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Language, Literature, and Cultural Identity in a Multilingual Context: A Study of Lalbagh, Murshidabad

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Abstract: Language and literature, which have long served as core elements of cultural identity, continue to play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining collective memory and social values. This paper examines the historical and contemporary dynamics of multilingual literary traditions in Lalbagh, Murshidabad, and analyses their contribution to cultural identity formation. It explores the interaction of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali across different historical periods and identifies the key factors influencing their continuity and transformation. There is limited research that comparatively analyses the coexistence of these linguistic traditions within a localized socio-cultural context. The study reveals that despite the dominance of Bengali in formal domains, Urdu and traces of Persian persist in cultural and religious practices, supported largely by oral traditions such as *marsiya*, *nauha*, and *Baul* songs. However, challenges such as modernization, language shift, and inadequate institutional support threaten the sustainability of these traditions. The study situates Lalbagh within a broader historical and cultural framework and highlights the importance of community participation, documentation, and institutional support in preserving linguistic diversity and sustaining cultural identity.

Keywords: Language and literature, Cultural identity, Multilingualism, Cultural hybridity, Murshidabad

I. INTRODUCTION

Language and literature are fundamental components of cultural identity, shaping how communities construct, preserve, and transmit their collective histories and social values. They function not only as tools of communication but also as repositories of cultural memory, reflecting the lived experiences, beliefs, and traditions of societies across time. In multilingual regions, the interaction of different linguistic traditions often produces complex cultural formations in which identity is continuously negotiated through language use and literary expression (Anderson, 1983; Fishman, 1999). At the same time, the increasing forces of modernisation, globalisation, and institutional standardisation have raised concerns regarding the erosion of linguistic diversity and the marginalisation of traditional literary forms. The dominance of standardised languages in education, administration, and the media often leads to the decline of minority languages and oral traditions, resulting in cultural homogenisation and the loss of intangible heritage (Rahman, 1996; Abbi, 2001). In response, scholars have increasingly emphasised the need to preserve linguistic diversity and recognise the role of local literary traditions in sustaining cultural identity and social cohesion (Bhabha, 1994; Vansina, 1985).

One of the most significant contexts for examining the relationship between language, literature, and cultural identity is historically layered regions where multiple linguistic traditions have coexisted over long periods. Murshidabad district in West Bengal represents such a context. As the former capital of the Bengal Subah under the Mughal Empire, it developed as a major center of Persianate administrative culture, Urdu literary traditions, and Bengali vernacular expression. Lalbagh, as the administrative and cultural core during the Nawabi period, became a site of intense linguistic interaction and cultural synthesis. Persian functioned as the language of administration and elite culture, Urdu flourished in religious and poetic traditions, and Bengali remained the primary language of everyday communication among the general population (Pollock, 2006).

The transition from Mughal to British colonial rule brought significant changes in linguistic hierarchies and cultural production. The decline of Persian and the rise of English and Bengali in administrative and educational institutions reshaped patterns of language use and access to power. These transformations were not merely institutional but deeply cultural, influencing identity formation and social structures (Sarkar, 1977; Chakrabarty, 2000). Despite these shifts, elements of Persian and Urdu literary traditions continued to survive, particularly in religious practices and oral forms such as *marsiya* and *nauha*, demonstrating the resilience of cultural traditions beyond formal institutional frameworks (Roy, 2013).

In contemporary Lalbagh, multilingualism continues to play a central role in shaping cultural identity. Bengali dominates in education and public communication, while Urdu remains significant in religious rituals and poetic traditions. Persian, although no longer widely spoken, persists symbolically in ritual practices and historical memory. At the same time, oral traditions such as Baul songs, folk storytelling, and religious recitations continue to function as important carriers of cultural heritage, preserving collective memory and reinforcing community identity (Eaton, 1993). In spite of the richness of this linguistic and literary landscape, existing studies on Murshidabad have largely focused on political history, economic development, and architectural heritage, often overlooking the role of language and literature in shaping cultural identity (Chaudhury, 2000). There remains a significant gap in understanding how multilingual practices and literary traditions interact to construct and sustain cultural identity at the local level.

A. *Conceptual Context: Language, Literature, and Cultural Identity*

This study attempts to examine the role of language and literature as key components of cultural identity in a multilingual and historically complex region. Language is not only a medium of communication but also a marker of belonging and differentiation, shaping how individuals and communities perceive themselves and others. Literary traditions, both written and oral, serve as important vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and historical narratives across generations (Vansina, 1985; Fishman, 1999). In multilingual societies such as Lalbagh, different languages operate within specific social domains, including administration, religion, education, and everyday life. The interaction between these languages creates a dynamic cultural space where identities are continuously negotiated and redefined, reflecting broader processes of cultural hybridity and syncretism (Bhabha, 1994; Pollock, 2006).

B. *Historical Evolution of Linguistic Traditions in Lalbagh*

The linguistic landscape of Lalbagh has evolved through successive political and cultural transformations. During the Mughal and Nawabi periods, Persian served as the dominant language of administration and elite culture, reinforcing its association with power and authority. Urdu developed as a significant literary and religious language, particularly within Islamic cultural practices, while Bengali remained the lingua franca of the general population. The advent of British colonial rule led to the gradual replacement of Persian with English and Bengali, resulting in a restructuring of linguistic hierarchies and literary production. This shift marked a transition from court-centred literary traditions to more vernacular and institutionalised forms of language use (Sarkar, 1977; Chakrabarty, 2000). However, the persistence of Urdu and the symbolic presence of Persian in religious and cultural practices highlight the continuity of historical traditions within changing socio-political contexts.

C. *Contemporary Cultural Dynamics in West Bengal*

In present-day West Bengal, and particularly in Lalbagh, the coexistence of multiple languages continues to shape cultural practices and identity formation. While Bengali has emerged as the dominant language in education and administration, Urdu retains cultural and religious significance among specific communities. Oral traditions, including *marsiya*, *nauha*, Baul songs, and folk narratives, remain active and continue to serve as important mediums of cultural expression and transmission. However, the influence of modernisation, formal education systems, and digital communication has led to shifts in language use, particularly among younger generations. These changes raise important questions about the sustainability of traditional literary forms and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. At the same time, they also highlight the adaptive nature of cultural identity, which continues to evolve in response to changing social and economic conditions (Abbi, 2001; Eaton, 1993).

II. RESEARCH RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

While language and literature are widely recognised as key elements of cultural identity, there is limited research on their interaction within localised multilingual contexts such as Lalbagh, Murshidabad. Existing studies often overlook the combined role of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali traditions, as well as the significance of oral practices.

This study uses a historical and ethnographic approach to examine how these linguistic and literary traditions shape and sustain cultural identity over time.

The Study aims to

- 1) To examine the historical evolution and roles of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali in Lalbagh, with reference to changing political and administrative contexts.
- 2) To analyse how literary traditions and oral practices contribute to the preservation, expression, and continuity of cultural identity in contemporary Lalbagh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Conceptual Foundations of Language, Literature and Cultural Identity*

Theoretically, language and literature are central to the construction and expression of cultural identity, functioning as key media through which communities articulate shared histories, values, and social meanings. Language is not merely a tool of communication but also a marker of belonging and a repository of collective consciousness (Fishman, 1999). Similarly, literary traditions, both written and oral, serve as vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations (Vansina, 1985).

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" emphasises the role of language, particularly vernacular languages, in shaping collective identities through shared narratives and print cultures (Anderson, 1983). Expanding on this perspective, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) introduces the concept of cultural hybridity, in which identities are formed through the interaction, negotiation, and coexistence of multiple cultural influences.

In multilingual regions, such as Murshidabad, this hybridity is reflected in the coexistence of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali literary traditions.

Empirical studies highlight that literary practices such as poetry, storytelling, and religious recitations play a significant role in preserving cultural identity.

Oral traditions, including folk songs and ritual performances, are particularly important in sustaining cultural continuity in communities where written records are limited or elite-centric. However, it is also observed that, with modernisation and linguistic shifts, many traditional literary forms face the risk of marginalisation and decline.

B. *Historical and Literary Traditions in Bengal and Murshidabad*

Historical research on Bengal underscores the importance of language and literature in shaping regional identities across different political periods.

During the Mughal and Nawabi eras, Persian functioned as the language of administration and elite culture, influencing literary production and intellectual life (Pollock, 2006). Murshidabad, as the capital of Bengal Subah, emerged as a significant centre of Persianate culture, where court patronage supported literary and scholarly activities.

With the decline of Mughal authority and the advent of British colonial rule, significant linguistic transitions occurred. Persian gradually lost its administrative dominance, while Urdu gained prominence in literary and religious contexts, particularly among Muslim communities (Orsini, 2002).

At the same time, Bengali emerged as a powerful vernacular language, expanding through print culture, education, and literary movements during the colonial period (Sarkar, 1977).

Studies on Murshidabad have largely focused on its political and economic history (Chaudhury, 2000), with limited attention to its multilingual literary environment.

The interaction among Persian, Urdu, and Bengali traditions and their collective influence on local cultural identity remain underexplored. This gap is particularly significant in areas like Lalbagh, where these traditions historically coexisted and interacted within a shared socio-cultural space.

C. *Oral Traditions, Multilingualism and Cultural Syncretism*

Oral traditions constitute an essential component of cultural identity, especially in regions characterized by linguistic diversity and historical continuity.

Scholars have emphasised that oral literature, such as folk songs, storytelling, and ritual recitations, serves as a living archive of community memory and social values (Vansina, 1985). In Bengal, traditions like baul songs, kavigan, and marsiya recitations reflect a rich blend of religious, linguistic, and cultural influences.

The concept of multilingualism and cultural syncretism is particularly relevant in the South Asian context, where multiple languages and literary traditions coexist and interact. Research indicates that such interactions often produce hybrid cultural forms that transcend rigid linguistic and cultural boundaries (Rahman, 1996). In Murshidabad, the coexistence of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali has contributed to a unique cultural landscape marked by shared practices and overlapping identities.

However, contemporary studies also highlight challenges such as language shift, declining use of traditional literary forms, and the impact of globalisation on local cultural practices. The erosion of oral traditions and the dominance of standardised languages in education and administration pose significant threats to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. These issues underline the need for localised, field-based research that documents and analyses living traditions within their socio-cultural context.

D. Postcolonial Perspectives and Language Shift in Cultural Identity Formation

Postcolonial scholarship provides critical insights into the transformation of linguistic hierarchies and cultural identities in regions affected by colonial rule. The transition from indigenous and courtly languages to colonial languages often resulted in shifts in power, knowledge systems, and cultural expression (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the Indian context, the replacement of Persian by English and the promotion of vernacular languages such as Bengali under colonial administration significantly altered the linguistic landscape and literary production.

Scholars argue that such transitions were not merely administrative changes but deeply influenced identity formation and cultural representation. The emergence of print culture and modern education systems contributed to the standardisation of vernacular languages, enabling wider dissemination of literature while simultaneously marginalising certain traditional and oral forms (Sarkar, 1977). In Bengal, this process played a crucial role in shaping modern literary consciousness and regional identity. Furthermore, postcolonial theorists highlight the persistence of cultural hybridity, where precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial influences coexist and interact (Bhabha, 1994).

In regions like Murshidabad, the legacy of Persianate culture, the development of Urdu literary traditions, and the rise of Bengali vernacular literature collectively contribute to a layered and dynamic cultural identity.

Recent studies also emphasise the importance of examining local-level experiences to understand how communities negotiate these historical transitions in everyday life. Despite broader structural changes, many communities continue to preserve elements of older linguistic and literary traditions through religious practices, oral performances, and cultural rituals. However, the pressures of modernisation, globalisation, and institutional language policies continue to reshape these practices, often leading to the gradual decline of less dominant languages and literary forms.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study examines language and literature as key components of cultural identity formation in Lalbagh, Murshidabad, using a qualitative, interpretive research design. Since the study focuses on historical processes, cultural practices, and lived experiences related to multilingual literary traditions, it requires contextual and interpretive analysis rather than purely quantitative measurement (Creswell, 2014; Chakrabarty, 2000).

The research adopts a historical-sociolinguistic and ethnographic approach, integrating archival analysis with field-based investigation. The historical dimension enables the study to trace the evolution of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali literary traditions from the Nawabi period through the colonial and postcolonial eras. The ethnographic component enables exploration of contemporary cultural practices, oral traditions, and community perceptions of language and identity.

This combined methodological framework facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how language and literature have functioned as dynamic agents of cultural continuity and transformation. It also enables the study to connect past literary traditions with present-day cultural expressions within a localised socio-cultural setting.

B. Analytical Framework

The analysis is based on a cultural and sociolinguistic analytical framework informed by literature on language, identity, and cultural hybridity. The study draws upon theoretical perspectives that emphasise language as a marker of identity (Fishman, 1999), literature as a repository of cultural memory (Vansina, 1985), and hybridity as a process of cultural negotiation (Bhabha, 1994).

The research examines language and literary practices across the following key dimensions:

- 1) Historical evolution of linguistic traditions and literary forms;
- 2) interaction between Persian, Urdu, and Bengali within a shared socio-cultural space;
- 3) role of literary genres (poetry, religious texts, folk literature) in shaping cultural identity;
- 4) significance of oral traditions and performance practices in preserving cultural continuity; and
- 5) contemporary language use, intergenerational transmission, and community perceptions of identity.

These dimensions enable a systematic analysis of both historical and contemporary data while remaining sensitive to the complexities of multilingualism, cultural change, and local context. The framework also enables the study to link macro-level historical transformations with micro-level cultural practices, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of cultural identity formation in Lalbagh.

IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

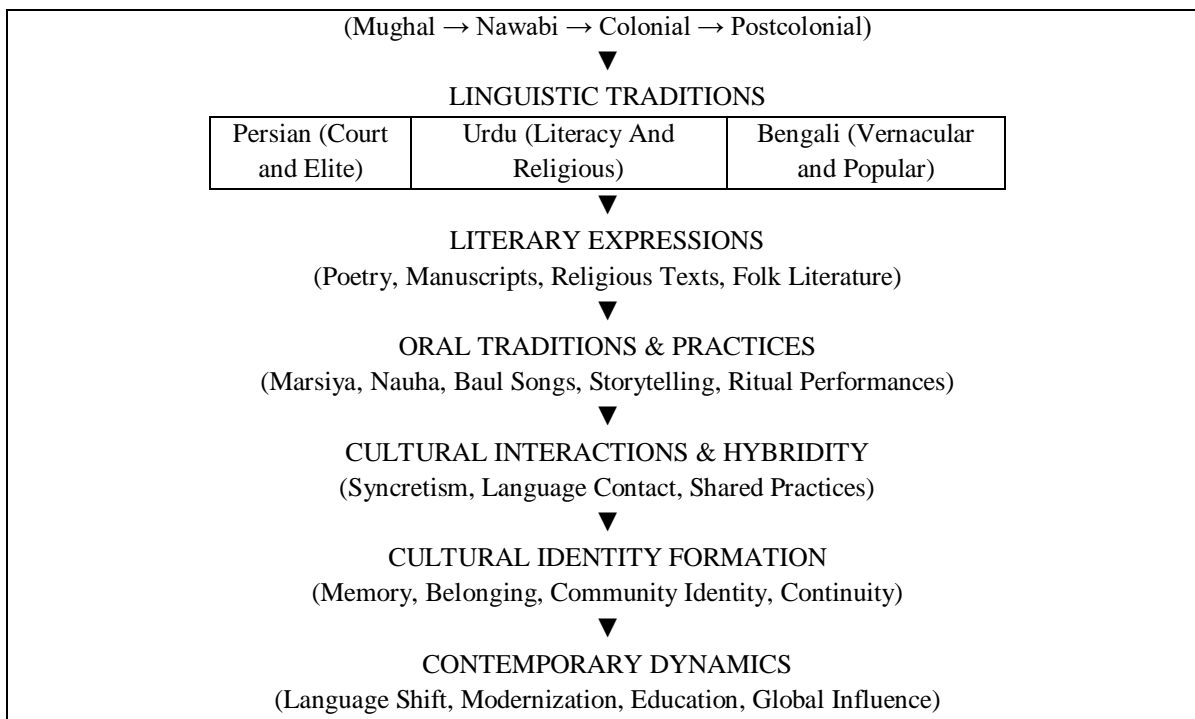


Fig: Research Analytical Framework by Researcher

Table: Comparative Overview of Linguistic and Cultural Dynamics in Lalbagh (Historical–Contemporary Analysis)

Analytical Dimension	Historical Context (Mughal–Nawabi Period)	Transitional Context (Colonial Period)	Contemporary Context (Postcolonial Lalbagh)
Language Orientation	Persian is an administrative and elite language; Urdu and Bengali coexist in cultural domains.	Decline of Persian; rise of English and Bengali in administration and education.	Bengali is dominant in formal domains; Urdu and Persian are retained in cultural and religious contexts.
Institutional Support	Court patronage supporting Persian and Urdu literary traditions.	Colonial institutions promoted English and Bengali education systems.	Limited institutional support; reliance on community and informal cultural networks.
Primary Functions of Language	Governance (Persian), religious and poetic expression (Urdu), daily communication (Bengali).	Administrative restructuring; Bengali gains prominence in public communication.	Functional multilingualism—Bengali (education), Urdu (religion), Persian (symbolic/ritual).
Literary Traditions	Courtly literature, manuscripts, poetry in Persian and Urdu; early Bengali texts.	Expansion of print culture; growth of Bengali literature and vernacular expression.	Survival of mixed literary traditions; reduced role of classical written forms.
Oral Traditions	Supported through cultural and religious gatherings.	Continued but less institutionalised; shift toward vernacular forms.	Active practices such as marsiya, nauha, Baul songs, and folk storytelling
Cultural Interaction	Strong syncretism between Persianate, Indo-Islamic, and Bengali traditions.	Cultural blending continues under changing political structures.	Hybrid cultural identity shaped by shared practices and multilingual interaction.

Transmission of Culture	Through royal courts, scholars, and religious institutions.	Through print media, education systems, and local communities.	Primarily through oral traditions, community practices, and informal learning.
Role in Identity Formation	Language linked with power, status, and cultural belonging.	Identity reshaped by colonial policies and linguistic shifts.	Identity negotiated through cultural memory, religion, and everyday practices.
External Influences	Mughal administrative and cultural influence.	British colonial policies and modernisation processes.	Globalisation, education systems, and digital communication.
Key Challenges	Limited access to elite literary traditions for common people.	Linguistic hierarchy and marginalisation of traditional forms.	Language shift, decline of oral traditions, lack of documentation and institutional support.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical–Cultural Synthesis of Findings

The integrated analysis of historical, literary, and ethnographic data reveals that cultural identity in Lalbagh has evolved through a continuous interaction of multiple linguistic and literary traditions across different historical periods. From the Mughal and Nawabi eras to the colonial and postcolonial phases, Persian, Urdu, and Bengali have coexisted and contributed to a layered cultural landscape. Language and literature are consistently associated with cultural continuity, social memory, and identity formation. However, there are significant variations in their status, usage, and institutional support across time.

Historically, Persian dominated as the language of administration and elite culture, while Urdu emerged as a prominent literary and religious language, and Bengali functioned as the vernacular of everyday life. With the advent of colonial rule, these hierarchies shifted, leading to the decline of Persian and the rise of Bengali as a standardised literary language (Pollock, 2006; Sarkar, 1977). Contemporary Lalbagh reflects this historical layering, where Bengali dominates formal domains, while Urdu and elements of Persian persist in religious and cultural practices. This temporal variation suggests that the strength of cultural identity is shaped not only by the presence of linguistic traditions but also by their institutional support, social relevance, and adaptability to changing socio-political contexts.

B. Role of Literary Traditions and Oral Practices

The findings indicate that literary traditions both written and oral play a crucial role in preserving and expressing cultural identity in Lalbagh. Written literature in Persian, Urdu, and Bengali historically served as a medium of intellectual and aesthetic expression, supported by court patronage and scholarly institutions. In contrast, oral traditions such as marsiya recitations, nauha performances, baul songs, and folk storytelling continue to function as living cultural practices that sustain communal memory and identity.

Particularly during religious events such as Muharram, Urdu marsiya and nauha recitations demonstrate the persistence of literary traditions that connect present communities with their historical past. Similarly, baul songs and folk narratives reflect syncretic cultural elements that transcend rigid linguistic and religious boundaries. These oral practices not only preserve linguistic diversity but also reinforce social cohesion and shared cultural values.

However, the study also observes that many traditional literary forms face challenges due to declining patronage, generational gaps, and the increasing dominance of standardised languages in education and media. Without active documentation and transmission, these oral traditions risk gradual erosion.

C. Linguistic Transition and Contemporary Identity Dynamics

The transition from a multilingual historical environment to a more Bengali-dominated contemporary setting has significantly influenced identity formation in Lalbagh. Bengali, as the primary language of education, administration, and mass communication, has become the dominant medium of expression. At the same time, Urdu continues to hold cultural and religious significance among certain communities, while Persian survives primarily in ritual and archival contexts. Field observations suggest that language use varies across domains: Bengali is prevalent in public and educational spaces, Urdu is used in religious and cultural settings, and

traces of Persian remain embedded in literary and ritual expressions. This domain-specific usage reflects a form of functional multilingualism in which different languages coexist with distinct roles.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of language shift among younger generations, who are increasingly oriented towards Bengali and English for educational and economic reasons. This shift raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of Urdu and Persian literary traditions in the region.

D. Cultural Syncretism and Hybrid Identity Formation

One of the most significant findings of the study is the presence of cultural syncretism in Lalbagh, where diverse linguistic and literary traditions interact to produce hybrid cultural identities. The coexistence of Persianate, Indo-Islamic, and Bengali vernacular influences has created a unique cultural environment characterised by shared practices, overlapping traditions, and mutual adaptation. This hybridity is evident in literary forms, performance practices, and everyday cultural expressions. For instance, religious poetry often incorporates linguistic elements from multiple traditions, while folk practices reflect both Islamic and regional Bengali influences. Such interactions align with theoretical perspectives on cultural hybridity, which emphasise the fluid and negotiated nature of identity (Bhabha, 1994).

At the same time, the study highlights that syncretism is not a static condition but an ongoing process shaped by historical change, social interaction, and contemporary pressures. The persistence of hybrid identities in Lalbagh demonstrates the resilience of local cultural systems despite broader transformations.

E. Comparative Interpretation of Past and Present Dynamics

A comparative analysis of historical and contemporary contexts reveals distinct contrasts in the role and status of languages and literary traditions. Historically, linguistic hierarchies were closely tied to political power and patronage, with Persian occupying a dominant position. In contrast, the contemporary period is characterised by the institutional dominance of Bengali and the marginalisation of other languages in formal domains. While earlier literary production was supported by courts and elite institutions, contemporary cultural practices rely more on community participation and informal networks. This shift indicates a transition from institutionalised literary cultures to community-driven preservation of traditions. However, the absence of structured support systems and formal recognition poses challenges for the sustainability of these practices.

The findings suggest that cultural identity in Lalbagh is shaped more by lived practices and community engagement than by formal institutional frameworks. The continuity of oral traditions and localized literary expressions plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity despite structural changes.

F. Cultural and Policy Implications

The analysis yields several important cultural and policy implications:

- 1) **Documentation and Preservation:** There is a need for systematic documentation of oral literary traditions such as marsiya, baul songs, and folk narratives to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.
- 2) **Educational Integration:** Incorporating local literary traditions into educational curricula can promote awareness and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge.
- 3) **Community Participation:** Encouraging community-based initiatives and cultural organisations can strengthen the preservation and revitalisation of linguistic and literary traditions.
- 4) **Institutional Support:** Greater involvement of cultural institutions, archives, and government bodies is required to support research, preservation, and dissemination of regional literary heritage.

G. Integrative Synthesis

The study demonstrates that language and literature in Lalbagh function as dynamic and interconnected elements of cultural identity. While historical transformations have altered linguistic hierarchies and literary practices, the persistence of oral traditions and cultural hybridity sustains a distinct local identity.

The findings suggest that cultural identity is not a fixed entity but an evolving process shaped by historical legacies, social interactions, and contemporary influences. The sustainability of this identity depends on the continued relevance of linguistic and literary traditions, supported by community engagement and institutional recognition. Ultimately, the study highlights that the preservation of cultural identity in Lalbagh is deeply rooted in the interplay between tradition and change, continuity and adaptation.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that cultural identity in Lalbagh, Murshidabad, has evolved through a long historical process shaped by the interaction of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali linguistic and literary traditions. From the Mughal and Nawabi periods to the colonial and contemporary phases, shifts in political power have redefined language hierarchies while allowing elements of older traditions to persist.

In the present context, Bengali dominates formal domains, while Urdu and traces of Persian continue in cultural and religious practices. Oral traditions such as *marsiya*, *nauha*, and Baul songs remain important in preserving collective memory and sustaining cultural continuity. At the same time, modernisation and changing language preferences pose challenges to the survival of these traditions.

Overall, the study concludes that cultural identity in Lalbagh is dynamic and hybrid, shaped by both historical continuity and ongoing social change. Its sustainability depends on preserving linguistic diversity and strengthening the transmission of local literary and oral traditions

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