



Mapping Gender Inclusivity in Digitalization of Contemporary *Alha* folklore Performances.

Rahul Bajpai

PhD scholar

University of Lucknow

Introduction

Folklore has often served as a tool for subversion or resistance against established power structures, while also providing insights into the socio-cultural essence of the society to which it belongs. It is well-documented that Alha performances have traditionally been dominated by men. However, with the advent of digitalization, there has been an opportunity for individuals of various genders and classes to step forward and gain recognition and respect as Alha singers according to their talent and potential.

This paper aims to analyse the impact of digitalization on Alha folk performances and its effect on the inclusivity of performers. Specifically, it will explore how digital platforms have provided opportunities for female Alha singers to gain respect and popularity as Alhais. In addition to examining the inclusivity in digital performances, this paper will conduct a comparative study of performances by male and female Alha singers. It will compare various aspects of Alha performances, such as manner, style, tone, rhythm, and contexts.

Karine Schomer, a renowned south Asian Folklore Scholar, provides most precise introduction of mentioned folk epic in his article titled “*The "Alha" Epic in Contemporary Performance*”

“The Alha is the most popular and widespread heroic epic cycle of the Hindi- speaking area of north India. Originating in Bundelkhand, the area just south of the Yamuna and Chambal rivers with whose history it is most directly connected, it is especially popular there and in the central Doab area between the Ganga and

Yamuna rivers, where much of the action also takes place. However, it is found in and "belongs" to a greater or lesser extent to all the sub-regions of the large "Hindi heartland" zone covering the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Bihar...

“The Alha recounts the intertwined fates of the three principal Rajput king- Doms of north India on the eve of the Turkish conquest (late 12th century A.D.): Delhi, Kanauj and Mahoba. Delhi at the time was in the hands of the Chauhan clan and ruled by King Prithviraj; Kanauj was ruled by the Gaharwar (or, according to some traditions, Rathor) King Jaichand, and the ruler of Mahoba was the Chandel king Paramardideva (Parmal in the epic). The heroes of the epic are the brothers Alha and Udal, retainers of Parmal, whose cause is the protection of Mahoba and defense of its honor. The narrative is a cycle of episodes in which the heroes confront opponents and enemies of Mahoba or the fathers of girls they want to marry. There are said to be 52 episodes, though the actual number is not fixed, and new episodes are being created even today.³ The principal enemy is Prithviraj, whose attacks on Mahoba result in major confrontations. The climax of the epic is a great battle between Mahoba and the forces of Prithviraj, which results in the total annihilation of the Chandels and so weakens Prithviraj that he is unable to resist subsequent attacks by the Turks.”

Alha, a significant element of local folk culture, has utilized its "performances" to achieve a variety of goals, including cultural preservation, fostering pride in the Hindi language, establishing a regional identity standard, increasing tourism, and motivating young people to act for social change. Since every single folk performance is regarded as an essential component of the related regional cultural identity, it can offer us the chance to discuss ways to preserve cultural traditions through performances and other Signifying practices, which in turn will help to establish the related region's cultural identity.

Types of Alha performances across North Indian Region

Karine Schomer has provided his sharp views on Alha performances in modern times in his essay, *"The Alha epic in Contemporary Performance,"* where he explores variants and performance-wise comparisons. Even though it is well-known and frequently sung throughout the Hindi heartland, the "Alha" is not a standardized custom. There are various performers, slightly different patronage patterns, audiences, and performance contexts in each cultural sub-region. Favourite episodes also vary considerably in plot and detail, as well as in linguistic texture and, perhaps most obviously, in performance style. Even within a single region,

separate guru-disciple traditions (known as Akhara) may Favour particular tunes, types of instrumental accompaniment, and delivery techniques.

There are three prevalent performance settings:

- Unrelated to any larger event, informal performances by amateurs for one's own amusement. The typical locations for these performances are in front of houses, on the Chaupals or open Verandahs of houses, on rooftops, and in urban areas, around lampposts.
- Public performances attended by the entire village or neighbourhood. These are performances by singers who have been recruited as paid professionals or semi-professionals. Such concerts take place in public spaces, frequently in the hamlet's main square where most of the village commerce is conducted. Depending on the size of the community and the singer's renown, audiences, made up of men from all the local castes, might range in size.
- Performances at certain Cultural events. Although various melas serve a variety of cultural, religious, and economic purposes and have a focus unrelated to the "Alha," the site of these locations is believed to have some legendary connection to the "Alha" saga. Even though the audiences for these performances are still exclusively male, they are larger and originate from a somewhat wide area.

A **fourth** performance scenario has been quickly emerging, particularly in urban areas. It is a contemporary stage performance before a large audience, frequently featuring competition (Pratiyogita) between several vocal ensembles. (Primarily semi-professionals). These occasions are typically supported by institutions and middle-class cultural promoters who care about local folk art.

From last decade, A **Fifth** kind of performance has emerged during digital age in India, Virtual performances provide excess to a larger non-ethnic audience but there are some repercussions to other performances. For instance, how informal performances, almost vanished due to radio broadcasting of Alha performance during monsoon season.

Pre-Digital Performances and Status of Inclusivity

The pre-digital dominance of male performers in Alha folklore can be attributed to historical and societal norms. Traditionally, many folk performances, including Alha narratives, were deeply rooted in patriarchal

structures. Social expectations and cultural norms often confined women to specific roles, limiting their participation in public performances.

In many cases, Alha narratives glorified male heroes engaged in battles or heroic deeds, reflecting the prevailing gender dynamics of the time. Additionally, the performance spaces and platforms were predominantly male-centric, further reinforcing the notion that these narratives were primarily the domain of male performers.

The pre-digital era lacked the accessibility and inclusivity that digital platforms offer today. With the advent of the digital age, female artists now have the means to challenge these historical norms, share their perspectives, and actively participate in reshaping traditional narratives, contributing to a more balanced representation in Alha folklore and other folk performances.

Digitalization of Alha Folklore and Increasing Female Emancipation

Female emancipation in folk performance during the digital age has seen increased visibility and empowerment. Online platforms provide opportunities for female folk artists to share their stories, challenge traditional norms, and connect with a global audience. Social media amplifies voices, fostering a diverse and inclusive representation in folk music, breaking away from historical gender stereotypes. Digital spaces facilitate collaboration, allowing women to showcase their talents independently or in partnerships, contributing to the ongoing evolution of folk music with a more equitable and diverse perspective.

In the context of Alha folk performance, which is a traditional narrative form of balladry in parts of North India, the digital age has offered a platform for female artists to redefine and expand their roles. Historically, Alha performances were predominantly male-centric, portraying the valour of warrior heroes. However, in the digital era, female artists can use online platforms to reinterpret these narratives, infusing them with a feminist perspective and challenging traditional gender roles.

In the digital age, female emancipation within Alha folk performance has seen a transformative shift, challenged historical gender norms and amplified women's voices. Traditional Alha narratives, typically centered around male protagonists, are being reinterpreted and expanded by female artists using online platforms.

For example, a female Alha performer might leverage social media to share reimagined stories that highlight the strength and resilience of female characters, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive representation within this traditional balladry. Collaborative projects, facilitated by digital spaces, allow women to actively participate in shaping the narrative of Alha folk performances, breaking away from historical gender stereotypes and fostering a more equitable and empowering environment. The digital era has thus become a catalyst for female artists to redefine their roles within the Alha folk tradition, embracing and promoting gender emancipation.

Through social media and digital channels, female performers in Alha folk can share their own interpretations of these epics, highlighting the strength and resilience of female characters or even creating new narratives that empower women. The digital space allows them to connect with a broader audience, fostering conversations around gender equality within the context of traditional folk performances. Overall, the digital age has opened avenues for women in Alha folk to contribute to the evolution of this art form, promoting inclusivity and gender emancipation.

Pre-digital performances of selected folk epic were mainly male dominated, but during the digitalization process of the folklore tradition, we find an unusual growth in Performers or Alhais, who positioned to a secondary gender role in their society. Male Alha singers have been more common and traditional in the past, with performers known as "Bhagats" or "Alhais" They typically sing and recite the epic using a specific style and rhythm. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of female Alha singers, like *Sheelu Singh Rajput* and *Sanjo Baghel* often referred to as "Alhaan." These female singers have started to gain recognition and perform the Alha-Khand narratives, which were traditionally male-dominated. Both male and female Alha singers play a significant role in preserving and propagating the rich cultural heritage of the Alha-Khand epic, each contributing their unique style and perspective to the storytelling.

The digitalization of Alha folk performance has significantly paved the way for women performers to gain recognition and visibility. Here are several ways in which this transformation has occurred:

Online Platforms and Accessibility: Digital platforms such as YouTube, social media, and streaming services have provided a global stage for Alha folk performances. Women performers can now showcase their talent to a broader audience without traditional barriers.

Independent Publishing and Promotion: Women artists can independently publish their Alha performances online, eliminating the need for traditional gatekeepers. This autonomy allows them to control their narrative, style, and presentation, fostering a more inclusive representation within the genre.

Community Building and Collaboration: Digital spaces enable female Alha performers to connect with like-minded artists and audiences. Collaborations, discussions, and support networks on social media contribute to a sense of community, empowering women in the folk performance scene.

Reinterpretation of Narratives: Women can use digital platforms to reinterpret traditional Alha narratives, infusing them with feminist perspectives or creating entirely new stories that empower female characters. This reinterpretation challenges historical gender norms within the folk tradition.

Recognition Beyond Local Boundaries: Digitalization allows women performers to transcend local constraints and gain recognition on a global scale. The ease of sharing content online facilitates exposure to diverse audiences, fostering appreciation and acknowledgment beyond traditional regional limits.

In essence, the digital age has democratized access to Alha folk performance, breaking down gender barriers and providing a platform for women to contribute, reshape narratives, and receive due recognition within this traditional art form.

The style of female Alha singers, also known as "Alhaan," can differ from male Alha singers in several ways:

Female Alha singers typically have a different vocal range and style compared to male singers. Their voices might be higher in pitch, which can result in a distinct and melodious rendering of the Alha-Khand epic.

Female Alha singers often infuse a different emotional intensity into their performances. They might emphasize the emotional aspects of the story, such as love, devotion, and heroism, in a way that resonates with their own experiences and perspectives.

Female Alha singers may adopt unique costuming and stage presence that align with their gender and tradition. Their attire and demeanour can add a distinct visual element to their performances.

Female Alha singers might interpret the characters in the Alha-Khand narrative with a different nuance and depth. This can lead to a different portrayal of the heroines and other female characters in the epic.

Female Alha singers may use their storytelling approach to highlight elements of empowerment and resilience in the narrative, emphasizing the strength and agency of the female characters.

Overall, while the core narrative of the Alha-Khand remains the same, the stylistic differences between male and female Alha singers can make their performances unique and offer a fresh perspective on this traditional epic. These differences often reflect the gender and cultural context in which they are performing.

Increasing gender inclusivity in *Alha* folk performances in the digital age is imperative for several compelling reasons, some are mentioned following-

Folk performances of Alha, have historically been dominated by male voices. In the digital age, expanding representation to include artists of all genders especially female, provides a more accurate reflection of society's diverse makeup, allowing more people to see themselves reflected in the arts.

As Alha Folk performances are integral to preserving cultural heritage. By involving artists of all genders, these traditions can evolve and adapt, remaining relevant and vibrant in a changing world.

Inclusivity fosters a wider range of artistic perspectives and influences, leading to innovative and eclectic performances that can captivate a broader audience.

Diverse programming and representation can attract a more varied audience, expanding the reach and impact of Alha folk performances, which can lead to increased support for the arts.

Promoting gender inclusivity in the arts aligns with broader social movements striving for gender equality. It sends a powerful message about the importance of equal opportunity and representation in all aspects of society.

By showcasing talented artists of all genders, folk performances of Alha can inspire and empower individuals who may have previously felt marginalized or excluded.

Alha Folk performances often convey cultural and historical narratives. Inclusivity provides an opportunity to educate audiences about the roles and contributions of different genders throughout history.

Collaboration between artists of different genders can lead to unique and innovative performances, enriching the selected folk genre with new perspectives and approaches.

In the digital age, Alha folk performances can reach global audiences. Gender inclusivity can help break down cultural stereotypes and promote a more open and accepting worldview.

An inclusive approach can attract a wider range of supporters and sponsors, contributing to the sustainability of folk performances of Alha as an industry.

In summary, increasing gender inclusivity in Alha folk performances in the digital age is not only a matter of social justice but also a means to enrich the arts, engage diverse audiences, and promote a more inclusive and equitable society. It is a vital step toward a more representative and culturally vibrant future.

Female Alha performers in digital renditions of Alha folklore bring a fresh perspective, breaking traditional gender norms. This inclusion not only promotes gender equality but also adds diversity to the narrative, making it more relatable to a broader audience. It's a meaningful step towards acknowledging and empowering women in cultural storytelling, fostering relevance in contemporary times.

Incorporating female Alha performers in digital renditions of Alha folklore serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it challenges historical gender norms prevalent in traditional performances of the Alha narrative, where male actors often dominated the stage. By featuring women in these roles, it promotes inclusivity and helps break down stereotypes surrounding gender roles in cultural expressions.

Moreover, introducing female perspectives in Alha performances brings a new layer of complexity and richness to the storytelling. It allows for exploration of themes such as resilience, strength, and heroism from a feminine standpoint, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the folklore. This evolution aligns with the contemporary emphasis on diverse and authentic representation in cultural narratives.

The relevance of such adaptations in the digital realm lies in their potential to connect with a broader and more diverse audience. Digital platforms provide a global stage, enabling these performances to reach people who may not have had access to or familiarity with traditional Alha folklore. This accessibility ensures the preservation of cultural heritage while adapting it to contemporary sensibilities, making it more engaging and relatable for modern audiences.

In gist, the inclusion of female Alha performers in digital adaptations of Alha folklore not only addresses gender disparities but also enhances the narrative's depth, relevance, and resonance in today's diverse and evolving cultural landscape.

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