



Research article

Female Subjectivity & Transgressive Sexuality in Bhawaiya Musical Traditions: Mirroring the Lived Realities of North Bengal

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Abstract

Bhawaiya is one of the most popular folk song genres of North Bengal. If folk songs are the perfect medium for portraying the lives of marginal people, Bhawaiya becomes the gateway for exploring the female passion and emotion of everyday life. Bhawaiya is the folk song of the Rajbanshis, who have intermingled their language in Bhawaiya. Bhawaiya is attached to every sphere of their lives. Some of the eminent Bhawaiya artists of North Bengal are Surendranath Roy Basuniya, Shailen Roy, Jeeten Maitra, Harishchandra Pal, and Tulsi Lahiri. Today, Bhawaiya has crossed the regional border and reached the international arena. Most of the love songs of Bhawaiya talk about illicit love affairs, which deviate from the oppressive social norms and institutions of marriage. They become the means to express the collective female voices of subjectivity and desire. It is the song of the heart and soul of the people of North Bengal. The present study aims to explore emotions that are often deemed deviant, but these voices can challenge patriarchal norms and reconstruct female subversive subjectivity.

Keywords: Bhawaiya, Rajbanshi, North Bengal, Female Subjectivity, Female Sexuality, Subversive Desire, Authorship.

Introduction

Traditional culture mirrors rituals, traditions, and cultural activities, such as costumes, food, dance, music, etc., of a community. Music is one such important means through which the culture of that community is manifested and mirrored. Music acts as a potent medium to express human thoughts and emotions. It is a powerful offshoot of any culture that evinces the development and evolution of human society. In this evolutionary history of mankind, folksong as a genre function as a significant medium to reflect the ways of life of a community.

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Folksong reflects the ways of life, and the cultural milieu; it is the result of the relationship between humans and his/her views of different aspects of life (Khan 1987). Although in this modern era, globalization has subsumed the folk culture, the indigenous culture of a community needs to be commemorated, as the history and tradition of a nation are exhibited through the folk culture. Ashutosh Bhattacharya remarks that “the essence of the culture of the Bengali nation can be found in the folk culture of Bengal” (Bhattacharya 9). Folk is the cornerstone of all culture; the culture of a community is not complete without the study of its folk culture. Those who have disregarded their native, indigenous culture have lost the all-around development of their culture, tradition, and heritage. It manifests in daily life, human relationships, social, economic, and religious status of society. It is the source of other cultures; it is the pillar of the culture and tradition of human society. Here, ‘Dotara’ and ‘Bhawaiya’ come to the forefront to enliven the culture and traditions of North Bengal.

What is a Bhawaiya song?

Bhagirath Das, in his book, *Bhawaiya Madhurjya Sunidasher Jibon O Gan*, comments on different types of folk songs of Bengal and states:

“Bhawaiya in the North
Bhatiali in the East
Jhumur in the West
Baulalli in the South” (Das, 10).

Amid different types of folk songs, Bhawaiya is the folk song of the Rajbanshis, the original inhabitants of North Bengal. They have intermingled their own language in this folk song genre, and it has become the song of their hearts. Bhawaiya is regarded as the upholder and bearer of the tradition and culture of North Bengal. Bhawaiya is often called ‘song of separation’, ‘song of desire’, or ‘song of women sung by men’. These folk songs mainly talk about women’s courtship, devotion to love, and chastity. Women’s conjugal life, duty towards their home and hearth, their social status, etc., become the principal issues of the lyrics of Bhawaiya. They also incorporate themes like love for the motherland, spiritual awareness, education awareness, environmental awareness, etc. Pronunciation of the word ‘Bhawaiya’ generates the meaning of ‘a song of love’. Bhawaiya means ‘Bhao’ + ‘Aiya’, i.e., ‘Bhao’ means ‘Bhab’ (love, emotion) and ‘Aiya’ means bearer of that ‘Bhab’; hence, the word ‘Bhawaiya’ refers to the person who carries the ‘Bhab’ and sings the song of love. A Bhawaiya artist uses different types of musical instruments like Dotara, Kasi, Karka, Juri, Sarinda, Bansi, Dhol, Ghontaal, etc.

Origin of Bhawaiya

Bhawaiya folk song emerged in the undivided Rangpur district, Nepal, Bihar, Assam and seven districts of North Bengal such as Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Maldah. But, the Bhawaiya song primarily originated in Cooch Behar during the reign of Maharaja Biswa Singha and these songs were primarily sung during the crowning ceremony of the kings. Bhawaiya is called the folk song of Cooch Behar as it was evolved in the hands of folk musicians of Cooch Behar such as Surendranath Roy Basuniya, Jateen Maitra, Abbasuddin Ahmed, Nayeb Ali Tepu, Parimohan Das. Although the women’s love affair, devotion, and their chastity were the primary issues of the Bhawaiya song, females were not permitted to sing these songs; they were sung by males. They also included songs on agriculture, rural festivals, activities, and the environment. Today, the folk song Bhawaiya

is not restricted to the regional area of North Bengal; it has crossed the regional border and reached the international arena. Nowadays, the Bhawaiya song is performed in government functions, and in North Bengal, the State Bhawaiya Sangeet Competition is also conducted every year. As Bhawaiya is the folk song of the Rajbanshi community, these songs are sung in their festivals, marriage ceremonies, and rituals.

Different types of Bhawaiya

North Bengal's folk song Bhawaiya is not limited to a particular theme; different types of Bhawaiya songs can be found.

a. Devotional Bhawaiya Songs

Devotional Bhawaiya songs are usually sung to uplift the spirits of an aggrieved mass by providing them with the soothing tones of a folk cultural masterpiece like Bhawaiya. Various Bhawaiya songs are written with the influence of devotional traits of Vaishnavism and Sufism. They are performed in the form of Palagan of North Bengal. Mainamati songs, Nayansari songs are examples of this category.

b. Bhawaiya Songs of the Deities

These are Rajbanshi songs that deal with the spiritual issues. Rajbanshis worship various gods and goddesses, and during their worship, different types of Bhawaiya songs are sung to please the deities. Such songs are Sitol Puja song, Sonaraya songs, Katipuja song, etc.

c. Marriage songs

These songs are mainly sung by women, and they express various emotions associated with the different stages of marriage. They celebrate the rituals of marriage, the togetherness of the married couple, and blessings for a happy married life. Some of the songs talk about the difficulties of newly married life, domineering husbands, unsympathetic in-laws, etc. Madankam song, Tistaburi song, Mecheni song, and Satyapir song are some of the wedding songs sung at the wedding.

d. Bhawaiya songs of love, pain, and separation

The primary theme of the Bhawaiya song is love and separation. Here, we find the emotional bond of mahut and maishal (one looks after the elephant and buffalo) and the cart driver for their lovers. It is also seen that a woman is attracted by the dotara of mahut and maishal and sings the song:

*“O ki Garial bhai
Kata rabo aar panther dike chayare
Je din gariyal Ujan jay
Narir nana more jhuriya raya re
O ki Garial bhai
Hakao gari tui Chilmarir bandare
Aar ki kabo dusker jwala
Garial Bhai, gathiya chikan mala re
O ki Garial bhai
Kato Kadin mui nidhua pathare” (Paul, 5).*

The pang of separation is evident when a woman is far away from her lover Maishal and worries for him as he has not returned home for a long time.

“Mahis charan more mahishal bandhu re
 Bandhu kon ba charer majhe
 Ela kene Ghantir bajan
 Na shong mui kane maishal re
 Maishal dotara bajeya
 Kon ba kathay hichen gosa
 Na dhekken firiya re
 Takhane na kaichong maishal re
 Maishal na jan goyal para
 Goyal parar chengrigula
 Jane dhula para maishal re
 Takhane na kaichong maishal dhura
 Chhal kariya karia nibe
 Hater dotara maishal re” (Paul, 80).

Bhawaiya song also reflects the pain of a woman when her husband is in love with another woman:

“Kiser more randhan kiser more baron
 Kiser more haludi bata
 More pranath anyer bari jaya
 More angina diya ghata
 O pran sajani, kar sange kabo dusker katha?
 Aro jadi dyakhong aro jadi shonong
 Anyajner sange katha
 Ei heno joubana sagare bhasabo
 Pasane bhangibo matha
 O pran sajani kar aage kabo dusker katha
 Nider alise hat pare balishe
 Mane karang bandhu bujhi aachhe
 Chyatan haya dekhong bandhu nai bagale
 Buk khan more chhhangchhaga haiche” (Basuniya, 51).

Bhawaiya song not only reveals the sorrow and separation of women from their lovers but also talks of the love of father-son and mother-daughter:

“Mor kaga re kaga
 Jakhan mao mor randhe bare
 Patra na dyen kaga mayer haste
 Maribe mao mor agunat pariya re
 Jakhan mao mor anja kote
 Patra na dyan kaga mayer haste
 Maribe mao mor galat katari diya re
 Jakhan mao kor bichinat shote
 Patra dyan kaga mayer haste
 Moribe mao mor bichinat shutiya re” (Adhikary, 41).

e. Bhawaiya songs on nature:

In many Bhawaiya songs, we find detailed depictions of Mother Nature. Some of the songs offer pictorial depictions of rivers, mountains, forests, and tea gardens of North Bengal. In every monsoon, the rivers of North Bengal are flooded every year resulting in damage and destruction. There are many songs about the rivers of North Bengal like Teesta, Torsa, Dharla, Kaljani etc.

*“Mon mor kandere Gadadharer bhanginere dakhiya
Bari ghar mor bhangiya re nilu dakhiya dakhiya
Maa mor kande re
Aji ghargirsthi mor bhangiya nilu re
O nadi tui bhangiya nilu par
Vaat nai kapor nai kor thakang parar ghar
Mor man mor kande re-”* (Adhikary, 12).

Construction of Female Subjectivity through Embodied Emotions

A. Question of authorship and Bhawaiya as the medium of female desire

The lyrics of Bhawaiya primarily embody the female desires and experiences but the question of authorship is crucial to be discussed here. Generally, it is proposed that it is men who speak for the women and their pain and suffering. The idea of female youth or joubon is central to Bhawaiya songs. In other words, it is said that the poets who write for women become a medium to talk about the female passion or youth (joubon) as evident in the song:

*“Aaj ki diya bandhiya raikhobo re
Amar a naya Joubon re
Sona na hoy, roopa na hoy je- mala goraye golay dibo
Taka na hoy poisa na hoy je- joubon bakshe tuliya thuibo
Arreh taama na hoy, kasa na hoy je taak dore uti khuibo
Moni na hoy, manik na hoy joubon anchole bandhibo”* (Khandoker, 110).

Because of the gendered patriarchal society, in the earlier period, women could not express their desires and passions; it is male poets who can transcend the gendered identity and speak for women. When the female sensuality and adulterous desires are spoken through the mouths of the male poets, they are not stigmatized, but these subjects are accepted by the audience. Thus, the women are portrayed as sexual subjects rather than male objects of desire (Barua 67). Therefore, the lyrics of Bhawaiya express the sufferings and pain of those women who cannot express their pain. Thus, the female voice is heard and female subjectivity is constructed in this act of acceptance. So, Bhawaiya enables the male author to think like a woman to express her feelings and emotions, as Bhawaiya is mainly concerned with female sensuality and desire. But at the same time, there exist some contradictory opinions about the authorship of Bhawaiya songs. It is often said that Bhawaiya is influenced by the pala gaan where the female characters were often depicted with important subject positions and this trend became popular to the audience. Bhawaiya started with that characteristic of pala gaan making female as the first person and bringing her suffering, pain, and desire to the forefront. It is often said that most of the Bhawaiya songs of earlier periods are collected; they are transmitted from one person to another when the women used to sing during their work in the field. Folk songs are primarily collective, oral and transferred from one generation to another. So, it is difficult to ascertain the exact authorship of the folk songs. But it is true that

Bhawaiya is a folk song genre that approves female desires, emotions, pain, and suffering as the primary themes.

Ranjit Deb in his book about Bhawaiya depicts the romanticized love between man and woman and he states, “The love story depicted in Bhawaiya lyrics originated from worldly love between man and woman, but when it takes the form of art, personal emotions go beyond the individual- not owned by the lovers anymore- becoming unworldly” (Deb, 112). He refers to a well-known Bhawaiya song ‘Bhawaiya gane biye o dampotto bohirbhuto prem’ that explains the adulterous desire of a young wife whose husband cannot satisfy her. Deb comments that “it is undeniable that these songs ignored social norms and celebrate adulterous desire” (Deb,133). In his book, Deb not only argues over the reason for female adulterous desire but also talks of female subjectivity and the establishment of the female voice.

B. Female Bhawaiya Singers

Contemporary Bhawaiya songs composed by the Bhawaiya singers and composers depict the lives and experiences of the singers. But female songwriters are very few to be talked about. Nasrin Khandoker, in her book *Songs of Deviance and Defiance*, talks about the lives and experiences of some of the female Bhawaiya singers of North Bengal. One such woman is Aparna, hailing from Cooch Behar. She is both a composer and singer of her own songs. She says that her songs are her weapons to express her angst about the things happening all around. She not only writes songs about her own life but also about other women like her mother and her friends. She writes about the suffering of women in a male-dominated society. She says:

I wrote a song about one of my girlfriends who was not able to get married. I wrote that spring is coming and going, but the flowers are not blooming. Not only did I write a song about her, but I also prayed for her marriage. Being a devoted Hindu, not only did I pray to my Thakur, I fasted with Muslims, and went to the Muslim *majhar*. (Khandoker, 116)

When she is asked about the issue of authorship, she states:

The way I write songs from the stories I hear and feel, that’s how old songs were written, too. There are so many songs that are exclusively written by women, like the *biyar gaan*, *pujar gaan*, *sadol gaan*, *saitoler gaan*, *soyari melar gaan*. All these songs are women’s songs. (Khandoker, 117)

But all the female Bhawaiya singers are not strong enough to express their own feelings. They cannot claim the authorship of their songs, probably because of the fear of the dominant patriarchal society. They are afraid of society; if they express their adulterous desires and their feelings, they may face public humiliation. Therefore, they allow their songs and voices to come out of man’s writing and reach the audience. Khandoker refers to another woman named Amina who wants to tell her story, but at the same time, she is afraid of her husband. She fears her story may cause trouble in her married life. She talks about her life struggle to Khandoker, but she does not allow Khandoker to record her interview about her suffering and struggle. Despite all the impediments, she continues her singing with the ray of hope that one day her husband will support her passion (Khandoker, 118).

C. Contemporary Bhawaiya songs filled with symbols and metaphors

In the course of time, Bhawaiya has moulded its style and form; it now employs symbols and metaphors to talk about the everyday life of women. In traditional Bhawaiya songs, the lovers

are mainly maishal and mahut, but now there is no restriction on the new forms of the songs. Now, the lovers can be anyone, like a grocery shopkeeper, or a rickshaw driver who flirts with female customers or passengers. Khandoker refers to one song, “missed calls,” where the male lover is giving a missed call to the woman, and here, the metaphor of Krishna’s flute is transformed with the metaphor of ‘missed call.’ But the tone of the song remains the same, revealing the longing and desire of the lovers to see each other (Khandoker, 121). So, Bhawaiya becomes the medium through which female desires, passions, and emotions are reflected and reach the common people. Today, the songs are not only about female suffering and misery but also about sensual desires, anger, and their experience of everyday life. These songs do not reflect the women as the victims, but they reproduce the female subjectivity. Bhawaiya becomes the sphere where women can raise their voices and express their divergent desires. In today’s world of capitalist society, Bhawaiya songs transcend the boundary of collective authorship; here, each song becomes the cultural product of an individual. However, the scope of transformation and creativity is very limited in this generic pattern. Even in the era of popular culture, the female first person and her voice still continue to be focused on this genre of folk songs. Here I can refer to a song reflecting a woman’s craving for her sensual youth:

*“Doyal re- kar joinye rakhibore sonar Jouban
Lage nai koi doyal re, doyal baap mayer aage
Tola matir bola jemon re doyal holgol holpol kore
Oi moto mor sonar jouban dine dine bare re”* (Khandoker, 130).

As I have illustrated earlier Bhawaiya songs are not all about female suffering, they also explore the women’s anger and frustration towards their lovers who are indifferent towards the feelings of the women. The meanings of the songs also depend on the context and the interpretation of the audience. Here, I must refer to a well-known Bhawaiya song depicting an extramarital affair:

*“Eki ekbar asiya sonar chand mor jao dekhiya re
O diya o diya jan re bondhu dara na hon par
Ore thauk mon tor, dibar dhubar dekhay paoya vaar re
Kora kande kuri kande, kande bali hans, ore dahuki kandone o mui chharnu bhaiyar dyash re..
Aailat fote aailo kashiya, dolat fote hola
Ore baap-maye becheya khaichhe soyami pagela re
Loke jemon moynare poshe pinjiraat voriya
Ore oi moton narir Jouban rakidong bandiya re”* (Khandoker, 131).

The song is immensely popular. Here, the girl has an affair with a man but her parents have fixed her marriage to a crazy husband. She now pines for her lover but the connotation of an extramarital love affair is ignored in the mass appeal. It is said that she is pining for her husband who is indifferent towards her. What is to be noticed here is the mass appeal of the songs- whether it is extramarital or not. The female passion for love is always an important factor to be discussed in Bhawaiya songs.

Bhawaiya in the Context of Folk Songs of Bengal

Among different forms of folk music, Baul, Bhatiali, Bhawaiya are the most known genres. These three genres share some commonalities and differences and, this section, will talk about these three musical formats in the context of female subject and their sexuality. Bhawaiya becomes the sphere for the exposure of deviant female emotions. The unsatisfied

women in their married lives or the widows had to suppress their desires and sensuality in the patriarchal society but the Bhawaiya songs became the medium to reveal their unsatisfied desires through the songs. Bhawaiya basically focuses on the everyday lives of the women as evident in the song:

“Tui more nidoyaar kaliya re
 O mor kaliya doya nai tor prane re
 Angina samotiya, ghor na lepiya ghor na muchhinu re
 O mor kaliya beray nai mor ghore re
 Chhyaka na pariya, kapor na dhuiya kapor shukanu re
 O mor kaliya pindiya dekhaimo noi kake re
 Vaat na chareya vaat na randhinu vaat na barinu re
 O mor kaliya khawaiya nai mor ghore re
 Bichana jhariya bichina parinu, musori tananu re
 Mor kaliya showaiya nai mor ghore” (Khandoker, 85)

So, the song depicts the life of a woman whose lover is not at home; she is crying for her absent lover, and she has stopped her mundane chores.

Bhatiali songs mainly focus on the lives of the people of riverine areas and are mostly popular in the Eastern area of Bangladesh. The word ‘bhati’ refers to the riverine areas, so the songs depict the rivers, tides, and the lives of the boatmen. Both Bhatiyali & Bhawaiya criticize the patriarchal society and its institution of marriage. However, the metaphors of Bhawaiya are more direct than the Bhatiali songs. The primary difference between the two genres is geographical; Bhatiali originates from Bangladesh, whereas Bhawaiya is the song of North Bengal, incorporating both sides of the Bangladesh and India border.

Bauls, the wandering minstrels originally from Bengal, are known for their soothing songs charged with the philosophy of body and soul. Music is their medium to be united with their ‘Moner Manush’ (Man of the Heart). When people are fighting over religious issues and creating segregation among them, this Baul sect is talking about love and communal humanity. They do not believe in the worship of idols, and their philosophy is a blend of Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Music for them is not just a source of entertainment, but a medium to communicate their thoughts with the common people. Lalon Shah, the forerunner of this Baul tradition, has tried to dissolve barriers like caste, class, gender, religion, etc., and his main concern is humanity. Lalon’s philosophy is the philosophy of searching for the ‘Moner Manush’ that has no caste or class discrimination. It is Lalon Shah who has made Baul songs accessible to people and established his Gharana as a distinct one. Women have a significant role in Baul philosophy, and they are honoured within their sect. It indicates a stable gender equation that exists in the Baul community. Lalon also talks about the emancipation of women and the equality of men and women in society.

If we compare Bhawaiya and Baul, we will find that Bhawaiya sexuality is material, whereas Baul sexuality is spiritual. Baul is a lifestyle, but Bhawaiya does not possess any ritualistic practice concerning the idea of love. Baul concentrates on the experiences of the senses and body, and Bhawaiya also talks of embodied emotions of living experience. Generally, Bhawaiya bears the feminine image of love and suffering, whereas Baul contains within itself the spiritual, philosophical, male image. But for Lalon, women are equal to men. Lalon followers state that a woman seems to be God to them. So, the relationship between men and women is sacred and blessed. This alludes to the easeful and stable gender relationship between men and women in the Baul community. Women are the means of their sadhana,

and they open the door to moksh for the sadhaka. In Baul philosophy, female (Prokiti/ Radha) is the primordial creative force. A Baul song is worth mentioning here-

“Eber mole meye hobo mohot songo
Cheye nebo”

Conclusion

Bhawaiya has now gained immense popularity; it now competes at the international level. In various government functions, Bhawaiya songs are sung. Tistaganga festival (State Bhawaiya festival) is held every year with government funding. Talented artists are felicitated and emerging artists are also appreciated. Many private training centres and schools are established in different parts of North Bengal to teach Bhawaiya songs. In the case of Bhawaiya songs, proper pronunciation, tune, rhythm, diction and melody are necessary; therefore, proper training centres are needed. But in today’s world, folk songs are being commercialized and Bhawaiya songs are also being distorted. In the context of the commercialization of Bhawaiya, Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya writes in the preface to *Uttar Banger Palligiti*: “But one of the main features of regional folk music is that, apart from the singers of its particular region it cannot be performed properly in the voice of a singer from another region” (Pa,l 33). Government and private institutes must come to the forefront to preserve this genre. West Bengal Government and the West Bengal Rajbanshi Development and Cultural Board are now providing musical instruments to the Bhawaiya artists free of cost. The government also has also started a monthly allowance scheme under which one thousand rupees per month are given to the folk artists. Recently, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University has offered Rajbanshi Certificate Course and Diploma Course in 2018 and 2020 respectively. Students can enroll here to learn proper pronunciation and grammar of the Rajbanshi language.

To sum up, it may be said that Bhawaiya is the song of the heart and soul of the people of North Bengal. It is the song of the Rajbanshis who have mixed their own language, tone, temper and emotion with it. These songs utter the language of love, pain, and suffering and depict the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of North Bengal. This once popular rural folk song genre form is now facing competition in the age of extreme globalization. In the course of time, newer forms of entertainment like television, the internet, and radio have captured the field of older art forms. The changing taste of the audience, popularity of the mass media, modernization and lack of patronage have posed a threat to this folk genre. Globalization is necessary for the development of a community but it cannot be at the cost of ignoring our traditional folk-art form.

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