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Women's Voices In Maithili And Magahi Folk Music: Agency, Resistance, And Identity

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Abstract

Folk music in Bihar, particularly within the Maithili and Magahi traditions, offers a rich and nuanced perspective on the social, cultural, and gendered dynamics of the region. These musical forms, often performed in domestic, ritualistic, or seasonal contexts, are far more than mere entertainment; they serve as significant sites of women's expression and socio-cultural participation. Through genres such as *sohar* (birth songs), *samdaun* (marriage songs), *janmotsav* (festive compositions), and other seasonal or life-cycle folk performances, women articulate a spectrum of emotions ranging from joy and celebration to grief, anxiety, and subtle dissent. These songs not only document everyday experiences and societal expectations but also provide women with a medium to assert agency, negotiate social norms, and preserve collective memory. Furthermore, Maithili and Magahi folk songs frequently encode resistance against patriarchal structures, allowing women to critique and challenge power hierarchies in symbolic or metaphorical ways. This interplay of performance, identity, and resistance highlights how women's voices, even within ostensibly private or community-centered spaces, contribute to broader processes of cultural continuity and transformation. By examining the linguistic, melodic, and performative elements of these folk traditions, this study illuminates the central role women play in sustaining regional cultural heritage, asserting individual and collective identity, and fostering resilience within socially restrictive environments. Ultimately, the article argues that women's folk music in Bihar is not only a repository of cultural knowledge but also a vibrant medium through which gendered experiences, creativity, and resistance are expressed, making it a crucial lens for understanding the intersections of music, society, and empowerment in regional India.¹

Introduction

Maithili and Magahi folk traditions form an inseparable part of Bihar's rich cultural and social heritage, reflecting the historical evolution, regional practices, and collective consciousness of the community. These musical forms are deeply embedded in the rhythms of agrarian life, domestic chores, ritual practices, and seasonal festivals, serving not only as entertainment but also as vehicles for cultural continuity and social cohesion. While men have historically dominated public discourse, political spaces, and literary production, women have traditionally been the primary custodians of folk music, preserving and transmitting these traditions across generations. Their songs emerge from the lived realities of everyday life, encompassing birth, marriage, fertility, agricultural labor, religious observances, and communal celebrations. Genres such as *sohar* (birth songs), *samdaun* (marriage songs), *paag* (seasonal songs), and festival-related compositions, though rooted in domestic or ritualistic contexts, often carry subtle commentaries on social norms, family structures, and gender roles.²

In these folk forms, women's voices articulate a spectrum of emotions-joy, sorrow, longing, and resistance-providing a medium to negotiate personal and collective identity within a patriarchal framework. The seemingly simple lyrics often contain layered meanings, metaphorical expressions, and narrative techniques that reveal women's critical engagement with societal expectations. Folk music, therefore, operates as both a repository of cultural knowledge and a subtle instrument of social commentary, enabling women to assert agency in spaces where their presence is otherwise limited or marginalized.³ Furthermore, women's participation in Maithili and Magahi folk music is significant in understanding how cultural memory and regional identity are maintained. These songs are not merely artistic expressions but also forms of historical documentation, reflecting local customs, community ethics, familial relationships, and the gendered distribution of labor and authority. The performative aspects of folk music-collective singing, ritual enactments, and community gatherings-also reinforce social bonds and provide women with a sense of solidarity, empowerment, and belonging. In this context, folk music becomes a subtle yet potent platform for negotiating power, questioning social hierarchies, and preserving indigenous knowledge systems.⁴

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of women in Maithili and Magahi folk music, focusing on how they employ song as a medium of self-expression, resistance, and identity formation, while also examining the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape these practices. By analyzing women's engagement with folk music, the study aims to illuminate the intersections of gender, power, and cultural continuity, highlighting the ways in which these musical traditions both reflect and reshape women's social experiences. Ultimately, the paper argues that women's voices in folk music constitute an indispensable aspect of Bihar's cultural landscape, revealing resilience, creativity, and agency that have ensured the survival and evolution of these traditions across centuries.⁵

Historical and Cultural Context

The folk music traditions of Bihar, particularly Maithili and Magahi, are deeply intertwined with the region's historical, social, and cultural fabric. Maithili folk music, with its rich literary and poetic heritage, has long been associated with ritual, devotion, and social ceremonies. Drawing inspiration from the classical works of Vidyapati in the 14th century, Maithili music blends lyrical sophistication with local vernacular expression, reflecting both spiritual devotion and everyday experiences. While male poets and scholars like Vidyapati provided the written framework, it was women's oral traditions that ensured the preservation and transmission of lived culture, embedding emotional depth, social memory, and community values within the songs. Genres such as *sohar* (birth celebrations), *samdaun* (marriage songs), and devotional compositions performed during festivals illustrate the active role women played in nurturing the spiritual, social, and aesthetic dimensions of Maithili life.⁶

In contrast, Magahi folk music is marked by its earthy, robust, and communal character. Known for labor songs (*gaon ke geet*), agricultural chants, and songs accompanying domestic chores, it highlights women's role in collective performance and cultural continuity. During ploughing, sowing, harvesting, or other routine activities, women sang songs that synchronized labor, alleviated fatigue, and reinforced social cohesion. Beyond functional utility, these songs often incorporated narratives of resilience, social critique, and moral instruction, giving voice to women's experiences and perspectives within patriarchal settings.⁷ Across both traditions, women are central not only as performers but also as custodians of the oral heritage. Their songs preserve linguistic nuances, local idioms, and culturally specific symbols that written records often fail to capture. By performing, teaching, and innovating within these musical frameworks, women have ensured the intergenerational transmission of regional identity, social norms, and collective memory. Moreover, their performances transform private, domestic, or labor-intensive spaces into vibrant arenas of artistic and social expression, challenging the invisibility often imposed by broader male-dominated cultural narratives.⁸

In essence, the Maithili and Magahi folk music traditions underscore how women's musical practices are inseparable from Bihar's socio-cultural history. These traditions not only reflect the rhythms of daily life and communal existence but also provide critical insights into women's agency, creativity, and enduring role in preserving and shaping regional cultural identity. Through their songs, women have continuously negotiated social hierarchies, asserted their presence in public and domestic spaces, and contributed to the resilience and evolution of Bihar's folk heritage.⁹

Women's Agency through Song

Folk music in Bihar, particularly in the Maithili and Magahi traditions, serves as a powerful medium through which women articulate agency, negotiate social norms, and express their lived experiences. One significant domain of this musical expression is ritual songs. Songs such as *sohar*, sung during childbirth, and *samdaun*, performed during weddings, provide women with a culturally sanctioned space to voice perspectives on family dynamics, marital expectations, and social pressures, including dowry and inheritance issues. Within

these performances, women often embed subtle critiques, humor, or advice, effectively using song as a socially acceptable form of commentary and resistance. These ritualistic performances thus transcend mere celebration, becoming vehicles for reflection, negotiation, and the reinforcement of communal values, while simultaneously highlighting women's knowledge, creativity, and authority within domestic and ceremonial spaces.¹⁰

Beyond ritual contexts, labor songs constitute another vital sphere of women's agency. Sung collectively during tasks such as grinding grain, fetching water, working in fields, or performing household chores, these songs serve multiple purposes. They synchronize labor, reduce monotony, and build solidarity among women, transforming physically demanding work into a communal and emotionally sustaining activity. Through these songs, women convey shared experiences, express frustrations, and articulate desires or grievances that might otherwise remain unspoken in patriarchal settings.¹¹ The communal singing process fosters emotional release, mutual support, and a sense of collective identity, reinforcing women's social networks and informal structures of power. Another domain where women exercise influence is through lullabies and songs of care. These intimate forms of musical expression transmit cultural knowledge, ethical values, and community expectations to children, embedding socialization within daily routines. Lullabies often carry layered meanings, reflecting women's perceptions of motherhood, familial responsibilities, and the shaping of future generations. By embedding wisdom, cautionary tales, and moral instruction in song, women assert an influential role in cultural transmission and identity formation, even within the confines of private domestic spaces.¹²

Through ritual, labor, and nurturing songs, women in Maithili and Magahi traditions actively participate in shaping social discourse, asserting autonomy, and creating shared emotional and cultural spaces. These musical practices not only reinforce women's presence and agency within patriarchal structures but also underscore their indispensable contribution to the continuity, evolution, and richness of Bihar's folk heritage. In essence, song becomes a lens through which women negotiate power, preserve cultural memory, and assert their identities across private, communal, and ritual spheres.¹³

Resistance in Disguise

Folk music in Bihar, particularly in Maithili and Magahi traditions, serves as a subtle yet potent instrument of resistance against patriarchal structures. While women often navigated highly restrictive social norms, their songs created a culturally sanctioned space to critique, question, and negotiate power relations within households and communities. Many songs, especially those sung during weddings, childbirth, or festivals, contain embedded critiques of patriarchy-highlighting unfair treatment of daughters-in-law, controlling or oppressive in-laws, and the pressures of forced marriages.¹⁴ By voicing such concerns in song, women could articulate grievances that might have been dangerous or taboo if expressed openly, turning music into a medium for social commentary and covert empowerment. A significant dimension of this resistance is the mockery of male authority. Folk songs frequently humorously portray husbands as lazy, indulgent in alcohol, or negligent in their familial duties. Through playful exaggeration and satire, women subtly challenge the legitimacy of male dominance, questioning societal norms without overt confrontation. This humor not

only provides emotional relief but also fosters solidarity among women, reinforcing shared experiences of oppression while normalizing the expression of dissent within communal settings.¹⁵

Another critical arena of resistance is the critique of the dowry system. Many Magahi and Maithili wedding songs explicitly express women's anger and frustration at the burden of dowry, exposing the economic and emotional exploitation it entails. Through allegory, metaphor, and collective performance, women challenge the legitimacy of dowry practices, assert moral authority, and call attention to the injustices embedded in matrimonial traditions. These songs thus operate as a subtle form of social protest, using rhythm, melody, and narrative to question entrenched hierarchies. Importantly, folk music provides a space of safe resistance. The collective nature of singing-whether during labor, festivals, or domestic rituals-offers protection from direct reprisal. Metaphors, humor, and coded language allow women to articulate critique and dissent while maintaining cultural acceptability. In this sense, song becomes both a shield and a sword: a medium through which women assert agency, negotiate power, and cultivate solidarity, while simultaneously ensuring personal safety within a patriarchal framework.¹⁶

Through these subtle yet powerful forms of expression, women's folk songs emerge as tools of cultural and social resistance, reflecting resilience, creativity, and a persistent desire for justice. They not only preserve women's perspectives within oral traditions but also challenge, disrupt, and transform social norms over time, ensuring that the voices of women continue to resonate within Bihar's folk heritage.¹⁷

Identity and Community Building

Folk music in Bihar, particularly in the Maithili and Magahi traditions, serves as a powerful instrument for constructing and reinforcing both gendered and cultural identities, while simultaneously fostering solidarity and community among women. Through collective singing during household chores, fieldwork, or ritualistic events such as weddings and festivals, women create a shared space of expression where personal and social experiences are voiced, validated, and understood by peers. These communal performances provide women with an opportunity to assert a gendered identity, allowing them to articulate feelings, challenges, and perspectives that are often suppressed in male-dominated social structures. Singing together becomes a form of emotional release, negotiation, and resistance, where women reaffirm their agency within constrained social frameworks, strengthening bonds that transcend family hierarchies and neighborhood boundaries.¹⁸

In addition to gendered identity, folk music is crucial for the preservation and transmission of cultural identity. Women function as custodians of oral traditions, ensuring that the melodies, lyrics, rituals, and narratives associated with Maithili and Magahi folk music are passed down through generations. This responsibility is especially important in migrant or diasporic communities, where folk songs become repositories of memory, enabling women to maintain a tangible connection to their ancestral lands, linguistic heritage, and cultural roots. Through these performances, women not only retain a sense of belonging but also cultivate intergenerational continuity, teaching younger women and children the linguistic, musical, and ritualistic nuances embedded in these songs. Folk music thus becomes a living archive, bridging temporal gaps and sustaining regional identities in changing social contexts.¹⁹

Moreover, Maithili and Magahi folk songs provide a platform for the subaltern voices, particularly of lower-caste women, whose lived realities of labor, social marginalization, and economic hardship are often overlooked in official histories and elite cultural narratives. Through ritual, labor, and seasonal songs, women narrate everyday struggles, social injustices, and systemic inequalities in ways that are both subtle and powerful. The songs often encode criticism of exploitative practices, gendered oppression, and class hierarchies, allowing women to express dissent and resistance in metaphorical, performative, and socially acceptable ways.²⁰ In this sense, folk music serves as a medium of social commentary, political awareness, and communal consciousness, enabling women to document and transmit their experiences across generations. Folk music also plays a pivotal role in creating a shared emotional and social space, where collective participation reinforces mutual support and solidarity among women. By singing together, women not only celebrate joyous occasions but also share grief, negotiate tensions, and collectively respond to societal pressures. The act of singing transforms private feelings into public narratives, granting women a sense of agency and visibility within their communities. This shared engagement strengthens social cohesion, nurtures resilience, and fosters a sense of empowerment that is both personal and communal.²¹

In essence, Maithili and Magahi folk songs are far more than entertainment or ritual accompaniment; they are dynamic instruments of identity formation, community building, and cultural preservation. They allow women to negotiate social hierarchies, challenge patriarchal norms, assert agency, and transmit knowledge and values across generations. Through these songs, women maintain a living connection to their cultural heritage, while simultaneously articulating subaltern perspectives, fostering collective solidarity, and ensuring the resilience and continuity of their traditions. The enduring presence of these songs highlights the central role of women not only as performers but also as active agents in shaping social, cultural, and communal identities, thereby demonstrating the profound impact of folk music on gender, society, and regional heritage in Bihar.²²

Contemporary Shifts

In recent decades, the landscape of Maithili and Magahi folk music has experienced significant transformations, shaped by migration, media, globalization, and scholarly attention. One notable shift is the impact of migration and diaspora. As women move from rural villages to urban centers for education, employment, or marriage, they carry their folk traditions with them. These songs serve as cultural anchors, preserving memories, familial bonds, and a sense of rootedness in unfamiliar environments. Whether sung during domestic gatherings, religious occasions, or informal social spaces, these performances maintain continuity of identity, enabling women to transmit linguistic, musical, and ritual knowledge to younger generations even far from their native villages. In diasporic contexts, folk music becomes a vehicle of nostalgia and collective memory, allowing women to reconstruct and relive the rhythms, stories, and emotions of their ancestral homes.²³

At the same time, the rise of media and popular culture has introduced new dynamics. Bhojpuri, Maithili, and regional films, as well as television and online platforms, have increasingly incorporated folk elements to appeal to wider audiences. While this has contributed to the popularization of folk music, it has

also led to commercialization, where authentic women's voices and traditional expressions risk being overshadowed by entertainment-oriented renditions. Folk songs are sometimes adapted, simplified, or stylized for commercial purposes, which may dilute their original socio-cultural meanings and subtle critiques of gender and class. Despite these challenges, media exposure has also offered opportunities for women performers to gain visibility and recognition, reaching audiences who might otherwise remain disconnected from these traditions.²⁴

Another important contemporary shift is the revival and documentation of women's folk songs by scholars, cultural activists, and heritage organizations. Recognizing that oral traditions are vulnerable to erosion, researchers are now systematically archiving songs, recording performances, and publishing collections, ensuring that women's voices are preserved for posterity. Festivals, workshops, and community initiatives further provide platforms for women to perform and share their repertoire, thereby reinforcing the historical, artistic, and social value of these songs. Through these efforts, women's contributions are increasingly acknowledged not merely as entertainment but as cultural knowledge, social commentary, and historical testimony.²⁵ Such initiatives also promote intergenerational transmission, inspiring younger women to learn, perform, and sustain these traditions in ways that honor their original context and significance. Collectively, these contemporary shifts—migration, media engagement, and scholarly documentation—reflect a dynamic interplay between continuity and change in Maithili and Magahi folk music. While challenges such as commercialization and loss of authenticity persist, the active participation of women in performing, preserving, and innovating their musical heritage ensures that these songs remain living expressions of identity, resistance, and cultural memory. In an era of globalization and rapid social transformation, women's folk music continues to assert its relevance, highlighting the enduring power of collective voice, creativity, and agency within Bihar's cultural landscape.²⁶

Conclusion

Women's voices in Maithili and Magahi folk music represent far more than mere cultural artifacts; they are living testaments to resilience, creativity, and socio-cultural agency. Through ritual songs, labor chants, lullabies, and festive compositions, women have historically articulated their experiences, emotions, and perspectives, often negotiating restrictive social norms and patriarchal structures. These folk expressions function simultaneously as instruments of resistance, spaces of solidarity, and mediums of identity formation, enabling women to critique injustices, preserve collective memory, and maintain cultural continuity across generations. In contemporary contexts, the migration of communities, engagement with media, and initiatives in documentation and revival have further enhanced the reach and recognition of these musical practices, while also presenting challenges related to commercialization and authenticity. By acknowledging, recording, and promoting women's folk music, scholars, activists, and cultural institutions not only safeguard Bihar's intangible heritage but also amplify the voices of women who have historically been marginalized in dominant historical and social narratives. Ultimately, Maithili and Magahi folk music exemplify how women negotiate tradition and transformation simultaneously, asserting agency through song, sustaining community bonds, and

shaping the cultural identity of present and future generations. The continued recognition and empowerment of women as performers, preservers, and innovators remain central to preserving the richness, diversity, and vitality of Bihar's folk music traditions.

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