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Resilient Voices: Women's Folk Songs In Colonial Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract:

This article discusses the significance of women's folk songs played in colonial Uttar Pradesh as a means of expressing joy and sufferings. It explores how these songs served as a powerful medium for women to find solace, celebrate their joys, and voice their struggles within a patriarchal and colonial context. While specific examples from the colonial period may be scarce due to the lack of audio recordings, the article suggests various avenues to explore, such as oral traditions, folklore archives, ethnographic studies, literature, and contemporary folk music. By engaging with these resources, readers can gain valuable insights into the themes, cultural heritage, and empowering nature of women's folk songs in colonial Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Folk songs, Women, Colonial Uttar Pradesh, Melodies.

Introduction:

Indian culture has always been deeply rooted in folk music, which act as a storehouse of customs, stories, and emotions. In colonial Uttar Pradesh, women's folk songs played a crucial role in expressing their experiences and preserving their cultural identity. These songs, often performed during festivals, weddings, and other communal gatherings, provided a platform for women to voice their thoughts and emotions in a society where their voices were otherwise marginalized.

In colonial Uttar Pradesh, women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Women's lives were fraught with challenges and restrictions imposed by patriarchal norms and British colonial rule. British colonial policies impacted various aspects of life, including agriculture, industry, and education. Rohilkund Ukhbar of the 2nd January 1869, under the heading "Allahabad", the following appears-

"It is said the magistrate of Allahabad has passed an order prohibiting all kind of native music in city. For merely the order was, that all who required music should ask permission for it. But this new order has put a stop to all music and singing. But besides this, even in one's own private dwelling music is not allowed. The editor remarks that "authorities of this description only cause pain to the people they rule."¹

However, amidst these adversities, women found solace and a powerful means of expression through folk songs. These songs became a conduit for conveying their joys and pains, and an avenue for preserving cultural heritage. Themes of resistance and resilience were also prevalent in women's folk songs. These songs often reflected women's struggles against social norms, economic hardships, and political oppression, highlighting their strength and perseverance. Indian folk songs, trickle down through the social, cultural, and religious strata of a village's life, constantly nourishing the traditional beliefs and values of the people. Folk entertainments, festivals, fasts and life-cycle ceremonies (samskar), performed amidst singing, storytelling and merriment, provide diversions in the monotonous lives of women. This article explores the significance of women's folk songs in colonial Uttar Pradesh, shedding light on how they served as a medium for women to find solidarity, celebrate their joys, and voice their struggles. Women sang *Kajari*, *Chaiti*, *Baramasa*, *Fagua*, *Bideshia*, *Birahi*, *Shohar*, *Vivah geet*, *Gari*. Women learnt these songs from their mothers, their sisters, their friends, while cooking, washing and stitching, maintaining and transmitting them over generations.²

Expressing Joy Through Melody:

Women's folk songs offered an outlet for women to express their moments of joy and celebration. On occasions such as weddings, childbirth, and festivals, these songs resonated with the sounds of hope, dreams, and love. Through collective singing, women found unity and empowerment, momentarily transcending the hardships of their lives. These joyous songs painted vivid pictures of marital bliss, romantic yearnings, and the anticipation of a brighter future. In these moments, women discovered a shared language of happiness, forming bonds that provided strength in the face of adversity. Particularly popular was the singing of jocular wedding songs, known as *garis* or *galis*. They were sung mainly by the bride's side, chiefly addressing the groom and his family. Some of these *garis* ridiculed the husband, the mother-in-law, and the existing hierarchy of familial relationships, and they were provocative and illicit. Newly-wed girls were advised to dictate terms in the *sasural* so that the *sas* and the *nanad* remained at their command, and so that the *jeth* fetched the water. The groom's family was abused and the sexual proclivities of the groom's mother were joked about.³

Another famous type of joyous folk song was *Jhoola songs*. These songs are associated with swing festivals, such as Teej and Sawan. These songs celebrate the joy of swinging on decorated swings, accompanied by rhythmic music and lyrics filled with playful banter.

Sohar is a form that is part of the life-cycle repertoire. It is described as a form sung to celebrate the birth of a child.

Here is an classic example of sohar:

Nand ghar anand bhayo jai kanhaiya lal ki.
Ayodhya mein Ram bhaye, Gokul mein Krishna bhaye,
Kalyug mein humre angna bhaye Ram-Krishna ka roop,
Nand ghar anand bhayo jai kanhaiya lal ki.

There is bliss in Nand's house, victory to baby Krishna.

Ram was born in Ayodhya, Krishna was born in Gokul,

In this Kalyug, a form of Ram-Krishna is born in our courtyard,

There is bliss in Nand's house, victory to baby Krishna.

This Sohar song celebrates the birth of a child by comparing it to the joyous births of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna, expressing the happiness and blessings that the newborn brings to the family.

Lullabies and songs for children were another important category. These songs not only soothed and entertained children but also transmitted cultural values and traditions from one generation to the next.

Venting Sorrows and Struggles:

However, life for women in colonial Uttar Pradesh was far from idyllic. Oppressive customs, gender-based discrimination, and social inequalities marred their existence. Women's folk songs also became a medium for expressing their pain and struggles. Through heartfelt lyrics, women bared their souls, singing about lost love, unfulfilled desires, and marital conflicts. These songs served as an outlet for their grief and frustrations, offering catharsis and a sense of release. The act of sharing their pain in the form of songs fostered empathy within their communities, reminding women that they were not alone in their experiences. The sorrow and suffering of women can be seen in folk songs like Birhi, Bidesiya etc. **Birahi** is a genre of folk songs that convey the emotions of love, desire, and longing. Birahi is a genre of folk songs that convey the emotions of love, desire, and longing. These songs often depict the emotional struggles of individuals in love, blending elements of romance and melancholy depict the emotional struggles of individuals in love, blending elements of romance and melancholy. **Bidesiya** is another genre of folk songs that depict the pain and longing experienced by individuals who have migrated from their homeland. These songs touch upon themes of separation, nostalgia, and the challenges faced by migrants. **Bidesiya** and **Birha** carefully capture the conjugal insecurity of women as the fear of losing their husbands to other women, literally and metaphorically, is very prominent in most of the verses. The fear is justified because, when placed within a patriarchal family system, women's mobility was restricted, and their participation in decision making was nominal in the patrilocal households.⁴

A classic example of this can be given from the original play by Bhikhari Thakur, where the male protagonist leaves behind his wife, only to come back to the village years later with a new bride that he has met in the country where he worked. Both women accept each other as *sautans* (co-wives), as they have nowhere else to go.⁵

Here is an example of Bidesiya song where The wife warns the husband from taking off to Calcutta as it is full of prostitutes, is rampant with malaria and dotted with paan - Cigarette shops.

Kalkatva tu jan jaa raja, hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me randi bastu hai, mojra kare hai din raati hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me malaria bastu hai, gajla kare hai din raati hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me tamoliya bastu hai, beerwa lage hai din raati hamar dil kaise lagi”⁶

Here as an example of a vivah geet that shows the emotions of a mother at the wedding of her daughter:

Bhaile biyah parela sir senur

Nau lakh mange re dahej re

Ghar me ke ba bhara angan dei patkeli

Saturu ke dhiya jani hoire

The wedding over, sindur (vermilion) ceremony completed,

They asked for a 9 lakh dowry.

In despair Mother threw out the cooking pots into the courtyard.

One should not wish the birth of daughters even to enemies.⁷

Preserving Cultural Heritage:

Women's folk songs were crucial in conserving the cultural heritage of colonial Uttar Pradesh. Passed down through generations, these songs embodied the wisdom, values, and stories of their ancestors. As women sang, they ensured the continuity of their cultural traditions, instilling a sense of identity and belonging within their communities. Through their songs, they celebrated their unique customs, rituals, and folklore, safeguarding the richness of their heritage in the face of colonial assimilation. Chaita songs, which are performed during the month of Chaitra, which signifies the start of the Hindu lunar calendar, are an example of this genre. These songs are typically dedicated to Lord Rama and depict his life and adventures.

But there are many other elements that can be included in this, here is an example:

Aaye badariya chait mas ki,
Mori gali gali chhai ghata ghati.
Aaj mori sakhi piyawa ke sang,
Gori sihati na bhaye re,
Sajanva na aaye re.
Aaye badariya chait mas ki,
Mori gali gali chhai ghata ghati.

The clouds of the month of Chait have come,
My lane is filled with dense clouds.
Today, my friend, with my beloved,
I cannot stay calm,
My love hasn't come.

The clouds of the month of Chait have come,
My lane is filled with dense clouds.

This Chaita song captures the essence of the longing and anticipation that comes with the arrival of spring, a time associated with love and reunion.

Thumri is a semi-classical form of folk singing that originated in Uttar Pradesh. These songs often draw inspiration from the cultural traditions and courtly music of the region. **Thumri** songs preserve the nuances of Hindustani classical music while incorporating elements of folk music, ensuring that traditional melodies and lyrical themes continue to thrive. Thumari incorporates particular poetic themes, Ragas, Talas and musical embellishments.

Here is an example of a very famous Thumri song:

Babul mora naihar chhooto hi jaaye,
Chaar kahaar mil, mori doliya sajavain.

Angana to parbat bhayo,
Dehri bhayi bidesh,
Jaise jakhin laagi kachhu dinhe ki,
Bhaagi parai pardesh.
O father, my parental home is now being left behind,
Four men have come to lift my palanquin.

The courtyard has turned into a mountain,
The threshold has become a foreign land,
As if a yaksha has taken me away,
Fleeing to a distant land.

It was written by the renowned poet and playwright Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. He was the last Nawab of Awadh (Oudh), known not only for his political role but also for his significant contributions to the arts, especially music and dance. The Thumri is a poignant expression of the pain of separation, symbolizing Wajid Ali Shah's own feelings of loss and exile after being deposed by the British.

Empowering Women's Voices:

Beyond serving as a medium for expression, women's folk songs provided a platform for women's voices to be heard. In a society where women's opinions were often silenced or disregarded, these songs offered an opportunity for women to reclaim agency. Through their lyrics, they challenged societal norms, critiqued injustices, and demanded change. These songs became a source of empowerment, inspiring women to question the status quo and strive for a more equitable future. Folk songs often contained lyrics that challenged gender-based discrimination and inequality. These songs criticized social norms and customs that oppressed women, encouraging them to assert their rights and demand equality within their communities. Some folk songs emphasized the importance of education for women and urged them to seek knowledge and empowerment.

Sasuji se kahe betiya,
Humra kahe rokein padhaye,
Bhaiya se na kahe aiso,
Humra kahe rokein padhaye.
Ghar ka sab kaam hum kari,
Bhaiya bas khele aur padhe,
Phir kyon kahat hain hum se,
Na jane tum kuch bhi kari.

Bachpan se ab tak hum,
Suno bas tumaari aagya,
Par apni ichchha ka bhi,
Kuch toh haq hai hamara.

The daughter says to her mother-in-law,
Why do you stop me from studying,
You don't say the same to my brother,
Why do you stop me from studying.
I do all the household work,
While my brother just plays and studies,
Then why do you tell me,
That I don't know how to do anything.
From childhood till now,
I have only obeyed your commands,
But I also have the right,
To follow my own wishes.

This song reflects the frustration and questioning of a young woman who faces gender inequality within her household. It highlights the disparity in educational opportunities and expectations between boys and girls, capturing the desire for equal treatment and the right to pursue one's own aspirations.

These songs aimed to inspire women to break free from traditional limitations and strive for personal growth and independence. Folk songs acted as a means to address social issues affecting women, such as child marriage, dowry, and widowhood. Through these songs, women raised awareness, critiqued harmful practices, and called for societal change.

Conclusion:

Women's folk songs in colonial Uttar Pradesh were not merely melodies, but powerful tools of expression and resilience. They provided women with a platform to celebrate their joys, vent their sorrows, and preserve their cultural heritage. Through these songs, women found solace, solidarity, and empowerment. Their voices reverberated through the generations, reminding us of the strength and resilience of women in the face of adversity. These tunes still reverberate, demonstrating the unbreakable spirit of women. In addition to presenting a stereotypical image of a Hindu woman, these songs also show her as joyful and able to articulate her feelings. The songs describe her desires and longings, her annoyances, and the situations that surround many facets of her life. Women's folk songs serve as a sort of safety valve, giving women a way to release their feelings of rage toward the social order. Hindu girls are educated to respect and obey their spouses and family members from an early age but on the other hand, we frequently hear extremely disparaging and accusing language in folk songs directed at these same relatives, who would normally be regarded with the utmost respect. Folk songs provide an acceptable outlet for everything, no matter how inappropriate it may be in real life. Folk songs, especially those sung by women, are a great way to learn about women's roles in Hindu society.

Endnotes and References:

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