



Kurmali: A Linguistic- Anthropological Overview

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Abstract: The present work is based on the Kurmali language of Purulia district. The paper explores the various Linguistic Anthropological aspects of kurmlai language as well as its unique features. Kurmali is an Indo- Aryan spoken language in south Jharkhand and parts of West Bengal (Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, etc.), Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. The total population of Kurmali according to census 2001 (Government of India) is 425,920. However, the language has been kept under the cover term Hindi as one of the varieties by the census conducted by the Government of India.

Kurmali is mainly spoken by the Kurmi community. In West Bengal, Bangla script is used while in Jharkhand Devnagari script is used to write Kurmali. It is also said that in Odisha, Odia script is used to write Kurmali. As the language is spoken in the vast area, it has different verities. There are some different spellings of the name itself. Some write Kudmali while others prefer Kurmali. Census 2001 (Government of India), use the spelling Kurmali, so, I also follow the same tradition in this paper.

There are various debates about the classification of Kurmali language. Grierson (Vol. 5, Part 2) classifies Kurmali as the western variety of Bangla. Verma (2007) mentions Kurmali as a sub-dialect of Magahi. Lahiri and Saha (2017) argue Kurmali is a mixed language. Ethnologue (2017) point out that Kurmali has Lexical similarity 58%-72% with Magahi and 41% - 55% with Bengali.

Kurmi community is largely based on agriculture hence the names of the months are named based on the agriculture pattern of the community. The community's close proximity to nature can be witnessed in the names of their festivals and

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supernatural elements. Moreover, on the basis of their features, there are varieties of terms for natural elements like fire, lakes, ponds, etc. Kurmi community take themselves as tribal people who descended from different clans. The language has a rich collection of lexical items for supernatural elements, Beside these this paper also revealed about a comparative analysis of Kurmali and Bengla lexical items like colour terms, number, etc.

Keywords: Kurmi, Kurmali, West Bengal, Linguistic Anthropology, clan.

Introduction

The Kurmi are a large peasant community widely distributed in the states of Uttar Pradesh (more than 5 million), Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Jharkhand, Assam and various districts of West Bengal. Successive waves of land reform legislation all over India since the 1950s abolished the landlord system which enabled the cultivating caste of Kurmi, who were tenant farmers, into a landowning caste. Among the Kurmi there are also businessmen, government servants at various levels, engineers, doctors and defense personnel. In Delhi they are mainly engaged as industrial workers, daily-wage laborers or are self-employed, running shops or dairies (Sing, 1994).

The name Kurmi is the Sanskrit word *Krishi* meaning 'cultivation'. Some authors attempt to trace the divine origin of the Kurmi from the tortoise (*kurm*) – believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu. These authors further relate the Kurmi to the gods Rama and Indra, the established symbols of the Kshatriya (second level in caste hierarchy) and thereby attempt to claim a higher caste origin. They are believed to be the direct descendants of the earliest Aryan tribes.

The Kurmi genealogists and historians maintain that the Kurmi are divided into more than 1500 sub-castes. The more rational view is that the Kurmi have eleven main divisions and these are endogamous, i.e. they do not marry outside their division. Some Kurmi are distinguished by the regions from which they hail. Hence, those from Uttar Pradesh are known as Purabia Kurmi, those from Bihar, Bihari Kurmi, and those from Madhya Pradesh as Manwa Kurmi (Sing, 1994).

The Kurmi are listed among the Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the Indian Constitution. This provides them many benefits such as quotas in government jobs and development schemes, reserved seats in medical and engineering colleges, all of which are intended to assist them in improving their lives.

The Kurmi are farmers except in Punjab where they are a landless community who mainly work as gardeners for private and government institutions. Some are sharecroppers, rear buffalo such as those in Bihar, while a few poorer Kurmi work as farm laborers. These days they can be found in all professions including politics, films, medicine, law, administrative services, and business as well as the traditional occupation of agriculture. In Delhi they are employed as industrial workers, daily-wage labourers or are self-employed and own shops or dairies.

These are a progressive community who make good use of the benefits provided by the government. The Kurmi of Bihar in particular have improved their circumstances and are doing well in better paying jobs, as professionals and in government bureaucracy and are now part of the middle class. They have taken advantage of loans to purchase time saving implements and changed the way they farm, using new technology for improved efficiency. They still use indigenous medicine as well as visiting clinics. Family planning is becoming more acceptable as well as formal education for their children. Children of the poor Kurmi are less fortunate. The staple food consists of meat, wheat, rice and pulses. They eat seasonal vegetables, fruit, milk and dairy products. Alcoholic drinks are socially prohibited; nevertheless some of them are addicted to alcohol.

Marriages are usually governed by the rule of sub-group endogamy and clan exogamy. The trend is changing, extending marital restrictions by considering the entire Kurmi community as an endogamous group. Marriages are arranged by elders of the families. Child marriages are still quite common in some rural areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Adult marriages are becoming increasingly preferred. In case of child marriage the gaona (bride's departure to the husband's house) takes place after she attains puberty.

The Kurmis believe in monogamy. A dowry is paid in cash and kind. Glass bangles, sindur (vermilion mark) and a nose-ring are the strictly observed symbols of marriage. Divorce is socially permitted and may be sought on grounds of adultery, impotence and maladjustment with compensation given to the aggrieved party. Generally, the caste Panchayat's (council) decision is binding on both parties. Community custom allows for remarriage of widows and widowers.

Nuclear families exist in urban areas, while extended families are still common in the rural areas. The daughter-in-law observes purdah (veil) and avoids direct conversation with her father-in-law, husband's elder brother, elder male relatives and strangers. However, lighthearted humorous relationships are allowed between

a man's wife and his younger brother, as well as between the man and his wife's sister. When the family property is divided all the sons receive an equal share and the eldest son succeeds as head of the family. Although women contribute in the agriculture sphere and perform all the household chores as well, they have a lower status than the men and are dependent on them.

The Kurmi have a rich oral tradition of folklore and folktales passed down over the generations. Women sing folk songs on auspicious occasions like marriage and childbirth. The musical accompaniments are usually the dholak, a cylindrical or slightly barrel-shaped double-headed drum, and the manjira, a pair of small cymbals.

The All India Kshatriya Kurmi Mahasabha is the Kurmi's national level council that looks after their welfare. Since India's independence this organization has become a pressure group for politics. Kurmi Politicians have also grown in number and status and there are Kurmi ministers at Central and State levels practicing at this time. Regional and local councils come under the Mahasabha and they exercise social control over the areas under their jurisdiction. Instances of adultery, rape, elopement, disrespect for traditional norms, contempt towards the caste council and matrimonial disputes are handled by these councils.

The Kurmi are Hindus and worship Ram and Vishnu (preserver) as their family deities. The goddesses Kali (goddess of destruction) and Durga (another form of Kali), and the monkey god Hanuman are regional deities. They celebrate prominent Hindu festivals like Diwali (festival of lights), Holi (festival of colours), Shivaratri (Shiva's Night – the celebration of Shiva's marriage with goddess Parvati) and Dussehra (celebrating the victory of Rama over the demon king Ravana).

The Kurmi's rites and rituals are performed by Brahmin priests. Mundan (shaving the head) is a ritual performed in childhood while adolescent boys go through the rite of wearing the sacred thread (genoi). The dead are cremated, but the bodies of children are buried. The ashes are immersed in a river, preferably the sacred Ganges River.

This paper basically shows that the Kurmi community is largely based on agriculture hence the names of the months are named based on the agriculture pattern of the community. The community's close proximity to nature can be witnessed in the names of their festivals and supernatural elements. Moreover, on the basis of their features, there are varieties of terms for natural elements like fire, lakes, ponds, etc. Kurmi community take themselves as tribal people who

descended from different clans. The language has a rich collection of lexical items for supernatural elements, Beside these this paper also revealed about a comparative analysis of Kurmalı and Bengla lexical items like colour terms, number, etc.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on the direct intensive observation and interviews taken from more than twenty informants from the members of Kurmi community of Shyampur village of Purulia district of West Bengal. Questionnaire method was followed to collect the data and all the sessions were digitally recorded by Sony audio recorder. I have been presented the both Kurmalı kinship terms and clan's name through International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to understand about the actual pronunciation of the terms. Apart from the above mentioned methods employed in the field, the earlier published and unpublished materials of Kurmalı have also been used in this study.

About Clan

Here are 81 clans among the Kurmi community (like /ɔʃurar/, /utʃariar/, /kanbīdha/, /adhīʃīpa/ etc.). These clans are exogamous in nature. In Kurmalı I found that they can't marry within his/ her clan groups. i.e a woman/ man of the /ɔʃurar/ clan group cannot marry another /ɔʃurar/ clan member. Every clan follows a totem. These clan totems can be categorized in to various domains on the basis of its meaning. In the following way some examples are given.

<i>IPA</i>	<i>Totem</i>	<i>Domain</i>
/kudri-ar/	One type of Vegetable	vegetable
/kātʃī-ar/	Green grass	fauna
/kāʃī-ar/	Kassi grass	fauna
/kanbīd ^h -a/	Holes on the ears	body parts
/keʃri-ar/	Meadow grass	fauna
/kheʃho-ar/	One type of grass	fauna
/k ^h εʃu-ar/	Pulses	vegetable

Beside theses I have also statistically analyzed the data of different domains among their totemic believe (fig. 1).

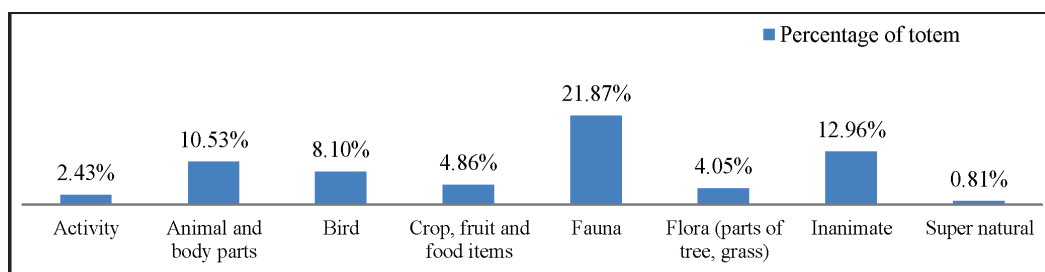


Fig. 1: Bar diagram showing the domain distribution of different totemic groups

Morphological Aspects

The clan names show a combination of totem name + the suffix /-ar/ or /-a/ which is used to denote genericity. In Bangla, the generic classifier is /-ra/ as in pakhi-ra ‘birds’ and Kurmali seems to have borrowed it as /-ar/ to show the generic nature of the clans. Lexical borrowing from Bangla is quite common in case of clan names such as from *ɔ/ur* (demon), *ɔ/urar* and from *bæra* (fence), *bærar* etc.

About Kinship

There are eight terms for core consanguineal relations in Kurmali as can be seen in the following table (Table 1). There are no sex and age neutral terms in Kurmali which are found in English like parents, brother, sister, etc. In Kurmali, the terms, viz. /*dada*/ (eB), / *b^hai* / (yB) make the age distinction and the terms, viz. /*dada*/ (eB), /*didi*/ (eZ) make the sex distinction.

Table 1: Core consanguineal Kinship terms of Kurmali

Kin types	Kinship terms		
	Kurmali	Bengali	English
F	/bap/	/baba/	Father
M	/mai/	/ma/	Mother
yB	/b ^h ai/	/b ^h ai/	Brother
eB	/dada/	/dada/	Brother
yZ	/b ^h in/	/bon/	Sister
eZ	/didi/	/didi/	Sister
S	/beʈa/	/tʃ ^h ele/	Son
D	/beʈi/	/meʈe/	Daughter
Abbreviations			
M= mother, F= father, B= brother; Z= sister; S= son; D= daughter, yB= younger brother, eB = elder brother, yZ= younger sister, elder sister			

As can be seen in the bellow table (Table 2), a kinship term can either be in simple or compound form (e.g. *dudu-bap* = *dudubap*). A simple word consists of a root or stem together with suffixes or prefixecan also form a kinship term in Kurmali, e.g. *nɔnod* + *fu* = *nɔnodfu*.

Table 2: Peripheral Consanguineal Kinship terms of Kurmali

Sl. no	Masculine	Gloss	Feminine	Gloss	Gender Marker	
					Mas	Fem
1	/kaka/	Uncle	/koki/	Aunt	-	/-i/
2	/naŋi/	Grand son	/naŋni/	Grand Daughter	-	/-ni/
3	/nɔnod/	Husband's sister	/nɔnodfu/	Husband's sister's husband	/- fu/	-
4	/tʃhaoa/	Son	/tʃhɔori /	Daughter	-	/-i/
5	dudubap	Grandfather	Dudumai	Grand Mother	/-bap/	/-mai/

It is seen that the prefixes and suffixes play a major role in formation of the kinship terms in Kurmali Language. We have drawn trees (Fig 1& 2) of the systematic kinship terminologies. This genealogical diagram is used to compare the kinship terms of Kurmali with Bangla. In the above table (Table 1) it can be seen that Kurmali kinship terms share a close resemblance with Bangla kinship terms. These genealogical diagram can help us to establish the language family of Kurmali as well as the kinship pattern that Kurmali follows which is Hawaiian kin terms pattern.

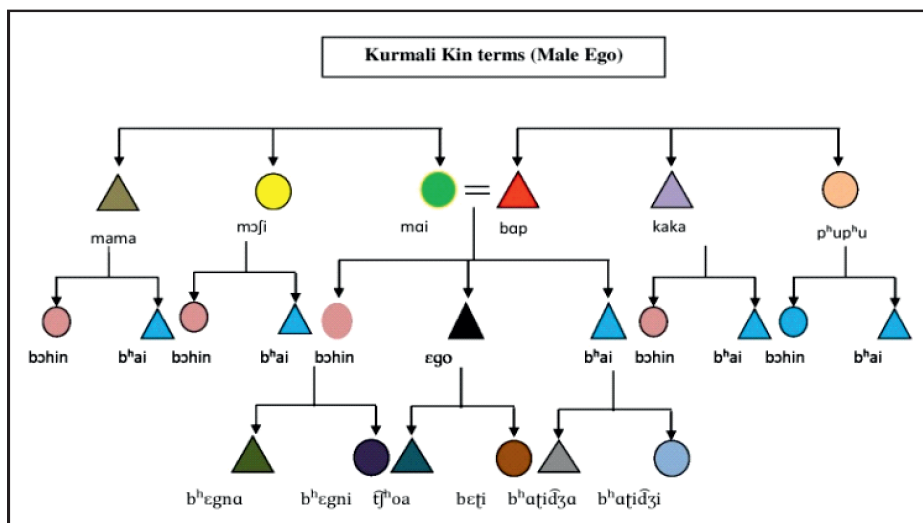


Fig. 1: Kurmali Kinship terms

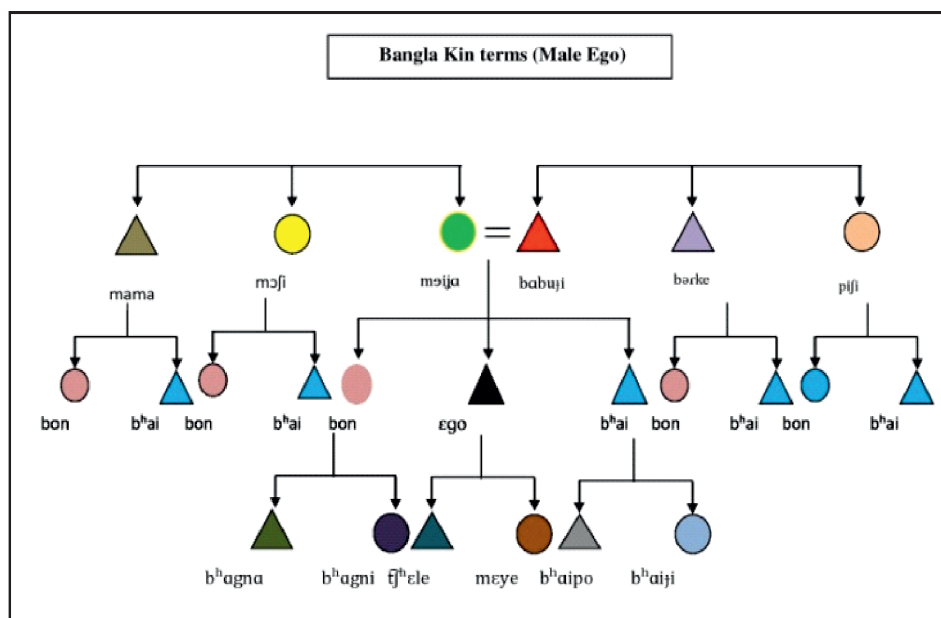


Fig. 2: Bangla Kinship terms

About Ghosts

Name of Ghosts (IPA)	Descriptions
gēra b ^h uṭ	short heighted ghost
gurk ^h a b ^h uṭ	A type of ghost
demni b ^h uṭ	Ghost which lives in grainery
signaha	A type of male ghost which always have a flowing nose
signai	A type of female ghost which always have a flowing nose
pāc boni	Female ghosts. They live in the forest.
sikli b ^h uṭ	A type of ghost which lives in pond and makes noise
kuḍra	A type of ghost which is black in colour. It has long black hair.

About Months

Months (IPA)	Months (English)	Months (Bengali)	Months (Hindi)
məḍ ^h umas	Names of Months, January-February	মাঘ	माघ
bihamas	Names of Months, February-March	ফাল্গুন, ফাগুন	फाल्गुन, फागुन
məhuamas	Names of Months, March-April	চৈত্র	चैत्र
nirənmas	Names of Months, April-May	বৈশাখ	वैशाख

ḍʰərənmas	Names of Months, May-June	জ্যৈষ্ঠ	ज्येष्ठ, जेठ
bihənmas	Names of Months, June-July	আষাঢ়	आषाढ़
ropamas	Names of Months, July-August	শ্রাবণ	प्रावण
kərəmas	Names of Months, August-September	ভাদ্র	भाद्रपद, भादो
tanmas	Names of Months, September-October	আশ্বিন	आश्विनी
ʃərəimas	Names of Months, October-November	কার্তিক	कार्तिक
məihəsərmas	Names of Months, November-December	অঘ্রান	अग्रहन
jarmas	Names of Months, December-January	পৌষ	पौष

About Days

Days (IPA)	Days (English)	Days (Bengali)	Days (Hindi)
sīḍobar	Monday	সোমবার	सोमवार
gʰərbar	Tuesday	মঙ্গলবার	मंगलवार
həbar	Wednesday	বুধবার	बुधवार
ḍinibar	Thursday	বৃহস্পতবার	गुरुवार
bʰuḷkabar	Friday	শুকরবার	शुक्रवार
bʰaṅabar	Saturday	শনিবার	शनिवार
berabar	Sunday	রবিবার	रविवार

About Number

Number (IPA)	Number (English)	Number (Bengali)	Number (Hindi)
ɛṛi	one	এক	एक
ḍɛṛi	Two	দুই	दो
gʰɛṛi	three	তিনি	तीन
cōuki	four	চার	चार
panja	five	পাঁচ	पांच
ḍɛḡ	six	ছয়	छह
ʃūtoi	seven	সাত	सात
aṅṛi	eight	আট	आठ
neṅṛi	nine	নয়	नौ
baṅṛi	ten	দশ	दस

Conclusions

From the above discussion we may say that Kurmi community is largely based on agriculture hence the names of the months are named based on the agriculture pattern of the community. The community's close proximity to nature can be witnessed in the names of their festivals and supernatural elements. Moreover, on the basis of their features, there are varieties of terms for natural elements like fire, lakes, ponds, etc. Kurmi community take themselves as tribal people who descended from different clans. The language has a rich collection of lexical items for supernatural elements, Beside these this paper also revealed about a comparative analysis of Kurmali and Bengla lexical items like colour terms, number, etc.

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