

Folk Culture of the Surjapuri People in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur of West Bengal:An Assessment

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Abstract: *Folk Culture refers to the unique cultural characteristics of a society. Folk Culture is not just entertainment, it reflects the history and heritage of a people. Each community's folk culture identifies them uniquely. The present work attempts a detailed study of the Folk Culture of the Surjapuri People in the Uttar Dinajpur District with special reference to Islampur Subdivision. The current Islampur Subdivision was a part of the surjapur pargana during the Mughal period, which bears historical significance. The Surjapuri language carries the uniqueness of this region and is deeply connected to the local culture. In this Subdivision, people from various communities live together, which creates cultural diversity. The term 'Surjapuri' has been associated with them for positional and linguistic reasons. In this Subdivision, one can observe a rich variety of folk cultures among the Surjapuri people. Their cultural diversity is truly fascinating. Which, the people of Surjapuri have separated from other people.*

Keywords: *Folklore, Folk Culture, Islampur, Kirata, , Mithila Kingdom , Purnia, etc.*

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Introduction

The history of the present Islampur Subdivision is centered around Bihar. Before 1956, Islampur Subdivision was a part of the undivided Purnea district of Bihar. This is an important aspect of the region's cultural heritage. During the Ramayana era, this area was part of the Mithila

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Kingdom, which is historically significant. The boundary of Mithila comprises the modern districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran and parts of the districts of Monghyr, Bhagalpur and Purnea.¹ Over time, this area has been ruled under many rulers, enriching its history. During the Mahabharata era, this area was ruled under King Virat, which helps to understand the political situation of that time. The place where the Panch Pandavas taking refuge in this area initiated a lot of history. Local tradition still speaks of the struggles and conquests of the kiratas, and a kirata (kiranti) woman from the morang or Tarai is said to have been the wife of Raja Virat, who, according to legend, gave shelter to Yudishthira 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.² According to Buchanan's account, the residence of the Virat King's brother-in-law Kichak was in this area. The ruin of the house of Kichak, which has been a very large building, is now shown, and is called Asurgar, or the house of the infidel, to whom however many of the neighbouring Hindus still offer worship.³ The term refers to Asuragarh, which is under Chakulia police station, which is currently under the Islampur subdivision. Age of the Mahabharata, The Karandighi Police station of this Subdivision has been ruled by King Karna. The name of this area, Karandighi has been set according to Karna, the son of the Sun. Before 12th century, traditional Hindu culture was widespread in this area. At the end of the 12th century the Musalmans under Bakhtiyar Khilji burst down upon Bengal sacking Bihar and Nadia, the capitals of Bihar and Bengal.⁴ Since that time, many Sanatani Hindus in this area had begun to convert to Islam. In particular, a large number of people from the Rajbanshi community converted to Islam. The majority are believed to be descendants of aboriginal Koches or hill tribes.⁵

Before 1545 AD, a Hindu ruler named Sukhdeo ruled this area. 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 Sher Shah 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.⁶ The eastern part of the Mahananda River was part of the Tajpur Sarkar and the Surjapur pargana was under the Tajpur Sarkar. From the Ain-i-Akbari it appears that the present district was included in Sarkar Tajpur

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east of the Mahananda.⁷ The current Islampur Subdivision was a part of the Bengal Province, Tajpur Sarkar and Surjapur pargana during the Mughal period.

In 1770 AD, the British displaced the last Muslim governor, Muhammad Ali Khan, and took control of the region. The last of the Governors was Muhammad Ali Khan, who was replaced in 1770 AD by Mr. Ducarrel, the first English supervisor or collector.⁸ During the British period, Islampur Subdivision was under the Kishanganj Subdivision of undivided Purnea district of Bihar.

On 1st November, 1956, on recommendations of the 'State Re-organisation Commission' this Surjapuri Nations with an area of 759 square miles were included in West Bengal from Purnea district of Bihar. Thakurganj, Islampur, Chopra, Kishanganj, Goalpokhar and Karandighi Police station were included in the boundary of Transferred Area.⁹ These areas were formed as Islampur Subdivision. The language of the Surjapur pargana was Surjapuri language and the script was Kaithi. The Surjapuri language survives today but the Kaithi script is not used. In 2011, a survey by an organisation called 'TASO'(TRANSFERRED AREA SURJAPUR ORGANISATION) revealed that, 3,95,138 people of the present Islampur Subdivision registered Surjapuri language as their mother tongue.¹⁰

Folk Culture of the Surjapuri People

The Folk Culture of the Surjapuri people is very rich. The diverse folk cultures of the Surjapuri people are reflected through various festivals. When a society is formed, distinctive customs and traditions are seen that shape the identity of the society. Folk culture is a broader concept that reflects the cultural characteristics of a specific community and always preserves the identity and heritage of a community. These include their faith, lifestyle, heritage, art, literature, music, dance, sports and other culture elements. There are various rituals and practices in the culture of the Surjapuri people. From birth, a person becomes involved with various social and cultural traditions. This is a reality that continues even after his death. This folk culture of Surjapuri is very ancient. The traditions of this culture still exist today.

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The folklore of the Surjapuri people are an important part of culture heritage. Surjapuri people is a broader concept, encompassing people of various religions and ethnicities. The belief in supernatural powers is a part of the culture of the Surjapuri community. After a child's birth, the mother is separated and placed on a bed on the floor of a room. The mother is kept under special care and protection to ensure that both she and the baby remain healthy. An iron object is placed under the bed, where the mother and child sleep. With this iron object, ghosts and spirits will not be able to catch the mother and child.¹¹ During this time, the mother and child are considered untouchable (impure). The barber should be called after the baby is born when the umbilical cord dries up and falls off. In this process, the men of the family, along with the child, also cut their hair and nails, while the women's job is only to cut their nails. The women of the family clean the house with pure water. In the village, several women from the family gather to worship at the 'well or tubewell' using betel leaves-areca nut-vermilion. Once the worship is completed, everyone begins to return to normal life. This ceremony is known as 'Chhay Sasti or Kuya Chumani' in the Surjapuri society.¹² Various rituals are observed in this marriage ceremony that are important to the elders. There is no shortage of dance, music, and joy in the marriage ceremony of the Surjapuri People. Elders from both sides gather to decide on the wedding date, and this process is called 'Kara.' Women are preparing for the wedding celebration three days in advance, engaging in songs and dances. On the eve of the wedding, turmeric is applied to both the bride and groom through various songs, which adds joy to the entire atmosphere. This event is called 'Adhibash.' The day after the Adhibash, the bride and groom are taken to receive blessing from various gods and goddesses. Which is known as 'Bidkara.' On that very night, the groom's party went to the Bride's house to get married. In the morning, the groom's party(Barjatri) returns home with the bride, and everyone rejoices. The bride's side women often comment on the bride through songs, which she has to silently tolerate. The day after the wedding, some people from the bride's side come to take the bride and groom. A few days later, several people from the groom's side go to the bride's house to take the bride and groom. This event is known as 'Athowari' in the Surjapuri society and it is a special day for the local residents. The Muslims of Surjapuri deeply followed Hindu culture, which had a significant impact on their lives. Even today, some aspects of Hindu culture can be observed among the Muslims of Surjapuri. L.S.S.O'

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Malley has been mentioned in his Gazetteer that in the past, the Muslims of Surjapuri used to follow Hindu culture during marriage. In every village can be found a Kaliasthan , and Hindus and Muhammadans celebrate their characteristic festivals together. At the time of marriages, Muhammandans perform some ceremony at the Bhagwati Asthan and put vermilion on the bride's forehead.¹³

Like birth and marriage ceremonies, several rituals are observed even after death, which is part of the culture. When someone in a family passes away, the head is oriented to the north. A lamp and incense are lit near the head of the deceased body during the mourning rituals. When there are many sons of the deceased, usually the eldest son performs the last rites for father and the younger son often performs the last rites for the mother. Among the people of Surjapuri, there are two distinct traditions of burial and cremation. When a deceased person's body is taken outside the house to prevent their soul from becoming a ghost, it is customary to place several marks on the main door with 'Chham/Gain.'¹⁴ After three days of burial or cremation, the villagers who attended the rites become purified. That day, the villagers were invited to eat ghughni and muri. The event is referred to as "Telsnan(Oil Bathing)" and it holds special significance in many cultures. The funeral rites are performed 13 or 14 days deceased, which is a traditional practice. The Hindu Surjapuri people celebrate an important festival called 'Hukahuki(Ulkadan)' for the ancestors on the night of Kali Puja.

The stories of gods and spirits are an important part of human society. The Surjapuri people worships various deities in hopes of some worldly gains. Some people offer various offerings to protect themselves from ghosts and spirits. The people of the Surjapuri Muslim community have converted from the Hindu community, resulting in many Hindu customs being integrated into their culture, and some of these rituals are still practiced past day. L.s.s.o' Malley has mentioned in his gazetteers about the adherence to Hindu customs during the weddings of Surjapuri Muslims. In every village can be found a Kaliasthan, and Hindus and Muhammadans celebrate their characteristic festivals together. At the time of marriages, Muhammandans perform some ceremony at the Bhagwati Asthan and put vermilion on the bride's forehead.¹⁵ The people of the Surjapuri Muslim community have been unable to break away from the religious traditions of their ancestors. In their religious beliefs, they worshipped Hindu deities alongside

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Allah. Attached to almost every house, even of Muhammandans, is a little shrine called Khudai Ghar or God's house, and prayers are offered there in which the names of Allah and Kali both figure.¹⁶ Among the Surjapuri Muslims, the belief in ghosts and spirits were prevalent, and they sometimes sought the assistance of Hindu Ojha in cases of illness. All the low class Hindus, and the degenerate Muhammadans believe implicitly in evil spirits/ when ill, ever Muhammandans call in a Hindu Ojha, who recites some mantras over the sick man. They freely offer goats, fowls, pigeons and the first fruits of tree and crops to purely Hindu deities, and especially to the village godling, who generally lives in the most convenient tree.¹⁷ The oldest deities of the Surjapuri people are- Shiva, Bishahari, Kali, Bhagwati, Mashan and Devata Maharaj. Goddess Bishahari is the chief goddess of the Surjapuri Hindu community who protects everyone. Bishahari is the snake goddess. According to the custom of the forefathers, they have got both a Khuda ka ghar and Bishahari Mai Ka ghar.¹⁸ The deity Devata Maharaj is well known as the oldest deity among the Surjapuri People. The most popular deity among the lower grades, both Hindu and Musalman, is Devata Maharaja and his doorkeeper Hadi. His abode and temple are very primitive.¹⁹ Many Surjapuri people nowadays worship various deities, which is part of culture and tradition.

One of the agricultural festivals of the Surjapuri people is Sora Sora or Gariguri, which they celebrate annually. During this festival, the members of the Surjapuri people indulge in the joy of agriculture. This festival is organized once a year to please the 'Field Goddess' with the aim of increasing crop production. On this day, the Peasants go to the paddy field and dedicate bananas and milk as offerings to the 'Field Goddess.' Many Surjapuri people celebrate festival with duck eggs, Payesh, Pitha and duck sacrifices. Incense is burned and lamps are lit in the paddy field, which is an important religious practice for the Peasants. During that time, Peasants recite various verses in the melody of songs. In this way, they express their feelings. Among them are a few verses-

Lai Lui Dufola

Poka Makar Dur Fela

Sorai Sorai

Loker Dhaan Aaul Bhaul

Hamar Dhaan Dharmer Chaul

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Sorai Sorai
Khato Langol Dighal Ish
Hamar Dhaaner Baro Baro Shis
Sorai Sorai
Hanser Dima Kachur Futi
Aay Maa Lakhee Hamar Bheeti²⁰

Gareya Puja or Garu Chumani

The main asset of the Surjapuri people was their cattles, which was essential for their livelihood. Also, cattles were a key to economic success for the Surjapuri people. People's wealth was judged by livestock, which had a significant impact on society. Some customs and folk culture were also prevalent at that time, which is still prevalent in the villages. This folk culture and folklore is observed on the day before Kalipuja and on the night of Kalipuja. Cows were bathed and oiled, vermilion applied. Cows were worshipped as Gods. Cows were fed with various fruits and other foods. Cows and cow dung were worshipped in the morning. Which is popularly known as 'Gareyapuja or Garu Chumani or Gabardhanpuja' in the Surjapuri society. People who have Cows in their houses in the village are still following this customs.²¹

Jituya Puja

Jituya Puja is an important festival among the Surjapuri Hindu people. This is worshipped in different villages of Islampur Subdivision. This puja is celebrated on the eighth day of the dark fortnight of the months of Bhadra and Ashwin, which is a traditional festival of North Bengal.²² The main purpose of Jituya Puja is to ensure that newly wed couples have children, which helps them in farming a happy family. The music continuous throughout the night, which delights everyone. To be protected from dangers, troubles, and diseases, people vow in this worship.

Narikel Khela or Dadhikado

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This is a grand and joyful occasion for the Surjapuri people. This day is celebrated on the occasion of Lord Krishna's birthday. Narikel Khela or Dadhikado are two different names used in the Surjapuri language for this festival. Clay is made using mud, and ghee, honey, milk and yogurt are mixed into this clay. In this clay, the elders first light incense and lamps to perform worship. After that, the little children began playing in the mud first, which is a main source of their joy. After that, the elders participate in the Narikel Khela.²³ The person who first grabs the coconut in the intense crowd will be the winner.

Satya Narayan Puja

Lord Narayan is the main deity of this worship. It is important to follow the rituals of Lord Narayan's worship properly so that he is pleased. Lord Vishnu's other name is Narayan, who is the protector of creation. Offering is made by mixing flour, milk, banana, Jaggery and various fruits. Which is known as 'Satyanarayana Prasad.' The worship of Satyanarayan served as an initiation for the worship of Satyapir among Muslims. What is known about the origin of Satyapir is that a Muslim Fakir went to a Brahmin named Katak and asked for a Shirni(Offering), but the Brahmin refused to give it. After that, the Fakir disappeared from there. Then the Fakir took the form of Hari(Lord Vishnu) and again came to the Brahmin and disappeared. After realising this truth that the Muslim Pir and the Hindu Hari are one, the Brahmin gave him a Shirni (offering). Thus began the worship of Satyapir.²⁴ Both Hindus and Muslims worship the Satyapir or Satyanarayana. This is an example of religious tolerance.

Common Proverbs of Surjapuri People

The proverbs in this society are not only entertaining but also carry educational message about various aspect of life. Some proverbs have been used as a sarcastic form. This proverbs are being conventional from the ancestors orally. Each proverbs has the underlying meaning. Which gives

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people a normal life. Several proverbs and sayings were discussed, which open new perspectives in our thinking.

Jaat Ni Chhore Jaater Pani

Holdi Ni Chhore Rang

Saat Dhuyate Sutki Ranleo

Taahu Ni Chhore *Gan*²⁵

The character of evil people never changes. One should never expect anything good from the wicked.

Aay Bhasha Jahay Bhule

Uhaar Janam Pashur Koole²⁶

Those who are ashamed to speak their own language are reborn as animals in their next life. Here the importance of respecting one's own language is emphasized.

Gharat Nai Bhaat Dhapat Chulaha

Duyar De Jachhe Dhuti *Jhula*²⁷

It is essential to consider the family's tragic condition for development, but one should never act like the wealthy outside.

Aaij Ki Bujhibo

Bujhibo Kail

Haat Dhore Jela

Paar Karba Hobe

Baro Baro Aail²⁸

This proverb is directed towards the youth. It signifies how crucial the duties and responsibilities for running household are, which they will learn in their future.

Conclusion

The Surjapuri Folk Culture is as ancient as the oldest cultures in India, intricately intertwined with the history of its local environment and Society. In the expressions of this culture, one can find traces of various ceremonies and joyful moments of life. The Surjapuri people is composed of multiple religions, reflecting the unity and harmony of their society. The folk culture of the

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Surjapuri Hindu community has been flowing in the same trend for many generations. The people of the Surjapuri Muslim community have been converted. A large part of the Rajbanshi community has converted to the Muslim community. The Surjapuri Muslim community has adopted new trends, but the culture of their ancestors has been preserved in the same way.

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