

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE SHERSHABADIA COMMUNITY IN BENGAL, BIHAR, AND JHARKHAND

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Abstract:

This study explores the Shershabadia language, culture, and community, predominantly located in Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Originating from the historical term ‘Sarsabad,’ this community’s name and identity evolved through the Mughal and British periods. Rooted in the fertile Jawar-e-Sarsabad division, Shershabadia communities today trace their heritage through complex intermixing with agrarian societies in Murshidabad, Malda, and neighbouring regions.

Linguistically, the Shershabadia dialect reflects influences from neighbouring dialects, including Kamtapuri, Maithili, and Jharkhandi, and is noted for its distinct intonation, admired for clarity, and nuanced vocal patterns. This dialect acts as a cultural bridge and retains influences from both Hindu and Islamic traditions, demonstrated in marriage customs, folk performances like Gantira and Alkap, and everyday speech patterns. Shershabadia folk literature, including riddles, songs, and poetry, serves as a repository of cultural identity, contributing richly to regional literature.

This study further reviews significant works on Shershabadia society, beginning with Abdus Samad’s pioneering 1987 book and followed by contributions from scholars like Mir Rezaul Karim and Nurul Hasan. Contemporary Shershabadia poetry, rooted in agrarian life, reflects the community’s struggles and identity, with publications that have gradually preserved their oral traditions.

Key-words: Shershabadia community, Linguistic identity, Cultural heritage, Bengali dialects, Folk literature, Border regions of Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Marginalized communities, Shershabadia literature, Cultural Identity.

Introduction:

The Shershabadia community, historically and culturally rooted in the regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand, holds a significant yet often overlooked place in South Asian

history. Emerging from the historical designation "Sarsabadia," a term dating back to the Mughal era and later modified during the British colonial period, the Shershabadia identity reflects a deep connection to the land, language, and cultural heritage of the region. This agrarian community has long inhabited fertile territories along the Ganges and its tributaries, thriving in villages that are now part of districts like Murshidabad, Malda, and adjacent areas within present-day Jharkhand and Bihar.

The Shershabadia dialect serves as both a linguistic and cultural bridge among the distinct but interconnected regions of North Rarh, Bagri, and Varendra. Linguistically, it shares affinities with dialects like Kamtapuri, Maithili, and Jharkhandi, creating a unique vernacular that has preserved ancient speech patterns and cultural expressions. Scholars, including Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, have highlighted the Shershabadia language for its eloquence, while others have noted its distinctive intonation and phonetic characteristics. Despite Hindi influences, the dialect has retained unique linguistic elements, reflected in folk performances like Gambhira and Alkap.

The cultural heritage of the Shershabadia community is rich with folk literature, poetry, and oral traditions that span generations. Since the 1970s, figures like Abdus Samad have pioneered the literary preservation of Shershabadia poetry, riddles, and songs. Today, literature in the Shershabadia language continues to grow, with authors and poets contributing works that celebrate and preserve the community's narratives, struggles, and customs. Publications like 'Badiya Bartar' and 'Shershabadia Patrika' serve as platforms for these cultural expressions, ensuring that the legacy of this unique agrarian society endures.

This study examines the historical, linguistic, and literary dimensions of the Shershabadia community, offering a comprehensive view of their dialect and cultural practices. By exploring these aspects, the research aims to highlight the Shershabadia community's influence on the broader cultural landscape of Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand, underscoring the importance of this vibrant group in the region's socio-cultural tapestry.

Administrative Structure and Historical Significance of Jawar-e-Sarsabad in Akbar's Bengal :

According to Aangani Akbari, Jannatabad (Lakhnauti) was one of the 19 subdivisions into which Akbar divided Bengal's territories. The governance structure was organised into six main divisions, with the largest being Jawar-e-Sarsabad, also known as the Sarsabad Division. This division was further subdivided into 10 smaller administrative units called mahalas, each

covering 11°-1 beams. Based on Irfan Habib's spatial analysis, the ten mahalas in Jawar-e-Sarsabad were positioned around beams 113–14, as noted on page 43 of Habib's text.

Presently, Manikpur and Hatinda are in the northern region of Malda district, within the areas of Kambashi Harishchandrapur-I and Chanchal-I blocks. The original location of Gaurhanda is at Chanchal-II or the Malatipur Rock site in Malda. Khiarpur, also known as Khidirpur, can now be found in Harishchandrapur II. Akbarpur today covers sections of Chanchal-II and Ratua-I blocks in Malda, situated along the Ganges and stretching westward to the boundary of present-day Prarnia-Sahabganj district in Bihar-Jharkhand. The area also includes Gati (Garai), lying south of the Ganges in the modern Sahabganj district of Jharkhand, where Teliagarhi fort, once a gateway to Bengal for conquerors like Bakhtiyar Khalji, Sher Shah, and Mansingh, stands.

Makrain today primarily lies in the Ratua-2 block of Malda district. South of Makrain, Kotwali is located in the English Bazar block, the central hub of Malda. The Zamindari estate of Gani Khan Choudhury is noted for its estates, including Sarsabad Mahal and Pardihar. Sarsabad Mahal, historically known as Shershabad Pargana, was part of the larger Gaur and Murshidabad territories. Pardihar originally belonged to the undivided Kaliachak Thana and was later incorporated into Shershabad Pargana under British rule. Irfan Habib's interpretation of 'Sarsabad' as 'Sarabar' holds meaning; 'sarsa' conveys 'sarsa + abad = sarsabad.' The word 'Saras' implies moisture or water abundance, and Saraswan (सरस्वान) is a term for bodies of water like lakes, rivers, and seas. Similarly, 'Saraswati' means 'river,' encompassing rivers, streams, and other water channels.

In Jawar-e-Sarsabad, rivers such as the Ganges, Phulhar, Pagla, Bhagirathi, and Padma, along with their tributaries, enrich the area's fertility and scenic value. This region, historically known as Sarsabad, earned its name from its lush, fertile lands abundant in water and agricultural resources.

The Shershabadia Community: Ethnic Diversity and Historical Roots in Bengal:

The Shershabadia-speaking agrarian community is a diverse tribe. In Murshidabad, the main ethnic subgroups are the Sarsabadia (Sarsabaida), Phulbaria (Phulbaida), and Penchi. Additionally, the Badia and Pahuchi groups, along with the Bosnian-Jolah community from the undivided Kaliachak region, are considered part of the Shershabadia tribes in Malda.

Sujapur was a prosperous village settled by Shershabadias. Historical records by Ashok Mitra indicate that a significant portion of this Muslim community traces its lineage to Hindu and Buddhist roots. During the mediaeval period, there was a network of foreign shaykhs (pir-muballeg) and traders who travelled on missionary journeys. According to British historian William Hunter, some Shershabadia people, descendants of the Gauda monarchs from various periods, integrated with the local population and gradually lost their royal status. Even during the Mughal and Nawabi eras, many soldiers transitioned to agriculture and continued to reside in the area known as Sarsabad.

The Linguistic and Cultural Heritage of the Shershabadia Community :

Sarsabad, a region encompassing parts of North Rarh, Bagri, and Varendra, belongs to the areas of Jawar and Shershabad Parganas. The Shershabadia language forms a linguistic bridge between the local dialects of Rati and Varendri. It shares significant linguistic features with Kamtapuri to the north, Maithili to the west, and Jharkhandi to the southwest. Linguist Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar has categorised the Bengali-speaking regions into 12 segments, specifically highlighting the Shershabadia language on November 5. Known variably as Shershabadia, Maldaiya, or Jangipuri, Bengali is predominantly spoken in areas like most parts of Murshidabad district, the Pakuf and Rajmahal subdivisions of Santal Pargana, Maldah district, Barsoi, the Ajmangar area, and several eastern zones of Katihar district, as well as in Dalkola of West Dinajpur and Nawabganj subdivision of Rajshahi district. This dialect is noted for its refined pronunciation and unique vocal style. Language and Dialect-1, also called Discourse 7, held in Kolkata on July 31, 1983, praised the Shershabadia language for its exquisite articulation and distinct intonation. M. O. Katar, however, hesitates to recognise the Shershabadis as true Bengalis due to Hindi influences in their speech. According to Satya, Shershabadis employ a rising pitch at the end of their sentences, a feature often humorously mimicked in Gambhira and Alkap performances. This information is documented on page 46.

Shershabadia boasts a rich tradition of folk literature, with the popular folk dramas Gantira and Alkap performed in the language. Shershabadia, also referred to as Maldaiya or Jangipuri in certain areas, is widely spoken by both Hindu and Muslim communities across Malda and Murshidabad. Among Shershabadia Muslims, elements of Hindu culture have been preserved for generations in the Gourbang region, such as goktira, alkap, geed, the haldi ceremony, and the offering of paan-supari in marriage rituals. Notably, many of their ancestors converted to Islam.

Literary Contributions and Documentation of the Shershabadia Community :

Although information about the Shershabadia community appears in various government documents like cess records, district gazetteers, and land settlement reports dating back to 1901, Abdus Samad's 'Shershabadi'r Kathalekha,' published in 1987, stands as the first in-depth book dedicated to Shershabadia. This work brings together an array of Shershabadia folk literature, including Fausti (riddles), Laokchhara, Khesa, Khela rhyme, and songs for girls, or Geed. Following this, Professor Mir Rezaul Karim authored 'Shershabadia Sampraday: Bhasha O Sanskriti' in 1999. Nurul Hasan's book, 'Shershabadia Muslim Samaj, Sanskriti O Bhasha' (2018), presents a more recent exploration, while Abdul Ahab's 'Shershabad O Shershabadia: Ekti Upajati'r Itihas' (2021) provides a thorough analysis of Shershabadia historical roots. Another notable work by Nurul Hasan, 'Lassa-Arser Pramer Geed' (2016), compiles songs traditionally sung by Shershabadia women. In 2022, Moh. Ibrahim published 'Gourbanger Beti Geet Bahukhanik Partho,' a modern literary piece examining Shershabadia girls' songs, or Geed. Abdus Samad, recognised as the first Shershabadia poet, began sharing his poetry in various magazines during the 1970s. The community's first newspaper, 'Badiya Bartar', launched in Malda in 1989. Later, Abdul Ahab started a bimonthly literary and cultural magazine, 'Shershabadia Patrika', from Malda in Autumn 2020. In early 2021, Hasan Ali and Mohd. Mosaraf Hossain from Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur, introduced the fourth Shershabadia magazine, 'Pahat', published semi-annually.

Evolution of Shershabadia Poetry: From Oral Tradition to Published Works:

The Shershabadia agrarian community has traditionally been marked by limited development. Although the poets from Gramganj crafted verses in their native dialect, they neither published nor preserved their work. The earliest known printed poem in Shershabadia is thought to have been written by Abdus Samad Kene Kigono, a researcher and writer from Malda in the 1980s. Utpal Das, a Malda-based poet, published three poems sequentially: 'Loke Hamra' (2011), 'How Humanity' (2015), and 'Chidnya Gaye' (2018). Currently residing in Siliguri, poet Nurul Hasan released the poem 'Chikas' in 2015. 'Shershabadiya Kavya', authored by Ibn Zaynab (also known as Abdul Ahab), is a compilation of Kafr poetry published in 2021. In addition, there are three other poetry collections: Abdus Samad's 'Ke Dhan Bahane Kun Sahane' (2021), Moh. Mazharul Abedin's 'Sholwana Shershabadia' (2022), and Sajiruddin Ahmed's 'Haranghe Kabitya' (2022). A recent addition is Md. Akmal Hossain's poem 'Hamra Kaliachaker Lok' (2022).

Conclusion :

The Shershabadia community, with its rich historical background and distinctive linguistic heritage, exemplifies the cultural diversity of Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Through an exploration of its dialect, literature, and cultural practices, this study underscores the role of language as a vital cultural marker that not only preserves Shershabadia identity but also acts as a bridge among regional dialects and neighbouring linguistic influences. Despite being marginalised, the Shershabadia people have a well-defined cultural and literary tradition that contributes to the broader cultural landscape of the region. Preservation and scholarly engagement with this community's language, literature, and cultural expressions are crucial for safeguarding its unique identity amidst the challenges posed by linguistic assimilation and modernisation.

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