



‘Women’s Songs’ in Rajbanshi Language and Culture

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Abstract:

Historians appraise songs as more or less elementary “reflections” of the society and culture in which they are fabricated as songs are always an eminent part of the fabric of human life and culture. Women in Rajbanshi society, even now, are trapped in a strange whereabouts between the fast changing world on one hand and the traditional way of living on the other. Hard work and labour to support their male counterparts makes their lives even harsher. A woman has an eminent role to play in any culture or society, she is the first teacher of the culture, the traditions, and the core values which are needed to move the same from generation to generations. The rajbanshi women through ages were immune to the deprivations, suppression and sometimes agony that they had to bear and endured them as a way of life. Songs has an important role to play, serving as a medium to express what ponders deep within the heart and serve as a way to release emotional strain. The hammer of time only molded them in the set norms of the society without any realization of pain or harrow. Exploring the miscellanea of thoughts used in these songs of rajbanshi women gives a certain maxim about the lost and suppressed feelings and cravings of these women by the medium of its fairness. ‘Bhawaiya’ as a genre has inculcated and contained within it these songs ‘of women, by women and for women’. The songs starting with those sung in the times of remorse and despair bringing out the moods of desire and deprivation to the songs of joyous moods sung during marriages including the songs that talks about the yearnings of a woman waiting eagerly for her love to return. Sometimes escaping from the world of reality and longing for the illusions to be real and again returning to the present situations with a wish to cope up with the harsh concreteness of life. Here an attempt will be made to identify and understand the importance of those very songs which bespeaks of the footing, longing and identity of those positions of women through the medium of their songs and to suggest some directions for the future courses of action.

Keywords: *Rajbanshi Society, Rajbonshi Women, Traditions, Bhawaiya, Songs.*

“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Now, relating poetry to songs is not a tough assignment. Songs are also a product of those emotions that originates deep within the mind and are appraised as more or less elementary “reflections” of the society. Being a vital part of literature they reflect the images that emerge within the society. Following the deep attachment of songs and human culture, it is not arduous to come to a definite idea of a particular society through the avenue of prevalent and popular songs that are sung by masses following the culture. Songs are also known to represent and adumbrate the popular culture as well. And popular culture on the

other hand foreshadows on the present circumstances. Since ancient times, songs or any manifestation of written literature in the form of manuscripts were indispensable documents and evidences that provide a strong knowledge about the prevailing situations. They evince the workings of a human mind in association to the society and the norms those are ubiquitous in the society at that point of time. To know about any culture it's essential to study their literature first; may it be songs, poems, or any form of art. The *Rajbanshi* people are the most eminent and native dwellers of the northern parts of Bengal. They have a society which is quite similar to the rest but also differentiates in many perspectives. They are notably agricultural and the society is also framed keeping the same occupation at its milieu. It is worthy to mention that the women in this society are quite laborious. They with their male counterparts work hard to sustain their families working hand in hand. Women are the members holding paramount stature of any society or culture as they are the one who helps in the forwarding of the traditions, values, ethics and rituals from generation to generations. A trend or say culture begins with them, runs and also ceases with them. They are the observers of history; survivors of the present day and the shapers of the future.

The rajbanshi society is predominantly dependent on farming and animal husbandry which forms the backbone of culture as well. Men and women work hand in hand to fulfill the arising demands of their family. Cultivation of paddy, jute and vegetables including the maintenance of livestock like cattle, buffaloes, and goats forms a part of their daily routine. The society, largely based in a rural background is dependent on these main occupations. The fertile lands of the northern parts of Bengal covered with extensive farm lands, forests and rivers including the plains near the Himalayan foothills are the home to the rajbanshi people for centuries. Men engaged in the occupations of being farmers, mahuts, gariyal, maishals, and boatman etc. the women absorbed themselves in the household chores; looking after the kids and livestock, working in the fields and even selling the farm products in the local markets (haat). Religion is given due importance as the gods and demigods were considered to be the protectors of the village in which they dwell including various rites and rituals like 'Gram-seba', Tistaburi puja (Khelaa-khela), Bisohori gaan, 'Thakur-bosa', 'Thakur-chumaa', 'Gor-chuma' etc. Women are the pioneers taking part exclusively in all of these ceremonies; gathering together, singing songs and praying for their wellbeing. Going to markets, listening 'kitton', pala gaan, etc are just some of the ways to pass the spare time which they get luckily enough after a whole day of tiresome work.

The rajbanshi women are stranded in a sitch which cannot be easily chronicled. It is somewhere between the deep rooted traditions on one hand and the urge to create and establish an identity of her own. An identity that will be with her, speak 'of her' and 'for her'. The primarily agricultural society cannot at any position deny the existence of the woman who works day and night to cope up to the demands of her family. The norms and notions of this patriarchal society molded her in accordance to their demands. Sometimes these women enjoy a prosperous life which has to do with self-respect and honour and sometimes they has to walk alone the path obsessed with the repressive patriarchal system of the society. The wellbeing of her family is her primary role as a mother, daughter, wife or sister. Their lives are two folded. At first comes the responsibilities of a daughter when she stays at her father's house which is followed by a change in roles when she gets married, playing the role of a wife at her husband's house trying to cope up peacefully with the in laws. The religious customs of the society also happens to shape her in according to the demands. Religion can be like a blessing sometimes giving her the status of extra purity and holy helping her to gain respect in the form of fear or at many times pity also. At times it is the same religion that can make her alienated.

Sometimes poverty also plays a huge role. It can destroy all bonds that hold humans together. Poverty has a grip on the rajbanshi society a well. Reasons can be various. Lack of essential commodities to bad harvest. A woman has to bear the burdens alone. Not being able to bear the toils of poverty a few are forced to work as labours even not willing to continue doing the same.

An abusive relationship between the husband and wife can also lead to worse situations. Reasons can be many but generally it is the women who have to bear most of the times. The agony and despair she holds in her heart can reach fatal consequences but still she has to accept them in order to save her family from ruin at least that is the decision of the society. The heart of a rajbanshi woman also aches when she is abandoned by her beloved. This separation echoes screams and cries of a heart that desperately dreamt of endearment and affection. Longing and carving for the lover gives rise to torments in the soul. The restless soul dies for a glimpse of the departed lover.

But it is not that the lives of rajbanshi women are always surrounded by misery. She enjoys the happy moments with equal ecstasy. She cherishes those happy moments when she is surrounded by her relatives such as marriages and religious festivals. A good and fruitful harvest is also enough to bring smiles. It overwhelms her when she sees her family and partner in prosperity. She also has some small demands to make especially to her friends. She is contented even with the slightest fulfillment of her wishes. Delight is when a newly married couple plays 'sirua'(colours) for the first time. A rajbanshi woman is pleased and euphoric when she succeeds in her mission to deliver the meal to her 'halua' (farmer husband) in time so that he can plough the field with zest. Her effervescence shows when her family is running smoothly under the ample leadership of her partner. She sparkles at times of happiness, she cries in desolation like at times when she cannot bear the sorrowful situation of Behula during the 'Bisohori-gaan'.

A hint of romanticism can always be traced in the songs of rajbanshi women. The emotions of delight and despair culminate to get released only through the medium of expressions. These expressions take the form of songs. The eruptions of thoughts from deep within the heart flows down through the canals of the soul disguised as tears. Songs has an important role to play, serving as a medium to bring out what ponders deep within and also as a way to release emotional strain. They are a vehicle to travel and escape the world of reality and take refuge in the world of one's own imagination. Escaping can be a good solution, forgetting the harsh circumstances and longing for something that provides happiness familiarizes to the notions of romanticism. The rajbanshi women see no boundary in doing the same. Singing out their soul is a way to vent the desires they keep within themselves in silence. Thoughts recollected in tranquility, serenity and turbulence frames the words and emotions that manifest themselves to form the lyrics of their songs. They are produced at times when the unstoppable emotions overflows the limits and barriers caused by the torments and turmoil that the women has to face constraining and limiting them to an unknown sphere of desolation , yearning and deprivation. To bring out the deep rooted connections traced between the rajbanshi women and their songs is necessary from the view that helps us to bridge between the songs on one side and the society and culture on the other. These songs are amply recorded in the form of Bhawaiya which again as a genre bespeaks on behalf of the emotions of the rajbanshi women portraying them as the bearers of the culture from times immemorial aptly singing out the voices and their positions as women in a largely male dominated patriarchal society. Sometimes these songs do get a touch of revolt against those occurrences that they don't want to bear and endure anymore, unable to cope up with the circumstances they declare themselves as free as they can to succeed to break the social constraints. To be true not all of them can do that and are bound to be satisfied with what they have, limiting and molding them in the set norms of the society without any realization of pain or harrow.

Songs of happiness includes those sung during the time of marriages like the 'Bairaati songs', songs of couples including the songs depicting the conjugal relationships. The 'Sirua-bisua' songs also form a part of this category. Boishak, the first month in the Bengali-Hindu calendar is celebrated by the rajbanshi people as a time which is good for beginning a new occupation like agriculture, marriages, and business etc. This is the month when the marriages are organized. Marriages brings all the members of the family together creating harmony and celebrations which brings a wholesome enjoyment to all the family members bonded together under a single roof and also joining two families in a single bond. The ceremonies include a lot of

rituals which comes with their own songs composed to fit every purpose. The rituals include adhivas, holdi-baatar gaan, jol-bhora, bor-chuma, sat-pir gaan, bisohori gaan, pani sarpon etc. Among all these, the songs sung during adhivas, jol-bhora, holdi-baata and bor chuma are extensively sung by women. The following song is sung in the time of greeting the groom (bor-chumaa)-

“Aaeth’er chailon, baeth’er baan/aadha thubra’tak boriya aan/
.....tor mao maiya sekhai nai/maatha hetebar koi nai.....”

These songs also depict the prevailing mindset of bride’s parents especially the mother during the time of marriage. It is for sure that the bride’s mother is passing through a difficult situation as he is going to lose an eminent friend and helping hand –

“Aagot khaisen mao bata bhora paan re/elhai keno kaanden mao aandone bosiya re/

Mao’er aagot jaya kaandibare dhoil/o’mor mao gae,aadha-bosa dulha ta amok bodlaya de/

Taama na hoi, kaansha naa hoi, bodlaya dim / o’mor beti gae, je aache kopaler lekha khandabar aar ke?”

In present days, these songs are in the verge of extension. Customs like ‘beti-bechai khawa’ or ‘beti becha’ was commonly practiced which included a poor father taking dowry from the groom’s side to marry off his daughter. Sirua-bisua songs are sung with a joyous mood of playing with colours which is celebrated on the first day in the month of boishak. They apply colours on each other accompanied with songs and music. These songs are sung by the sister of the bride addressing to her brother in law insisting him to pay ‘sirua’(colour) with her.

“Sirua khelai’t e re/ ore oh re bohnu/ naa hoish gosa.....

Jouban kaale’t e re bohnu , eknai te aasha....”

Biyai-biyani song also comes under this category which are sung in a not so serious but informal mood. Here, the groom’s mother complains about her daughter in law to the father of the later-

“O’mor biyai, biyai re/ kon lojja’t e aasilen aji haamar bari’t e.....

O’mor biyai tomar beti’r emon cholon / sodai mok dekhai groom.....

/kenong bou je ore biyai/ panung re bhaggo te?”

Religious songs are worthy to be mentioned in the context. Religion is given due importance as the gods and demigods are always considered to be the protectors of the village in which they reside. Religious practices include various rites and rituals like ‘Gram-seba’, Tistaburi puja (Khelaa-khela), Bisohori gaan, ‘Thakur-bosa’, ‘Thakur-chumaa’, ‘Gor-chuma’ etc .To mention one , the ‘Tista-burir gaan’, which is sung by the women at ‘chaitra-sankranti’, addressed to god Teesta buri (an incarnation of Goddess Parvati) to welcome the new year (that comes the very next day) is quite relevant . The possession of tista-buri puja is led by the ‘marayani’ holding the beautifully decorated umbrella, is followed by the other women singing songs addressing to the goddess-

1. “Ashiya nokoni mao mor / duwar’e dilen dilen pao.....”
2. “Hai re poran’er maa/ chariya gelo moke re.....chariya gelo, chariya gelo nidaruni hoye re...”
3. “Sun gae mata Teesta buri/ tomhar’e baade boiraagi hoiche naa re.....

Hai're poraner maa chariya gelo moke re.....”

The river Teesta is personalized in the form of a god; she is the god of havoc. If not satisfied, she can bring plunders and destruction to a village. The songs sung on her behalf tries to please her by addressing her as a mighty personality and the protector of their houses and farmlands from the heavy floods and also asking her to save them from the diseases and evil influences. The narratives reveal the condition of the people living on the banks of the river and their struggles to continue their day to day activities in the lap of nature.

Relying on agriculture as the principal occupation, the women in rajbanshi society composed songs to suit this purpose also. The songs are mostly knotted depicting the life of farmers and laboures connected with agriculture. The ‘Halua-haluani’ songs, which are basically the farmer and his wife, are quite relevant to fit for this purpose. Sometimes these songs are composed by using the ‘Lehenkaari’ mode of expression by the medium of musical dialouges between the halua and haluani depicting the deep rooted conjugal love and mutual respect for each other -

“Kunthe gelo haal bohobar re .../o’ mok ni galo re koihaa.../

Chaul bhajiya , gundaa korite re o’ mor hoya gel re bela/

Kunthe gelo haal bohoba re.../

O’ mok ni galo re koiha....”

Waiting for her loved one and longing for him to come also erupts feelings from the heart through the medium of songs. The ‘songs of waiting’ represents the cravings that lie in the profound corners. These are the songs with a tone of sadness expressing the torments, yearnings and desire of a lady to meet her beloved. The lady seeks to express her provoking emotions in loneliness-

“Aare gaile ki aasiben/mor maahut bondhu re.

Hostire noran, hostire choran/hostir golai dori/

Ore sotti koriya kon re maahut /kon ba deshe bari go/

Gaile ki asiben mor maahut bondhu re.....”

In this song the lady questions her patner who is too much concerned about the return of her beloved who is a ‘Mahut’ (elephant trainer). The mahut goes to distant lands in search of elephants leaving his lady alone. The lady enquires about his movements and is not fully contended with the answers that she gets in reply.

Sometimes the song sung by a maiden addressing her partner to make her aware of the time when he is going to return is also enchanting –

“O ki o bondhu kaajol bhromora re/

Kon din aasiben bondhu /

Koya jao, koya jao re.....”

The lady calls her lover a ‘Kajol-bhromara’. As a bhromora or black bee goes from flower to flower in search of nectar, men also keeps on changing their love. The lady is concerned by this attitude that men keeps in general. She does not want to lose her lover and with a caring attitude, she urges her lover to say her the time of his return.

Not being satisfied by the answers of her partner, the maiden asks him again –

“O ki gariyal bhai / koto robo aami ponther dike chayaa re?

Jedin gariyal ujaan jai/ nari'r mon mor buriya roy re/

O ki gariyal bhai / koto kaandim mui nidhua paathar e te ?”

She is tired waiting endlessly for her lover and earnestly seeks for his homecoming. Her eyes looking down the path but cannot see the bullock cart of her beloved ‘gariyal’ approaching towards her. She doesn’t want to speak more of despair and agonies that she has to face in the absence of her love. She just wants her friend to approach the ‘cheel-marir bondor’ where she is waiting with wet eyes and an eager soul.

Loneliness and longing are two strong emotions that work hand in hand. The feeling of being alone wears away the soul making an individual secluded and alienated from all the others in the society. It comes with a strong feeling that there is no one to love and care for. This song sung by the friends of the maiden asking her the cause of being upset –

“Kene he Radhe tor/ biros mon/

O tor kanaihay bajai bashi.../

Jomunaro kule kule kodom sari sari.....”

Radha is distressed and disturbed as her beloved Kanhaiya is not with her. She feels lonely and forlorn and cannot concentrate on what to do. Seeing her condition the other maidens asks her the reason behind being discontent and their conversation is expressed through the medium of this song.

Personification also has a role to play in the Bhawaiya songs. This song presents the despair and torments of a human heart through the image of a ‘Bogha’(a crane bird). The song sings of the role that fate has to play on the conjugal relationships –

“Aaji fande poriya bogha kaande re/

Faan bosaiche faadi re bhaiya/ puti macho diyaa...

Oore maacher loove boka bogha/ pore ural diya.

Aaji fande poriya bogha kaande re....”

The ‘boghi’(female crane) is longing for the bogha to return to its nest, cries in the absence of its partner but is unaware of the fact that the bogha is trapped by an evil bird catcher who caught it in his net using the small fishes. Unknowingly the bogha flies to satisfy its appetite but gets trapped unexpectedly and cries for rescue thinking about its chicks and partner.

A married woman tries to see the world through the eyes of her husband. The very thought of his departure fills her mind with a strong sense of loneliness and isolation.

“Kene kaandis oore doel/ raatri nisha bhage/

Aaji tor kandon suniya re doel/mor nidra bhange....

Ore ekla ghore thakong re doel / baalish bheje aankhir jole

Aji ehenon sonar jouban mor / kon ba kaaje laage re/doel kaandis kene.”

In this song a married woman talks to a doel (robin) and asks the bird the reason of its unhappiness. She tries to connect her loneliness to the melancholy cry of the doel and says that just like the bird she is alone, her husband is not at home and without him there is no one else who can rightly satisfy the cravings of a woman’s heart and bring an end to the torments of her soul.

At times it not only loneliness which afflicts a women, but the intensity rises when it is accompanied with the torments of abandonment or desertation. These cases are nicely recorded in the rajbanshi folk songs especially bhawaiya which contains in it ample evidences of the sufferings of rajbanshi women who goes through this phase. These songs of lamentation are sad enough to fill anyone with grief and attachment for the victim. The woman finds no way in such a situation and blames her fate.

“Nodir parer kuruyare mor/jamer gaacher suwa/
Kene kaanden omon kori/ chokher jol feleya re/
Dal kauwatar kandon suni/ moner agun jole
Poti mor gaise mori/ aador nai mor ghore re
Korare mui o kandong chitul boduwa hoyo.”

(Kedar Chakroborty)

In this song a widow speaks about her grief as she is left alone to survive without her husband. She cries on the loss of her husband finding no one to help her and stand by her side but as silent spectators only. A large number of bhawaiya songs are based on ‘fatalism’. When there is no one to blame but fate, the burden on the mind reduces. The misery intensifies when the widow is in her ‘bhora jouban’(peak youth).

“Oki hai bidhi – aaji ghot gachai nai pore kali/
Taate bidhi mok korilo aari/
Ooki hai bidhi aaji swamidhon moriya , aai mor /
aai mor se hoil haani-”

(From Padmapuran)

The newly wedded bride (Behula) cries and complains in despair, she is grief ridden as she has lost her husband at that time when the arrangements made for the marriage were just intact where they were placed, nothing changed. The ‘ghot’ still contains the holy water, the ‘gaacha’, still burning. She accuses her fate and ‘bidhi’ (god) to be responsible for all these despair that happened to her at such a young age. This song is important as it is taken from Padmapurana which is the source of ‘Bisohori gaan’. This bisohori-gaan is like an enacted play which is to be compulsorily performed during the marriage ceremonies of the rajbonshies.

Songs will never fall short to express and suit the various moods of Rajbanshi women. These songs which constitutes the folk culture of Rajbansi people are the reflections of the society. They affirm and talk about the circumstances that the women has to undergo in the course of their life. The rajbanshi society presently has undergone a tremendous change in its urge to cope up to the multicultural society that dwells with them side by side. Though much of these songs are in the verge of extinction; not sung or heard for decades and

largely replaced by the popular songs in trends, an attempt to recollect these valuable gifts of this culture can always be appreciated. Not all of these songs are forgotten rather some became immensely popular by the spread of the different types of audio-visual and social media. Efforts are made to revive and remix the songs go give them a contemporary touch.

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