



Bhojpuri Folk Songs

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On 26th April, 2019, Gillette India's YouTube page released an advertisement which features the story of two girls from Uttar Pradesh who took over their late father's profession as a barber- a legacy rarely seen in patrilineal societies of North India. Running in the background is a popular Bhojpuri folksong known as *Sohar geet* (celebratory songs usually sung at the birth of a male child). At the end of the advertisement, the wordings of the song are tweaked to celebrate the birth of a female child. For a company like Gillette to have picked a Bhojpuri folksong to drive home the point of gender equality might be a revelation for many, especially because, Bhojpuri language and culture are marked by notions of being uncouth and highly patriarchal. This is in turn exacerbated by a proliferation of lewd and sexist lyrics in contemporary Bhojpuri songs where women are strategically placed to feed the voyeuristic tendencies of the audience. However, to come to a conclusion that there is nothing worthwhile in the language and culture of Bhojpuri region would be tantamount to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns us against in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"—that of Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle class cultures as the norm and codifies working class histories and cultures as Others (61).

An ethnographic study of Bhojpuri folksongs allows us to begin recognizing the discontinuity, fissures, or the contextual shifts in meaning that are embodied in the wordings, rhythm, or something even as subtle as a pattern of rhyme. Gloria Goldwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold in their groundbreaking book *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* note that ethnographic studies often finds its

meaning in the embellishments and improvisations that provide the ground for creativity and resistance and that can only rarely be recovered from the historical archive. Therefore, it is perhaps more likely than history to bear witness to such fluid and contextual creativity on the part of women who have all too often been denied the powers of literacy, and whose words have been erased from historical records when proved unpalatable to those who did the writing (Gloria and Ann 16-17). While it is true that these songs merely allowed for a temporary reversal of the social hierarchy, that too in prescribed settings; but to dismiss them as merely reinforcing the status quo is also too sweeping a dismissal. Saba Mahmood in chapter 1 of her groundbreaking work *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* cautions against falling into the trap of easy binaries such as those of resistance and subordination. She notes that Western feminist discourse has its limitations and cannot be applied as it is to non-Western settings. There is a heterogeneity in the experiences of people belonging to different societies which needs to be appreciated and understood on their own accord (38).

Lila Abu-Lughod, the editor of *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* also argues along similar lines that we need to be careful against over-romanticising resistance or be overly critical of anything which is not resistance and therefore lacking in any kind of agency. Agency should be understood in the socio-cultural settings of people. Complete overturning of establishment is not the only form of resistance through which one can understand agency. Agency should be studied in the everyday struggles and negotiations especially when we are trying to understand the agency of women (26).

I collected a few Bhojpuri folksongs from Hurmujpur village in Ghazipur district during my extended stay in 2021 which helps in understanding the power relations that women negotiate to subvert those power structures. The songs listed

below belong to different genres and are sung during important events like weddings, birth of a child, while carrying out activities related to Agriculture or simply when women indulge in domestic chores. These songs provide a window not only into the collective lives of the women who sing them but also reveal the complexities of their cultural lives.

*Jug jug jiya su babuniya
bhavanwa ke bhaag jaagal ho
jug jug jiyas su babuniya
bhavanwa ke bhaag jaagal ho
o babuni pyaari hoiye
kulwa ka jyoti
manwa mein aas laagal ho
aaj ka dinwa suhawan
ratiyaa lubhawan ho
o babuni didiya ke
bitiya janamal ho
bitiya badi sundar ho
jug jug haan
saasu suhaagin badi bhaagin
an dhan lutaaweni ho
o babuni duwar pe
bajela badhaiya
anganwa uthe sohar ho
naachi naachi gaawela bhaiya
babuni ke khilaawela ho
oh babuni hasi hasi
tihuki chalaweli
ras barsaaweli ho
jug jug jiya tu babuniya ki
tu duniya ajor kailu ho*

(Long live O girl
Your birth has kindled the palace's fate
O girl, you will grow up to be lovely
And take forward the family legacy

Igniting hope in our hearts
This day is enchanting
and the night's enticing
O, our sister has given birth
to a lovely daughter
Long live O girl
mother-in-law is jumping in joy
splurging all her wealth on her granddaughter
celebrations have reached the doorstep and the entire
household is filled with the echoes of sohar
even her brother is dancing and singing in joy
embracing her in his arms
while she giggles softly
and looks on curiously
Long live O girl
you have lit the world with your birth) (my tans.;
Seema, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

*is baar khojiya baba kunwaar kanhaiya
are jaise gopin mein kandha re lalanwa
ek baar dekhli beti ghodwa chadal aave are hatwa ke
lihle rumaal re lalanwa
uhe ta bar jin khojiya more baba are uhe ta hawe
desh ke kangaal re lalanwa
ek hi bar ham dekhli ae beti cycle chadhal aave are
hatwa mein lihale kitaab re lalanwa
uhe ja bar jin khojiya more baba are uh ta hawe desh
ke awara re lalanwa
ek baar hum dekhli ae beti are kahiya par sobhela
kudaar re lalanwa
uhe ja bar jin khojiya more baba are uh ta hawe desh
ke kisaan re lalanwa*

(this time father search for a young lad
like how krishna is among the gopis
I saw a lad riding a horse daughter, holding a kerchief
in his hand

don't choose him father, he is completely bankrupt
I saw a boy approaching on a cycle daughter, holding
a book in his hand
don't choose him as a groom father, he is a well
known rogue
I saw a man holding a sickle daughter
don't choose him as a groom father, he is a mere
farmer).
(my trans.; Sangeeta, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

*piyari vastra pahineli siya beti baba se araj hamaar
ho
hamara heent joge baba var ek khonji dhiya bhaili
bihan jog he
jekrahi ghare baba var dhiyava kunwari baari se ho
kaise sute nirbhed ho
purab khojni beti pachim khojni khojni udisa
jagannath ho
teen bhvan beti ghumi firi ayani katahi na milale shri
ram he
tohra heent joge beti var nahin milela ab beti rahabu
kunwaar he
jaai na baba ho ayodhya nagariya raja dashrath ke
duwar he
unka hi baare baba chaar betwa na chaaro hi baare
kunwaar he
saanwar dekhi mat jhijakab ho baba saanwar hauve
shri ram ho
saanwar ke maathe tilak balu shobhela hriday
chandan mukh paan he
jhetka se lagan hamaar ho*

(donning a yellow garment Sita requests her father
“please find a suitable groom father as I am of
marriageable age now
how do people who have unmarried daughters sleep
peacefully at night?”

“I looked for a groom in the east and the west,
searched in Orissa and Jagannath
I wandered in all the corners of the world but didn’t
find Ram
I found no suitable match for you my daughter, you
will be a spinster entire life.”
“go to Ajodhya father and at the doorstep of king
Dashrath
are his four sons, who are all unmarried
don’t be hesitant seeing Ram’s dusky face
a tilak on dusky face, chandan on chest and betel leaf
in mouth are his adornments
and with the eldest one fix my marriage.”) (my trans.;
Rinku, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

*lahar sahar kare kavan beti kin da papa moti ka
saadi
kin da papa banarasi saadi
tohre jab janam beti
gareeb ke ghare kaha mili moti ka saadi
kahan mili banarasi saadi
tohke bihaibo beti dhani ke ghare ohijan mili moti ka
saadi
tohke bihaibo beti dhani ke ghare
ohijan mili moti ke saadi
ohijan mili banarasi saadi
ghodwa chadal aihe tohro dulah chala
suhwa hamar
deshe tohko bhi kinbo suhwa moti ke saadi
apna ke banagali dhoti*

(swaying in the woods daughter appeals her father
to buy a pearl saree or banarasi saree
“you were born in a poor household, daughter
how can we afford such expensive sarees?
I will get you married in a rich household

over there you can demand a banarasi saree or pearl
saree riding a well neighing horse your groom will
arrive my darling then I will buy you a pearl saree
and a bangali dhoti for myself!”)
(my trans.; Sangeeta, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur district).

*sawariya sudhiya sataave suni tor
pal bhar bisre na tohri suratiya
batiya johat ho bitaaini saari ratiyaa
rowat rowat bhaili bhor ho
sawariya sudhiya sataave suni tor
mahal ataari mora manhi na bhaave
satal jiyara ke madan sataave
bhaili nagariya mein shor ho
sawariya sudhiya sataave suni tor*

(my love, your memories make me yearn for you
not a moment has passed by without reminiscing your
face
I spent the whole night waiting to hear your voice
I cried all night till dawn
I have no fancy for palatial buildings
my love, your memories make me yearn for you
I am eaten away by the pangs of love
there is an uproar in the streets that
my love, your memories make me yearn for you.)
(my trans.; Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

*ekahi baans ke dui re konpalwa
ek bansuriya ek baans ho
ek je maiya ke dui re janm lein
ek bahini ek bhai he
bhaiya ke likhal baba chaupariya
bahini likhal door desh he
amma je kaheli niyare bihaiya
babuji kahele teen kos he
bhaiya je kehle nau kos bihaiye*

*bhauji kaheli door des he
kiya tor bhauji ho nunwa girauni
kiya tel deni dharkaay he
kiye tor bhauji rasooya dukh dihani
kaahe kahelu door des he
nahi-nanad more nunwa girwailu
naahi dharkavalu tel he
naahi nanad more rasooya dukh dihalu
batiya bairan tohar he*

(Like the two shoots of a bamboo tree were we
one was moulded into a flute while the other
remained a stem
one mother gave birth to two children
a sister and a brother
father gave brother the entire household
while sister was sent off far away
when mother requested that I be married off nearby
father said at least 5.4 km
while brother said 16.2 km
and brother's wife wanted distant lands
"Did I spill your salt sister-in-law
Did I trouble you in the kitchen
why did you want to send me to distant lands?"
"No sister-in-law, you did not spill the salt
neither did you trouble me in the kitchen
but you speak like a nemesis.")
(my trans.; Seema, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District.)

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