

Caste and Communication: A Thematic Analysis of Bhojpuri Folk Songs of Bihar

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ABSTRACT

Folk songs have an intrinsic value that provides an impetus to communicate ideas, cultural practices, values, beliefs, and norms among community members. One of the major components of folk songs is their community-based participation and representation of various issues affecting the community through words and music. This paper investigates communication through Bhojpuri folk songs sung by caste-based marginalised communities in Bihar. It assumes that folk songs are not mundane speech acts but rather discursive texts having multiple layers of meaning. The discursive structure of folk songs communicates the context in which they are formed and performed. This study aims to answer the following research questions: What do subaltern communities communicate through their folk songs? In what ways do folk songs facilitate human agency to express lived experiences and social contexts? What are the limitations of the communicative aspect of folk songs?

Regarding methodology, a thematic and semantic analysis of the folk songs is carried out, with due consideration given to the sociocultural realities in which they originate and the messages they intend to convey. The study adopts a post-Heideggerian hermeneutic approach whereby the art of understanding the communicative power of folk songs extends beyond the song to its singers and the context in which it is performed. The paper argues that folk songs call for communicative creativity, where text, context, music, expression, cultural memory, and appropriation are interlinked.

Keywords: Folk Songs, Caste, Communication, Bihar, Subaltern, Human Agency, Hermeneutics, Thematic Analysis

“*Maanav mein jaati kahan se aayil? Mata pita se sabke janam iya, kaise bhed samaail?*”
(*From where did caste come into humankind? Everyone is born from their parents, so why is this differentiation?*)

(*Lines from a folk song among Chamars, Champaran, Bihar*)

Locating Caste in Folk Songs: An Introduction

Caste is a living practice in our society that manifests in oral and performative folk traditions. Communication is deeply ingrained in the social fabric; it carries the ideology of caste through various symbolic forms, with folk songs being one of them. Folk songs provide us with deep insights into the prevalence of caste among communities devoid of written scripts and primarily dependent on oral traditions. In communities where orality operates, it forges a bond of sharing a common history and identity. Their lifeworld revolves around such oral traditions, which are not fixed but undergo a process of interaction and negotiation. In India, according to V. N. Rao (1985), most folk performances denote a *jati-sanskriti*, referring to the cultural practices of a caste group. Each caste (*jati*) group creates its own folk narratives, performances, oral traditions, and folk songs that give it a distinct identity from other caste groups. Since culture is fluid and cannot be contained within one group, folk culture travels from one caste group to another. A different and independent repository of folk traditions, however, has always been maintained by marginalised castes owing to their position in the social hierarchy, differential treatment, and humiliating lived experiences. When caste becomes a significant motif in folk songs, it tends to develop what Scott (1990) refers to as “hidden transcripts” or strategies to resist domination and overcome marginality. It aims to create *jati-chetna* (caste consciousness) and transform the community members from a caste-in-itself to a caste-for-itself, as Marx discussed along class lines.

This paper does not necessarily look at folk songs solely as an art of resistance; instead, it considers them as what Rege (2002) says, “at once emancipatory and imprisoning” (2002: 1032). They seem to convey caste oppression but, at the same time, try to appropriate their position in the caste hierarchy. As James Scott (1990) opines, “caste subordination represents an institutionalised arrangement for appropriating labour, goods, and services from subordinate populations” (1990: x). Another guiding factor for the study was to consider folk songs as narratives—fictitious or based on real incidents—but distinct from mundane speech communication (Bel et al., 2010, p. 179).

At the outset, we would like to highlight the characteristics of folk songs, which are essential to understanding how they are formed and the different meanings of their content. Even though folk songs emerge from older narrative traditions, they can incorporate events related to immediate social concerns. One can find regional variations in the folk songs of Bihar; as such, they have had a scattered and isolated identity. The same folk song can have multiple similar and varying wordings. The ability to merge new elements with existing genres and motifs makes folk songs, as Sinha (2018: 205) calls them, “malleable social texts that defy any precise dating or authorship.” As a song passes orally from one generation to another, it gathers new elements according to the mood and context in which it is heard and modified. Srivastava (1991: 272) mentions that naming a composer in a folk song is not a tradition, as several individuals contribute to the making of folk songs. It therefore makes folk songs fluid and open texts, whose categorisation based on dialect or region does not always hold true. The elastic or flexible nature of folk songs positions them in a continuum of the region’s culture, tradition, and contemporary trends. They are, therefore, not necessarily treated as ahistorical. Determining the original words or the place where the song was first composed becomes practically impossible. However, the songs undertaken for this study are claimed to have been composed by individuals from lower caste groups. We approach folk songs as interpretive texts of human attitudes towards life because they reflect people’s perceptions and understandings of events, experiences, and relationships. Indra Deva (1989) asserts that folk songs reflect people’s attitudes towards certain events that occur in their lives. The focus, therefore, lies in the context (what actual events took place and their impact on the lives of the people) and process (which event is accorded more importance and embedded in the folk songs, and what is excluded). Social structures keep changing, and so do the words of folk songs. When new words are added to folk songs, they give meaning to the context in which they are being written or sung.

There has been an undisputed differentiation between classical and folk art forms on the pretext of preserving aesthetics and “purity.” Chanda (2021) explains how several art forms belonging to marginalised communities have been erased or made invisible. There has been an exclusion of hereditary dancing castes (Srinivasan, 2011) due to their marginal position in the caste hierarchy. Apart from dance, music is equally dominated by the upper castes (Krishna, 2018), and even percussion artists are discriminated against on the basis of caste (Pradeep & Nandkishor, 2023). Bhojpuri folk songs associated with agricultural labour, such as *ropani* and *sohani*, are sung by Chamar and Musahar women, but not by upper-caste

women. Similarly, *gond* and *kaharwa* are associated with the performance of lower-caste men alone (Singh, 2019, pp. 56–57). Das and Majhi (2021: 16) argue that the communicative aspect of caste requires considering the “vernacular legacies of caste that include the language and practices of communities through which they communicate.” Against this backdrop, this paper investigates Bhojpuri folk songs as “performative registers to communicate, ventilate, and mitigate” (Singh, 2019, p. 61) the lived crisis of caste reality and practices. This study aims to answer the following research questions: What do subaltern communities communicate through their folk songs? In what ways do folk songs facilitate human agency to express themselves and the contexts of their living? What are the limitations of the communicative aspect of folk songs?

This article is divided into four sections, beginning with an engagement with literature on the communicative aspects of folk songs, with particular focus on caste-based marginalised communities. The second section details the methodological framework of the study. The third section forms the crux of the paper, wherein four themes—caste discrimination, caste consciousness, anger against upper-caste practices, and caste, gender, and education—emerged after analysis of Bhojpuri folk songs. The concluding section summarises the findings and mentions the study’s limitations, which pave the way for further research into folk songs in Bihar.

Folk Songs, Marginalisation, and Communication

The ability of folk songs to invite “community-based participation” (Achuthan, 1987, p. 397) gives an impetus to the unique cultural identity of the communities in which they are sung. Folk songs are pivotal in creating awareness among marginalised castes about Brahmanical practices. One may trace the art of cultural resistance in folk songs to the Bhakti tradition, which became popular during the nationalist movement in India and questioned the rigid practices of the caste system (Hawley, 2015). Folk songs also introduced stories of religious leader-icons and saints popular among lower castes to create a sense of solidarity and caste-based identity. Cohn (1958: 420), in his study, found how Ravidas, a prominent figure revered among Dalits, was invoked in the folk songs of North India. The narration of historical episodes of heroic figures calls for collective social action and social mobility among lower castes. Yogendra Singh (2012: 153) notes that *Birha* folk songs motivated lower castes to struggle against the traditional caste system in rural areas.

Folk songs contain enough power to shape, mould, and express various dimensions of self-expression and communication. In India, folk songs encompass mainly the areas of cultural and religious practices, and it is easily traceable that most such songs belong to what generally could be called a “woman’s genre” or to practices largely performed by women within society. Most folk genres and songs are based on cultural practices, seasons, festivals, events, and ceremonies that focus on self-expression and women’s issues.

One of the most recurring themes of Bhojpuri folk songs is migration because of a long historical tradition in this region, wherein informal labour migrates to metropolitan cities. One finds themes related to women lamenting the migration of their husbands to the city for work. The tone of expression in such Bhojpuri folk songs conveys a mood of separation from the husband; adding to the sorrow is the separation from one’s natal home. These themes are found in specific genres of Bhojpuri folk songs such as *bidesiya*, *poorbi*, *kajri*, *barahmasa*, and *jantsar* (Tiwari, 2012).

Raheja and Gold (1994) draw women’s perspectives from Rajasthani oral traditions of celebration and worship. They explore and examine Rajasthani folk songs sung by women in different genres and events. The authors focus on female self-imagery produced through being sensual and motherly in songs that women sing in front of men or address to them. Rajasthani folk songs exist for different seasons and social and family events, such as marriage and the birth ceremony of a newborn child. In these songs of women’s celebrations, sexual imagination is a recurring theme. It is found in different contexts and may be expressed directly or metaphorically through lustful and double-meaning words, or through abuse expressed with humour, satire, and pleasure. The authors also point out that women who sing these songs are not tied to any single caste or community, so their songs cannot be categorised specifically as “low-caste” or “tribal” songs, because women from all castes participate in such musical events in villages. This insight indicates that categorising songs or their singers as belonging to any one community or social group could be complex while working in regional cultures.

Singh (2017) discusses how the upper castes in Punjab have domination and monopoly not only in public places, land ownership, religious institutions, and government organisations, but also in the music industry in the form of popular Jatt pop music. In opposition, singers from lower strata, or “Dalit singers,” are emerging and voicing protest against unequal treatment and caste conflict through songs. Identity consciousness and political activeness

among Dalit Sikhs, who follow lower-caste poets and saints such as Ravidas and Kabir, have played a vital role in this shift in representation.

Kalyani (2020), in her study on Tathagata Buddha songs, stresses that folk songs have become the voice of cultural resistance and assertion of identity among Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. These songs invoke the teachings of Gautam Buddha and other revered figures in Dalit communities. The songs highlight the social exclusion faced by Dalits and encourage emancipation from the rigid caste structure by embracing Buddhism.

In her study, Asha Singh (2021) discusses contemporary folk singing practices from the women's perspective in *Naari-Geet*, presented by the women of the Arjak Sangh. These women invoke the teachings and life events of Dalit icons such as Savitribai Phule and B. R. Ambedkar so that listeners may connect with the folk songs. Folk songs provide linguistic and communicative resources to challenge gender and caste oppression in the community.

Neerja Singh and Namit Vikram Singh (2021) discuss how members of the Ahir community take recourse to folk songs, namely *Birha* songs, to express their anger against discriminatory caste practices. Folk songs are a powerful mechanism through which lower castes resist upper-caste domination. Folk songs, thus, become creative forms of infotainment and potential tools of protest and resistance in rural areas.

Understanding Bhojpuri Folk Songs: Methodology

Bhojpuri is one of the widely spoken Indian languages in eastern Uttar Pradesh and the western parts of Bihar. Bihar's prominent Bhojpuri-speaking districts are Bhojpur, Kaimur, Gopalganj, Rohtas, Saran, Siwan, Buxar, East Champaran, and West Champaran. Apart from India, Bhojpuri is spoken in certain parts of Nepal, Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, and Mauritius. According to the 2011 Census of India, Scheduled Castes constitute 16% of Bihar's total population, and 92% of them live in rural areas.

For this study, folk songs were collected from the Champaran (East and West) region of Bihar through fieldwork conducted in August and September 2024. The first author, a native of rural Bihar belonging to one of the marginalised caste groups, selected the participants through snowball sampling. The participants, all male, belonged to Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, namely Chamar and Mestar/Mehtar. One of the five songs related to caste-

based issues was collected as an audio/audio-visual recording. The remaining four songs were collected as written texts through in-person meetings with participants by the first author. Transcripts of the Bhojpuri songs were written in “Hinglish.” Later, free translations of the songs were prepared in both Hindi and English, focusing on intended meanings and contexts. Both authors first analysed the folk songs individually and attempted to develop common themes. Member checking with the creators of the folk songs was also undertaken to avoid any misinterpretation of data.

Several folk songs related to agriculture, marriage, festivals, and caste were collected from three participants—Nathu Ravi, Bhola Ram, and Rajendra Ram. Nathu Ravi is a 53-year-old man belonging to the Chamar community who works as a social worker in Bagaha, West Champaran. Drawing from his awareness and experiences, he composed two songs: *Maanav Mein Jaati Kahan se Aayil?* (From Where Did Caste Come into Humankind?) and *Utha Bhaiya Aankh Khola, Sutla Mein Ka Ba?* (Wake Up, Brothers, Open Your Eyes, What Did You Gain by Sleeping?). The inspiration behind these songs comes from past and present experiences, as well as from older traditional songs, which are moulded to fit current circumstances. Bhola Ram, a 65-year-old man from the Mehtar caste who has retired from a government school, engages in writing folk songs to create awareness among Dalits in community gatherings. His restlessness over the silence of Dalits in the face of injustice led him to title one of his songs *Jaaga Bhaiya Dalit, Jaaga Mazdur Kisaan* (Wake Up, Dalit Brothers; Wake Up, Workers and Farmers). Two songs related to Dalit girl-child education—*Kayini Hum Koun Khasur?* (Mother, What Is My Fault?) and *Maai Kaahe Na Padhawal?* (Mother, Why Did You Not Educate Me?)—were composed by 53-year-old Rajendra Ram, who recreated these folk songs by listening to old songs and adding new words. All these songs are performed in social gatherings to reinforce caste-based solidarity among community members. The following section deals with the different themes identified through thematic analysis.

Resisting Caste through Singing: Findings and Analysis

The self-composed songs by the participants reflect subjectivity and agency. They can be read as “small windows of protest” that have assumed the character of ritual (Singh, 2019, p. 63). We have identified four themes from the selected folk songs.

Questioning Caste-Based Inequalities

The song *Maanav Mein Jaati Kahan se Aayil?* (From Where Did Caste Come into Humankind?), composed by Nathu Ravi, interrogates and attempts to unsettle people's faith in the caste system. It dwells on the idea of bringing equality and ending caste-based discrimination and violence. The song recognises that nature has not differentiated human beings; rather, caste is man-made.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Hawa paani bhojan se sab koi upje
Ek samaan badan iya
Unch neech chahe koi hokhe
Haad maans khoon sab mein bhetail
Maanav mein jaati kahan se aayil?*

English Translation

Everybody is nurtured by air, water, and food.
Everybody has a body that looks alike.
There may be distinctions of high and low.
But flesh and blood are found equally in all.
From where did caste come into humankind?

The song raises a crucial question: what is the basis of caste if we all have similar physical features and undergo the same lifecycle of birth, growth, and decay?

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Aankh, kaan, naak, jeebh aur chamadiya
Ek barabar paave
Paanch gyan indri, paanch karm indri
Eke barabar bantayil
Maanav mein jaati kahan se aayil?*

*Bachpan, jawani aur budhapa
Baari baari sab paave
Gareeb ameer chahe koi hokhe
Maanav mein jaati kahan se aayil?*

English Translation

Everybody has similar eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin.
The five senses of knowledge and the five organs of action
Have been equally distributed.
From where did caste come into humankind?

The phases of childhood, youth, and old age
Come to everyone in turn,
Whether one is poor or rich.
From where did caste come into humankind?

In each stanza, the undifferentiated nature of humankind is highlighted, and the recurring question—*Maanav Mein Jaati Kahan se Aayil?*—seeks to provoke listeners to question taken-for-granted caste inequalities. Toward the end of the song, the author answers the question by locating the origin of caste in hatred and malice:

Bhojpuri Folk Song

Maanav mein nafrat se jaati aayil
Maanav mein bair se jaati aayil
Maanav mein raag se jaati aayil
Maanav mein dwesh se jaati aayil

English Translation

Caste came into human beings through hatred.
Caste came into human beings through spite.
Caste came into human beings through anger and attachment.
Caste came into human beings through embitterment.

Folk songs, thus, act as a form of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984) for marginalised sections of society through which they express themselves and pass on the aesthetics of folk tradition to future generations. They create metaphors, language, and registers from specific socio-historical conditions and immediate socio-economic concerns. Folk songs are not restricted to the context of discrimination, oppression, and suffering. They go beyond mapping suffering in victims’ lives. They choose an aesthetics of “traumatic materialism” (Nayar, 2015: 3), wherein suffering is not rendered as something unspeakable beneath daily life, but as part of lived reality. One significant consequence of such folk songs is that they create awareness and consciousness about one’s caste position in the social hierarchy.

Awareness and Caste Consciousness

The song *Utha Bhaiya Aankh Khola, Sutla Mein Ka Ba?* (Wake Up, Brothers, Open Your Eyes, What Will You Gain by Sleeping?), composed by Nathu Ravi, gives a clarion call to fellow community members to become aware of caste practices and raise their voice against them. The reference is not to the physical act of sleeping, but to being blindfolded by caste injustice.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

Utha bhaiya, aankh khola, sutla mein ka ba
Sab koi jaagal ba, apne mein laagal ba
Milal ba mauka ta chukla mein ka ba
Utha bhaiya, aankh khola, sutla mein ka ba

*Sab koi ek ba, tohra kahe tek ba
Jatiya ke bhed chhoda, ruthla mein ka ba
Utha bhaiya, aankh khola, sutla mein ka ba*

English Translation

Wake up, brothers, open your eyes; what will you gain by sleeping?
Everyone has woken up and is busy in their own life.
If you have an opportunity, why let it pass?
Wake up, brothers, open your eyes; what will you gain by sleeping?

Everyone is one and the same.
Leave caste discrimination behind.
Why remain offended and divided?
Wake up, brothers, open your eyes; what will you gain by sleeping?

The folk song appeals to listeners to forget the caste hierarchy that exists even within lower caste groups. It urges them to come together in solidarity for the betterment of the community at large. It reminds people of what they are losing—such as equal treatment, better opportunities, and improved social and economic status—by remaining unaware and uneducated. The importance of education and collective action is not directly stated in the lyrics, but is clearly present in the metaphors.

Another folk song written by Bhola Ram, *Jaaga Bhaiya Dalit, Jaaga Mazdur Kisaan* (Wake Up, Dalit Brothers; Wake Up, Workers and Farmers), is also an awakening song for marginalised castes. The title itself reveals that it is dedicated to Dalit workers and farmers. He combines Dalits, workers, and farmers because he sees all three as occupying the lower rungs of Indian social hierarchy. The main source of earning for Dalits and farmers in Bihar relies on farming or labouring occupations that remain stigmatised for certain castes.

The song begins with a positive invocation, suggesting that a new dawn has arrived with rays of hope. These rays metaphorically urge Dalits and farmers to awaken, arise, and raise their voice. The folk song enables listeners to understand the discrimination, inequality, and poverty they face in daily life despite being among the most labouring and struggling sections of society. It suggests that such inequalities are indicators of oppression and feudal exploitation, which they must overcome.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Karkhanwa mein kapda tu hi banawela
Rahela tu hi ughaar
Jaaga bhaiya dalit
Jaaga mazdur kisaan*

*Maai bahiniyan ke fatli lugariya
Ehe saamanti nishaan
Jaaga bhaiya dalit
Jaaga mazdur kisaan*

English Translation

You are the one who makes clothes in the factory,
Yet you yourself remain uncovered.
Wake up, Dalit brother.
Wake up, labourer, farmer.

The clothes of your mother and sisters remain torn—
This is the mark of feudal mentality.
Wake up, Dalit brother.
Wake up, labourer, farmer.

This folk song is sung at social and community gatherings among members of the Mehtar caste community. In his interview with the first author, Bhola Ram explained that the purpose of singing these songs in large gatherings of Dalits is to create solidarity based on caste identity. It resembles “mission singing” (Singh, 2017, p. 37), where singers propagate the teachings of Dalit icons such as Dr B. R. Ambedkar and foreground the concerns of the community.

Anger and Resistance against Upper-Caste Practices

The futility of the caste system is also communicated through these folk songs, wherein upper-caste practices are either questioned or ridiculed. Folk songs provide a platform for community members to express anger and resistance. In another context, Narayan (1997) considers folk songs to be “autonomous spaces” that facilitate the expression of grievances, complaints, and aspirations. In the folk song *Maanav Mein Jaati Kahan se Aayil?* there are references to upper-caste markers such as *janeu* (the sacred thread worn by upper dominant castes) and *tilak* (the mark made by vermilion or sandalwood paste on the forehead).

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Jaati ke teen nishaani
Tik janeu dhaaran kare langa
Ghamand mein gyan bhulayil
Maanav mein jaati kahan se aayil?*

English Translation

Three signs of caste are recognised.

Those who wear the *janeu* and mark *tilak* on their forehead stand exposed.

In pride, they have forgotten true knowledge.

From where did caste come into humankind?

The folk song expresses how people are differentiated through particular markers of caste identity. The creator further expresses anger towards the wearers of *tilak* and *janeu* and accuses them of arrogance and pride, which causes them to lose their moral knowledge of treating others equally.

In the second part of the folk song *Utha Bhaiya Aankh Khola, Sutla Mein Ka Ba?*, there is a call for the annihilation of idol worship, which is seen as having brought no real benefit to its practitioners.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

Soyi soyi khowala, kuchh naahin pawala

Ab-hun ta nasha chhoda, unghla mein ka ba

Utha bhaiya, aankh khola, sutla mein ka ba?

Mann na dhowawala, dhowawala khaali tanwa

Jawan devta kaam na aayilein

Unka pujala mein ka ba

Utha bhaiya, aankh khola, sutla mein ka ba?

English Translation

You kept sleeping and losing, and gained nothing.

At least now, give up this intoxication.

What is there in remaining drowsy and sleepy?

Wake up, brothers, open your eyes; what will you gain by sleeping?

You have cleaned only your body, not your soul.

Those gods have been of no use.

Why worship them?

Wake up, brothers, open your eyes; what will you gain by sleeping?

The folk song reminds listeners that religious belief can function like an intoxication that robs people of rational thinking. By following rituals, one may purify only the body, but not the soul. The song goes so far as to question the existence or efficacy of God and presents such worship as futile.

Caste and Gender Discrimination

Two folk songs based on caste and gender were collected during fieldwork, namely *Kayini Hum Koun Khasur?* (What Is My Fault?) and *Maai Kaahe Na Padhawalu?* (Mother, Why Did You Not Educate Me?), composed by Rajendra Ram, who belongs to the Mehtar caste and works as a school teacher. Even though men wrote these folk songs on Dalit girls and women, they document social reality. Jassal (2012: 10) reminds us that male authorship of such songs may still invoke women's marginalised viewpoints. However, this is not to deny that there are distinctions between men's and women's folk songs.

These songs depict the hardships of being a Dalit woman who could not attend school because of gender discrimination within the family.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

Door kayini babu ji ho, door kayini maai ji
Kayini hum koun khasur ho
Padhaiyya se door kayini babu ji

Nanhin chuker rahni ta bakri charawani
Seth sahukaaran ke kaam karwayini
Khayini na kabhi bhar pet bhaat ho
Padhaiyya se door kayini babu ji

Nanhin chuker rahni ta munnawa khelawani
Munnawa khelawani, hum munniya khelawani
Hardam khayini hum maar ho
Padhaiyya se door kayini babu ji

English Translation

You kept me away, dear father, dear mother.
What fault was mine?
You kept me away from education, dear father.

When I was a little girl, I grazed goats.
I worked in the homes of moneylenders.
I never got a full plate of food.
You kept me away from education, dear father.

As a little girl, I looked after Munna,
And I cared for Munna and Munni alike.
Yet I was the one who was always beaten.
You kept me away from education, dear father.

The folk song is composed in a mode of complaint, where the Dalit girl questions her parents for not educating her. The discrimination faced by a girl child is deeply ingrained in these cultural texts. It elaborates the girl's hardships through caring for siblings, grazing goats, and doing domestic labour in the homes of moneylenders. In this folk song, the Dalit female body is rendered as an abject body of labour.

In another folk song, *Maai Kaahe Na Padhawalu?*, the girl child questions her mother for not providing education.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Maai kaahe na padhawalu
Kayilu jinigiya barbaad ho
Logwa kahe humke anpadh ganwaar ho
Maai kaahe na padhawalu*

*Arey babua ke janamiya par dhol baja baaje la
Ae maai, beti ke janamiya par thokelu kapaar ho
Logwa kahe humke anpadh ganwaar ho
Maai kaahe na padhawalu*

English Translation

Mother, why did you not educate me?
You have ruined my life.
People call me illiterate and uncultured.
Mother, why did you not educate me?

Drums are played when a son is born.
O mother, when a daughter is born, you beat your head in grief.
People call me illiterate and uncultured.
Mother, why did you not educate me?

The girl in the folk song observes that in a patriarchal society, the birth of a boy is celebrated with drums, dance, and song, whereas the birth of a girl is met with grief. This reveals disparity in parenting in rural Bihar. Women face the consequences of being Dalit, uneducated, and poor in both natal and marital homes, which finds expression in these folk songs.

Bhojpuri Folk Song

*Sasura mein tana maare sasu aur nanadiya
Kahan se aayil badi anpadh bahuriya
Hey maai, kaahe na padhawalu
Logwa kahe humke anpadh ganwaar ho
Maai kaahe na padhawalu*

English Translation

My mother-in-law and sister-in-law taunt me,
“From where has this illiterate daughter-in-law come?”
O mother, why did you not educate me?
People call me illiterate and uncultured.
Mother, why did you not educate me?

Folk songs seek to question social structure and register resistance through such expressions. However, it must be noted that resistance is accompanied by resilience in the everyday lives of Dalit communities in Bihar. One must therefore look beyond Western feminist discourses of resistance and subordination. According to Saba Mahmood (2005: 38), people from different social groups have varied experiences, which must be valued and understood on their own terms.

Folk Songs, Communication, and Anti-Caste Aesthetics: Concluding Remarks

Folk songs communicate the lived realities of lower caste groups. A plurality of voices and meanings is embedded in these folk songs, and they cannot be treated as fixed textual sources. They represent a historical reality of lower caste communities in rural Bihar. Even though there are studies (Ram, 2018) claiming that Dalits are becoming more socially conscious, embracing Sanskritisation, and using constitutional provisions and socio-religious movements to alter their caste and class status, the folk songs remind us of the continuing prevalence of caste discrimination in the Champaran district of Bihar. There is no denying that successful attempts to change social status may exist among Dalits, but the notes of resistance in their folk songs tell a different story. There is a significant disjuncture between their lived realities and the imagined life reflected in the folk songs. The folk songs are meaningful in their contexts and serve as an oral cultural tradition for Dalits in rural Bihar. They provide a glimpse into the caste-based discrimination that Dalit communities continue to undergo in Bihar. According to folklorist Alan Dundes (1969: 471), the study of folklore allows one to view another society “from the inside out” rather than “from the outside in.”

The folk songs undertaken for this study do not intend to romanticise resistance but rather provide a fresh perspective on human agency as it is enacted in everyday struggles and negotiations. The question arises: are folk songs symbols of human agency? We support the argument that folk songs are powerful agencies that can take several forms, such as negotiation and bargaining, deception and manipulation, subversion, and resistance (Kabeer,

1999; Abu-Lughod, 1988). While upper or dominant castes distinguish between “pure,” “standardised,” and “local” or “vulgar” culture, Bhojpuri folk songs create new definitions of aesthetics, art, and culture by challenging prevailing traditions and working towards an anti-caste aesthetics.

This study is limited by its inability to assess audience perception and response to anti-caste folk songs, which can be taken up in future research. We began with a question implicit in the title of this paper: Can the subaltern sing? We found an answer. Yes, the subaltern does sing but they must also be heard by the dominant upper castes.

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