



RESEARCH ARTICLE



ETHNOLINGUISTIC INTERPRETATION OF FLORA BY SYLHETI SPEAKERS OF BARAK VALLEY

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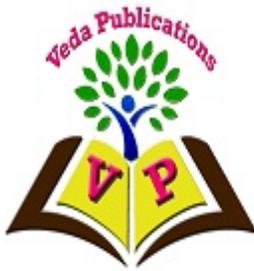
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ABSTRACT

Ethnolinguistics holds a distinctive role as an intermedial field connecting linguistics and anthropology, enabling a thorough examination of the functioning of language within specific cultural settings and reciprocally, how cultural norms and practice influence linguistic structures. The present study will analyse the interrelationship between the Language and culture of Sylheti community spoken in Barak valley. It will also study the reflection of cultural aspects in the language with particular reference to Flora of Barak-Valley.



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INTRODUCTION

According to Collins English Dictionary (1979), 'Ethnolinguistics is a field of anthropological linguistics which deals with the study of the language with particular ethnic group and the relationship between language and culture'.

James W. Underhill in his book 'Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts (2012) describes Ethnolinguistics as the study of how language relates to culture and ethnicity.

According to the 2011 Indian census, Barak valley has a population of 3,624,599 Sylheti speakers. No Ethnolinguistic study has been done on Sylheti Bengali.

Ethnolinguistics examines the interdependent connection between language and culture.

The Government of Assam officially publishes the Assam State Gazetteer, Volume 1 (1999), which was edited by Amlan Baruah and S.B. Roy Choudhury. It was intended to give a thorough and authoritative description of the geography, history, culture, economy, and governance of Assam as part of the Indian state gazetteer series. This volume aims to modernise and consolidate information across Assam's many areas, including the three districts of Barak Valley-Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi, as a replacement for the colonial-era district gazetteers. India's southern Assam province contains the Barak Valley. Due to its diverse climatic, hydrological, and topographical features, it supports a very broad variety of flora and is a part of the Indo-Burma biological diversity hotspot. The three administrative districts that make up the Barak Valley, a vital but

underappreciated biological region in northeast India, are Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi.

Cachar: One of the three districts that make up southern Assam's Barak Valley region, Cachar is a place of sociopolitical significance, natural beauty, and a rich cultural legacy. Cachar, which has its administrative center in Silchar, has a complex history that has been influenced by post-independence events, colonial intrusions, and ancient kingdoms.

Location & Boundaries: Cachar district is situated between 24°22'N to 25°8'N latitude and 92°24'E to 93°15'E longitude and area covering 3,786 square kilometers.

Cachar shares borders with-

- North: Barail and Jaintia hill ranges.
- South: State of Mizoram.
- East: Manipur.
- West: Districts of Hailakandi and Karimganj.

Land: The majority of Cachar's soil is made up of clayey loam and alluvial soils, which are productive but have a limited capacity to hold moisture. The district's agroclimatic conditions facilitate the production of aromatic plants including patchouli, rice, tea, rubber, betel nut, and coconut.

Karimganj: Known for its rich socio-cultural landscape, historical depth, and geographical diversity, Karimganj is one of the three districts that make up the culturally rich Barak Valley in southern Assam. Situated in Assam's southwest, it borders the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi to the east and



north, respectively, and Bangladesh to the west and Tripura to the south.

Location & Boundaries: Karimganj is situated Between 24°15'N to 25°55'N latitude and 92°15'E to 92°35'E longitude and area covering approximately 1,809 square kilometres.

Karimganj shares the borders with:

- North & Northeast: Cachar District and Bangladesh.
- East: Hailakandi District.
- South: Mizoram and Tripura states.
- West & Northwest: Bangladesh.

The district shares a 92 km international border with Bangladesh, of which 41 km is demarcated by the Kushiara River and 51 km is land border.

Land: Karimganj possess predominantly alluvial soils which is suitable for agricultural use. The district's fertile plains support the cultivation of rice, tea, and various other crops.

The smallest of the three districts in Assam's Barak Valley, Hailakandi is renowned for its tranquil scenery, diversified culture, and agrarian economy. Hailakandi enjoys a special geographic location tucked between hills and plains, bordered to the north and east by Cachar, to the south by Mizoram, and to the west by Karimganj.

Location: Hailakandi district is situated between 24°41'N to 24°68'N latitude and 92°34'E to 92°57'E longitude, with area covering approximately 1,327 square kilometres. Hailakandi share its border with:

- North & East: Cachar District.
- South & East: Mizoram State.

- West: Karimganj District.

Land: The majority of the soils in the Hailakandi district are clay to clay loam, with alluvial and sandy soils in specific locations. In general, the soil is acidic.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the present paper is to bring out the Ethnolinguistic explanation of Flora by Sylheti speakers of Barak valley and to study the names of flowers and medicinal plants.

METHODOLOGY

The data for the present paper was collected from the three districts of Barak Valley, that is Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The methods applied for data collection for the present study includes both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is based on personal contact with the speech community through informants of different age groups, professionals and sexes with the help of questionnaires. The secondary method of collecting data includes available written materials like referred journals, articles, books etc.

ETHNOLINGUISTIC INTERPRETATION OF FLORA

Examining the connection between language and culture, ethnolinguistics is being used more and more in ecological situations, especially when viewed via the ethnobotanical perspective. Plant names, folk sayings, healing chants, and seasonal songs are examples of Sylheti ethnolinguistic expressions that demonstrate how flora in the Barak Valley is named



not only for its physical characteristics but also for its social memory, ceremonial function, and symbolic meaning. These language signifiers comprise a lexicon of living knowledge, offering insight into cultural views of gender roles, health, purity, and seasonal cycles. More than just a philological curiosity, Sylheti speakers' ethnolinguistic interpretation of flora offers a window into a worldview in which plants are seen as semiotic agents, rich in metaphor, memory, and meaning, in addition to being material resources. The biological diversity and cultural depth of the Barak Valley make

Sylheti

it an ideal location for this kind of multidisciplinary research. This study intends to shed light on the dynamic interaction between language, land, and life in one of India's most culturally rich but scholarly understudied places by fusing linguistic analysis with ethnobotanical awareness.

MEDICINAL PLANTS

In Sylheti, the suffix **/gas/**, which means "tree", is added to the names of the plants based on the fruits, flowers, or vegetables they produce. The names of the medicinal trees are listed below.

Gloss

/amb + xi/	'sour or acidic + Sanskrit feminine noun'
/ambxi/	'indian gooseberry' (Phyllanthus emblica)
/am + ltaʃ/	'similar to amla + creeper or vine'
/ambtaʃ/	'golden shower' (Cassia fistula)
/ɔrdʒun/	'sanskrit origin meaning bright or silver white'
/ɔrdʒun/	'arjuna' (Terminalia arjuna)
/bel/	'Hindu trinity'
/bel/	'wood apple' (Aegle marmelos)
/dɔŋkɔɔʃ/	'strong (medicinal properties) + pot'
/dɔŋkɔɔʃ/	'thumba' (Leucas aspera)
/dut+ura/	'intoxicated (symbolic plants effect) + to feel light after intoxication'



/dutra/	'thorn apple (Datura metel)
/gul+m̄ris/	'round + chilly'
/gulm̄ris/	'black pepper' (Piper nigrum)
/h̄r + t̄ki/	'green or remover (lord Vishnu) + one who has'
/̄rt̄ki/	'yellow Myrobalan' (Chebulic myrobalan)
/l̄d̄za + boti/	'shy + Sanskrit feminine suffix'
/l̄d̄zaboti/	'touch me not' (Mimosa pudica)
/nim/	'bitter'
/nim/	'neem' (Azadirachta indica)
/r̄kt̄ + d̄z̄ba/	'blood red + chanting'
/r̄kt̄d̄z̄ba/	'hibiscus' (Hibiscus rosasinensis)
/tul+̄ji/	'balance or beyond compare + reverence'
/tul̄ji/	'tulsi' (Ocimum tenuiflorum)
/t̄h̄ā+kuni/	'root (folk origin) + small creeping plant or herb'
/t̄h̄ākuni/	'gotu Kola' (Centella asiatica)
/x̄ā+̄f̄rēnga/	'pungent + shrubby nature'
/x̄āf̄rēnga/	'starfruit' (Clerodendrum viscosum)

**FLOWERS**

Flowers are deeply symbolic of beauty, devotion, emotion, and the natural cycles of life. They are intricately interwoven with daily life and spirituality.

As a sign of good fortune and happiness, flowers are used to decorate homes, worn in hair and garlands at festivals and weddings, and offered in ceremonies to deities like Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi. Every flower has a cultural significance of its own: the lotus, /**ফাদ্দা**/,

symbolises purity and spiritual enlightenment, the hibiscus, /**দড়াবা**/, symbolises power and sacrifice, and /**জিুলি**/, invokes nostalgia and seasonal change. Flowers are not only botanical objects but also essential cultural symbols that, from a Sylheti perspective, link nature, emotion, and ritual. They are frequently used as metaphors for love, impermanence, and feminine grace in literature, songs, and folklore.

Sylheti**Gloss**

/কপ্ত + azita/

'unbounded + undefeated'

/কপ্তরাজিতা/

'Asian pigeonwings' (Clitoria ternatea)

/বকুল/

'sanskrit origin /বকুল/- small fragrance'

/বকুল/

'spanish cherry' (mimusops elengi)

/দড়াবা/

'sanskrit orijin /দড়াবা/- chanting'

/দড়াবা/

'hibiscus' (Hibiscus rosasinensis)

/গন্ডহা + raz/

'frangance + king'

/গন্ডহা রাজ/

'cape jasmine' (gardenia jasminoides)

/গুলপি/

'pink colour'

/গুলপ/

'rose' (rosa rubiginosa)

/কৃষ্ণ + sura/

'lord Krishna + crest'



/kriɲɔsura/

'royal poinciana' (delonix regia)

/jeuli/

'sanskrit origin /jibali/- lord Shiv'

/jeuli/

'night-flowering-jasmine' (nyctanthes

-arbor-tristis)

/tɔgɔr/

'Sanskrit origin /tɔgɔra/- sacred or soothing'

/tɔgɔr/

'pinwheel' (tabernaemontana divaricata)

Conclusion

Sylheti speakers' linguistic and cultural manifestations of the Barak Valley's flora provide a rich tapestry of ethnobotanical knowledge, ecological awareness, and cultural memory. The Sylheti language encodes traditional knowledge of medicinal use, seasonal cycles, agricultural techniques, and spiritual beliefs in addition to plant names. In oral traditions, folk medicine, food, and rituals, plants such as /tʰaŋkuni/, /ʃuli/, /tɔgɔr/, /xaɸreŋga/, and /dɔŋkɔɔɔ/ are more than just biological beings; they are living metaphors.

This distinctive linguistic and ecological convergence demonstrates how Sylheti speakers use local metaphor and vocabulary to preserve a strong bond with their surroundings. The syncretic evolution of the Sylheti language itself is reflected in the morphological patterns of these floral names, which frequently combine Dravidian and Austroasiatic influences with Sanskritic origins. Particularly among women, who have historically been the keepers of rituals and family medicine, the flower language

serves as a medium for the generational transfer of ecological knowledge.

Studying the flora of the Barak Valley using Sylheti dialect serves as both an act of ecological preservation and cultural resistance in a time of environmental degradation and language homogenisation. It is essential to preserve and revive this oral-ecological legacy in order to honour the traditional ways that communities interact with their land and to save biodiversity. Therefore, in order to highlight the interdependence of language, geography, and lived experience in the Barak Valley, this study encourages a multidisciplinary conversation between ethnolinguistics, environmental humanities, and regional history.

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