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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF HOUSEHOLD HANDICRAFTS OF SYLHETI IN BARAK VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

Ethnolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and culture, emphasizing how cultural practices reflect social identity, worldview and belief systems.

It examines how a particular community encodes cultural knowledge, traditions, values, and histories through language, and how language functions as a key marker of ethnic belonging. The field investigates not only vocabulary but also speech patterns, oral traditions, naming systems, metaphors, kinship terms, and ritual beliefs. By studying language in its social and cultural contexts, ethnolinguistics reveals how meanings are shaped by cultural norms and how communication sustains community identity.

The present study will undertake and analyse the interrelationship between the Language and culture of Sylheti community spoken in Barak Valley where comparatively the traditional way of cultural heritage and the language is being maintained in respect to the use of Household handicrafts in day-to-day life.

Keywords: Sylheti, Barak valley, Handicrafts, Art, Household crafts, Language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Barak Valley of southern Assam, comprising the districts of Cachar, Sribhumi, and Hailakandi, is a vibrant cultural landscape shaped by centuries of interaction among diverse ethnic groups and cross-border ties with the Sylhet region of present-day Bangladesh. The concept of art according to the Sylheti community is a bit different. The process of making a craft is also considered as art. Artwork is not a product but craftwork is and it is believed that art is spiritually related to the culture.

Ethnolinguistic data is collected through the field work in participation and observation method holding a strong hypothesis that the Sylheti community of Barak Valley has a unique art and handicraft system. The present study is an attempt for identifying the development of the system of art and handicraft among Sylheti community of Barak Valley. Therefore, the places Algapur, Aynakhal, Chatla, Katlichara, Lala, Patharkandi, Sunam-Bazar and Dholai is selected for data collection.

2. Objectives: The main objective of the present paper is to bring out the Ethnolinguistic explanation of Household Handicrafts by Sylheti speakers of Barak valley and to study the names of the art and crafts.

3. Methodology

The data for the present paper was collected from the three districts of Barak Valley, that is Cachar, Sribhumi 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 questionaries. The secondary method of collecting data includes available written materials like referred journals, articles, books etc.

4. Review of Literature

The publication 'Indian Handicrafts' focuses on examining traditional handicrafts as the economic alternative mass-produced day to day goods. It also highlights about the Indian handicrafts which has historically and deeply held the cultural as well as economic importance, while the modern artisans face a severer pressure from the exploitation of middleman and globalized (modern) manufacturing. Therefore, utilisation value of the handicrafts combining everyday use with combined aesthetic and traditional art offer a market path for a high potential, eco-friendly and sustainable consumer choice, (Choudhary and Mishra, 2022).

'Addressing constraints in the Handicraft sector' explains the internet-based intervention and the technological adoptions which focuses on models of digital transformation to bypass market constraints for the traditional handicraft artisans, (Dalal, Chattopadhyay and Roy, 2023).

5. Art

In Sylheti culture the name for art is called **/alɸona/** and the art made of thread on Quilts is called **/nokʃi/**. Here **/alɸona/** is basically a 'Traditional or ritual painting' which is done on various crafts, floor design with rice flour paste, marriage stool design etc.

Image-1: A 'winnowing fan' called **/ɖanna/**



Image-1

Image-2: A 'prosperity pot'- **/moŋgol goʈ/**



Image-2

6. Handicraft

Household crafts in the Sylheti culture of the Barak Valley represent a living tradition where every day domestic needs merge with aesthetic skill, cultural memory, and women's artisanal labour. Rooted in the broader Sylhet-Bengali cultural knowledge, these crafts include hand-embroidered textiles such as woven mats, bamboo and cane utilities produced within family-based industries. Such crafts historically serve practical household functions.

Image-3: A 'double-headed barrel drum' called **/ɖul/**



Image-3

Image-4: A 'hand cymbals' called **/xorʈ̪al/**



Image-4

Image-5: **/ʈuxri/** used for collecting pebbles, soil, sand and other earthly materials.



Image-5

Image-6: **/ɖala/** used for separating small pebbles in rice and ritual purpose where offerings are kept.



Image-6

Image-7: **/saluin/** used for separating pebbles from rice.



Image-7

Image-8: **/ɖanna/** used as a hand fan to separate dust from paddy.



Image-8

Image-9: **/zaxa/** used for storing dried grass and serves as a grass bowl for household cattles.



Image-9

Image-10: **/xaʈi/** used for measuring rice or paddy. This bowl measures 1.5 kilograms of rice in it.



Image-10

Image-11: **/ʃolar zaɖu/** used to sweep mud, sand and small pebbles on the corridors of a house.



Image-11

Image-12: **/ḍusun/** used for storing paddy, fruits and vegetables. Also used for washing food items in the kitchen.



Image-12

Image-13: **/zaɸi/** used for ceremonies and it stores offerings.



Image-13

Image-14: This is a 'Hand fan' called **/haṭ ɸaxa/**



Image-14

Image-15: This is a 'Hand fan' called **/haṭ ɸaxa/**



Image-15

Image-16: This is cool mat called **/ʃiṭol ɸaţi/**usually laid on floor or bed and is used mostly in summer season.



Image-16

Image-17: **/xoloi/** used for collecting and storing fish while fishing.



Image-17

Image-18: **/saxa/** used for cleaning small fishes of various species that are available in narrow water streams or local ponds.



Image-18

Image-19: **/seɸa/** used for catching fish. This handicraft is kept in a narrow stream or in a pond with small amount of any rice and the fishes or crabs come in to take the food but the design is made in such a way that after being trapped they cannot come out.



Image-19

Image-20: This is head umbrella called **/saṭa/** and is used in monsoon season by farmers to protect themselves from sun's heat as well as rain while farming'.



Image-20

7. Conclusion

Sylheti cultural sensibilities in Barak valley are rooted in traditional art and craft practices that reflect a fusion of indigenous aesthetics and regional identities. These practices serve not only utilitarian functions but also convey rich symbolic meanings integral to daily life, identity, and community cohesion among Sylheti-speaking people and their neighbours in the valley.

The present study is an attempt to identify the system and development of the Art and craft system of the Sylheti speakers of this area that is Barak Valley.

In Sylheti culture the name for art is called **/alɸona/** basically a 'Traditional or ritual painting' which is done on various crafts, floor design with rice flour paste, marriage stool design etc.

This art is done in 'winnowing fan' called **/ɖanna/**, 'prosperity pot' called **/moŋgol goṭ/** and marriage stool called **/ɸiɽi/**.

There are different handicrafts made for daily economic works which includes **/ɖul/** used in 'traditional Sylheti folk dance', 'hand cymbals' called **/xorṯal/**, **/ʈuxri/** which is used for collecting pebbles, soil, sand and other earthly materials, **/ɖala/** which is used for separating small pebbles in rice and ritual purpose, **/saluin/** which is used for separating pebbles from rice, **/ɖanna/** which is used as a hand fan to separate dust from paddy, **/xaʈi/** which is used for measuring rice or paddy, **/ɖ̲usun/** which is used for storing paddy, fruits and vegetables etc.

The handicrafts that are used till date is the means of preserving the traditional knowledge of utilizing the natural resources available around the natural habitat. Using these materials not only showcase the affection towards own ethnic identity but also the presence of consciousness about the surrounding. Though historically centred in the wider Sylhet region, this handicraft tradition has resonant forms and practitioners in parts of Barak valley and adjacent areas, linking the valley's crafts cape to a larger Sylheti heritage.

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