



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agrarian Production and the Archiving of Folksong

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Abstract: Songs that accompany women's tasks in agriculture often provide significant insights into agrarian conditions and the conditions of labour. What might songs as forms of cultural production tell us about relations of production? To investigate the extent to which songs may be used as source material to unearth the consciousness of labouring women, this essay subjects to close scrutiny two song genres from the Bhojpuri speaking region of India. It asks about the extent to which these songs provide a space for women to interrogate the existing patriarchal order and to bargain with it. This paper also explores the role of these songs in producing and reproducing the accepted gender norms.

Keywords: Peasant, work songs, *jatsaar*, agricultural tasks, cultural production, Sufism, ballads of the millstone, *kajli*, patriarchy, migration, bargaining, women, songs, Bhojpuri, Uttar Pradesh.

INTRODUCTION

In rural settings across India, rich genres of songs are invariably associated with agricultural operations carried out by women. These songs which alleviate boredom and lighten the tediousness of repetitive tasks are inseparable from women's work culture. Other than ploughing, which is done mainly by men, the tasks associated with cultivation – tilling, sowing, irrigating, weeding, reaping, spreading manure, fetching and carrying, winnowing, transplanting, and processing – are all mainly women's work. Recognition that women's songs accompany agricultural tasks serves to link women with agrarian production, and points to the need to link cultural analysis to economic analysis. What, then, might these forms of cultural production – the songs that accompany agrarian tasks – tell us about the nature of agricultural production? Since women sing while they work, to what extent can their utterances be used as source material for unearthing the consciousness of labouring women, especially on the lower rungs of caste and agrarian hierarchies?

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Is it possible, for example, to learn something about the conditions of women's labour from their songs? In other words, what may we learn about the relations of production from songs sung during processes of production? To answer this question, here I take up for analysis a couple of genres of songs associated with women's work. Earlier, in my research on women's land rights in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, that is, the Bhojpuri speaking belt, I discovered that women are much more likely to sing what they cannot, and do not, ordinarily articulate in everyday speech. Maybe they do not have the conceptual categories to do so. Moreover, the language of rights is after all an unfamiliar discourse for them. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I often found that women who were otherwise reluctant informants were transformed into eager participants during song sessions. The fact that women say so much through their songs turned out to be one of the most pleasurable aspects of doing fieldwork in eastern Uttar Pradesh (Jassal 2012).

On finding that song sessions were a far more accessible entry point than other forms of enquiry for wide-ranging discussions with the women, I adopted the recording and singing of songs as a fieldwork strategy to put my informants at ease. Being more relaxed during these sessions, the women were more likely to respond thoughtfully to my questions. Overtime, it became clear that the women's song repertoires are so rich and abundant that they deserve to be read as embodying the female voice in rural settings.

Theoretically, in making the point about the connection between women's agricultural production and cultural production, my intention is to unsettle the boundaries between political analysis and cultural analysis. In other words, it is necessary to ground cultural understanding within political economy – a method that is steadily being eclipsed in post-colonial enquiries. In making this connection, I draw on Kandiyoti's theoretical insights about "bargaining with patriarchy." The evidence indicates that women strategise within sets of specific constraints, identified as "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti 1988, 1998), to advance their own interests, but they end up reproducing prevailing gender ideologies and gender structures (Kandiyoti 1988).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the task of making visible the contribution of women to production occupied scholars and development practitioners. However, just as a previous period was characterised by a tendency to not *see* women in agriculture, we still need to grapple with the persistent tendency to not *hear* these women. If, then, we were conditioned to not see the work in which labouring women were constantly engaged, the inability to hear them has continued to obscure the voices and songs of the most marginalised of rural women. This failure also stems partly from a continued understanding of peasant women as homogenous. For the purpose of this essay, Gayatri Spivak's question could be modified to ask: Can the subaltern be heard? Or, is the subaltern heard? (Spivak 1993) Framed in this way, the question shifts our focus and asks: while the subaltern had always been speaking, were we listening?

There is another compelling reason to investigate women's songs. In the nineteenth century, social reformers placed restrictions on women of intermediate castes. The restrictions ranged from prohibitions on public singing and on women's attendance at marriage processions as well as fairs and festivals (Gupta 2001; Jassal 2012). Clearly, there was at that time among reformers a deep anxiety about the explosive content of women's songs, and in many cases it was believed that the songs were obscene. The reformers were also concerned about women's customs of collective singing. The practice of women singing together invariably appears to have aroused patriarchal anxieties. This has been documented not only in India, but also in West Asia. Lila Abu-Lughod tells us that in West Asia, the process was linked to a denunciation of women's homosocial networks because these all-women gatherings supposedly encouraged the subversion of male authority (Abu-Lughod 1990). In India, where restrictions on women's singing practices had always been largely caste- and class-specific, we find in the nineteenth century, an increasing fragmentation of women's collectivities. So if the goals of reform could be served simply by silencing women and, in a sense, disrupting women's collectivities, it is worth investigating what was going on in these women's songs. Why, after all, should there have been such concern with silencing women?

While much of the literature on folksongs from India points to evidence of both resistance and subversion in women's songs, my work shows that there is much more to it. Apart from "resistance" and "subversion" and "agency," of which there are stunning examples, what strikes the listener is the remarkable multivocality and diversity of viewpoints. In fact, resistance and subversion are terms that do not capture the myriad shades of emotion in these songs. In other words, if we were to look for examples of resistance to patriarchal norms, we would certainly find abundant evidence of these, but the point is that in looking only for such examples, there is a danger of missing out on other nuanced, subtle shades of meaning – multiple shifting and contested meanings articulated within the same frame, as it were. I therefore suggest that a multiplicity of meanings might be possible if we analyse these songs as "texts." Then, because of the existence of competing statements in any context, the songs tend to impact listeners and singers in diverse ways.

What I am putting forth in this paper, therefore, is that song-text or song-as-text, and, in this case, songs that are sung while performing labour, allow us to understand patriarchal structures and the life-contexts of women, and provide a way of viewing the agricultural tasks performed by them, which are often invisibilised by dominant understandings of work and labour.

WORK SONGS

As many of my recordings during fieldwork in eastern Uttar Pradesh were made when women were actually involved in some kind of work, two distinctive sets of songs

emerged under the category of work songs: the first are the “grinding” songs that women sing while grinding grain and spices in the courtyards of their own homes; and the second are of the smaller and pithier *kajli* or *kajri* genre, sung by labouring women as they carry out numerous tasks in the fields. Songs sung when paddy is transplanted in the month of *Ashadh* are called *ropani*, while *sohani* songs accompany weeding. During the last stages of tillage, when fields have further to be cleared of weeds, *nirwahi* songs are sung. The tasks could range from transplanting rice to weeding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, creating water channels – the list covers the entire crop cycle.

These two categories of songs are very different – not only in terms of their length and narrative content, but also in terms of mood, rhythm, and melody. The grinding songs, for instance, are rather ponderous, and tell long, dark, and macabre tales about long-suffering heroines, the anxieties associated with the transgression of caste and other patriarchal boundaries. The pertinent point with regard to the grinding songs is that they appear to serve pedagogical functions, since the important values of society appear to have been pounded in with these songs. In southern India, for instance, Sufi mystics had early recognised this potential of the grinding songs and used them to disseminate ideas about Sufism (Eaton 1974). Richard Eaton tells us that the mystic Burhan al-din Janam is associated with the *Chakkinama* (Eaton 1974, 2002), which he points out as a major development in the cultural history of the region (Eaton 2002). These songs recognised that the power that turns the wheel is also witness to the Light. They appear to have linked God, the Prophet, and the *pir* with the woman at the grindstone (*ibid.*).

In the region of eastern Uttar Pradesh, the cautionary tales of the grinding songs, or the *jatsaar* as the genre is called, while issuing notes of warning and setting out the limits of transgression, also appear to celebrate women’s ingenuity. Sometimes the songs seem to endorse the motif of Sita’s trial by fire in the *Ramayana*. Heroines in the *jatsaar* often take their own lives in order to uphold the honour of caste and family. These songs actually confirm the understanding that the stronger the patriarchal structures are, the more likely it is that women are treated as custodians of the honour of their communities. Yet it is interesting to note that the very same songs also spell out the attractions, even the irresistibility, of men of castes lower in the caste hierarchy. In this way they serve to expose the conceit of upper-caste masculinity.

On the other hand, the *kajli*, being about negotiation, throws unique light on women’s powers of persuasion and bargaining. The tone of these songs is often flirtatious, and includes much coaxing and cajoling. Bargaining is needed so that women’s work conditions are made more bearable. If the grinding songs help us see just how much women are circumscribed by patriarchal structures and constraints, the *kajli* offer clues about how women manoeuvre within these structures that bind and confine them.

Jatsaar

Work songs known as *jatsaar* are heard, along with the rumble of grinding stones, in the inner courtyards of homes. Although sung within the confines of the household, these songs are part of a wider range of songs associated with women's work in the home and the field. Since the work of processing food required for daily existence is laborious and time-consuming, diverse oral ballads have evolved to accompany these tasks.

A striking aspect of the *jatsaar* is their duration. They can be very long, usually lasting the time it takes a woman to grind the 5 kilograms or so of grain necessary to prepare a meal for an extended family.

Grinding grain and spices requires substantial effort, and women sit on the courtyard floor with the *jata* (grinding stone) held between their legs. Since the act of singing makes the task of grinding easier, usually two women, one old and one young, sing the *jatsaar* together. This arrangement also facilitates ideological transmission, in that the social values familiar to older women are conveyed to younger women. In this way the voice of experience and authority instructs the subordinate female. The physical act of grinding also resonates with the grind of daily life for women of the village.

One could surmise that, where the women sing the same kinds of songs day after day, they indeed absorb the lessons imparted in the course of this activity. For peasant women, the seemingly benign and empowering practice of singing songs of the millstones facilitates effective learning about social and gender-specific roles, as well as about power and powerlessness. It is therefore not surprising that at least in southern India, Sufi mystics of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries used grinding songs to disseminate ideas about Sufism. Millstone ballads have been recognised as a way of “speaking bitterness” in many cultures across the world. For example, songs sung by rural women while pounding maize have been used as oral testimony about a famine in Malawi that had occurred 40 years ago (Vaughan 1987).

Punishments for transgression and resistance are important themes in *jatsaar* songs. My fieldwork revealed that there are at least three categories of grinding songs. In the first category are songs describing daily lives in conjugal homes and the bleakness of women's existence. The second category dwells on conflicts within families and among close kin, including the turbulence experienced by daughters-in-law. The third narrates the consequences for women who transgress a variety of behavioural norms or violate codes of honour. In this sense, the *jatsaar* also work as cautionary tales. It could be argued that *jatsaar* songs serve to enforce gender and caste norms, which in turn have wide-ranging implications for the way women see themselves as workers in non-domestic situations and in the sphere of agricultural production.

Women's work songs often match their rhythm to the rhythm of repetitive tasks. In the case of the *jatsaar*, a distinctive rhythm accompanies as well as mimics the trundling of the two millstones (one on top of the other) that completes a full circle. *Jatsaar* songs are recognisable also by typical line endings such as "O Ram," "Nur re ki," and "Arei Rama," common in this genre. The line endings impart a rhythmic quality to the song and coincide with circular hand motions of the singers. A peasant woman confided to me that she regretted forgetting whole stanzas of songs as she now no longer engages in grinding activity. However, by mimicking the semi-circular motion of the hands across the grinding stone, she was able to remember the words of some of these songs from her youth.

Here is a fragment from a *jatsaar* about a brother's ritual visit to his sister in her marital home:

Brother do not tell of my hardships to our mother
Mother, seated on the cot spinning, you know
Tossing aside the spinning wheel will burst into tears, you know
Brother, do not tell of my hardships to our sister
Hearing about them our sister will refuse to go to her conjugal home
Brother, of my hardships just make a bundle
To toss into the river, you know.

Kajli

The *kajli* song genre is a genre of the rainy season when there is a lull in the agricultural cycle, and women can hope to get some respite and rest from their demanding duties in the fields. But this time away from work and responsibilities has to be negotiated. *Kajli* songs fully explore the range of women's emotions and relationships, and are associated both with women's labour in the fields and their playfulness during the monsoon. Paradoxically, songs about intimate inner worlds are best heard in the "anonymity" of wide open spaces. Despite their association with agricultural tasks, there is also a light-hearted quality about the *kajli* which associates them with play. This is also the genre that celebrates the monsoon rains.

Today, the *kajli* is recognised in musical circles as a light classical form. Its rural origins and, most importantly, its association with labouring women in the fields is completely forgotten. Ironically, therefore, as the genre moves from the fields to the world of "culture," to urban drawing rooms, its earthy, rural origins are effaced, and it ends up in popular understanding as simply the song of the rainy season. It is perhaps because of the overarching and pervasive aversion for manual labour today that the genre's connections with labour processes representing the collective voice of labouring women are forgotten. In its sanitised understanding, the *kajli* is seen as merely representing the "spirit" of a particular season. Further, in its incarnation as *kajri*, the light classical musical form, the genre appears to have been even more

distanced from the quotidian heritage and knowledge systems of working women, while nevertheless remaining intrinsic to their life-worlds. The tendency to not hear the voice of labouring women has obscured the origins of *kajli*. Today, classical musical traditions find themselves at a remove from these authentic labouring women's songs.

The following is a typical women's work song that has entered the world of northern India's light classical music. In this *kajli* song, a woman first requests and then asserts to her husband, her decision to return to her natal home for a break.

When the rains end, I'll return, in the rains do not think, just sing songs of devotion.
My girlfriends will come from their marital homes, dear one.
Reunions and warm embraces there are going to be, for sure.
Just get a saree and a top stitched for me to wear.
Get detached from my things, don't think, just sing bhajans.
When the rains end I'll be back, don't you think, in the rains, instead sing bhajans.
My girlfriends will dress up of course, dear.
To visit their fathers, our own worlds, dear one.
Swinging on the swings, how we'll sing, melodies of the rains to sing.
Just for four days, take care of the kitchen chores for me.
Send for your sister, call her over here.
By now, she too must be bored at her in-laws, for sure.
The housework she'll manage, then it's easy for you and I may leave.
Just don't go grumbling, sing those devotional songs.
This isn't a joke, don't scoff, dear, please,
My bother will arrive to fetch me this very Sunday.
Like a pandit you're clever, but why silent like this?
Morn and night say some prayers, sing your bhajans.
When the rains end I'll return, remember not to think
It's the bhajans you must sing, you must sing. (Jassal 2012)

The genre is characterised by fun and playfulness, and it is through such songs where women negotiate with their husbands to be allowed to visit their natal homes, their *naihar*, and to take some time off work, that we learn the extent to which the entire agrarian economy is dependent on the labour of women. Quite unexpectedly, therefore, these songs become a resource to understand the hidden nature of women's work in agriculture, the unrecognised, uncompensated part of it, since the work that women do is assumed to be an extension of their household duties. In other words, the songs, having arisen from the soil, end up being a vital source to unearth the relatively unrecognised aspects of women's involvement in agrarian production. Ironically, then, it is through women's negotiations in song for "play," to get away from work, that we get deep insights about women's work cultures.

Moreover, women's negotiations to visit their natal homes in the slack season hint at the importance of their labour during the rest of the agricultural year. The songs help us understand how this time for play must strategically be negotiated. The bargaining tone points to the extent to which women themselves have internalised the understanding of their work on the field as an extension of their work as wives in the home. We learn from the songs about the elaborate arrangements that must be made before wives can get away. We also learn about the conditions under which permission to leave might grudgingly be granted. We see here evidence of the unconditional control husbands exercise over the labour of their wives. Also clear is the need for women to sweet-talk their way to a break from household and family responsibilities. Although not all women might be interested in securing such "leave" time, they would still relate to the words and spirit of the songs that articulate structural tensions that require both assertion and resolution. It could also be argued that these songs, by allowing women to take credit for such negotiations, also thereby blunt resistance, promote gender conformity, and even ensure that real autonomy for women remains elusive.

Two points need highlighting here. First, in uncovering the sociology and history of women in India, we have invariably ended up with an upper-caste perspective, because the early literate women who wrote diaries and biographies – the *bhadramahila* – were from the upper castes. Much has been written about this figure by Partha Chatterjee, Tanika Sarkar, and others, and I do not need to cover the same ground. However, it is worth underlining that this *bhadramahila*, the so-called "cultivated woman," was constructed through a series of binaries, and in opposition to the supposedly uncouth, labouring peasant woman – in fact, the heroines of these very songs (Chatterjee 1990).

Secondly, there is next to nothing in the existing literature on peasant women or labouring women – women who constitute 90 percent of rural women. It is for this reason that women's songs, comprising the enormous body of women's oral tradition, are of vital interest to social science. They help us to unearth the lives, struggles, concerns, values, of generations of real women – our foremothers. These songs help us to reconstruct their stories and struggles. I have found it instructive to look at these songs, then, as the collective diaries of women.

The Migration Motif

The following *kajli* is a startling document because it actually tells us the history of how labouring women have perceived the conditions under which they worked. It could be easily treated as a historical record.

Oh, the green woods are scorched.
My love has left for foreign lands.
Oh, abandoned me in my natal home.

The bed holds no charm, the green wood's burnt up.
 O beloved, your service worth just five rupees.
 Ten, I could have given you on my own.
 And kept you before my eyes.
 Not let you go, beloved.
 No letters, not a four-liner did he send,
 About the state of his heart, he didn't write.
 Letter upon letter sends the Mehrin,
 "Return home!
 Leave the service and return home."
 Letter upon letter sends the Maharaj,
 "I shall not return home,
 Giving up my job
 I shall never return home."¹

Kajli songs are a rich source of the history of male migration from this region. The songs are suffused with the motif of migration, which makes complete sense because the region of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar witnessed male migration on a dramatic scale – first to Kolkata and then to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, and also as indentured labour to Mauritius, Fiji, and other places. Slavery was abolished by then but replaced by indentured labour, drawn from the region of my fieldwork. It is quite startling to hear the note of protest and pathos in these songs, since it was the women left behind who spent entire lifetimes waiting for the return of husbands and lovers – waiting for men who, in fact, never came back. Mostly, these men ended up establishing new families while forming the core populations of countries in the Caribbean, Mauritius, and Fiji. The impact of this male migration on the women who stayed behind can be understood from folksongs. Even today, continuing male migration for work to far-flung corners of India has kept alive the migration motif in the folksongs of the region.

My lover comes and goes, my friend
 But when he does
 I could jump across the highest mountain
 With my teeth bite off the chains, my friend
 Oh my body trembles and quivers
 To his mother, when he sends letters and missives
 To his queen, just words of separation he sends
 To his mother and sister, when he sends festive sarees
 To his wife, two little handkerchiefs, my friend
 Just to wipe off all those tears, my friend.²

¹ Tengra kaharin, Atara Jaunpur, Jassal (2012), pp. 98–99.

² Sitara Nishad and Mallah women, Sadiapur, Allahabad, cited in Jassal (2012).

When I asked the singers to explain the meaning the song held for them, Mala Devi, a daily wage worker in Sadiapur, one of the significant settings of my fieldwork, underlined the plight of women who receive words of anger from their absent husbands rather than precious gifts, which the men reserve for their sisters and mothers. These words appeared to describe Mala Devi's own reality, and without a hint of self-pity, she added, "See, our men don't provide anything for us."

"We have no support from men," stated another woman in the group, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Why two handkerchiefs?" I persisted.

Sitara laughed. "So that when the first one gets completely drenched with tears, the other one can be used." At this everyone was in splits again.

"Just crying and wiping away the tears, crying and wiping," added Sehdei.

Collapsing with mirth, Mala Devi added, "Now you see how necessary the second one is" (Jassal 2012).

Another important discovery for me was the realm of emotions conveyed through songs. As anthropologists, we are familiar with the structural features of certain rites of passage, especially marriage. Often, what is missing from these accounts is the intense emotional charge at these events, and the ways in which the songs tend to not only express, but also to channelise and contain emotions that might otherwise spill out, as it were. For instance, the principle of village exogamy by which daughters are transferred from their natal to conjugal homes at marriage is a well-known feature of Indian society. What are less known are the corresponding emotions of women who are implicated in these arrangements. It is through marriage songs that women voice their loss and protest the injustice of the system, such as in this song where a daughter tells her father on the eve of her wedding:

You got the canopy erected in the courtyard
For this night, let me stay Father, I am at your beck and call
You gave me gold, father, you gave me silver
You gave me precious ornaments crafted and set
You gave me elephants, horses you gave
One thing you didn't give is the head ornament
Mother-in-law and sister-in-law, jeer and mock.³

Clearly, no amount of wealth can compensate for this bewildering loss of rights and claims on the natal home – the monumental severance from the home of her birth to which this daughter will only return, if at all, as a guest. What was startling to

³ Khatun, Jaunpur city, cited in Jassal (2012), p. 126.

me in this context was to find that the question has been posed in such a stark and focused way – not, as one would expect, by a contemporary scholarly feminist but by folk wisdom, and therefore, by generations of peasant women. Here is another song in which women express their envy at the fate of brothers in patriliney.

Brother and I, born of the same womb
Raised on the same mother's milk
Brother's destiny is father's inheritance
While mine, exile far away. (Jassal 2012, p. 129)

The psychologist Sudhir Kakar has pointed out that in spite of the preference for sons, there is little evidence in the psychology of Indian women of male envy (Kakar 1997). This viewpoint can be countered through songs such as this one, where women voice and confront deep-seated feelings of envy.

In all you earn Father, I stake a claim for half
Father: "Insist not on half your share, daughter
This entire wealth is yours, after all.
Just a pinch of vermilion, daughter
Before long, far and away, you'll be gone." (Jassal 2012)

The song is a stunning example of the sleight of hand by which women are denied rights in the property of their fathers. We hear both smugness and relief in the father's tone as he evokes the bride's vermilion, the symbol of matrimony, by which the daughter will perforce have to forego her claim to the father's property. However, the song also verbalises the woman's experience of disinheritance as well as the deep societal unease with the cultural notion of daughters as transitory members to whom shares in natal property cannot be allowed. Hence, despite the socialisation that daughters receive through songs such as these, it is also refreshing to come across a song that questions the received wisdom. I have argued that the songs often point to a developed critical consciousness that perceives the injustices of the system and sometimes, as in this case, even goes so far as to offer a solution.

Songs therefore lend themselves to different interpretations that vary with context. As texts, their meaning is by no means fixed but is constantly evolving and shifting, as are the interpretations they make available. This manner of transmission suggests a profound awareness of the grammar of poetics. As each song echoes others, every song is best appreciated as a part of whole and as integral to the totality of the oral tradition.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that women's work songs are not only concerned with the labour process, but also that, if read with the seriousness they deserve, provide a

complex, multilayered, and nuanced map of the social, political, and economic terrain of women's lives and of the communities in which they live.

I have also argued that the women's songs that accompany agricultural tasks serve to link women with agrarian production, and points to the need to link cultural analysis to economic analysis. Songs that accompany agrarian tasks can tell us about the nature of agricultural production and can be used as source material for unearthing the consciousness of labouring women, especially on the lower rungs of caste and agrarian hierarchies.

The few examples of songs I have provided here are from the repertoires of peasant women: songs that are sung and heard in different contexts, where they are once again reflected upon by the singing collective. If the marriage songs grapple with the emotive issue of women's sense of displacement at being severed from natal homes, their anxieties about being deprived of many rights are also regularly slipped in, as in the song of a sister's envy towards her brother.

I have also argued that women's songs are best seen as women's collective diaries, articulating their life struggles but also questioning the unjust social order. In spite of their interrogative stance, women's work songs must also be seen as vehicles for the construction and reproduction of gender identities. The notion of "bargaining with patriarchy" suggests that the women, far from being passive victims of oppressive structures, tend to combine elements of resistance and subversion with elements of accommodation and collusion; thus, these folk narratives must be seen as emerging over long historical processes. Whether or not these stimulate change in existing patriarchal norms remains to be seen, but for the subjugated and the disadvantaged, the songs are "like social grammar that allows them to say the obvious and the unspeakable, both at the same time" (Jassal 2012).

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