

Women's Voices in the Folk Songs of Rajasthan

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Abstract

Women's voices in the folk songs of Rajasthan are a powerful tool to study the *weltanschauung* (world-view of an individual) of the women. Women's folksongs are stories of the self, encapsulating their worldview of life- socio-cultural, philosophical, religious and political. Embedded within this worldview are their responses towards and outlook on customs and traditions, fairs and festivals, superstitions and beliefs, cuisine and attire as well as on professions and pastimes of folk life. They are also narratives of women's responses to emotional traumas of life and as a medium to express their dreams, desires, thoughts and feelings. These songs are important tools of identity discourse projecting the images of the self. They also sing about the inter-gender and intra-gender relations and delve on the position of women in the family and the society. Folksongs contain women's voices, speaking the unsaid, symbolically, metaphorically or sometimes candidly. Apart from being empathy-generating tools these songs can serve as an effective means of gender sensitization young boys.

Keywords: Folksongs; Self; Voices; Women.

The word 'folk' is an Anglo-Saxon word which means uncultured and ignorant society. In normal usage it means 'All the people of the nation'. The meaning of the word 'folk' in compound words such as folk sayings, folk dances or folklore is limited to the cultures that are not civilized and distinctly differ from the mainstream cultures of the West. It therefore, means rustic and rural. Alan Dundes in his canonical work *Essays in Folkloristics* tries to contradict the narrow 19th century definition of 'folk' as 'illiterate peasant'. He opines that folk occupies a somewhat middle position on the evolutionary ladder, the civilized elite are at the top and uncivilized savages at the bottom. He further adds that the folk are understood to be "the illiterate in the literate society" (2). By virtue of this definition 'folk' is a link between the civilised and the savage, in the unilinear evolutionary sequence and that folk live in or near a society that also has literate people.

In Hindi, the word '*lok*' is used to denominate the English term 'folk'. In *Siddhanta Kaumudi* Bhattoji Dikshita states that, '*lok*' has its origin in Sanskrit

dhatu 'Lokdarshane', which means 'to see'. *Lok* therefore, means 'one who sees', suggesting the entire community of people who perform the act of seeing. In *Rigveda*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagwat Gita*, Panini's *Asthadhaya*, Varruchi's *Vartiko* and Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* the word '*Lok*' features at several places to mean 'common people'. It also finds mention in Ashoka's inscription to mean 'the welfare of the people'. Kunj Bihari Das observes, "As a literary epithet it is used to mean the people that live in more or less primitive condition outside the sphere of sophisticated influence" (15).

Till the first half of the 19th century, the word 'popular antiquities' meaning 'popular among masses' was used to describe the text dealing with the life of 'general public'. In 1846, the renowned English archaeologist William John Thoms coined the term 'Folklore' and it was hailed and immediately accepted.

The folklore of Rajasthan chiefly comprises of the oral literary folk tradition. It includes- *Lok Geet* (folk songs), *Lok Gatha* (folk ballads), *Lok Katha* (folk tales), *Lok Natya* (folk plays), *Lok Subhashita* (folk sayings) and *Okhanas* (proverbial sayings). *Lok Geet* or the folk songs are the spontaneous uttering's of the masses, therefore, more than any other genre they reflect the different aspects of the folk life. Mahatma Gandhi labels the folksongs as 'the sentinel of the culture' and Lala Lajpat Rai calls them 'invaluable treasure of the history of our progress'. A fine sketch of folk society and culture of Rajasthan can be drawn on the basis of the study of these songs. They delineate dexterously the picture of contemporary political order, trade, agriculture, *haat-bazaar* (local trade market), art and architecture, flora and fauna, geography, climate, season cycle, games and sports and capture a snapshot of the socio-cultural milieu. More particularly, the women's voices in the folk songs of Rajasthan are a powerful tool to study the *weltanschauung* of the women.

The folksongs need to be studied in the light of Ramanujan's theory of 'Alternative/Counter Traditions' (9) and 'Genders are Genres' (446). He observes, "Indian traditions are organized as a pan Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition and many local Little Traditions". He alternately calls the great traditions as *marga* (elite) and little traditions as *desi* (local). The little traditions, he remarks are pluralistic, comprising of the Bhakti, the Buddhist, the Jain, the Tantra, the Tribal and the Folklore. Further, he opines that these local traditions are responses to the previous and surrounding traditions (7-8). Hence, there is a continuum between the two kinds of traditions and that local traditions are counter narratives which subvert the ideas, canons and meanings established by the earlier texts. The oral folk traditions are therefore alternative to and autonomous from the classical tradition. In the light of counter traditions, women's voices in folksongs offer iconoclastic

ideas regarding images of women as portrayed in their classical counterparts. The ideal godly images of women of classical conventions are replaced with the realistic flesh and blood images of women with faults and flaws in character.

The concept of 'Genders are genres' derives from the context sensitivity of texts. The meanings of texts depend upon variants such as the telling (domestic/public), the teller (women/men), and the culture of which the text is a part. The same song may convey different meanings in a domestic or a public performance or when sung by men or women. The domestic renditions of folk songs by women are more personalized and emotive compared to the public renditions or when sung by men, which chiefly aim at providing aesthetic pleasure. Unlike men's songs, which represent women as objects of desire or as dutiful and submissive mothers, sisters, wives or daughters, the women's songs express both, the positive and negative aspects of their psyche. Women have not only expressed the feelings of love, separation, attachment, detachment, dedication, compassion, care, hope, delight and pride but also sang of the passions of fear, anxiety, anger, envy, concern, hatred, etc. The women's songs are, therefore, more faithful in the representation of women in comparison to men's songs. Women's folk songs are therefore, in the language of poetics, women's voices, which under the catalyst called stress transform their *bhavas* (natural feeling) into *rasas* (the essence of feelings).

The Kantian universal contexts of time and space do not hold true to women's folk songs. Indian culture is context sensitive; this context sensitivity is reflected in women's folk songs also. Same song may render different meanings based on time and space of renditions. In the Indian philosophical tradition, landscape is believed to have mood and character and so is time designated as *shubh* (auspicious) or *ashubh* (inauspicious) according to calendrical *tithis* (dates). This brings in the notion of *ritusatmya* or 'the appropriateness of season' in the context of women's folk songs. *Ritusatmya* implies the order of events with respect to time and space. The folk songs reflect the *ritusatmyata* of the life and thoughts of women. The folk songs portray that the emotions of women are governed by time and space. *Sawaan* (rainy season) triggers the erotic; *Vaisakha* (April-May) inspires religious feelings. The 'well', an otherwise secular space as a source of water, becomes a sacred space for women in ritualistic performances; sociologically it becomes an agora for women to discuss the family and village politics and when in company of their lovers it transforms into a romantic space.

Women's folk songs are stories of the self, encapsulating their worldview of life - socio-cultural, philosophical, religious and political. Embedded within this world-view are their responses towards and outlook on customs and

traditions, fairs and festivals, superstitions and beliefs, cuisine and attire as well as well as on professions and pastimes of folk life. They are also narratives of women's responses to emotional traumas of life and as a medium to express their dreams, desires, thoughts and feelings. These songs are important tools of identity discourse projecting images of the self. They also sing about the inter-gender and intra-gender relations and delve on the position of women in the family and the society. Folksongs have women's voices, speaking the unsaid, symbolically, metaphorically or sometimes candidly.

The Hindu way of life lays emphasis on sixteen *Samskars* or sacraments beginning with *garbhaadhan samskar* (conception) and culminating into *antim-samskar* (last-rite). There are songs corresponding to each one of these *sanskaars*- birth, death, sacred thread, wedding and so on. Songs like *Naarangi*, *Jachcha*, *Peepli*, *Suraj Pujna*, *Badhavo*, *Vinaya*, etc. are songs of this category. These songs are usually sung by women in the company of family and neighbourhood women. These songs not only present the outlook of women on the sixteen sacraments of life but also probe into the deeper recesses of women's mind and heart. A *Badhavo* (song of celebration) sung on the occasion of childbirth, sings of the empowered identity that she earns by her power of procreation and motherhood:

Kin ghar gaaven sundar gauri halroji.
Moto ji sahar nee nagar aee anjar
Ghar ghar gaaven Maruji haalroji
Laevae sundar gauri mharo naam ae
Goth bakhane mhare baaproji (Chundawat *Rajasthan ke
Sanskritic Lokgeet* 54).

("In whose house are the songs of birth being sung (asks the husband), it is a big town and so women keep singing from house to house (answers the wife); my beautiful wife they are mentioning my name and praising the clan of my father (says husband).")

This song is a dialogue between a husband his wife. The co-wife has given birth to a son and the women are singing birth songs in praise of the wife who has borne an heir to her husband. This song brings out that motherhood strengthens the position of women in the family and in the society, and to enjoy favours of their husband women need to bear children, more particularly sons. Similarly, there are innumerable folksongs associated with the rituals performed during the marriage ceremony. *Vinayak*, *Badhavo*, *Mayro*, *Bindi*, *Kasthuri*, *Sevro*, *Ghodi*, *Fera*, *Bano*, *Vani*, etc. are connected with the various rituals of *Vivah Samskar* (marriage ceremony). One such song presents women's outlook on man-nature relationship. Indian philosophical

concept of *prakriti-puruush*, (Mother Nature and the universal cosmic male) designates feminine attributes to nature. Therefore, women share kinship with nature and this relation is presented through a folk song in which a lady invites various components of nature to attend the wedding ceremony of her son, just as friends and relatives are invited:

Mhare raja hariyasa dungra ne nuvatiya
Mhare raja toran thamb le gharaaviya
Mhare raja Pechola jsyosagar nuvtiya
Mhare raja neersanjovanjogo
Mhare beladiya ghar chaviyo (Chundawat Rajasthan ke
Sanskritic Lokgeet 72).

(I have invited the green mountains, they shall bring *tooran and thamb* (the wooden articles used in marriage ritual); I have invited Lake Pichola, it is capable of bringing water. The creepers have spread in my house.)

Similarly, through a song, the singer heaps praises on her husband's country (village) in Mewar:

Mhe to vari ji thara desh ne
Jhathe neepaje bajri ro punkh
Mhe to dal dal randhu khichado
Jeemavu mharo so parvar (Chundawat Rajasthan ke Sanskritic
Lok Geet 1).

(Blessed is your land which produces *bajra* (pearl millet); I grind bajra to cook *khichada* (porridge). I serve it to my whole family.)

Rajasthan is a land of festivals. The *Gangour*, *Teej*, *Akhateej*, *Chouth*, *Goganavmi*, *Sheetla Saptmi*, *Ramdev Jayanti*, *Shivratri*, *Ramnavmi*, *Rakhabandhan* etc. are some of the popular local calendrical festivals of Rajasthan, in addition to the pan-Indian festivals - Diwali and Holi. Each festival has corresponding songs, which are sung melodiously by women in chorus. Most of these festivals are associated with the folk belief system and hence are ritualistic in nature. Their religious significance is gender neutral but at semiotic level they reveal the female psyche and women's worldview regarding various dimensions of life. Through the songs of Holi, the women sing of the abundance of the spring season. Symbolically, it represents the richness and warmth of interpersonal relations. *Dhamal* and *Rasiya* group of songs accompanied with the beats of *Chang* and *Dhaf* (membranophone musical instruments) add romantic fervour to the Holi festival:

Gauri ra badan pe kun maari pichkari, moy batao.
Chadta jovan pe kun maari pichkari? Moy batao (Menaria
Rajasthani Lokgeet 48).

(Who hit with water gun on Gauri's (beloved) body, tell me. Who hit with water gun the blooming youth, tell me.)

Songs of *Teej* and *Gangour* capture conjugal love and happiness; the maidens worship Gauri-Shiva and seek their blessing:

Baaya pujaan poojasyaa ke kaae var maang rahi,
Main to sasu Jasoda, ek Kisan var maang rahi (Ramsingh
Rajasthani Lokgeet 44).

(What boon do the maidens worshipping lord Shiva and Goddess Gauri seek, I ask for a mother-in-law like Yashoda and a husband like Krishna.)

Lord Krishna represents the ideal lover of the Indian mythology and every maiden desires to wed a man as loving as Krishna. Women invoke Gods to seek blessings for an ideal husband and a caring mother-in-law as post-marriage these relations become the fulcrum of her life.

Women are generally thought to be more religious-minded and superstitious. They observe more austerities and, fasts more frequently, and their belief in folk deities is more deeply grounded compared to men. There are songs depicting the beliefs in demons-ghosts, *tantra-mantra* (enchantments), good-ill omen, dream-intuitions and superstitions. A folksong expresses women's fears of demonic supernatural powers:

Doy-doy kaniya ler Bhanwarji ger naachba chalya,
Ghara thari parniyodi oolambiya jhara re dhare naach,
Daakaniya dakray re dhare naach (Jagmal Singh Rajasthan ke
Tyohaar Geet 100).

(The husband is in all festive moods as he dances merrily but the wife is worried for she believes that the ogress may victimize her handsome husband.)

These fears have a psychological grounding. Those were the times when the causes of many diseases and ailments were unknown to the folks, the reasons for which were attributed to supernatural powers and hence a firm belief in pacifying and calming them through rituals, worship or sacrifices. Such songs substantiate the common folk belief that illness, diseases and natural disasters are caused due to divine wrath, which they try to pacify through worship.

The deeply rooted beliefs in miraculous acts of *lok devtas* (folk deities) like *Pabuji*, *Gogaji*, *Panraji*, *Tejaji*, *Ramdevji*, *Jambhoji*, *Karnimata*, *Jeevanmat*, etc, have been elaborately sung through the folk songs. Throughout their lives, these deities worked for public welfare and sacrificed their lives for the emancipation of the poor and the downtrodden; and for the protection of

the wildlife, particularly the cows. The songs devoted to local deities present them as protectors of life, who mitigate the sufferings of people in the hostile ecological environment, bring rains, cultivate greenery and ensure a livelihood for the common people. Women strongly believe that whenever they confront any problem, folk deities would come to their rescue. A woman complains to *Bhairuji*:

Ubhi Gujarki de che olambha
Mhara rewar mine kariyo ujar
Baadh batuni jhadi todh gaya
Le gaya amarya bok

*Ji Bheru aavo kyuni kai ghada padhrahya (Chundawat
Rajasthan ke Sanskritic Lokgeet 6).*

(Gujri (a woman of Gujar community) complains, my cattle has been destroyed. The fence is dismantled and thorny shrub has been cut. Also the eternal He-goat has been taken away, why are you not coming Bheruji for help, why this delay.)

The deity-devotee relationship in the elite culture is that of master and a servant but in folk culture they share a friendly relationship, as is apparent from the above folksong. "Folk versions embody, domesticate, and humanize the gods" (Ramanujan 22). Therefore, in contrast to classical deities, folk deities depicted in the folksongs sneeze, sweat, menstruate, lactate and give intrauterine birth.

Rajasthan is identified as a land of brave warriors and the women pride themselves in bearing brave sons. Through folksongs not only is the state's saga of sacrifice, duty and chivalry rendered but the desire of mothers to inculcate these values in their children highlighted. The lullaby that a mother sings while breast feeding her infant depicts this desire:

Baalo godi doodho change doodh chungavat boli yu,
*Dhole pay par kayartaro, kalo daag mat layetu (Jagmal Singh
Rajasthani Lokgeeton ke Vivid Roop 99).*

(You are drinking pure white milk; don't ever stain it with cowardice.)

In the folk culture, familial relationships are valued more than anything else. Rajasthani folk songs are a treasure trove for those interested in study of interpersonal relations. There is a polychromatic range of Indian denominations for relationships - *dada-dadi* (paternal grandfather-grandmother), *nana-nani* (maternal grandfather-grandmother), *mata-pita* (mother-father), *beta-beti* (son-daughter), *tau-tai* (elder paternal uncle-aunt), *chacha-chachi* (younger paternal uncle-aunt), *mama-mami* (maternal uncle-

aunt), *bhai-bhabhi* (brother and his wife), *behan-behanoi* (sister and her husband), *sas-sasur* (mother-in-law-father-in-law), *bahu-damad* (daughter-in-law and son-in-law), *jeth-jethani* (elder brother-in-law and his wife), *devar-devrani* (younder brother-in-law and his wife), *nanad-nandoi* (husband's sister and her husband), etc., which lack western equivalence. The relations between family members depict strong paradoxes. Some folk songs capture the joy of togetherness and the strong family ties strengthened with the feelings of love, compassion, caring and sharing; while others sing of soured relations and family conflicts. Joint family system still persists in folk culture and together they celebrate the joys of festivals and mourn the loss of life or fortune. There are songs celebrating the uniqueness and highlighting the love that strengthens these relations, as in *Badhavo*, the female singer equates her family members to precious jewels:

Mhara susaroji sono solmo
 Mhara sasuji arth bhandar
 Mhara jethsa bajubandh serakha
 Bhabhisa ho bajubandhri lumbh
Saheliyaae ambo moriyo (Chundawat *Rajasthan ke Sanskritic Lokgeet* 2).

(My father-in-law is made of gold; my mother-in law is a stock of wealth. My brother-in-law is *bajubandh* (a jewel); my sister-in-law is the embellishment of *bajubandh*.)

The singer equates her family members to valuables and is all praises for them. This song lays emphasis on the importance of each family member in one's life and brings out that the real worth of life lies in celebrating the festival called life in the company of loved ones. Contrarily, practices like polygamy accentuate conflicts within the family. Co-wives in the folk culture do not act like sisters as in classical convention but are staunch rivals to each other. The families witness matrilineal conflicts because of the power politics between women. The women folk in the family coming from different social status and backgrounds compete with each other for control over the household. The most common conflicts are between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The daughter-in-law urges her mother-in-law:

Sasu gaal mat kadh parikar de,
Parikar de mhane, nyarikar de (Yojna Sharma *Rajasthani Lokgeeto ki Sanrachana* 20).

(Mother-in-law don't rebuke me, permit me to establish a separate household.)

The ethos of the state coupled with patriarchy has increased the vulnerability of women to physical and mental pains, there are songs deeply soaked in psycho-physical pains of women. Such folksongs are a pan-Indian phenomenon. If not in public, at least in their private spaces, the women across the nation have candidly expressed through these songs the wronged selfhood imposed on them. The women have been affected by social malaises more than men; child marriages, mismatched marriages, female foeticide and female infanticide have had a deep impact on their psyche. In addition to this, the discriminatory practices in the families have broken their hearts further. A folksong expresses this agony:

Aura ne maa ghapsa ghapsa khand
Mane ae maa chamthi lunki.
Aura ne ae maa pali pali ghee,
Mane maa mariyo telko (Jagmal Singh Rajasthan Lok Geeton
ke Vivid Roop 47).

(To others, mother gives a fistful of sugar, to me a pinch of salt. To others, mother gives lots of ghee, to me a little oil.)

This song brings out the discriminatory practice in distribution of edibles, the female members of the family are given poor and substandard diets making them under nourished. Such songs are also testimony of the fact that in India, women have been exploited by women more than men. Bande quotes a Kangra folksong with similar theme:

Chhalian di roti ni amma,
Khane jo dende,
Hathi dende fafru da saag,
Ammaji main naiyyu basna (The female voice in folklore).

(The singer complains that her in-laws give her coarse bread to eat with a vegetable made of wild grass so she is reluctant to go to her in-laws' place.)

Folk songs offer a very powerful medium for the study of women's psyche. Anthropological researches have established that fundamental categories of thought and subconscious ideas differ significantly across cultures and genders. This inference is greatly supported by the idea of context sensitivity of cultures. Folk songs are documents to study the conflicts, clashes, fears, anxieties, desires, emotion and other ideas that trickle women's subconscious. Women have used these songs to express their repressed wishes and suppressed erotic desires. A woman sings:

Bhila Rana Abu re javo toh re

*Mhare kachi ne paki kerī laavo re (Chundawat Rajasthan ke
Sanskritic Lok Geet111)*

(Bheel Raja, when you go to Abu Mountain, bring me some raw and ripe mango.)

Mango here symbolise the repressed wishes of the singer. Likewise, the hyperbolic presentations, the luxurious lifestyle and the bounty of wealth depicted through folksongs are not due to error of facts but symbolic representation of the repressed desires. Unlike the classical literature, where the thoughts and acts of women are governed by the Freudian ideal *ego* and *super-ego*, the singers of folksongs seem to be under control of their *id*. Folksongs contain the suppressed sexual desires of women, which otherwise remain unexpressed due to social constraints. The singer suggestively expresses her sexual desires to her younger brother-in-law:

Char char balda ki Jodi dhana maye ubi

Dheere haankh re devaruya bhabhi paanat me ubi

Bajra ka khet me paanat karta bhago re kanto

*Meetho lage re devariya thari naad ro santho (Jagmal Singh
Rajasthanī Lokgeeton ke Vivid Roop71).*

(Four pair of animals stands in the field. Brother- in- law, slow down the speed, your sister-in-law stands in the field. A thorn pricks while working in millet fields, brother-in-law your movement of neck is so sweet.)

The song symbolically expresses the extra-marital affairs of the singer with her brother-in-law. The word *meetho* meaning sweet has reference to the enjoyment of sexual act. In women's folksongs food metaphorically refers to sex. Ramanujan observes in this regard, "Food is a frequent metaphor for sex.....Sanskrit, root *bhuj* means both 'to eat' and 'to enjoy sex'" (88-89). Govind Agrawal quotes Jagmal Singh, who observes that this song documents the extra marital relations prevalent in the folk society between *bhabhi* (sister-in-law) and *devar* (younger brother-in-law) (71). Folksongs are therefore, therapeutic; they act as safety valve for the release of feelings which might otherwise cause psychological disorders. Bronner, quotes Dundes who observes, "the interpretation of symbols lodged within folkloric performances were a result of folklore serving the function of a socially sanctioned outlet for suppressed wishes and anxieties" (54).

Women have symbolically used folk songs as a tool to release hostilities, to diffuse anger, resist ill treatment, register disapproval, voice their self, protest subjugation and challenge the dominant discourse. They have also used the invectives of humour and satire to register their resistance to the

hegemonic powers of the family. Bande observes, "These songs or tales have evolved over the years, subtle modes of resistance to hegemonic forms of traditional hierarchy." She further writes, "These folk songs are some of the ways women have derived to mock convention and the dominant discourse of patriarchy. Their narrative potency lies in their ability to satirize the surroundings without hurting directly. Humour thus becomes an effective tool of resistance" (The female voices in folk lore). In a folksong the power figures of the family represented by *bhuva* (father's sister) and *fufa* (*bhuva*'s husband) are mocked at:

Haando dhovan fufo manga jhadu devan bhuva (Ramsingh
Rajasthani Lokgeet 45).

(*Fufa* who cleans cauldrons and *bhuva* who wipes the floor is sought for.)

Apart from solo singing in private spaces, group singing by women in private as well as public domain, not only has aesthetic appeal but other important functions also. Sometimes women sing in groups while working in fields or doing day-to-day domestic chores. Group singing lessens the fatigue of the women who perform vigorous domestic chores and make their task an enjoyable experience for them (Satyendra 31). The women steal time from their busy working schedule and assemble to celebrate an occasion/ festival, they sing and dance to break the monotony of incessant labour and to refresh and revitalize their body and mind. Folk songs are therefore, vital for the physical and mental health of women.

Women have used folksongs as a medium to speak their mind and heart. The folksongs of women's private spaces contain strong voices of resistance to hegemonic powers, candid expression of their repressed wishes and suppressed sexual desires, an appeal for social inclusiveness and disapproval for exploitative and discriminatory practices. As a therapeutic tool folksongs have also been used for emotional release and for refreshing the mind. As a medium of narrating identities the folksongs have projected the injured selves of women and brought to limelight the marginalized status of women. These songs strongly advocate for gender equality. Through these songs the women across the nation have shared their voices of consent and dissent over shared issues; hence folksongs stand for the unity of women. Apart from being empathy-generating tools, these songs can be used as an effective means of gender sensitization in the boys of young age.

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