural so the main occupation of the people here was agriculture. 'Sora Sora' puja, an ancient traditions of agricultural society of Surjapuri community, is observed to ensure fertility and abundance of crops. The ritual is performed in the Bengali months of Ashwin and Kartik when the grain of rice emerges. These songs are-

*“Khato Langal Dhighal Ish
 Hamar Dhaner Baro Baro Shis.
 Sorai Sorai
 Haser Dima Kachur Futi
 Aay Maa Lakkhi Hamar Bhiti”²⁹*

*“Lai Lui Dufola
 Poka Makor Dur Fela
 Sora Sora
 Loker Dhaan Aaul Bhaul
 Hamar Dhaan Dharmer Chaul
 Sora Sora”³⁰*

Proverbs are an important part of daily life in Surjapuri society. They use proverbs to explain difficult situations. Proverbs are often uttered to show the right direction to the youth.

*“Jaati Ni Chhore Jaater Paani
 Holdi Ni Chhore Rang
 Saat Dhuyate Sutki Ranleo
 Tahu Ni Chhore Gan”³¹*

This proverb indicates the character of an evil person. Their behaviour has a negative impact on society. These wicked people never reform themselves in life, they always engage in dishonest activities.

*“Aai Bhasha Jahay Bhule
 Uhar Janam Pashur Kule.”³²*

This proverb indicates a sincere love for own language. Those individuals

who feel ashamed to identify with their own language have been reprimanded through this proverb.

*"Aaij Ki Bujhibo
Bujhibo Kail
Haat Dhore Jela
Paar Korba Hobe
Baro Baro Aail"*³³

This proverb indicates that the youth should build a bright future.

*"Beshi Baro Hois Na Dune Bhange Jaabe
Beshi Chhoto Hois Na Bakure Mure Khabe."*³⁴

This proverb points out that do not be too proud of yourself, for Pride is the cause of your downfall. Do not think yourself too small, for then people will help you.

*"Jhake Jhake Chiriya Pare
Apna Apna Ahar Kare."*³⁵

This proverb says to believe in yourself and make your own destiny through hard work.

Economic Life And Occupation Of The Marginalised Surjapuri Community

This area was a major agricultural area, as a result of which most of the people in this area were agriculturists. In this context, J. Byrne mentioned that -"These figures show that 76 per cent of the district population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture."³⁶ Also, J. Byrne said about the Soil that -"In the records now prepared, a distinction is drawn only between dhahar and bhit land "³⁷ The Surjapur Pargana was administered under the Khagra Estate. The Nawabs of Khagra were at the center of this Pargana. Paddy cultivation was mostly done in this area. Aghani Paddy, Bhadoi Paddy and Bora Paddy were all different types of Paddy produced. L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned that -"Rice is the all important staple of Purnea accounting for 73.47 per cent of the net cropped area."³⁸ J. Byrne's writings mentioned that the land in this area was suitable for farming. "This would give 74.5 per cent cultivated or culturable and 25.5 per cent unculturable."³⁹ Jute cultivation was also done extensively in this region. This jute was the main income generating crop for the people here. "The jute crop is most extensively grown in the north-east of the district in the Kishanganj Subdivision, where thanas Bahadurganj, and Islampur account for 53,000 acres, while Araria thana in the North-west and Kadwa thana in the south-east come next with 12,000 acres each."⁴⁰ Other food grains were also produced. Cattle was very important in this area. Traditionally, because the farmers in this area used to cultivate land with plows pulled by oxen or cows. The number of cattle was a primary criterion for measuring a person's wealth. A lot of animals were bought and sold in Islampur fair and Khagra fair. Actually, these fairs were

known as 'Animal fair'. L.S.S. O'Malley mentioned that -"Goods cart bullocks are imported from Chopra and Tirhut, the principal markets being the Khagra, Islampur and Madanpur fairs in this district."⁴¹

Additionally, the men and women of this area were involved in handicrafts, which helped them earn their livelihood. The men and women of this area used to make handmade clothes, bags, mats etc and sell them in the market. There is a reference to the Barsoi market during the British period where many people used to go to sell their handicrafts. W.W. Hunter mentioned that -

*"The gur or treacle comes from the Kishanganj Subdivision, Rassakhua in police circle Balrampur, and kumarganj and Bochaganj in Dinajpur district. The cloth is brought in from kaligaon in Maldah, and from Balrampur and kadba police circles in Purniah. All these tracts are inhabited by Momins, Rajbansis, and Tantis, who make coarse cloth, Gunny-bags woven by the Koch people in Balrampur, and mats manufactured in police circle Kishanganj, are also largely sold at Barsoi market."*⁴²

Conclusion

An exploration into the historical roots of the Surjapuri community inhabiting North Bengal and north-eastern Bihar unveils a complex socio-economic formation process, shaped over a long period through the confluence of diverse influences. The genesis of this community did not stem from a singular historical trajectory; rather, it evolved through the dynamic interplay and mutual interaction of Aryan, Islamic, and indigenous regional cultures. During the colonial era, factors such as administrative restructuring, shifts in land-ownership systems, and broader economic transformations played a pivotal role in their marginalization and the erosion of their socio-economic status. Research indicates that the distinct identity of the Surjapuri people is deeply embedded in their language, folklore, and regional collective memory. Their oral traditions, customs, and daily practices serve as living repositories of historical consciousness, reflecting a unique identity deeply rooted in the past. Despite possessing such a rich cultural heritage, the community continues to face various challenges in securing formal recognition within the modern socio-political framework. Thus, the history of the Surjapuri community is not merely a narrative of their marginalization; rather, it constitutes an integral thread within the broader socio-historical fabric of North Bengal and Bihar. Further in-depth and comprehensive research on this community could play a crucial role in bringing their distinct identity to the forefront and bolstering their claims for cultural and social recognition.

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