

The Surjapuri Rajbanshis And The Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims: A Case Study In Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District

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Abstract: *The Surjapuri Rajbanshi is a Hindu Community, who believe in the Sanatani Hinduism. They were the Surjapuri Rajbanshis, who later converted into Muslim. Later they came to be known as Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslim. The present work attempts a detailed study of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis and the Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims in the Uttar Dinajpur District with special reference to the Islampur Subdivision. They left their own religion and embraced Islam are known as 'Nasya'. Those were converted under the influence of Sufi Saints were given the title of 'Shaikh'. Later they came to be known as 'Nasya Shaikh Muslims'. The term 'Surjapuri' has been associated with them for Positional and Linguistic reasons. Although the Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims converted into Islam long ago, many cultural traces of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis remain among them. The generosity of Islam, oppression of upper caste Hindus against lower caste Hindus and perhaps to escape the death penalty of Muslim rulers, many Surjapuri Rajbanshis converted to Islam over time. Even after many centuries, the Nasya Shaikh Muslims held on to the Sanatani Hinduism. Centuries ago, Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims worshiped Sanatani deities like Goddess Kali, Bishahari etc along with their Allah. Even after several centuries conversion to Islam, many Nasya Shaikh Muslim women used to put vermilion on her forehead. Even today, many similarities can be observed between the culture of Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims. For example, there are similarities in Marriage ceremonies, Naming of the child, Language, Food habits etc. The Surjapuri Rajbanshis and the Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims have been living together in many places of this area.*

Keywords: *Surjapuri, Rajbanshis, Nasya Shaikh Muslims, Islampur, Hinduism, Islam etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The north-eastern part of the undivided Purnea district belonged to the Surjapur Pargana. Although, the current Surjapuri language and culture originated much earlier, yet during the Mughal period, Surjapur Pargana was formed with the north-eastern part of the undivided Purnea district. This Surjapur Pargana was under the Subah of Bengal and the Sarkar of Tajpur. The eastern part of the Mahananda river was under the Tajpur Sarkar. According to Francis Buchanan's account, the Surjapur Pargana was formed within 14 and 15 lakhs of bigahs or 5,00,000 acres. L.S.S.O' Malley in his Gazetteer gave the area of Surjapur Pargana as 729(4,66,560 acres) square miles. It is known from the Gazetteer of L.S.S. O' Malley that - " According to its chronicles, Saiyad Khan Dastur 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". Many people of Surjapur Pargana believe that- " There is a very ancient village called 'Surjapur' in Chakulia police station the present-days North Dinajpur district. The idea of 'Surjapur Pargana' was born from this village ". On 1st November, 1956, on the 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. Thakurganj, Islampur, Chopra, Kishanganj, Goal Pokhar and Karandighi police stations belonged to Surjapur Pargana. Above mentioned places were included in the boundary of Transferred Area. These areas were formed as Islampur Subdivision, 1st April, 1992 . 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.

The Purushsukta of the 10 mandala of Rigveda mentions- " Brahman arose from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriya arose from the arms, Vaishya arose from the thigh and Shudra arose from the feet ". This was the " Varna system " of ancient India. The four varnas had separate works, they performed as their duty. Brahmins indulged in the worship of their Gods and Goddesses. Kshatriyas kept themselves engaged in war. Vaisyas engaged in trade and the Sudras in the service of the above three varnas. Kshatriyas are second Varna of vedic age. Later castes were formed on the basis of work. Although the Rig Veda mentions- " Members of the same family were engaged in different occupations ". The scriptures state that, a person of one Varna can be considered another Varna, if the qualities of that Varna are fulfilled. Such as- Vishwamitra Muni was born in the Kshatriya clan and considered a Brahmin. The person who gave joy of all became famous as "Raja". Those who protected the Brahmins from all kinds of harm, they were called " Kshatriyas ". Therefore Rajan, Raja and Kshatriya are identical words and the word Rajbanshi means " Lineage of kshatriyas ". In Rajasthan, Rajput means Kshatriyas only. Rajput means son of Kshatriya. India was ruled by kshatriyas for a long time. Mahapadmananda ruled India from 366 to 338 BC. Mahapadmananda was of shudra descent. He assumed the title of Parshuram-II and indulged in the killing spree of kshatriyas. As a result, Kshatriyas hide themselves to save their lives. At that time, many Kshatriyas hide themselves in Pundradesa under the identity of 'Rajbanshi'. Non- Kshatriyas Mahapadmananda accepted that - " I have no problem being a Rajbanshi , because I am a non-kshatriya but a king ". The Rajbanshis survived at that time. They are the absconding kshatriyas who later came to be known as " Rajbanshi ". For a long time, introducing themselves as a Rajbanshi, they forgot to introduce themselves as a Kshatriya. They became " Bratya Kshatriyas " according to the scripture. Kshatriyas who have forgotten their Kshatriyas are called " Bratya Kshatriyas" in the scriptures. This Rajbanshi caste lived in Purnea ,Jalpesh or Tarapeeth and other places of North East India. India was flooded with Buddhism except for the kingdom of Kamrupa. The Chinese traveller Hien Tsang came to India in 630 AD. He did not find any sign of Hinduism anywhere in the entire Aryavarta. He found traces of Hinduism only in the Eastern Indian kingdom of Kamrupa. He described - " The people have no faith in Buddha and adored and sacrificed to the Deva. There were above 100 Deva temples; of Buddhist Sangamas there were none. The king was a Brahmin by caste, Vaskara Barman by name and had the title of Kumar ". These Rajbanshis were divided into four Sub-divisions. Such as - Rajbanshi, Poliya, Deshi and Koch. They known as Poliya because of being fugitives from the distant past. Those who stayed in this country with pain of separation are known as Desi or Locals. Only the Koches were controversial. However, everyone now prefers to be known as Rajbanshi. Rajbanshis lived in all these places even before the Koches. The Kochs adopted Hinduism during the time of Koch King Vishva Singha. The people living in this Surjapur Pargana prefer to call themselves as "Surjapuri". In the same sense the Rajbanshis living in this transferred area do not hesitate to call themselves as "Surjapuri Rajbanshi". It is not easy to find out from where this Surjapur nomenclature came. At other time, some Surya dynasty Kings ruled over this area. It is believed that the people here started calling themselves " Surjapuri" from that time. It is not possible to say that there was no tribble influence in this region. These tribes worshipped the Sun and the Moon. The name Surjapur may be came from the Sun. The language of the people of this Surjapur Pargana also has a distinct expression. The Surjapuri language is like a kamtapuri language but little bit difference can be seen. Rajbanshi people whose are living in this area called themselves as "Surjapuri Rajbanshi" and they use Surjapuri as their language. Looking for the family of this language, we see that the family of this language is- Indo- European>Indo-Iranian>Indo-Aryan>East Bengal - Assamesh>Kamtapuri>Surjapuri. So this language has gained a social identity, which was written in Kaithi script. However, Kaithi script is not using nowadays.

Conversion Of The Surjapuri Rajbanshis To Islam In Islampur Subdivision

Rajbanshis were the majority part among the original inhabitants of the present days of North Bengal. The present Islampur subdivision was a part of the undivided Purnea district. For this reason, the history of Islampur subdivision is hidden in the history of undivided Purnea district. This area was also ruled under gaur rulers. Islam spreaded in Chittagaon in the middle of the 10th century. Bhaktiyar Khalji conquered Bengal in 1204 AD. Muslim rulers ruled Bengal from 1204-1765 AD. Many Hindus converted into Islam during this period. There were various reasons for Hindus to convert into Islam. Tyranny of Muslim rulers was one of the reason for Hindus to convert into Islam. In the 15th century, the process of conversion of Hindus into Islam reached its peak during the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin (1418-1433) of Bengal. Sultan Jalaluddin used to say to Hindus-"Either accept the Qur'an or die". Muslim rulers forcibly converted Hindus and Buddhists to Islam. On the other hand, before the Mughal period, the undivided Purnea district

was ruled by a Hindu ruler named Shukhdeo. In 1545, Mughal Emperor Humayun overthrew the Hindu ruler of Purnea, Shukhdeo, and appointed Syed Khan Dastur as the Zamindar of Purnea district. It cannot be denied that, the tyranny of the Muslim rulers was one of the reason for the conversion of Hindus into Islam.

The liberal practices of the Sufi-Saints were able to convert the lower caste Hindus into Islam. During the time of Giyasuddin, the ruler of Bengal, many muslim scholars were invited to Bengal. Nasiruddin Mahmud used to entertain Sufi-saints. The contribution of the Sufi-Saints and pirs in converting lower caste Hindus into Islam were undeniable. Many Sufi-saints and pirs had campaigned in many places in India to spread the greatness of Islam. Makhdum pir of Pandua, pir Nepir, Shaikh Alauddin, Alauddin Haque, Shaikh Nooruddin, Zafar Khan Gazi of Tribeni, Barakha Gazi etc. received considerable respect from the society. They tried to convert the lower caste Hindus into Islam by various tactics. Adam Shaheed, Shaikh Jalal, Kar Forma etc. came to Bengal from Delhi to spread Islam. Many Sufi-saints and pirs also came in the present days of Islampur subdivision, still there are some Dargas or Shrines. Syed Shah Pir Ali Chisti came from Fatehpur Sikri in Agra to the court of the Nawab of Khagra in Kishanganj during the reign of mughal emperor Akbar. And started living permanently in Bhujagaon village of the Islampur Subdivision. There is a Dargah of Hazrat Syed Fazli Rabbi in Yusufganj of Islampur police station. Not only during the Muslim rule but also the British period, a large number of Hindus converted into Islam. Apart from Dargahs or Shrines in Islampur subdivision, many Mosques were built during the British period. It has made an important contributions to spread Islam.

On the other hand, one of the reasons for the adoption of Islam by Hindus were the oppression, abuse and narrow mentality of the upper caste Hindus towards the lower caste Hindus. The 'Kaulinya Pratha' prevalent in the medieval society made the Hindu society full of complexities. This Kaulinya Pratha was prevalent in Bengal and Mithila. It is said that, Sena King Ballal Sen of Bengal and Hari Singha, the last Karnat king of Mithila, introduced the 'Kaulinya Pratha'. The Kaulinya Pratha fragmented the Hindu society and led it down the path of degradation. As a result, of this custom, nobility (superiority) was established in Hindu society. As a result, Hindus became different castes based on Karma. The Kaulinya Pratha gave high and low strata to Hindu society. As a result, the lives of the lower caste Hindus were disrupted. The lower caste Hindus embraced Islam hoping to escape the unbearable suffering of the upper caste Hindus.

There is no doubt that, ancestors of the Nasya Shaikh Muslims of North Bengal i.e. Islampur subdivision were Rajbanshis. "The whole of the Kishanganj and the eastern half of the Sadar subdivisions. In the Kishanganj subdivision, and in the Kasba Amur and Balarampur thanas, the Musalmans, who are said to be Koch Origin ". Nasya Shaikh is the major part of the converted Muslim community of North Bengal i.e. Islampur Subdivision. People who left their own religion and accepted Islam are known as "Nasya Shaikh or New Musalman". It was the Sufi-Saints who gave them the title of 'Shaikh'. "The pirs or religious devotees made it a point to exercise a great deal of influence to convert as many as possible of the people of the locality into Islam. The Sheikhs i.e. the Muslim cultivators frequently go by the name Nasya which means one whose original religion has been destroyed i.e., a convert". During the census of 1911, Muslim converts from Rajbanshi, Poliya, Desiya listed themselves as 'Sheikh'. The influence of the mongolids and the Bado community can be observe in the Surjapuri people of this area. "Mohammadans predominate in Kishanganj subdivision forming about 80 per cent of the population. The majority are believed to be descendants of aboriginal Koches or hill tribes. The other caste are Saik, Sadgope, Rajbanshi, Musahar, Dhanuk, Gangai, Tanti, Hari, Teli, Dusadh, Saiyed, Jhola, Brahmman, Koiri, Benia and Santhal". All these people were the natives of this area.

Cultural Similarities Of Surjapuri Rajbanshis And Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims

Many cultural similarities can be observed between Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims living in present days of Bihar and Islampur subdivision. Although the Nasya Shaikh Muslims of Surjapur Pargana converted to Islam long ago, they continued to cling to the Rajbanshi culture for the next few centuries. According to the census of 1901, the total Muslims population of undivided Purnea district(including Islampur subdivision) were 793673 or 43.3 per cent. With the passage of time, the number of Muslims in Islampur subdivision increased manifold, which is mentioned in L.S.S.O' Malley's Gazetteer -"Until in the thana of Islampur in the Kishanganj Subdivision, there is only one Hindu to every two Muhammadans". Little difference can be observed between the religious beliefs of the local Hindus(including the Surjapuri Rajbanshis) and Nasya Shaikh Muslims. These New Muslims worshiped the traditional Hindu gods and goddesses along with the Hindus. During the wedding of these Nasya Shaikh Muslims, the bride and groom were taken to visit the traditional Hindu goddesses and the bride used to take vermilion on her forehead. New Muslims (Nasya Shaikh) practiced both Hinduism and Islam. Mr. Byrne mentioned in

his settlement report - "In every village can be found a Kalisthan , and Hindus and Muhammadans celebrate their characteristic festivals together. At the time of marriages, 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 Khudai Ghar or God's house, and prayers are offered there in which the names of Allah and Kali both figure".

Like the Surjapuri Hindus (including the Surjapuri Rajbanshis) and Nasya Shaikh Muslims also believed in demonic powers. "All the low class Hindus, and the degenerate Muhammadans believe implicitly in evil spirits". If someone in the family got ill, they would used to call the Ojha of the village like the Surjapuri Hindu communities. Ojha would try to heal the sick person by reciting some mantras. Like Hindus, they also vow to sacrifice goats, pigeons etc to traditional Hindu gods and goddesses. Mr. Byrne mentioned in his settlement report - "Which 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". Like the Surjapuri Rajbanshis, Nasya Shaikh Muslims also had a popular deity as 'Devata Maharaj' or village protector. This deity is worshiped outside of the village. The Surjapuri Hindu people believe that worshiping the 'Devata Maharaj' will protect the village and prevent any demonic forces from entering the village. These Nasya Shaikh Muslims also worshiped this deity Maharaj. These Nasya Shaikh Muslims were called low Muslims, because their ancestors believed in another religion (Sanatani Hinduism) . "The most popular deity among the lower grades, both Hindu and Musalman, is Devata Maharaj and his door keeper Hadi. His abode and temple are very primitive".

There is a very old Lakshmi temple in the village of Islampur subdivision, Pokharia. In that place even today a unique example of harmony between Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims can be observed. A few years back, many Nasya Shaikh Muslims women used to give offerings. Even today in this Lakshmi fair surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims take responsibilities of Puja. Nasya Shaikh Muslims family when loses its livestock in this area, they vow to the Hindu goddess, to recover the lost livestock. In many places Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslim family welcomes the groom with Barandala(lamper,paddy seed, Panpata and durba grass) like Hindus.

A lots of similarities in food patterns can be observed between Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims. Many of the traditional dishes of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis are considered to be the favourite food of Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims as well. Sidol is a traditional dish of the Surjapuri Rajbanshis. Sidol, Sukti Machh (dry fish), Sour broth, burning Saati fish etc are popular in Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims society. The converted Muslim community of this area is not apart from the previous religious community. Even today many Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslim families Still have kinship ties. Pasarul Alam in his book "Islampur Na Ishwarpur?", said about Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims that -"They are of same blood and the same brother ".

Many similarities in nomenclature can be observed between surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims. Similar names are prevalent in both societies. Such as - Akalu, Andharu, Baishagu, Debaru, Maghu, Chaitu, Tihaku, Budhu, Manglu, Samaru, Sati, Mati, Khumanswari, Fulanshil, Panswari etc are prevalent in both societies.

Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims have their original residence in Surjapur Pargana and their communication language is also the same. Even today, Many Surjapuri Rajbanshis and Muslims express their feelings in Surjapuri language. Perhaps several families consider their mother tongue Surjapuri as inferior and choose Bengali and Hindi as their medium of communication. There are also many similarities in clothing. Like Surjapuri Rajbanshis women, Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims women also wore Bukani or Patani.

2. Conclusion :

There is no doubt that the ancestors of Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims were Surjapuri Rajbanshi, Poliya, Koch and Desiya in Islampur subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district. Although the Surjapuri Rajbanshis converted into Surjapuri Nasya Shaikh Muslims by adopting Islam for various reasons, they could not forget their own religion and culture. Even after few years of Indian Independence, they followed Hindu culture. Even today traces of their Hindu culture remain in some areas. Today they may be trying to forget Hindu culture for political reasons and consider themselves separate from Hindus. Remembering that they are the original inhabitants of this country and this country is also theirs. Even though these two community have taken separate forms today, they have always been doing their duty and respect towards their country.

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