



The identity crisis of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the twentieth century

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Abstract

This writing explores the Identity of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the twentieth century. The Surjapuri Rajbanshi is a Hindu community that is inhabited in the southern parts of North Bengal. They are culturally and linguistically similar to the Kishanganjia people of Bihar. However, the majority of Surjapuri Rajbanshi people of Purnea in the neighboring state of Bihar belong to the same community, and locally, they are known as the Surjapuri Rajbanshi. The 'Surjapuri' word came from the 'Surjapur Pargana'. They are commonly found in the present North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, Katihar, Purnia, Araria, and Mithila of Bihar. In 1903, Grierson reported their Mother Tongue as Siripuria or Kishanganjia during the Linguistics survey of India. Interestingly, in the 1961 Census Siripuria was replaced by 'Surjapuri'. The majority of people of this community inhabited villages, and basically, they were agriculturists. Their identity, socio-cultural life, and linguistics are different from the other Rajbanshis of North Bengal. From childbirth to death, they performed various unique customs. They have their own culture and language, such as Surjapuri culture and Surjapuri language. Even they have their own script called Hindi-Kaithi or Kaithi.

Keywords: Surjapuri Rajbanshi, Surjapur Pargana, linguistics, script, culture, etc

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the identity of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis of Southern North Bengal as they still suffer from disputed, wrongly defined, and confusing identities. Their existing history is based on the account left by colonial administrators and ethnographers. Even there has been hardly any attempt to identify their ethnic identity and affinity. Practically, there is no historical study on their social formation and identity. Very few sources are available on their origin and identity, which are highly speculative and hardly offer any clear-cut ideas about the position of the caste, sub-castes, and groups in the local hierarchy.

Historical background of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis: The early history of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis is not well known because no major research has been done regarding the Surjapuri Rajbanshis. Except for some ethnographers and some minor regional work, no major research work is done by the scholars. A mythical story had been heard during the early ages when Parasurama swore that he would wrath all the Kshatriyas from the world. Then, the Kshatriya's flight (palayan) to the foothills of the Himalayas and adjacent areas. And from that point of view, some Rajbanshis, known as Paliya, were flown (that means Palawan) from the wrath of Parasurama^[1].

The Rajbanshi community is like a tree with many branches, and Surjapuri Rajbanshi is like a branch of the Rajbanshi community. The Surjapuri Rajbanshis are Dravidian with an admixture of Mongoloid blood type of people inhabiting the Southern part of North Bengal. These snub-nosed, small-eyed, and beardless people claim their descent from the Kshatriyas of old and deem themselves superior by birth to those outside their clan^[2]. Dining with foreigners whom they term as Bangladeshi (people from downstream areas) is forbidden and anybody contacting any relation with them either by marriage or otherwise is declared an outcast. The Rajbanshis were initially the practitioners of nature

Worship. One interesting thing is that a small section of Muslims and also Hindus call them Poliya, but we can see that in the 1961 census of India, the Poliya Community was majorly found in Hemtabad, Itahar, and Bangshihari Police stations of West Dinajpur district which is not part of Surjapur Pargana in Purnea District of Bihar^[3]. Though, local Muslims and Hindus say that the Rajbanshis of this area speak in Surjapuri Language. So, it is clear that the Rajbanshis are not Poliyas of this area. Because there is no literary evidence that will prove that the Rajbanshis of Southern North Bengal are Poliyas.

Area of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis: The early history of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi is correlated with the history of the Purnea district of Bihar. So, we should also know the history of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi of the Purnea district of Bihar.

Surjapur Pargana was part of Purnea district of Bihar. It has two branches, Kishanganj and Khagra. After the independence of India, when the State Re-organization Commission was implemented, a portion of Bihar (an area of about 759 square miles) was submerged in the West Dinajpur district of West Bengal in 1956^[4]. West Dinajpur district was divided into north and south Dinajpur in 1992. The mainstream area of the Uttar Dinajpur district is under the Islampur Sub-Division, which was part of Surjapur Pargana of the Purnea district of Bihar, and the people of this area called themselves Surjapuri in association with the Surjapuri language they speak.

Islampur subdivision of West Dinajpur district existed in Bihar before 1956, and during the Mughal period, it was under the Surjapur pargana. It was established during the time of Mughal Emperor Humayun^[5]. Surjapur Pargana was formed with Haveli, Dulalaganj, Kishanganj, Udhrail, and a few parts of the undivided Dinajpur district^[6]. Surjapur Pargana was a subordination of the Tajpur government. Until the period of Emperor Akbar, this non-folded area was covered with forest, and Sikkimi and Bhutia were inhabited.

In 1545 AD, Sayed Ahmed Khan helped Emperor Humayun in recovering the territory. In that case, Humayun gave the governorship of this pargana to Syed Khan Dastur. According to Buchanan, "In the Year of 1545, when Humayun returned his Empire, Syed Khan Dastur Deputed to Pargana Surjapur by him."^[7]

Historical Uniqueness of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis

1. The land revenue system of the Surjapur pargana was called a 'Gachabandi system.' In this system, there is a lot of land to be given to the Gachadar. Instead of this, a certain quantity of revenue has been given from Gachadar. The owner of the Gach is called Gachadar, and the farmer of the land is called Gachbandi^[8]. This Gach name is still present in the present Islampur subdivision. For example, 'Goyalgach' 'Sufalgach' 'Kalagach' etc^[9]. In the nineteenth century, at the time of Nawab Ata Hossain in the Surjapur Pargana, the Permanent settlement was introduced, and the Gachbandi system came to an end^[10]. Whereas in the case of Kamta-Koch Rajbanshis the Jotedar-Adhiari system existed in Kochbehar and Jalpaiguri districts^[11].
2. The Surjapuri Rajbanshi have their own culture and language such as Surjapuri Culture and Surjapuri Language. Surjapuri Culture like Hokahuki Khela, Chorchunni Puja, and Natuya Gan. Even, they have their script called Hindi-Kaithi or Kaithi.
3. Another interesting thing is that the Rajbanshis of the Surjapur area have only one title, 'Singha'^[12] (except some Adhikari). On the contrary, the Kamta-Koch Rajbanshis used several titles like Roy, Burma, Das, Barman, Rajbanshi, Sarkar, etc. Recently the people of the Surjapuri Rajbanshi Community in North Bengal, are politically united through the "Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party." Whereas Kamta-Koch Rajbanshis have been united a long time before.
4. The Surjapuri Rajbanshi constructed a unique type of house which is called Dhawa^[13]. The wall of this Dhawa is made of mud-laundersed bricks.

Conclusion

As mentioned all the information regarding the Surjapuri Rajbanshis are different from the Kamta-Koch Rajbanshis of North Bengal. The cultural as well as linguistic uniqueness of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis could not be found anywhere in India. So, it is clear that the Rajbanshis of Surjapur Pargana are neither poliya nor Kamta-Koch Rajbanshi, they are Surjapuri Rajbanshi.

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