

VOICES OF THE MARGINALISED: AN EXPLORATION OF SHERSHABADIA LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Dr. Md Siddique Hossain

M.A.(Quadruple), B.Ed., M.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D.(Bengali & in Education), D.Litt.

Assistant Professor, Department of Bengali, Bangabasi Morning College

19, Rajkumar Chakraborty Sarani, Kolkata- 700009, West Bengal,

India ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3912-7101>

Email: mdsh803@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research investigates the dialect and literary expressions of the Shershabadia community, a marginalised group located in the regions of West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Known for their unique language, termed Shershabadia, this study delves into their historical roots, cultural identity, and the significance of their language within the broader linguistic landscape of Bengal. By analysing the evolution of the Shershabadia dialect, cultural practices, and literary traditions, this article aims to shed light on the community's contributions to the cultural fabric of the region and the ongoing efforts to preserve their heritage.

Keywords: Shershabadia, dialect, cultural identity, literary expression, Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, marginalized communities, linguistic heritage, folk traditions.

Introduction:

Often overlooked in mainstream discussions of South Asian history and culture, the Shershabadia community, native to regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand, represents a distinct ethnic and cultural group. Their unique dialect, also called Shershabadia, traces its origins back to the Mughal period, when it was spoken in the Sarsabad region—a division created under Emperor Akbar. This research explores the historical evolution of the Shershabadia people, their cultural identity, and their contributions to the regional literary and linguistic traditions.

The term 'Shershabadia' is closely linked to the historical region of Sarsabad, a fertile land noted for its abundant water sources, including the Ganges and Bhagirathi rivers. Over time, the linguistic and cultural identity of the Shershabadia people has evolved, reflecting both local and foreign influences, including the impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. This study seeks to highlight the significance of the Shershabadia dialect within the wider context of Bengali and regional languages, as well as its cultural resilience in the face of historical neglect.

Historical Significance and Cultural Identity of the Shershabadia Community in the Sarsabad Region :

The origins of the Shershabadia community lie in the Sarsabad region, once one of the most important divisions of Bengal during the Mughal era. This area, rich in natural resources and strategically located along major trade routes, attracted settlers from various ethnic backgrounds, including indigenous Hindus, Buddhists, and foreign traders. Under Mughal rule, the region flourished, and the influence of Islamic culture became prominent, especially with the establishment of Sarsabad as a political and economic hub.

Despite its historical significance, the Sarsabad region, and by extension the Shershabadia people, were often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. The community's agricultural heritage and unique dialect, however, have endured over centuries. The Shershabadia dialect, which shares linguistic features with neighbouring dialects like Kamtapuri, Maithili, and Varendra, has played a crucial role in maintaining the cultural identity of the community.

Cultural Identity and Diversity of the Shershabadia Community: A Blend of Traditions and Language :

The Shershabadia community comprises various ethnic groups, including the Sarsabadia, Fulbaria, and Penchi. Over time, these groups have merged, contributing to the rich cultural diversity of the Shershabadia people. Conversion to Islam occurred in the Middle Ages, often facilitated by foreign traders and shaykhs, yet many Shershabadias maintain cultural elements rooted in their pre-Islamic past. These include Hindu customs such as the use of turmeric and betel nuts in wedding ceremonies, which persist even within their Islamic practices.

The Shershabadia dialect is an important marker of the community's identity. Spoken by both Muslims and Hindus in regions like Malda and Murshidabad, the language is known for its distinctive pronunciation and intonation. Despite being subject to mockery in folk performances like Gambhira and Alkap, the language has survived, largely due to its deep-rooted connections to the community's daily life and rituals.

Evolution and Revival of the Shershabadi Language and Cultural Identity :

The Shershabadi people, while culturally and linguistically tied to Bengalis, speak a unique vernacular known as the Shershabadi dialect—a fusion of Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu. This dialect, though distinct, cannot be classified as any single language. Following India's independence, Bengali-medium schools in Bihar were gradually converted to Hindi-medium schools, leading the Shershabadi community to

distance themselves from their Bengali roots. Over time, they ceased identifying as Bengalis but continued speaking Shershabadi within their local communities. However, members of the community outside Bihar became proficient in Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Hindi-Urdu, with Urdu taking on special significance due to its close association with their religion and Islamic traditions.

In educational settings like maktabas and madrasas, Urdu became the dominant language, marking a shift in their linguistic identity and contributing to the community's socio-economic and educational disadvantages. Despite this, the Shershabadia dialect remains linguistically distinct, bridging regional languages like Bengali, Maithili, and Varendra. Its unique phonetic features and vocabulary make it an important part of Bengal's linguistic mosaic, though it has been marginalised in academic and literary circles, contributing to its decline.

Efforts to revive the Shershabadia language are now gaining momentum, with younger generations increasingly embracing their linguistic heritage. One of the first scholarly explorations of Shershabadia folklore was Abdus Samad's 1987 work, **Shershabadi's Kathalekhay**, which illuminated the community's rich folk traditions. Further research by scholars like Professor Mir Rezaul Karim and Nurul Hasan has deepened the understanding of Shershabadia culture, exploring the intersections between language, religion, and social life. Folk dramas, songs, and poetry remain central to the community's literary tradition, reflecting their historical struggles and cultural resilience.

Evolution of Shershabadia Literature: Key Publications and Cultural Contributions :

Despite the presence of material about Shershabadia in many government papers such as cess reports, district gazetteers, and settlement survey reports since 1901, the first comprehensive study book on Shershabadia is Abdus Samad's 'Shershabadi's Kathalekhay,' published in 1987. He has compiled and published a diverse range of Shershabadia folk literature, including Fausti (riddles), Laokchhara, Khesa, Khela rhyme, and Geed of Girls. The next study book is 'Shershabadia Susprdayer Language and Culture' (1999), authored by Professor Mir Rezaul Karim. Three Nurul Hasan's book, *Shershabadia Muslim Society, Culture, and Language* (2018) is a recent publication. Abdul Ahab's book, 'Shershabad and Shershabadia: The History of a Tribe' (2021), provides a meticulous examination of the origins of Shershabadia history. Lassa-Arser Pramer Geed (2016), authored by Nurul Hasan, is a compilation of songs that are often sung by females belonging to the Shershabadia group. Moh. Ibrahim's *Gourbanger Beti*

Geet Bahukaunik Partha (2022) is a significant and contemporary literary work that explores the theme of Shershabadiya Geed (Songs for Girls).

During the 1970s, Abdus Samad, the first Sharashabadia poet, disseminated his poetry across several journals. The first editorial of Badiya Bartatar, the first newspaper located in Shershabadia and published in Malda, took place in 1989. The second edition of the Shershabadia magazine, overseen by Abdul Ahab and published from Maldah, Shershabadia, is a bimonthly publication focused on literature and culture. It started its print run with the Autumn 2020 issue, covering the months of August to September. Hasan Ali and Mohd introduced the fourth edition of the Shershabadia semi-annual magazine, Pahat, in January 2021. The fourth edition of the Shershabadia magazine, titled 'Pahat', was issued in January 2021. It was edited by Hasan Ali and Mohd. Mosaraf Hossain, both from Islampur in Uttar Dinajpur.

Conclusion:

The Shershabadia language and culture, though historically marginalised, represent an important part of the broader cultural and linguistic heritage of Bengal. The dialect, which once thrived in the Gauranchal region, faced decline following the shift of Bengal's political centre to the south. Despite this, recent efforts by the Shershabadia community and researchers aim to revive and promote their unique language and literary expressions.

As modern scholarship continues to explore the Shershabadia dialect and its cultural significance, it becomes increasingly clear that preserving this linguistic heritage is vital to understanding the historical and cultural diversity of Bengal. The story of the Shershabadia people is not just one of linguistic survival but of a community's enduring connection to their ancestral past, language, and identity.

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