



Typological and Morphological Features of Assam's Sadri Language: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Tea-Garden Community

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Abstract

Sadri, also known as Nagpuri, is an eastern Indo-Aryan language historically associated with the Chota Nagpur plateau region of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Bihar, where it functions as a mother tongue of the Sadan community and as a lingua franca among several Dravidian and Austroasiatic tribal groups such as the Kurukh, Kharia, and Munda. A lesser-studied variety of this language, locally termed “Baganiya bhasa”, is spoken by the tea-garden community of Assam, whose ancestors were brought from the Chota Nagpur belt as indentured labourers during the British colonial period. Over more than a century of geographical separation and sustained contact with Assamese, this variety has developed distinctive phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics that distinguish it from the Sadri/Nagpuri spoken in its region of origin. This paper presents a typological and morphological description of Assam's Sadri, drawing on documented grammatical sources on Nagpuri/Sadri together with illustrative elicited data collected from the Monabari Tea Estate and Dalongguri village tea-community area of Biswanath District, Assam. The study examines the language's agglutinative morphology, its tense-mood-person marking system, its number and gender marking strategies, and its elaborate honorific

pronominal paradigm, and situates these features within the broader typological profile of eastern Indo-Aryan languages. The findings indicate that, while Assam's Sadri largely preserves the core agglutinative-cum-fusional morphological architecture of Nagpuri, it shows incipient lexical and pragmatic convergence with Assamese, manifested in code-switching, code-mixing, and emergent vocabulary among younger speakers. The paper argues that Assam's Sadri represents a contact-influenced diaspora variety worthy of independent typological documentation, and proposes a fuller programme of field-based research, including structured interviews and questionnaires, to establish the extent of its divergence from Sadri varieties spoken in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal.

Keywords: Assam's Sadri, Nagpuri, lingua franca, language typology, morphology, tea-garden community, language contact



1. Introduction

Sadri, alternatively known as Nagpuri, Sadani, Sadana, Sadati, Sadari, Sadhan, Sadna, Sadrik, Chota Nagpuri, and by several other regional names, is an Indo-Aryan language primarily associated with the western and central Chota Nagpur plateau, encompassing parts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Bihar (Grierson, 1903; Tiwari, 1960). It is considered by some scholars to be a dialect within the wider Bhojpuri continuum, reflecting its membership in the eastern Indo-Aryan branch (Jordan-Horstmann, 1969). Sadri is the native language of the Sadan community and simultaneously serves as a lingua franca for numerous tribal groups of the region, including the Dravidian-speaking Kurukh and the Austroasiatic-speaking Kharia and Munda, a number of whom have shifted entirely to Sadri as a first language (Lewis, 2009).

According to the Census of India (2011), Sadri/Nagpuri is spoken by approximately 5.1 million people as a first language, while field-based estimates from 2007 suggest that an additional 7 million people use it as a second language. These figures, alongside earlier estimates such as Lewis's (2009) figure of 1.97 million speakers for 1997, indicate considerable variation across data sources and time periods, a pattern that itself reflects the difficulty of delimiting Sadri as a single, bounded linguistic entity (see Figure 1).

A historically and linguistically significant offshoot of Sadri is the variety spoken by the tea-garden community of Assam, West Bengal's Dooars and Terai regions, and parts of Bangladesh. This variety, locally referred to as 'Baganiya bhasa', traces its origin to the large-scale migration of indentured labourers from the Chota Nagpur plateau to the tea plantations of Assam during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under British colonial rule. Separated from the Sadri-speaking heartland for well over a century, and embedded within an Assamese-dominant sociolinguistic environment, this diaspora variety has been shaped by sustained contact with Assamese phonology, lexicon, and possibly syntax, while retaining the core grammatical architecture of its Nagpuri ancestor.

Despite the considerable body of descriptive and historical scholarship on Nagpuri/Sadri as spoken in Jharkhand and adjoining states (Nowrangi, 1956, 1957; Gaũjhu, 2003; Prasād, 1992), Assam's Sadri remains comparatively under-documented in the typological and morphological literature. This paper addresses that gap by presenting a structured typological and morphological description of Assam's Sadri, with particular attention to its tense-aspect-mood system, nominal and pronominal categories, and its agglutinative-cum-fusional morphological profile, while situating these features against the documented grammar of Nagpuri/Sadri more broadly.

2. Statement of the Problem and Literature Review

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Sadri spoken in Assam, while historically derived from the Nagpuri/Sadri of the Chota Nagpur plateau, has developed in a markedly different sociolinguistic ecology: it has been in continuous contact with Assamese for more than a century, it functions primarily within the closed social space of tea-garden communities, and it has had limited contact with the standardized literary tradition of Nagpuri that has developed in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. The central research problem this study addresses is therefore: how does the Sadri spoken in Assam differ, in its grammatical (morphological, syntactic, and typological) features, from the Sadri spoken in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal? Subsidiary questions include the extent of lexical borrowing from Assamese, the nature of intergenerational change in the community's speech, and the patterns of code-switching and code-mixing that characterize everyday communication among the tea-garden population of Assam.



2.2 Literature Review

Foundational documentation of Sadri/Nagpuri dates to Grierson's (1903) Linguistic Survey of India, which situated Sadri within the Eastern Group of Indo-Aryan languages and provided early specimens of the Bihari and Oriya languages relevant to the Sadri-speaking belt.

Subsequent descriptive work by Nowrangi (1956, 1957) produced some of the first pedagogical

grammars and readers of Sadani, establishing baseline morphological paradigms still referenced in later scholarship. Jordan-Horstmann's (1969) monograph explicitly treated Sadani as a Bhojpuri dialect spoken in Chotanagpur, reinforcing the genetic affiliation of Sadri within the eastern Indo-Aryan dialect continuum, while Tiwari (1960) traced the broader historical development of Bhojpuri, of which Sadri is frequently considered an offshoot.

More recent scholarship, including Gaũjhu's (2003) literary and grammatical work and Prasād's (1992) compilation of Nagpuri folk narratives, has continued to document the language primarily as spoken in its region of origin. Lewis's (2009) Ethnologic entry situates Sadri demographically and confirms its role as a lingua franca for multiple unrelated tribal groups, a sociolinguistic function that closely parallels its role among the heterogeneous, multi-ethnic tea-garden workforce of Assam.

Notably absent from this body of literature is a systematic typological or morphological account of the Assam variety of Sadri. Existing references to the tea-garden community's speech are largely incidental, occurring within broader sociological or historical accounts of the Assam tea industry rather than within dedicated linguistic description. This paper, therefore contributes a focused typological and morphological treatment of Assam's Sadri, intended as a foundation for the larger comparative research programme outlined in the statement of the problem.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design situated within the generative typological framework, combined with a sociolinguistic field-study component. The design is exploratory in nature, appropriate to a language variety for which no prior dedicated grammatical description exists. Two complementary strands of evidence are drawn upon:

- (i) documented secondary descriptions of Nagpuri/Sadri grammar as spoken in Jharkhand and neighbouring states, used as a comparative baseline; and
- (ii) primary elicited data - sample phrases, grammatical paradigms, and sociolinguistic observations - gathered from the Assam tea-garden community, used to characterize the local variety.

3.2 Area of Field Study

The field area for the primary data component comprises the Monabari Tea Estate and the Dalongguri village tea-community area, both located in Biswanath District, Assam. These sites were selected because they host long-settled tea-garden communities descended from Chota Nagpur migrant labourers and continue to use Sadri/Baganiya bhasa as an intra-community lingua franca alongside Assamese.



3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for the larger research programme is designed around four complementary instruments:

- Personal interviews with native speakers across different age groups, to capture intergenerational variation in vocabulary, code-switching, and code-mixing patterns.
- Group or focus interviews, conducted with members of the tea-garden community, to elicit naturalistic conversational data and to cross-validate individually reported usage.
- Mailed questionnaires, targeting literate speakers and community representatives, to gather structured responses on language attitudes, medium of education, and literary preferences.
- Telephone interviews, used to extend coverage to speakers who could not be reached through in-person fieldwork, particularly migrant family members.

The research questions guiding data elicitation include, among others: whether Sadri is the respondent's first or second language; the language medium of schooling; perceived lexical and grammatical changes across generations; new vocabulary items entering the language; perceived differences in word order between Assam's Sadri and the Sadri of North Indian states; borrowed and loan items; attitudes toward the use of Sadri as a medium of instruction; and literary language preference between Sadri and English.

3.4 Data Analysis

Elicited phrases and grammatical paradigms are analysed descriptively and comparatively against documented Nagpuri/Sadri grammar (Grierson, 1903; Nowrangi, 1956, 1957; Jordan-Horstmann, 1969). Analysis proceeds at three levels: (i) morphological analysis, identifying whether grammatical marking is agglutinative, fusional, or periphrastic; (ii) typological analysis, characterizing word order, case marking, and the structure of the pronominal and nominal systems; and (iii) sociolinguistic analysis, examining patterns of code-switching, lexical borrowing from Assamese, and intergenerational variation reported through interviews and questionnaires. Quantitative elements of the analysis for instance, the count of honorific pronominal sub-categories, or the comparison of reported speaker-population figures across sources, are summarized descriptively in tabular and graphical form, consistent with the exploratory and descriptive nature of the design.

4. Results

This section presents the descriptive findings of the study, organized into (a) a comparative inventory of elicited sample phrases, (b) the pronominal honorific system, and (c) a summary of typological and morphological features, supported by two illustrative figures derived from the reviewed sources and field data.

4.1 Comparative Sample Phrases

Table 1 presents a representative inventory of elicited phrases from Assam's Sadri alongside their Devanagari Nagpuri rendering, illustrating close lexical and structural correspondence between the two varieties at the level of basic conversational expressions, pronoun forms, and verb inflection for tense and person.



English	Assam's Sadri	Nagpuri (Devanagari)
What is your name?	Tor naam ka heke?	तोर नाम का हेके?
How are you?	Toen kaisan aahis?	तोयं कैसन आहिस?
I am fine.	Moen thik aahon.	मोएं ठीक आहों।
What?	Ka?	का?
Who?	Ke?	के?
English	Assam's Sadri	Nagpuri (Devanagari)
Why?	Kale?	काले?
How?	Kaisan?	कैसन?
Which?	Kon?	कोन?
Come here.	Hian aao.	हियां आओ।
I am going home.	Moen ghar jat hon.	मोएं घर जात हों।
I have eaten.	Moen kha hon.	मोएं खा हों।
I will go.	Moen jamu.	मोएं जामु।
We go.	Hame jaeil.	हामे जाइल।
You go.	Toen jais.	तोयं जाइस।
You are writing.	Toen likhathis.	तोयं िलखतिहस।
You will come.	Toen aabe.	तोयं आबे।
We are writing.	Hame likhathi.	हामे िलखतिह।
We have written.	Hame likh hi.	हामे िलख िह।
He/She comes.	Oo aawela.	उ आवेला।
He/She is going.	Oo jat he.	उ जात हे।



He/She was coming.	Oo aawat rahe.	उ आवत रहे।
English	Assam's Sadri	Nagpuri (Devanagari)
They went.	Ooman gelaen.	उमन गेलयं।
They will go home.	Ooman ghar jabaen.	उमन घर जाबयं।
He/She will play.	Oo kheli.	उ खेली।
They have eaten bread.	Ooman roti kha haen.	उमन रोटी खा हयं।

Table 1. Comparative Sample Phrases — Assam's Sadri and Nagpuri (Devanagari)

4.2 The Pronominal Honorific System

Table 2 sets out the pronominal paradigm documented for Sadri (illustrated here with forms as used by a Chik Baraik speaker), showing that while the first person exhibits no internal sub-categorization, the second and third persons are each elaborated into four honorific/familiarity or proximal/distal sub-categories.

Person	Sub-category	Singular	Plural
1	Familiar (marked)	mōe	hamre
2	Familiar (unmarked)	tōe	tohre
2	Familiar (polite)	tohre	tohre=man
2	Polite	raure	raure=man
2	Honorific	apne	apne=man
3	Unmarked – Proximal	i(=go)	i=man
3	Unmarked – Distal	u(=go)	u=man



3	Honorific – Proximal	i(=mʌn)	i=mʌn
Person	Sub-category	Singular	Plural
3	Honorific – Distal	u(=mʌn)	u=mʌn

Table 2. Pronominal System of Sadri, with Honorific and Deictic Sub-categories

Figure 2 visualizes the distribution of these honorific/deictic sub-categories across the three grammatical persons, showing a marked asymmetry: the first person carries no internal distinctions, whereas the second and third persons each carry four.

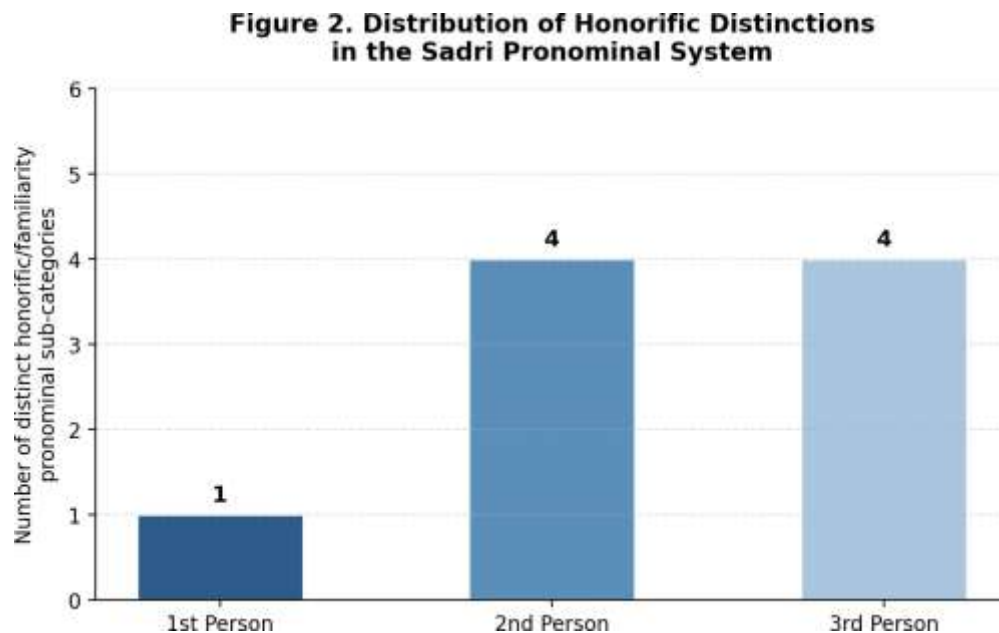


Figure 2. Distribution of Honorific Distinctions in the Sadri Pronominal System

4.3 Reported Speaker Population Across Sources

Reported estimates of the Sadri/Nagpuri speaker population vary considerably depending on the source, the year of estimation, and whether first- or second-language speakers are counted.

Figure 1 compares three commonly cited figures: the 2011 Census of India figure for first-language speakers, a 2007 field-based estimate of second-language speakers, and Lewis's (2009) Ethnologue figure for 1997.



Figure 1. Reported Sadri/Nagpuri Speaker Population Across Secondary Sources

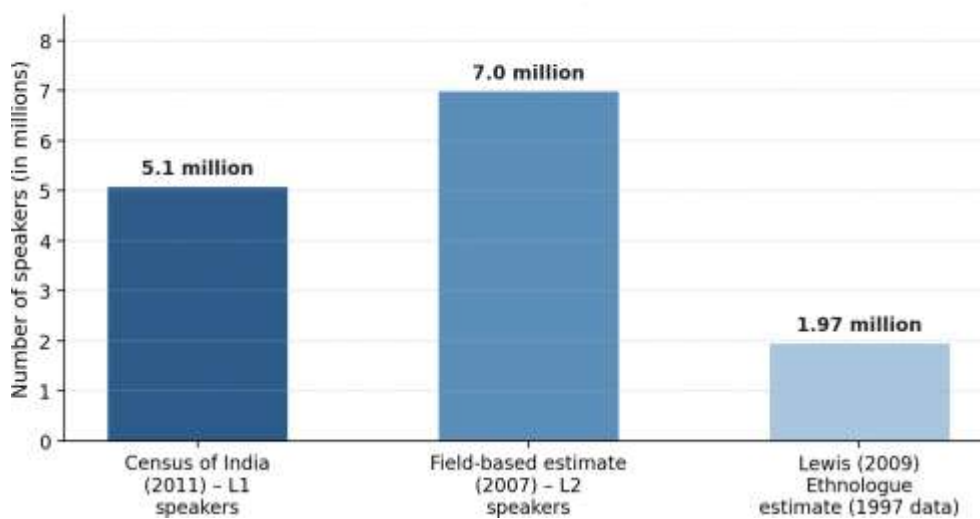


Figure 1. Reported Sadri/Nagpuri Speaker Population Across Secondary Sources

4.4 Summary of Typological and Morphological Features

Table 3 synthesizes the principal typological and morphological characteristics of Sadri as documented in the literature and corroborated by the elicited Assam data, covering morphological type, word classes, gender, number, tense, mood, negation, and honorificity.

Feature	Assam's Sadri / Nagpuri Pattern	Notes
Morphological type	Predominantly agglutinative; marking suffixes, enclitics, and postpositions	TAM and person marking is fusional; other grammatical marking agglutinative
Word classes	Two major classes — nominals and verbs — plus minor classes (postpositions, adverbs)	Nominals subdivide into nouns, adjectives, and pronouns
Gender	No grammatical gender	Sex distinctions marked derivationally for some nouns



Feature	Assam's Sadri / Nagpuri Pattern	Notes
		pairs (e.g., ghoṛa 'horse' / ghoṛī 'mare')
Number	Two-way singular/plural distinction	Plural formed with enclitic =mʌn on the noun phrase (e.g., chʌu → chʌuwa=mʌn)
Tense	Three basic tenses: past, present, future	Each has a periphrastic (participle copula) and a synthetic (single morpheme) form
Mood	Indicative, subjunctive, imperative	Dubitative interpretation often co-occurs with the future; future/non-future opposition in the imperative
Negation	Modal vs. non-modal negation	Non-modal negative marker ni vs. modal negative marker nʌ (e.g., nʌ aba! 'do not come!' vs. ni aba 'you will not come')
Honorificity	Elaborate honorific system in 2nd and 3rd person pronouns	Familiar, polite, and honorific social categories; proximal/distal distinction in 3rd person

Table 3. Summary of Typological and Morphological Features of Sadri

5. Discussion

The comparative phrase inventory in Table 1 demonstrates that, at the level of basic grammatical structure, Assam's Sadri retains close fidelity to the Nagpuri morphological system documented for the Chota Nagpur heartland: subject-verb-object-adjacent word order, person-marked verb suffixes, and consistent use of the future/habitual, progressive, and perfective constructions are all recognizable across both varieties. This supports the broader typological literature's characterization of Sadri as predominantly agglutinative, with fusional marking restricted to the tense-aspect-mood-person domain (cf. the morphological profile summarized in Table 3).



The pronominal system, summarized in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 2, reveals a typologically notable asymmetry: while the first person is structurally simple, the second and third persons are elaborated with an honorific architecture sensitive to familiarity, politeness, and (in the third person) spatial deixis. Such asymmetric honorific marking is well attested cross-linguistically in South Asian languages and appears to be robustly maintained in the Assam variety, suggesting that this dimension of the grammar has not undergone significant attrition or restructuring under contact with Assamese, which itself possesses a comparable, though not identical, honorific pronoun system.

At the same time, the wide variance in reported speaker numbers across sources (Figure 1) underscores a methodological challenge that is also a substantive sociolinguistic finding: Sadri/Nagpuri is not bounded by a single, stable speech community but is distributed across genetically related native speakers, language-shifted tribal populations, and geographically displaced diaspora communities such as the Assam tea-garden population. This dispersion is precisely what motivates the present study's focus on Assam as a distinct point of comparison, since aggregate national or international figures conflate populations whose grammars, as the present description suggests, may be diverging in at least some respects — most plausibly in the lexicon, where contact with Assamese is most readily observable, and potentially in subtler aspects of syntax and pragmatics that the present descriptive study could not fully resolve given its qualitative scope.

These findings should be read as provisional. The elicited data presented here is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and a definitive answer to the study's central research question — how Assam's Sadri differs grammatically from the Sadri of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal — requires the fuller programme of structured interviews, focus-group elicitation, and questionnaire-based data collection outlined in the methodology, ideally extended across multiple tea-garden sites and complemented by parallel elicitation from Sadri speakers in the Chota Nagpur region for direct comparison.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented a typological and morphological description of Assam's Sadri, a diaspora variety of Nagpuri spoken by the descendants of Chota Nagpur migrant labourers in Assam's tea gardens. The description confirms that Assam's Sadri retains the core agglutinative-cum-fusional morphological architecture, the tripartite tense-mood system, and the elaborate honorific pronominal paradigm documented for Nagpuri/Sadri in its region of origin, while existing in a sociolinguistic environment shaped by sustained contact with Assamese. The study's findings, drawn from a combination of secondary grammatical sources and illustrative field data from the Monabari Tea Estate and Dalongguri village tea-community area of Biswanath District, provide an initial empirical foundation for the broader comparative research question of how Assam's Sadri differs from Sadri varieties spoken in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal. Future research, employing the structured personal interviews, focus-group interviews, questionnaires, and telephone interviews outlined in the methodology, is needed to establish the precise extent of lexical borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing, and generational language change within this community, and to determine whether Assam's Sadri merits recognition as a distinct contact variety within the wider Sadri/Nagpuri dialect continuum.

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