Singing Songs, Narrating Lives: Desire and Dissent in Rajbangsi Women's Folksongs

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Abstract: In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the attempt to 'construct' the 'imagined ' nation of India, in line with the colonial, modern idea of the nation, resulted in a process of sanitization, appropriation and assimilation directed at the lower caste and tribal communities. However, on delving into the expressive culture of the Rajbangsi women of North Bengal, we encounter a realm of subversive female articulations and practices, offering glimpses into an alternate culture which destabilizes modern notions of decency and morality.

In my paper, I would like to study the oral songs of Rajbangsi women, *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives. Through singing they reclaim spaces for assertion of freedom, choice and agency, and challenge patriarchal norms and the dominant stereotype of women as passive victims.

A critical analysis of these songs as narratives through postcolonial feminist theory will shed light on the subversion of the dominant ideals of Indian Hindu womanhood and foreground the emergence of a new kind of female subject.

Keywords: Rajbangsi, life narratives, folksongs, selfhood, femininity, patriarchy, nationalism, Brahminical patriarchy, subversion, womanhood, lived experiences, rebellion

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the wave of colonialism, nationalism and communalism created a nexus of power within which the female body was the central site of control and domination. The imagination of India as a Hindu nation, and the attempts to 'construct' the national space in line with the colonial, modern idea of the nation, resulted in a process of sanitization, appropriation and assimilation directed at the lower caste and tribal communities. At the centre of this were women and their expressive traditions. Critics like Charu Gupta, Sumanta Banerjee, Partha Chatterjee, Anindita Ghosh et al. have written about this process of curbing female sexual liberation in the nineteenth century. The process is traced back to the introduction of colonial obscenity laws, particularly, The Indian Penal Code of 1860, and the measures taken by the state to curb feminine expressions in the name of culture, sanctity, and decency. Charu Gupta draws attention to the process of redefinition of sexual representations of women in literature as well as popular cultural traditions in the colonial context to construct a modern Hindu nationalist identity (4). She also sheds light on the crucial role of language, literature and print in disseminating dominant ideas and shaping national, regional, and communal consciousness. Therefore, the task of feminist historiographers was rendered more difficult, pushing questions of female desire and sexuality to a relam of silence. Several scholars have been working to find the absent female voice within this discourse. Aparna Bandopadhyay's work *Desire and Defiance: A Study of Bengali Women in Love 1850-1930*- based on upper caste Bengali women's rebellious acts of love- argues for a different notion of womanhood, one which is resistant, vocal, and assertive. Charu Gupta's book *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India i*s another important work which contests the dominant narrative of women as complacent victims of the colonial/nationalist patriarchal Brahmanical state.

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In this paper, I study the oral songs of Rajbangsi women, *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives. There are songs of widows, child brides, young, unmarried women, married women, and extra marital relationships. The subjective, lyrical 'I' accords an authentic voice, making women the subjects and narrators of their story. Through singing they reclaim spaces for assertion of freedom, choice and agency, and challenge patriarchal norms and the dominant stereotype of women as passive victims. They represent another arena of culture where we find a divergent picture of femininity than what was espoused within dominant discourses. Bhawaiya are songs of love and desire that transcend the boundaries of heteronormativity and conjugality, which according to Bose are the defining parameters of sexuality in Indian society (x). These songs also offer a critical scrutiny of the two institutions which govern female sexuality- state and marriage. Bose writes, "To reconceptualize the "force-field" of sexuality, it would be necessary, first and foremost, to reconstruct Indian female sexuality as one that could break through the heterosexual/conjugal relationship as the only acceptable norm, and to recognize alternative patterns of sexual behaviour not simply as sites of resistance and rebellion but as possibilities both valid and acceptable" (xiv). We find several of these 'alternative patterns' within the vocabulary of the *bhawaiya* songs. Herein we have a voice of critique against dominant ideals of Indian Hindu womanhood (defined by notions of chastity and purity, and constructed as national and cultural symbols) as well as assertion of desires which transgress social norms and conventions, enabling us to envision a divergent world where modern notions of decency and morality are turned on its head.

Rajbangsi Folk Songs and Subversive Subcultures

The Rajbangsis are a social sub group inhabiting, at present, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Dinajpur and Darjeeling in North Bengal, Goalpara in Assam, and Rangpur in Bangladesh. The community has suffered multiple layers of oppression from the colonial period till the contemporary postcolonial time. As Girindra Narayan Ray points out, there are several conflicts and dualities at the core of the Rajbangsi identity, but through the course of history, they have always occupied a marginalised, subaltern position in society. While Charu Chanda Sanyal sheds light on the colonial discourses of the Rajbangsi tribal identity, Swaraj Basu suggests that the Rajbangsis, along with the Namasudras and Pods, belonged to the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy in Bengal. Despite movements for kshtriyahood within the community, the Rajbangsis continue to be seen as an inferior, lower caste group. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Partition, they suffered further marginalization, leading to the emergence of a lower class Rajbangsi identity. All these elements form a network within which the Rajbangsi identity is constructed as the 'other'- the tribal other, the lower caste other and the lower class other. And, like all other communities clubbed under the banner of the "lower orders", the Rajbangsis faced a wave of cultural cleansing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their language, culture and expressive traditions were constructed as inferior, unrefined, backward and vulgar, while the polite, bhadralok culture was deemed fit for representing the national tradition. Under these dichotomising forces, the strong assertions of female agency and freedom in *bhawaiya gaan* were labelled as 'bawdy'; it laid the ground for their erasure and assimilation.

Bhawaiya Gaan are songs of love and emotion. We find a powerful female voice in *bhawaiya gaan.* These songs are mostly sung by Rajbangsi women, and also by the Rajbangsi men who spend most of their days away from home, for work. The element of affect and emotion gains centrestage here. However, a process of sanitization and appropriation of the Rajbangsi folksongs was underway from the nineteenth century onwards, which became more pronounced specifically in the 1950s and 1960s when these songs were played on the radio. Barman sheds light on the prioritization of songs with 'religious' content and suppression of the 'vulgar' ones dealing with female desire. The various attempts at cleansing and modifying the lyrics of the songs can be seen as an attempt on the part of the middle-class Brahmanical patriarchal state to control the ideological challenge posed by them. The free, powerful expression of desires in *bhawaiya gaan* posed a threat to patriarchy and it

defied the notion of womanhood which was foregrounded in the nationalist movement. In the post-colonial era stretching till our contemporary times, the liberal ethos of *bhawaiya* shatters bhadralok conceptions of culture, politeness, morality, and civilization. The study of *bhawaiya gaan* through the lens of gender and gendered experiences offers us a glimpse into an alternate culture of female assertiveness and agency.

In both western ideas of romantic love as well as Indian notions of conjugality, there was a strict distinction between the domain of sexuality or the erotic and the domain of conjugal domesticity. While the Western tradition idealized the companionate marriage, focusing on the cultivation of the female mind through education (albeit within limits), the Indian thought was predominated by the ideas of *satitva* and *pativrata*. Therefore, the institution of marriage failed to include and address the question of female desire as their status was reduced to the property of the husbands and sexual pleasure was constructed as a duty the wife is to offer the husband. As Charu Gupta points out, there was strict demarcation between sex for reproduction and sex for pleasure. Marriage as an institution regulated power over women's bodies and constituted discourses surrounding female desire, sexuality, and femininity, which became intrinsically related to the image of the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth century. When seen within this historical backdrop, the revolutionary potential of *bhawaiya* songs comes to the surface. Critics are of the opinion that *bhawaiya* are songs of emotion/'bhav' and the predominating emotion found here is one of love. However, the idea of love articulated in these songs is not restricted within the purview of the marital institution, instead love here is represented as the unsurmountable force of eros, overflowing social barriers like the tumultuous rivers of North Bengal. One of the most recurring themes in *bhawaiya* is the vocalization of pre-marital and extramarital love. The expression of desire in the female voice towards a man other than the husband holds a radical challenge to the moral and sexual norms of the Bengali Hindu patriarchal society. This vocalization is significant because firstly, it offers an implicit critique of the institution of marriage which fails to recognize female desire, secondly, it represents a strong voice of affirmation and assertion of female sexuality, and thirdly, it contests prevalent notions of womanhood and femininity defined within patriarchal discourses. Partha Chatterjee stated that women in the nineteenth century were confined within the domestic space and ruled by patriarchal nationalist dictates to embody the pure cultural essence of the nation. While it is undeniable that women's bodies were regulated and controlled by the state, through the study of *bhawaiya* folksongs we arrive at a new understanding of women in nineteenth century. The women of *bhawaiya* songs are not victims, rather they are subjects in their own right, narrating their lives through songs in their own voice. Rather than being the edified symbols of the pure Indian culture, the women of *bhawaiya gaan* represent a different portrait of femininity that disrupt and destablize nationalist constructions. We also find a new conception of love in these songs – sexual, erotic love, which was stigmatized in polite 'bhadralok' society. In the following sections, I will shed light on these varied notions of femininity and love expressed in *bhawaiya gaan*.

Songs of Deviant Love and Desires

Within the larger Hindu nationalist cause of glorification of marriage as the only legitimate, acceptable and true form of love, the effort to develop/create an imagined homogeneous Indian tradition through the sanskritization and sanitisation of 'uncivilized' elements and aspects, and the appropriation and assimilation of popular cultures and rituals of the marginalized, lower castes, lower class and tribes, the valorization of deviant, transgressive love in *bhawaiya* songs gain greater relevance. It contests dominant ideas and foregrounds the different vocabularies of love which were present and practiced by a large section of people. Extra marital love is not stigmatized within the rajbangsi worldview, rather it is an acceptable and common practice. Not only this, as Nasrin Khandekar points out, "Women could get a *thaykna swami* (alternative husband) if her husband left her or died, and the woman could become *Sangalu* (alternative wife or partner) to the new husband"

(113). As opposed to the atmosphere of sexual repression, in the Rajbangsi folk life we find a different cultural picture of female sexual freedom.

Ghorer kaj kamai re mor monot na nagey
I cannot concentrate on my household chores
Kalankini honu re mui jagat sansharey
I have become a disgrace to society
Kemon kori changra tok mui dekhong najarey- mor pran changra re.
How shall I catch a glimpse of you- oh my dear changra?
Mor Hoil pagla swami tore kongey nai
I did not get the chance to tell you that I was married off to a mad man
Hater sakha bhangiya re changra chol paleya jai
Let us run away together, breaking off my wedding bangles
Boidesh geiley o re changra ar toh firibar nong- mor pran changra re.
Once we reach a foreign land, there will be no looking back- my dear changra.
Dolay dolay jao re changra nodir parotey
Swinging my hips, o changra, I go to the river bank
Paichhla firi dekhong ota kay bujhi aishey
Looking back to make sure no one's watching
Jol bhoribar chhol koriya dekhiya aishong toke- mor pran changra re.
I go to the bank to cast my eyes upon you under the pretence of filling my buckets- my dear changra.[1]

In this song, a married woman expresses her wish to run away from a loveless marriage. Sexual desire, choice and agency is asserted by the woman, but it is notable that this assertion happens in a non-marital framework. In the context of erasure of sexuality from the sphere of conjugality, this song of extra-marital relationship offers a window on the alternative spaces of female sexual agency. *Bhawaiya gaan* abounds with references to extra-marital love, which can be read as an act of resistance to and transgression of patriarchal dictates. It also challenges the hegemony of conjugal love as the only form of love, and foregrounds extra-marital love as an equal, acceptable, and valid possibility. What is also noticeable is the conflation of conjugal domesticity with chores and labour, while pleasure is sought outside this space with the lover at the riverside. She states that her husband is mad, and she is imprisoned by her 'sakha', the symbol of marriage as well as confinement. Her song represents her suppressed life force (eros) and becomes the space of free unbridled expression. It is also indicated that the marriage is a non-consensual marriage where she was not given any choice. She masquerades her role of a dutiful wife who has come to fetch water in order to steal a glimpse of her '*pran changra*'. This sheds light on the everyday acts of resistance by women to assert their agency and sexuality. The oppressive atmosphere of the conjugal house is further intensified by the imagination of '*boidesh*' as the land of freedom. The word 'boidesh' means foreign land, the land to which she dreams of going with her lover to establish an equal relationship on her own terms.

Balutey randhinu, balute barinu
I have cooked and spent my life on the sands of this bank
Joley bhashiya dinu Hari
But now I have thrown the pots into the river
Ore biyar swami morley machh bhaat mui khaim re
Oh, I will relish my meals with fish though my husband dies
O bondhu moriley hobo ari.
But in the event of my friend's death, I will renounce all worldly pleasures.

The female subject in this song addresses her lover and tells him of her helplessness and victimhood within the institution of marriage and motherhood. However, through her strong assertion of desire

and will, she transcends the status of a victim and becomes the agent of her own actions. She says she'll not observe any austerity or rituals of widowhood if her husband dies but will be shattered the day her lover passes away. Through this vocalization, she rejects the patriarchal ownership of her husband and asserts her desire and emotions for her lover. Here we see a dismantling of the equation between marriage and love. Bandopadhyay writes, "In the proliferating discourses on conjugality, marriage was also portrayed as a spiritual union of souls, and a harmonious fusion of body and mind, with the wife deemed the man's *ardhangini* (the half body of the husband) and *sahadharmini* (co-practitioner of religious and spiritual duties). The sexual and procreative aspects of conjugality were subordinated to its more profound spiritual goals" (8). Such overriding of the sexual with the spiritual pushed the question of female sexual needs and desires to a sea of silence. *Bhawaiya gaan* offers a sharp critique of it, and foregrounds alternate narratives of female sexual assertions outside the purview of the marital institution.

Since the *garhiyals* (cart pullers), *moishals* (buffalo herders and cattle rearers), and *mahouts* (elephant herders) , travelled to faraway places for work, their wives would be left behind at home with their in-laws. This confined them to a life of sacrifice and duty, while being denied any conjugal happiness or intimacy with the husband. Their lives were often controlled by the power holders in the family. So, in many *bhawaiya songs*, the domestic space is depicted as oppressive, restrictive, dull, monotonous, and full of drudgery. In one song, the woman narrates how her life is regulated by the *sasuri* (mother-in-law) and *nanodi* (sister-in-law), who are the mouthpieces of patriarchy.

In this context, songs about the '*deora*' (brother-in-law) are significant. Commenting on 'devar-bhabhi' relationships in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century Uttar Pradesh, Charu Gupta stressed on the lightheartedness, joy, and lack of restraint in it as opposed to the "restrained relationship shared with the husband". This she says was because the 'devar', being the younger brother of the husband, was the only one equal to her in status and rank in the household. Emotional dependence and flirtation defined such relationships (155). She further provides historical reasons for the growth of devar-bhabhi relationships in the process of migration:

> The joint family was ruptured, and women were frequently forced to live in oppressive households, without their husbands. Male migration increased the responsibilities of women…Loneliness probably led many women to seek solace in other relationships, and the chances of getting close to their younger brother-in-law were high…The devar-babhi attraction seems to have been fairly common and it was one of the ways in which women undercut their pativrata images. (Gupta 154-155).

In the song titled, '*Bhaber deora*' we find an example of the 'devar-bhabhi' relationship. The metaphor of cooking is used to explicate the dynamic and emotional economy of the woman's relation to the *bhasur* (elder brother-in-law)*, sasur* (father-in-law), *deora*, and husband. The song delineates how the woman cooks the fish brought by the *deora* with utmost care and love. The flirtatious nature of their relationship is evident. The *'bhaber deorar'* fish is crisply fried by her, suggesting possibly the simmering, flavourful nature of their relationship, because she invites him to partake in that meal with a gesture from her bedside, and serves it to him herself, sitting in close physical proximity to him. The erotic strands of the song can be unravelled within the culinary details laid out there. It is remarkable how on one hand it successfully draws attention to women's household chores like cooking which generally do not find visibility, and on the other hand, it also invests the domestic space with a new meaning, through which it transforms from an oppressive space to a space which is being controlled by women in multifarious ways to assert their agency. The woman of the song does not break free from patriarchal structures, but resists it from within, carving out spaces and relationships marked by equality and freedom. Commenting on the transgressive potential of such songs, Charu Gupta writes, "It hints at how women were sometimes subverting expected behaviour and the dominance of husbands, how they were creating their own spaces for leisure and pleasure" (155).

Within the historical context of the Rajbangsis, several songs of longing and lament, evoking the emotions of the *biraha* rasa, are sung by the wives who are left behind at home by their husbands, who

travel faraway for earning their livelihood. Their longing, like love, is material and physical rather than spiritual or purely emotional. Here the figure of the wife is not sacrificial, dutiful, and desexualised, rather she is vocal about her deprivation, articulative of her desires and pain. She is not the object of her husband's desire, rather she is the desiring subject in these songs. Within the conservative moral framework of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal, a female asserting her sexuality and articulating her desires is a radical act of defiance. Such expressions are significant in the instrumentalization of agency.

Tola matir kola doyel re jemon holpol holpol kore
Like plucked bananas ripen with sweetness, oh bird
Oi moto sonar joibon dine dine barey re
My golden youth simmers with each passing day

The subject of this song is a lonely, young wife left behind at home by the husband for work. She is singing of her loneliness, longings, and desires. She identifies with the caged *doyel* (oriental magpie-robin) in her house and is singing to her about her sexual desires which she cannot express in front of any other person. The situation is one of entrapment in a loveless marriage defined only by duty and domesticity. In her voicing of sexual desires, there is a critique of the conventional understanding of marriage. Not only is her desire asserted and expressed here, but also a symbolic act of protest is registered, firstly, through her singing, and secondly, through the act of releasing the caged bird at the end of the song. Setting free of the bird can be read as a symbolic act of her own freedom from her claustrophobic household. By comparing the house to a cage where sexual fulfilment cannot be found, there is an implicit subversive tone in the song which suggests that the domestic space is restrictive towards women, and in order to attain sexual liberation and fulfilment one has to transgress and transcend its boundary, just like the *doyel* bird needs to be released from its cage.

In various other songs, the singing subject (in most songs, the subjects are married women) longs for sexual union with the husband and this is remarkable because conventionally we do not see women as desiring subjects, but only as objects of male desire. Such a portrait of a wife is hard to find in dominant or higher forms of literature around the nineteenth and twentieth century. A Hindu wife would conventionally be expected to stay loyal and faithful to her husband, even in his absence or in the event of his death. By articulating how difficult it is for the wife to suppress her desires, these songs subvert the idyllic ideas of loyalty and fidelity which define wifehood. Though alone and deprived, the women of bhawaiya gaan are not victims but subjects and agents of their lives. In the absence of tangible opportunities to attain freedom and realize their aspirations, these women narrate their stories and, in the process, attain their subjecthood:

nishar seshey doyel kandey re
the robin cries through the night
khopey kandey payra
the pigeons weep in their cage
basanto chhariya jay re
the spring of my life withers away
o mor barey joibon jala re
and my body burns with passion…
joiboner srotey sona re
my body is afloat
bhashiya jay mor gao
on a sea of desires
koto diney banijye geichen re
so long ago you had gone away on business
sona deshay firan na chao.
my love, won't you return home?

Defiant Voices: Songs of Single Women, Wives, Child Brides and Widows

One of the first Rajbangsi folksongs, documented by Grierson in his *The Linguistic Survey of India*, foregrounds the female voice and gendered experience of desire. Unlike the conventional image of a single, unmarried woman veiled within norms of chastity, purity and honour, we meet a desiring subject in the song:

Bapok na kao saromey mui maok na kao lajey,
Out of shame, I do not speak of my desires to my parents
Dhiki dhiki tushir oghun joleche dehar majhey,
The embers of fire are still burning in my body
…
Kohey kobe kalankini hani naik mor tatey,
Let society think I'm morally depraved, there's no harm in that
Moner sadhey korim keli pati niya sathe,
I will do as I wish with my chosen lover (Grierson 185)

"*Hosti re choran hosti re noran*" ("Oh elephant herder, you rear and move with the elephants") is another popular song about non-marital love. It sheds light on temporary, non-institutional, passionate, spontaneous love relationship between a *mahout* and a woman he meets by the Champa river. It opens up possibilities of imagining the relationship as subversive of chastity norms for unmarried women as well as ideals of 'strisvavaba' and 'pativrata'. The question, "*Ore sotto koriya kon re mahout/ Ghar a koi jon nari re*" (Oh elephant hereder, tell me honestly how many wives you have back home), is indicative of divergent marriage practices within the Rajbangsi community. Not only was the practice of polygamy common taking a '*thaykna swami*' (the practice of a woman choosing a live-in partner for herself in case one's husband passes away or leaves them), becoming 'sangalu' (a woman who lives with a man outside the bounds of matrimony) were rampant within the community. All these indicate a much more relaxed and gender equal culture which acknowledged the importance of both male and female sexuality.

Even though marital and sexual norms were more relaxed within the Rajbangsi community, patriarchy was prevalent. There are numerous songs which narrativise different forms of unjust practices and the plight of women.

Oho re baap ma a bacheya khaiche swami pagela re.
Oh my parents have sold me off in marriage to a mad man
Lokey jemon mayna re poshey pinjiray bhoriya
As people keep maynas imprisoned in cages
Oho re oi moto narir joibon rakhechong bandhiya re.
So have I kept my youthful womanhood tied down, suppressed.

In several songs we come across the term '*bacheya khaiche*' ; it is used to denote a specific kind of marriage, where the father gives his daughter in marriage to a man in return for a sum of money. This kind of marriages were prevalent among the poor who could not afford dowry and hence were incapable of getting their daughters married at an earlier age or to suitable men. These marriages were also used as a means to secure money. It is a transaction (economic/financial as well as sexual) between the father and the husband- the representative figures of male authority, and the woman is reduced to a pawn in that interchange. No surprise, therefore, that the subjects compare themselves to caged birds, trapped in loveless, non-consensual marriage with mad husbands. The absence of sexual fulfilment in such marriages of convenience is hardly a concern for the rest of the society, but in the voice of the singing subject not only do we hear a critique of that attitude, but also an assertion of her desires outside the restrictive framework of marriage. They sing to their lovers and tell them about their repressed desires.

The ideal portrait of marriage is punctured in numerous songs through the depiction of inequalities and unjust practices like domestic violence.

Oki o sangna marilu kene
Hey why did you beat me up, o husband
Bhater dukhye ore sangna kainor boshinu mui
I was crying out of hunger in the corner of the house
Kon doshetey duar bandhiya marilu aji tui.
For what fault of mine did you break open the door and suddenly hit me today.
Puber ghare marite marite randhon gharote anilu
Thrashing me from the east hut you brought me to the kitchen
Bhaat randha hari patil nyadeya bhangilu
And kicked the rice pot to the ground
Mok marilu bhaley korilu chhaoak marilu kene
Yet I silently accepted your beating; why did you still beat up my child
Chhoya-barun nagaim aji tor sangnar kopaley.
I will punish you, husband, by not permitting any physical intimacy in bed tonight.
Nin hatey dakey tuliya ponta khoanu toke
I woke you up and fed you the panta bhaat
Kolar chhaoa mor kandiya aakul
While my little child lay crying and restless
Oi na Peter bhokey.
Due to hunger.
Raitot ela tamsha dekhim bichhanat thakitey
I will now have the last laugh when we go to bed
Nitti pujar thakur aji tor thakibe upashey.
As the daily satiated appetite of your lord (phallus) will be left unfed.

The reference to '*sangna*' here suggests that it is not a normative marriage being depicted in this song. The word '*sangna*' refers to a man with whom a woman lives together, without sharing a legitimate marital bond. While this is indicative of an active, agential subject hood, as the narrative of the song suggests, even such unconventional relationships which were not controlled by the state and its institutions, could not escape the stranglehold of patriarchal dominance. The subject is singing of her experience of suffering domestic violence at the hands of her lover/husband. What stands out, however, is her challenge and resistance to his abusive behaviour. She does not submit to his beating, nor does she express any sense of fear, rather we see her boldly questioning him, "*Kon doshetey duar bandhiya marilu aji tui*". Through her words, she paints a detailed picture of his violent act, forcing him to see and reflect on it. The song ends with her rising and snatching the power away from the abuser, as she declares her decision to deny him sexual pleasure in bed as a punishment for this act. In spite of being abused and beaten, she does not relinquish control; the fight which is initiated by the lover/husband in the domestic space is carried over by her to the marital bed. And there, she does not comply to the role of the dutiful wife who unquestioningly fulfils the husband's sexual needs, but she asserts her agency and refuses to indulge in an unequal sexual relationship. The woman in this song is therefore strong willed, who asserts her agency and choice in her social as well as sexual life.

Though the Rajbangsi community had its own distinct customs, there were certain regressive practices like child marriage which were prevalent in this community too. As described by Bandopadhyay, the custom of child marriage was seen as a necessity to control wayward female sexuality and to deny them of any choice in marriage. There are several *bhawaiya* folksongs which expose these patriarchal ideals and challenge the hegemony of the institution of marriage. We hear the voice of child brides and child widows narrating their experiences of oppression, sexual repression, pain, and suffering.

Naiyare nao chapao ghatey
O boatman, moor your boat
Ore Kankher kolosh khali re thuiya
Leaving behind the kolshi from my waist
Amra jamo sathe re.
We will flee/escape together.
Ore bidhata koriya diche mok
By God's will I have become
Kancha chuler aari re.
A child widow.

Here a child widow entreats her lover, the boatman, to listen to her painful experience. The source of suffering, however, is not the death of her husband, but her unfulfilled sexual desires. She suggests her willingness to leave behind her conjugal home and go away to 'desh' with her lover. '*Kankher kolosh*', the water pitcher, here becomes the symbol of domesticity from which she wants to wrest herself. She invites her lover to spend the night with her in her 'ghar', implicitly indicating her desire for sexual consummation of their relationship. The underlying sexual overtone of the song hints towards the lack of female sexual fulfilment in the marriage. Girls would be married off before the onset of the menstrual cycle to older men, leading them to be entrapped in loveless marriages where the only legitimate sexual act was sex for reproduction. The pain and desire of the subject in this song can be read within this context as a critique of the system of child marriage. Not only does it crush down the idea that it leads to a stable and true love, but also highlights the sexual repression that women were subjected to. It is significant that the death of the husband is not perceived by her as an occasion of sorrow, rather it is seen as a moment of freedom, autonomy, and agency. In the death of the husband, she finds a voice to finally sing of her lived experience of neglect and suffering. It also provides us with a different figure of the widow – assertive and defiant of social norms of sexual and social austerity.

Bandopadhyay points out, "The non-marital relationships of widows – their relationships outside and/or not oriented towards marriage– were a persistent source of concern even after the legalisation of marriage [of widows] in 1856 …Saradaprasad Chakravarty, in his letter to a journal named *Somprakash*, identified widowhood as an important factor that led women astray (Chakravarty 1866). After losing her husband, he argued, a woman was initially overwhelmed with grief, but eventually her senses, especially her libido, got the better of her" (2–3). The central preoccupation, as we can see, is still with the uncontrollable sexual libido of women, which is seen as representative of a wild, primitive energy in need of the civilizing, modernizing control of the colonial/nationalistic patriarchal state. This control, no doubt, is asserted through the expansion of the snares of the hegemony of the institution of marriage. The songs of widows in bhawaiya are significant because here we find the authentic voice of the widows, rather than other expert voices commenting on and debating about the problems of widowhood. The overwhelming sense of lament expressed in these songs play a dual role; firstly, there is lamentation for the loss of the husband, but more importantly, we have an extreme sense of lamentation for the loss of a life of freedom, pleasure and fulfilment. In *bhawaiya*, marriage is not perceived as a spiritual union of souls, but as numerous songs elucidate, marriage is seen as a space for the physical union of bodies, for the satiation of irrepressible sexual desires. While the state used marriage as an institution for regulating female sexuality, many Rajbangsi women looked upon and used marriage as one of the means to release their sexual energy and fulfil their erotic desires. Widowhood would be agonizing because it entails the loss of that space of pleasure.

These songs enable us to see the widow as an autonomous individual, and not merely as the wife/widow of another. Bandopadhyay points out that women were expected to remain loyal to their husbands even after their death, through the observance of austere rules. Such norms define women's identity in relation to the male husband and reduce their status to properties whose ownership lies in the hands of another. These songs offer us a glimpse into the other side of the story, showing these

widows as individuals with desires, needs and aspirations, as well as human beings who feel hurt and pain (not objects to be owned and used by men).

(ore) moriya geiche mor biyar swami,
Oh, my husband has passed away
Bandichong mon mui kotoi kori,
I have tried to restrain the desires of my heart
Banda chhilo mor narir mon dilen auliya.
I was stone hearted, but now you have surged my repressed desires

This song unravels a divergent picture of widowhood. Rather than the tone of lament, here we find a lighthearted, flirtatious encounter between a widow and her lover. It is described in terms of an act of freeing from confinement: "*Banda chhilo mor narir mon dilen auliya*". The libidinal energy of this relationship is pregnant with disorderly, destructive force, emphasised in the word 'auliya' which means to render unruly and chaotic. Widowhood, therefore, is imagined in terms of freedom and agency, where she defies the role of wife and mother to assert her individuality and choice as a woman. She chooses her lover and meets him secretly, away from the surveilling eyes of her patriarchal household. This act of agency, it may be imagined, is possible because of the death of the husband and the loosening of his grasp on her life which stifled her subjecthood. That is why, rather than being a song of lament, widowhood here becomes a celebration of her sexuality and choice.

Conclusion

Anindita Ghosh writes about "a backdrop of 'invisible' but consistent gendered resistance against which to map the more well-known outbursts of the organised radical feminist movement, or of outstanding female public figures" (4). She stresses on the importance of delving into and exploring the everyday struggles and acts of dissent of individual, ordinary women, rather than always valorising acts which are collective, organizational and systemic in bringing about social and political changes or giving rise to mass movements. The female voice in bhawaiya represents one such instance of the 'everyday' struggles and transgressions of women. Their resistance constitutes in the intention as well as the aftermath of their actions, which enables them to snatch and reclaim spaces and time, though transitory, where they can assert their freedom, choice and agency. Though restrictive, these moments attain transcendental significance in the history of feminism. They stand as exemplars challenging and mocking the dominant patriarchal stereotype that depicts women only as passive victims. These narratives unfold an unseen, unread chapter of history, where women were active agents, working towards challenging patriarchal norms, rather than waiting passively for male saviours to come to their rescue.

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Notes

[1] This original song along with all other subsequent songs quoted in this paper are taken from the anthology of bhawaiya gaan, collected by Harish Pal, and published in 1973. The translations have been done by the author of the paper.

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