

Public Arguments – 2



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

Folksongs as an Epistemic Resource: *Understanding Bhojpuri Women's Articulations of Migration*

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Folksongs as an Epistemic Resource: Understanding Bhojpuri Women's Articulations of Migration

Asha Singh¹

Since centuries, women in Bhojpuri-speaking peasant society of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh have been experiencing out-migration of their men. The process of labour out-migration, in Bhojpuri peasant society, marks a creative peak in the history of oral cultural productions (especially folksongs).² Bhojpuri society is so deeply characterised by migration that it has become a frame of reference for all its cultural formulations. It has produced creative subjects. In Bhojpuri folksongs, the 'migrant' and his 'left-behind wife' are significant examples of such creative subjects. The latter being the protagonist in most of the Bhojpuri folksongs sung by women and men.

This essay is a result of my doctoral work on Bhojpuri women's folksongs in the context of male out-migration. It captures crucial sociological insights that I gathered in the journey of my studies. In my thesis, I have argued that 'folksongs' produced and disseminated by women are key academic resources (notwithstanding its limitations) which 'record' their perceptions and dilemmas as they witness male out-migration. I analysed folksongs from the standpoint of a gendered cultural insider drawing my material sustenance essentially from outside my field of enquiry. My status of being a material-outsider is crucial in actualizing such an academic exercise.³

Using folksongs as an 'epistemic resource' to understand women's perspectives on men's migration can be placed within an already existing body of sociological research on folklore and folksongs. Folklorists and sociologists have identified folksongs as reservoirs of women's said and unsaid expressions (see Narayan 1986, 1993; Gold 2003; Raheja and Gold 1996). Unlike other literary

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² This holds true for many other societies as well. For example, Dubey (1998) drawing from the work of Toni Morrison and others, links the evolution of jazz music with the 'Great Black Migration' of the 1920s. Similarly, Somalian love songs of 'lament and longing' are a direct consequence of industrial migration in the latter half of the 20th century (Kapteijns and Ali 2001).

³ This study began with an ambition to address the discomfitures of my being part of a lower caste migrant Bhojpuri family. There were discomfits at multiple levels. Bhojpuri language, people and culture are strongly marked by notions of being uncouth and unsophisticated. Such widely-held perceptions can be partially explained by the fact that Bhojpuri has remained 'oral' and a language spoken by a vast migrant population which has historically served as cheap labour force in urban centres of India. Moving away from my Bhojpuri-speaking life world and later on pursuing research concerned with Bhojpuri lives helped me make sense of my discomfits. Gopal Guru's (2002) preposition is inspiring, he proposes how freedom from one's immediate context is important to theorise that context

creations, socio-historical value of folksongs is more than their literary value and they have intensely human attitude towards life (Gupta 1964; Joshi 1982). Folksongs are an important source of sociological data; songs may or may not deal with social themes directly, but they are capable of hinting and suggesting. Highlighting their sociological value, sociologist Indra Deva (1989) asserts that scholars should not treat folksongs as simple documents, nor should they take them at 'face value' as they are not 'scientific monographs'. He further argues that folksongs are not a reliable account of actual happenings, but they reflect the attitude of people towards those happenings. In other words, folksongs represent people's perception about incidents, situations and relationships.

Folklorist Alan Dundes argues, 'folklore is an autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves' (1969: 471). Through the study of folklore one can see another culture 'from the inside out', instead of looking at it 'from the outside in' (See Dundes 1966; 1969; 1997). In this study too, Bhojpuri folksongs have been used to look at 'left-behind women' from an inside-out perspective in the context of migration.

The questions which guided my engagements with folksongs can be listed as follows – (a) How do folksongs reflect women's perspective about their life in the context of male out-migration? (b) What are the differences in the attitudes, concerns, contexts and metaphors in women's and men's folksongs traditions? (c) How do folksongs as an epistemic resource capture the complexities of caste and gender? (d) How does one document, examine and explain the continuities and changes in the folksongs with migration motif?

Before going ahead, I would caution the readers that my research should not be read as a treatise on monolithic/uniform reality of Bhojpuri society, it is largely concerned with backward caste peasant societies and its women who are left-behind.⁴

I have specifically analysed women's folksong genres such as *jatsaari*, *ropani*, *sohani*, *jhumar* and *kajri*. These folksongs are accounts of Bhojpuri women's everyday life. Work songs like *jatsaari*, *ropani* and *sohani* are melancholic in their mood, meter and tone. They are 'narratives of lament' sung by a left-behind wife for her migrant 'absent husband'. *Jhumar* and *kajri*, because of their happy performance contexts, are playful.

⁴ This study does not capture lived realities of women who migrated from Bhojpuri migration. A vast body of literature has been generated on women who migrated during the indenture labour migration era. To name but two, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) by Gaiutra Bahadur and *Jahajin* (2007) by Peggy Mohan.

My un-lettered mother Lakhpati Devi became my first source of Bhojपुरi folksongs. Secondly, I used anthologies of the folksongs collected from the region and lastly I visited my field (*between 2012 and 2014*) to collect songs from women and understand their contexts first hand. Visiting the familiar ancestral and kin villages (Dihari, Bhairotola, Ratanpur in Bhojpur district, Bihar) after conception of the study turned out to be a new experience. On the field, I was not identified as a researcher, but as an unmarried girl from the community. My insider status facilitated intimate conversations with women. However, my gender and caste-insider status restricted conversations with men and hence led to inaccessibility of certain insights.

Absent Men, Singing Women

The first and foremost thing that I noticed while analysing the folksongs was the material vulnerabilities of the left-behind woman which is hardly part of the masculine cultural discourses on migration. Usually, women whose husbands migrate are shown as repositories of sorrow who endlessly wait. However, women's songs clearly rationalise this 'longing' in the context of material and social hardships in the absence of the husband. Women's songs discuss unequal resource positions, describing limited or curtailed physical access to resources within families, communities and households in the context of migration. For instance, in following excerpt from a *jatsaari* song the woman protagonist is complaining to her migrant husband who has returned home:

Toharo je maiya prabhu ho awari chhinariya ho
 Tauli naapiye telwa dihalan ho ram
 Toharo bahiniya prabhu ho awari chhinariya ho
 Loiye ganiye hathwa ke dihalan ho ram

[Oh husband, your mother is such a bitch,
 She gives me only a few drops of oil.
 Oh husband, your sister is such a bitch,
 She gives me limited flour to cook.]

Folksongs being registers of collective experiences do not record autobiographical details of individuals, especially in women's genre. The limited access to oil or flour, often mediated through other (more powerful) female members in the household marks shared gendered experience of 'left-behind wives'.

⁵ This song was collected from my mother Lakhpati Devi in 2013 during my field work in Arrah, Bihar.

Scholarship on migration doesn't fully appreciate its impact on finer gendered spatial scales like body or household. On the other hand, Bhojpuri women's folksongs bring them to the centre stage.

The rightful claim over resources is often linked to a woman's sexual services to her husband, begetting sons and other forms of sexual labour. The absence of the husband has a direct impact on the negotiations of a woman at all levels (domestic, community and neighbourhood). If she is childless or has mothered only girls, the absence of the husband adds up to her material difficulty as other members of the conjugal family are seldom willing to spend on/for her. Even the natal family members are reluctant to take responsibility of married daughters. Following ropani song describes such a situation -

Baba ho kate da na duyi-das dinwa nu ho,
Tale praabhu ji lawati ayihen ho.

E beti ho humase na kati toharo dinwa nu
Chali ja na matariya bhiri ho

E mai ho kate da na duyi-das dinwa nu ho
Tale praabhu ji lawati ayihen ho

E beti ho humase na kati toharo dinwa nu ho
Chali ja na bhaiyawa bhiri ho

[Oh father, let me spend few days at your home
Till my husband comes back.

Oh daughter, I would not be able to do that
Go ask your mother.

Oh mother, let me spend few days at your home
Till my husband comes back.

Oh daughter, I would not be able to do that
Go ask your brother.]

The material crisis which one finds in these songs should be clearly linked to the cultural and sexual articulations in the songs. They are inseparable in oral cultural productions such as Bhojpuri folksongs.

⁶ I have done a free translations of all the folksongs used in this paper.

⁷ Source: Lakhpati Devi, Arrah, Bihar, 2013

The absence of the husband or the process of migration legitimises the act of 'singing' sexual desires. The 'sexual' is an oft-repeated motif in women's folksongs. However, there are several shades to the 'sexual' in Bhojpuri folksongs always in tandem with the social and economic vulnerabilities of migration. There are images of sexual desires, betrayal, disappointments and fantasies. The 'sexual' is culturally produced in these songs through a set of metaphors. One of the prominent metaphors is *gawana*. *Gawana* is a post-marriage ritual where the woman is brought from her natal home to her marital home. This ritual marks her puberty and is symptomatic of the consummation of marriage. Thus, consummation of marriage is the decisive goal of *gawana*. Usually, the woman protagonist challenges her man's migration by reminding him that *gawana* has been performed and he cannot run away from his duties of consummation. Songs perceive migration post-*gawana*, as a conjugal/sexual betrayal. This betrayal is challenged in songs with the help of sarcasm and black humour. The narrative of the folksong legitimises a woman's 'revenge' and 'sarcasm' in the context of an 'unfulfilled' marriage. However, these emotions are shaped within socially sanctioned structures of caste and gender. The following example captures the 'anger' and consequent 'revenge' of a life-behind wife on the return of her migrant husband –

*Gawana karayi saiyan ghar baithawale; apne chalela pardes
Barho baris par piya mor alien; ab na jaihen bides
'Duru-duru kukura re, duru re bilariya; duru re saharwa je log.'
'Naahin hum hayi re kukura-bilariya; naahin re saharwa ke log,
Aare hum ta-je hayin re, naanhen ke biyahuwa, tora saathe karbi upbhog.'
'Jaahu tuhun hawe re naaneh ke biyahuwa; bhiti mein se chipari
odar'Chipari odareti kaali bichhi marlis; saiyan karela pukar.
'Aare kahiya ke badla saghawlu e goria; kahiya ke dewta manaw.'
'Gawana karayi ke ghar baithawale ohi din ke badla sadhaw.'*

[Performed *gawana*, and left me to rot in this house, he went to *pardes*.
My husband has come back after twelve years, now he will not go.
'Go away O dog, go away O cat, go away you city-dweller.'
'I am neither a dog nor a cat not even a city-dweller
I am your husband; I want to have fun with you'
'If you are my husband, pull out the wall crust.'
While pulling out the crust a black scorpion stung,
Husband started screaming.

⁶ Upadhyaya, Krishna Deva. 2011. Bhojpuri Lok-Geet Bhaag 1. Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag. pp: 401–402.

'O my fair wife for what fault you took this revenge.'

'You made me sit at home alone after gawana, revenge of that day.']

Apart from expressions of sexual desire, songs voice sexual vulnerabilities of the migrant's left-behind wife. Since the men are absent, women get sexual proposals from other men. In the songs, the woman's brother-in-law is the usual seducer. Songs usually project '*devar*' as a character from whom she seeks protection from her husband. Also, the seduction motif is used to assert the wife's 'chastity'. However, in certain songs the woman is portrayed as having alternative sexual alliance leading to pregnancies. Folklorist Krishna Deva Upadhyaya (1991) in his writings on Bhojpuri folk culture has framed the former as *sati* and the latter as *kulta*. The *Sati* image is held as the rule while the *kulta* image has been discussed as an outlier. The point to note here is that songs which conformed to notions of chastity were sung in the domestic realms, for example, *jatsaari* songs. Though *jatsaari* is not caste-specific, it has been generally associated with savarna households (see Jassal 2012).⁹ While songs of agricultural processes (*ropani and sohani*) are sung by women of lower castes. In *ropani* and *sohani*, alternative sexual alliance is narrated as a 'everyday life' consequence of certain social situations. A cross-genre analysis of songs challenges the *sati-kulta* binary. However, the point one needs to note is that K.D. Upadhyaya's binary is drawn majorly from oral cultural productions based on male out-migration.

Women's folksongs voice their anxieties regarding migrant men's alternative sexual/conjugal arrangements at migration destination. Co-wife is a recurring character in Bhojpuri folksongs. In the songs, the protagonist often challenges the 'wrongful' desires of her husband. Women's folksongs are powerful and agential reworking of a 'conversation on co-wife'. However, the alternative conjugal spaces are clearly beyond the reach and control of Bhojpuri 'left-behind' women.

Women's folksongs articulate the largely 'unanticipated' social changes caused by migration. While the narrative in the text may imagine a 'left-behind' wife with a bitter critique of male-migration, this image may not coincide with real-life negotiation or decision-making in the context of migration.

⁹ *Jatsaari* songs that have been documented in Krishna Deva Upadhyaya's anthologies (1984, 1990, 1999, 2011) were recorded from savarna households. Upadhyaya has mentioned that his mother Moorti Devi was the source of most of these folksongs. However, for *ropani* and *sohani* songs he had to collect from Chamar and Musahar (Dalit) caste women because these songs are associated with agricultural labour, which is not performed by upper-caste women.

Left-behind Woman: A Comparative Perspective

The left-behind woman (protagonist) is not just the creative subject of women's folksongs alone, but is a creative subject of men's folksongs tradition as well. Like women's songs even in men's songs the woman protagonist appears in 'first person feminine'. The absence of 'first person masculine' in Bhojpuri folksongs in narrating experiences of migration really interested me. A comparative analysis of men's and women's songs revealed that conceptualisation of migration and related creative subjects differ in men's folksongs.

Men's genre, namely, *purbi*, *chaita*, *nirgun*, *gond* and *kaharwa* were subjected to content analysis and were compared with issues and concerns expressed in women's song with respect to male out-migration. While *gond* and *kaharwa* are performed by lower caste men, *purbi* is stylised genre with elite aesthetics. Nirgun is a mystical genre which supposedly deals with separation of body and soul; however, it predominantly uses the longing wife and migrating husband as metaphors. *Chaita* is sung during a specific season *Chaitra* (March-April).

Although folksongs with migration motif are not transgressive enough to imagine the 'left-behind women' beyond the pains and pangs of (sexual) longing, women's folksongs seem to go beyond simple articulation of desires, unlike men's folksongs. Politics of survival is strongly linked with the politics of intimacy in women's folksongs.¹⁰ One can see in women's folksongs that the woman protagonist is not just yearning for her migrant husband, but also exposing her material conditions (See the songs quoted above). She negotiates and strategizes to fulfil her material requirements. In other words, unlike men's genre songs that are limited to romantic portrayal of desire, women's songs go beyond the desire and draw a strong connection between the material and the sexual.

The social reality of bigamy in Bhojpuri peasant society is also a consequence of male out-migration. This reality has been dealt from a masculine perspective not only in men's folksongs, but also in their commercial extension (stage performances and cassette songs). Men's songs discuss co-wife to spice-up the narrative, whereas women's songs discuss it as a social *problem* which affects her status and leads to further deprivation. Let us examine the following songs-

¹⁰ Richa Nagar argues, discussing sexuality of a lesbian couple in rural India, that feminist theories give primary importance to desire and isolate discourse of sexuality from livelihood struggles. She emphasises that politics of survival and sexuality are intimately linked (see Lock and Nagar 2004).

Jhumar (Women's)	Kaharwa (Men's)
<p><i>Jaahu hum rahitin baanjh-banjhiniya; tab aayit sawtiniya.</i> <i>Raajawa humro do-do hain laal; kaahe ko laayo sawtiya.</i> <i>Jab hum rahitin langad-lujhi; tab aayit sawtiniya.</i> <i>Raajawa humro sota aisan deh; kaahe ko laayo sawtiya.</i> <i>Jab hum rahitin kaali-koyilia; tab aayit sawtiniya,</i> <i>Raajawa humro laale-laale gaal; kaaho ko laayo sawtiya.¹¹</i></p> <p>[If I was a childless woman, co-wife should have come, I have two sons, why did you bring a co-wife. If I were physically challenged, co-wife should have come, My body is voluptuous, why did you bring a co-wife. If I was like a black <i>koyel</i> (cuckoo), co-wife should have come, I have red cheeks, why did you bring a co-wife.]</p>	<p><i>Purub deswa se aawele sawatiya re na Nakiya mein bawele re lawangiya re na Daantwaa mein jadele misiya re na Ankhīya mein karele surumiya re na Hanseli ta jhalkela batisiya re na Roweli ta jhalera surumiya re na Soraho singaar karke chalali bajariya re na Bhent bhayil chauk-bajariya re na.¹²</i></p> <p>[Co-wife has come from East She wears a nose pin She decorates her teeth as well She puts kaajal in her eyes When she laughs, her teeth shines When she cries <i>kaajal</i> flows She adorns herself and roams in the market]</p>

The 'male gaze' in men's genre is evident in the above example. In men's genre the 'co-wife' is a highly sexualized subject, with meticulous details of her bodily conduct. Furthermore, the song imagines the 'left-behind wife' and the 'co-wife' as sexual competitors. On the other hand, the women's genre combines narratives of sexual and conjugal betrayals (with the coming of the co-wife) with issues of social standing and access to domestic resources.

Men's songs situate and depict migration as an exclusive crisis of conjugal relationships. Furthermore, they often imagine husband–wife as an unhindered romantic unit (occasionally 'spiced-up' with co-wife motifs), while women's

¹¹ Upadhyaya, Krishnadeva. 2011. Bhojpuri Lok-Geet Bhaag 1. Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, pp: 389.

¹² Upadhyaya, Krishna Deva. 1999. Bhojpuri Lokgeet Bhaag-2. Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, pp: 299.

songs narrate domestic strife and negotiations. Women's songs represent the travails of married life by articulating conjugality in terms of power relations, division of labour and gendered relations between the characters. Women's songs picture the household as a site of contestation over resources and give a glimpse of how conversations on conjugal politics are imagined by women within their marital home. In other words women's songs reveal the politics of hearth, which hardly becomes a subject of men's songs.

Although this comparative analysis did not answer the question which inspired the enquiry of first-person feminine in men's songs, they raised some important points. The language of pain being codified as feminine is used by men and women both to convey sufferings. Thus, men 'become' women in their songs of collective sorrow in the context of migration.

Continuity and Change

Bhojpuri labour out-migration is a continuing reality. The neo-liberal structural transformation and inter-communicative services have facilitated greater labour out-migration from Bhojpuri peasant society. It might have improved the economic status of migrants as they are equipped with mobile phones and are capable of buying land back home. However, my field experiences from lower-caste peasant villages came as a realisation that 'left-behindness' is a continuing reality for women. The remittance has not brought any qualitative change in lower-caste peasant women's life. Women migrating to cities with their husbands/fathers have not become a trend. Largely lower-caste peasant women are fixed in their conjugal homes looking after children, the aged and agricultural land, if there is any. They are still unlettered and are not just left-behind by their men, but also left-behind by the processes of modernity.

Bhojpuri women are still facing emotional, social and material insecurity which manifests in their folksongs. However, in spite of the larger reality of being left-behind, neither these women nor their folksongs are completely static. They have responded to the changes in new creative manners. The changes can be observed through the changing vocabulary and metaphors in the folksongs with migration motif.

Mode of communication has always been a prominent motif in Bhojpuri folksongs with migration motif. Earlier it was the letter; in most of the song narratives the migrant wife is someone who struggles to get a letter written to her husband by someone who is capable of reading/writing as she herself is unlettered. These days letter has been replaced by mobile phones. In present-

day songs to possess an exclusive mobile phone has become a matter of pride among Bhojpuri peasant women. They know that mobile phones can enhance the communication with her husband. Mobile phone is not an easily available gadget to women. Women still use mobile phones supervised by adult males in the house, because it is considered dangerous, something which can 'spoil' women by giving them freedom to talk and have illicit affairs. Women's songs with mobile phone motif are often anchored in their attempts and negotiations to acquire one for their own purposes.

*Naaya mobile, naaya charger laa di E raja ji
Saanjhe-saberwe raure se batiya-em E raja ji
Katano saasu jarihen, chhaka uda-em E raja ji
Halo-halo kah ke batiya-em E raja ji*¹³

[O my Raja ji, buy me a new mobile and a charger
Day and night I will talk to you only
Even if my mother-in-law is jealous, I will smack a six
I will say hello-hello and talk to you]

Where does the man go? This question has been dealt with in women's songs since the very beginning. The difference is that in older songs migration destinations were imagined within frames of ambiguity; however, the present-day songs refer to specific migration destinations. For example, songs collected during the colonial time have *purab*, i.e. east, in which direction the Bhojpuri men were migrating as labourers to earn livelihood. Also, Calcutta (now Kolkata) appears as a destination which later became a metaphoric destination in the songs for every migration happening towards eastern districts. One can find names of cities like Delhi, Ludhiana, etc. in the present-day songs which indicates increased spatial awareness among women due to communication-technology, irrespective of a trickle-down access to mobile phones.

Phulwa gire-la chapal pa gamak aawela
Papa aisan bar khojani tensan rahela
Jaake dilli-ludhiyana mein basal rahela¹⁴

[The flower fell down of sandal and is spreading aroma
O papa, you found me such a groom who gives me tension
He often goes and lives in Delhi-Ludhiana]

¹³ This song was collected during my field work in Dihari village of Bhojpur district, Bihar from an adolescent girl Seema Kumari in 2014.

¹⁴ Sung by an Anganwadi teacher Shail Kumari in Dihari village of Bhojpur district, Bihar.

Women's songs show awareness of changing political scenario and its contribution to their social status. Right to vote, especially post panchayati raj period, finds mention in the songs, as women can observe the direct impact of their votes.

*Sakhi ho lalka ribaniya se maath baanhe ke
Sakhi ujarka ribaniya se phool kare ke
Sakhi ho lalka bakaswa mein bhot daale ke
Sakhi ho sabh mukhiyawan ke hara dewe ke
Sakhi ho aihen pardesiya ta naa bole ke
Nasta karaih-en, nasta ka lewe ke
Sakhi ho bole ke kahin-hen muhwa pher dewe ke
Filim dekhaihen, filim dekh lewe ke
Sakhi ho bole ke kahin-hen muhwa pher dewe ke¹⁵*

[O friend lets prepare our hair with red ribbon
O friend lets tuck flower of white ribbon
O friend lets go and vote in the red ballot box
O friend lets defeat all the mukhiyawan (head of village panchayat)
O friend when pardesi husband comes let's not speak to him
If he will give something to eat, we will eat
But, when he asks to make love, we will deny
If he will show some fillim (movie), we will enjoy it
But, when he asks to make love, we will deny]

The change can be observed in terms of changing vocabulary as well. One can see usage of English words in Bhojpuri folksongs. This change can be attributed to several factors, one being the migrants themselves who carry new words back home. Bhojpuri cultural production taking place in Mumbai and Delhi enters rural markets and influences the language of folksongs of Bhojpuri homeland. There could be a separate area of enquiry to observe the impact of urban Bhojpuri cultural production on rural folk culture, focusing on their mode of interaction.

Folksongs as Conjugal Dialogic Space

Disruption and redefinition of conjugality was/is a key consequence of migration. Drawing from the work of V. Geetha (2007) and Cecile Jackson

¹⁵Seema Kumari, Dihari, Bhojpur.

(2012) one can understand conjugality as a set of social relations between gendered husbands and wives mediated by power, division of labour, family composition, caste, community, sexuality and place. The absence of husband in Bhojpuri society poses a lived crisis to women who are largely defined by their marital identity. Folksongs in Bhojpuri society become performative registers to communicate, ventilate and mitigate the lived crisis of *torn/absent* conjugality.

In their life women spend most of their years in the absence of their migrated husbands. They eat, talk, work and bathe with women in the household. There is an objective physical life without the husband. However, this does not mean that the husband is absent from their imagined lives. Bhojpuri folksongs singing conjugality are often conversational and dialogic narratives. They image conjugality as a 'conversation' between the wife and her migrant husband. They produce gender and sometimes rupture gender. On an everyday basis, the 'image' of marriage is reproduced through the folksongs women sing. However, the contexts of conjugality in real life map different experiences. The places in folksongs are often at odds with places in lived lives.

The 'woman protagonist' (migrant's wife) is constantly addressing 'her husband' who is not the physical, real life audience of these songs. Folksongs are performed in gender-segregated spaces. In Bhojpuri region (like other rural peasant societies), women's folksongs are performed in women's exclusive spaces. Men may listen to these songs from a distance, but they do not constitute the 'legitimate' audience. In addition, there is no such divide as the performer and audience in folksong society; women sing for other women and with women. Similarly, men sing for other men as audience, with men, though they might be singing about the pain and sufferings of women. There is a disjuncture between gendered conjugal spaces in *folksongs* and gendered conjugal spaces *in reality*. Folksongs with their tailored autonomy puncture and blur certain notions of public and private. This is done by imagining 'conversational conjugal places' in the text.

The disjunctures between the lived geographies and imagined geographies (in folksongs) tell us stories of women's subjectivity, agency and helplessness. Women sing what they cannot often actualise or implement in real lives. Folksongs become 'autonomous spaces' (Narayan 1997), which gives women a certain degree of poetic license to index her grievances, complaints and aspirations.

Women through their folksongs blur gendered spatial divisions. They fantasy conversations; beyond angana-duar¹⁶ binary. The content of folksongs has

¹⁶In rural peasant Bhojpuri societies, gendered spatial arrangement is such that married couples have limited or

institutionalised sarcasm, ridicule, lament and dialogue. They imagine husbands who converse and negotiate. However, its performance unfolds in impossible geographies. Life continues to be regimented and non-dialogic. The interaction between songs and lives are opaque. Songs are not 'straightforward reflections of social realities'. In other words, folksongs do not mirror ethnographic truths. However, they do operate as indices of history, place and society. In fact, it is the disjuncture between social norms, narratives and actions that illustrates the interface between folksongs and life. Women produce folksongs and folksongs produce women. They are imbued with ideas of social status, membership in family and kinship, social distances (Jacobson cited in Narayan 1995), social legitimacy and illegitimacy and domesticity. These ideas are both material and non-material.

Folksongs as Small Windows

A textual analysis by itself may give one the impression that Bhojpuri women are highly agential. However, it is important to be mindful that these songs were collected from villages which do not have toilets, roads, electricity or neighbourhood schools. Most of the women remain unlettered. They sing songs of possibility in geographies of impossibility. Songs seem to be a legitimate medium of voicing extinguished challenges and unfulfilled claims.

Folksongs, in their present forms, are not a powerful medium. Apart from the apparent 'psychological' solace that collective singing provides, folksongs are archaic in their output. They do not equip women to talk to the 'powerful' within their families or outside. One can argue that the evaluation of a cultural expression should not be limited to its usefulness. However, the stark contradictions between 'life and dialogue' in folksongs and lived spaces, forces one to examine the usefulness of folksongs. While Bhojpuri folksongs present multiple images of Bhojpuri femininity, it in no way equips women to analyse structures. In fact, folksongs are accommodated very well in the established oppressions of an agrarian caste society.

Looking at the content of women's folksongs one can infer that these songs emerged as markers of protest. However, over the years songs have assumed the character of a ritual; a ritual which accompanies every labour process, every festival and every 'life-cycle' event. This ritual does not lose its lustre as

no interaction during day time. Men and women hardly ever sit together. There is an *angana*, (inner courtyard) where women and children carry out their daily chores. Men usually stay in *duar* (the outer courtyard). It is almost impossible for a daughter-in-law to speak to her husband in the presence of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law who share the same space with her during the day time. However, one needs to recognize 'spatial gender

there are no other medium of expression.

It is evident that folksongs operate as 'small windows' of protests. However, one has to be very careful while appreciating 'protest'. Extrapolating idealistic stories of protests, based on our own politics, would tamper our academic exercise. Songs are meaningful in their contexts, performance and aesthetics. These meanings are important as they index lives in certain perspective, politics, prosody and place. At the same time, these meanings are universal when we place them in larger socio-economic histories and processes such as migration.

In Bhojpuri peasant society, folksongs also provide such spaces where women can question and confront their men. They expose the status of women in caste-patriarchal structure. But they cannot change it as women's agency and assertions are conditioned by dominant cultural assumptions. There is disjuncture in the images of life and folksongs which is an integral part of the ways Bhojpuri society is 'designed'.

Reflections and Scope

I would like to highlight the limitations and scope for further enquiry. In this study, I have accessed folksongs of men's genre from published anthologies, specific to Bhojpuri linguistic region. I could not collect men's genre folksongs during my fieldwork owing to my gender and social location in the villages I visited. Men were not ready to sing in my presence because I was marked explicitly as the 'daughter' of the village.

The study of present-day folksongs of men's genre can generate important insights about gendered socialisation, migration and cultural productions. 'Bhojpuri men', as a (heterogeneous) category, cannot be conceptualised, as 'left-behind' owing to the predominantly gendered nature of migration vis-a-vis social and spatial mobility. However, this is not to say that 'men' are not 'left-behind'. The 'left-behindness' of such men, who stay back or who have returned after long years in 'pardes' should be conceptualised differently in terms of their socio-economic standing, mobility, cultural productions, access to communication technologies, etc. My study has not dealt with the questions of 'left-behind' men.

Cultural productions by Bhojpuri migrant workers in their destinations

segregation' does not pre-suppose the presence of an inner or outer courtyard. Even a single room residence may double itself into an *angana* and *duar*. The *angana-duar* binary may exist irrespective of the size or the area of the residence. There is no conjugal place which allows long conversations. There are hurried sexual encounters between couples in dark when elder women and children are fast asleep. The logic of household geography works against the idea of dialogue put forth by the folksongs.

have emerged as an important point of reference to understand the affective consequences of migration. They are both producers¹⁷ as well as consumers of vernacular Bhojpuri music industry in Mumbai and Delhi. There is scope for a study on the ways in which the Bhojpuri cinema and music industry, which cater to migrants, has affected the form, content and performance of Bhojpuri men's folksongs in rural Bhojpuri region. Bhojpuri folksongs (across genres) have attracted substantial commercial interest in recent years. This interest, in turn, has codified songs in a commercially satiable fashion. Today, Bhojpuri folksongs are often 'identified' by its singer-performers. Increasingly, Bhojpuri songs seem to have authorial signatures in their reproduction and distribution. One can map several features in this commercial transformation. One immediate feature is that of 'place'. Songs produced and exchanged in a rural, agrarian milieu are reproduced and sold in urban locations. Another feature is the change in the actors. For example, songs which are produced as a result of exploitative labour processes by women of labouring castes. When such songs are transplanted into cassettes and CDs, they get authored and labelled. Moreover, it also involves unrealistic video portrayals of women's sexual desires and articulations.¹⁸ Thus, the journey of folksongs (nurtured in a folk ethic of collective memory of tribulations, pain and joy) from rural landscape to commercial stage, cassettes, CDs, Youtube and mobile phones need to be studied in its own right.

Conclusion: Methodological Limitations of Folksongs

Using oral cultural productions as epistemic resource for academic research has certain key limitations. As I have already argued that folksongs only index certain meanings and perception of life. They cannot be mistaken for life itself. Again, such indexing is not done within the conventions of 'written world'. This makes it difficult to time and emplace folksongs with precision. Moreover, the performance contexts which have changed over the period of time may continue to utilize metaphors or shared experiences which might have been composed as songs in remote past, making visible sharp 'disjuncture'. The study of migration would surely benefit by making enquiries into world of orality, however I see no reason why we should be content with orality. This is especially important in the case of Bhojpuri women who never had access to literary sphere to articulate migration. This historical absence makes folksongs

¹⁷ Bhojpuri migrants residing in Mumbai and Delhi are part of these cultural productions (vernacular cassette and 'live concert' industry). They are performers, producers, distributors and organisers depending upon their relative economic status (see Tripathy 2012; see also Bidesia in Bambai, a documentary by Surabhi Sharma).

¹⁸ Merely typing the word 'Bhojpuri' on Youtube, one can find endless lists of overtly sexualised Bhojpuri video songs. 'Bhojpuri' almost has become a synonym of 'erotica' in audio/video industry.

relevant but not the most important epistemic resource. It is important to admit that folksongs tells us very little and cannot be understood outside its society. The need to find new resources and ways of reconstructing the past and present of migration through standpoint of women (especially lower-caste women) would mean maintaining a political and academic discontent with folksongs and its scope.

On a reflective note, one can argue that this discontent would take the form of a sharp 'antithesis' only when the society gets exposed to new mediums of interactions and confrontations. New mediums emerge from social changes. In my opinion, lives of Bhojpuri women and men of backward-caste peasant society can change through education, representation in public institutions and moving away from traditional occupations marked by caste. These changes would open up new discussions on reconstructing histories of migration. Drawing lessons from history, one can observe that Dalit and Bahujan women have sought their liberation in process of modernization (Rowena 2015). This would mean moving beyond songs and orality.

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¹⁹For example, the abolition of slavery in America gave way to large-scale Black literacy assertion, in many ways replacing the function of Negro spirituals (Ames 1950).

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