

Songs Of Methor Women

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The Methors of Jalpaiguri who have not received the attention of any enquirer till now, have in their due course conserved and continued their rich tradition which is abundant with rituals, aphorisms and songs. These have been passed down orally from one generation to another. In the process they have been able to enact and continue their cultural practices in spite of the impact of the colonization and modernization around them. As one goes deeper into studying the tradition of Methor community it is very evident that it is the women who play the major role in preserving and continuing their culture and at the same time helping in maintaining the institution called family. Therefore, any attempt to study the life and culture of the Methors in general requires a better appraisal of women's role in their culture and everyday practices.

In this paper, I try to address some received conceptions and lay bare some striking realities which demonstrate the fact that women do play a major role in any oral tradition. Thus, it becomes very important to analyze the women's songs. This, in fact, is an interesting way to explore the potential worth of the oral tradition of the entire community. This kind of study portrays contemporary life, documents the everyday behavior of Methor women. The songs reveal their ideas, hopes and fears, aspirations and conventions, which are connected with their traditional past.

According to Karl Marx, "anyone who knows anything of history knows that the great social changes are impossible without the feminine. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex." (Cited in Jane E.Way, 1981:3). However, woman as an entity remains mostly ignored in researches done on oral tradition. A subtle irony hovers around here. Although women in an oral tradition contribute a substantial cultural, traditional and economic portion to the society, their status and role have not been investigated fully, even to this day.

Studying Methor women songs or rituals would help open up new kinds of inquiry and would also serve us to know more about the Methor community as a whole. As there is no documented data or written accounts on Methor women and no collections of their songs are available, our task of understanding the status of women will be quite difficult. However, I hope that the folk songs would be a useful resource in this regard. Therefore, all my analysis in this paper draws on the recorded and transcribed versions of their songs (AmitRauth, 2009).

Women Folk Songs: Some Concerns

Before delving deep into Methor women songs, it becomes pertinent to define folk music in the first stance. The Tech Multimedia Music Dictionary defines folk music as “music of the common people that has been passed on by memorization or repetition rather than by writing, and has deep roots in its own culture. Folk music has an ever-changing and varying nature, and is deeply significant to the members of the culture to which it belongs.” (Cited in Richard Cole, 2009). In fact, the Methors imbibe them by birth to keep their tradition living.

The relationship between songs and hearts/minds, a theme echoed by the female singers in Methor community, addresses an enduring issue in social theory. Expressive forms like folksongs and folk narratives have tended to be conceptualized as speaking unproblematically for all participants in the culture under study. Scholars have scrutinized such expressive forms, often cast as “texts” in order to discern the (singular) “native’s point of view” or comprehend the mind of a (monolithic) “folk” (Kirin Narayan, 1997). With the rise of a paradigm emphasizing performance, by the 1970s scholarly focus moved from texts alone to account also for the creativity of situated performers in a diversity of contexts (1997:23). However, performers have rarely been given a chance to explicate their own texts, artistry, or emotional response. Despite Alan Dundes’ prescient call for “oral literary criticism” (Cited in Kirin Narayan, 1997:23), and despite the development of reader response and reception theory in literary studies, it remains rare to find scholarly texts in which singers are invited to comment on their songs.

The above situation applies also to India. Women’s singing is usually associated with “auspiciousness” (Narayan, 1997:24); particularly in rural areas, women assemble to sing for rites of passage and other occasions marking good fortune.

Since women sing in groups, it is easy to understand why scholars might hear songs as speaking for women, “collectively conceived” (Narayan, 1997:24). Indeed, scholars generally have interpreted song texts as representing the subjectivity and emotions of a generic (albeit sometimes caste-specific) woman in a particular regional context. Songs thus become textual objects on which general theoretical statements about women can be based rather than the lived practices of reflective subjects (Williams 1991) (as cited in Narayan, 1997:24). Ironically, in speaking for the collective woman’s voice in songs, scholars have tended to bypass the voices of actual singers. To tackle the above situation, the words of RustomBharucha should act as a motivating force. According to him, “instead of agonizing about the inevitable failure to translate the musicality of songs into words, it would be more useful to focus on what can be said about them by way of content, social context, vocabulary, and textual improvisation.” (2007:156).

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According to Susan S. Wadley, “Anthropology has too often ignored the texts used in religious performances. Fortunately this situation is rapidly changing, with both folklorists and those interested in native conceptual systems re-examining texts. But as the ethno-sociologists become interested in native concepts and terms, and thus in texts, they move away from a concern for texts in context. Meanwhile the folklorist is turning from texts to the performance of texts, de-emphasizing the words. Both approaches are needed: in understanding religion and religious performances, both text and context must be analyzed”(2005:124-127).

The importance of Methors, including their oral and performative traditions, are unfortunately ignored and underestimated by both classical scholars and anthropologists. In fact, we need detailed examinations of rituals as performed, with more attention paid to verbal traditions and the contexts of the rituals.

According to Kirin Narayan, the standard scholarly approach to folksongs in the Indian context has been to present song texts, and then to extrapolate from them truths about the condition of a collective Woman in that particular regional context. (1997:46). Thus, looking for cultural truths in songs, scholars (working on the area) is in danger of reducing texts to ethnographic artifacts, overlooking the subjectivity and agency of performers. Therefore, the words of RustomBharucha should act as a timely check in this regard.(2007:156). Women’s “voice” refers not just to the spoken word,

but also to perspectives on social relations that frequently go against the grain of representations stemming from “dominant (male) groups” (Narayan, 46). In the cultural world of Methors, when women sing, males are completely excluded. That is to say, women want to be an independent group or community. In songs that are collectively sung, women join together in a common voice.

The Methors have a rich tradition of songs for different occasions. Accordingly, they have Deity songs, Marriage or Wedding songs, Melancholic songs and so on and so forth. You name an occasion and you will find songs meant for that occasion in the Methor arena. For the purpose of this paper, I have however exclusively paid attention to one song encrypted under the label of Deity songs to enunciate the flora and fauna of the Methor community.

1. DEITY SONGS

Gods and goddesses form part and parcel of everyday life in the Methor world. The Methors sing particular songs addressed to the particular Gods and goddesses during different times to appease them. The Methors are afraid that if they do not perform some specific ritual which includes singing, they would ensue the wrath of the deities. Therefore, the Methors sing songs to please the deities and get blessings from them.

BaheePurbaalii

BaheepurbaaliiDolalee see maar,

BaheepurvaiyaahaekaaliDolalee see waar. (2)

NaaghailionaaDubee,

Kaaliyeejamunbaanadiyeebaar. (2)

Kahaangeelaiikiyeebeelwaajiganamaalaa,

Naiyyalaaunaiyyaalaaujiganamaalaa. (2)

Haathikaathideebaureemajhiyaa,

Haathikaathideebaujiganabanaiyeetaarwaa. (2)

Baahiikaathideebaujiganabanaiyeenaiyyaareepaar (2)

Ekoriikheebeereebaabuudosaarbasiyaa,

Ekoriikheebeereebaabuhasiyaareemajaak. (2)

English Translation

The east wind is blowing, the boat is swaying

Goddess *Kali*!! The east wind is blowing, the boat is swaying. (2)

The pot is not drowning

In this *Jamuna* river, *Kali*!! .(2)

Where is the boatman *Jigana*?

Bring the boat *Jigana* (2)

I shall cut your hand boatman

I shall cut your hand *Jigana* with which you make oar. (2)

I shall give you oar *Jigana* please take us to our destination. (2)

On one side of the river there is tension

On the other side there is laughter. (2)

Analysis

The wind is so terrible and violent that the boat is swaying. The flood by the *Jamuna* River has already engulfed the *Purbaiyya* region(a place in Bihar). At the same time the east-wind is making the life of the people hell. It is making the *see maar* to *Dolalee*(sway) around. They are very panic and do not know how to overcome the situation. At this time, *ghaili*(pot)comes as a source of inspiration to them. They see it floating on the river *Jamuna* and wonder how this vessel is able to withstand the violent storm. Soon they realize that this *ghaili* is not just any vessel but it is one being offered to Goddess Kali. And, therefore, these people start praying the goddess to help them in this tensed situation. At the same time, they also remember about the ferryman *Jigana*. The people are calling *Jigana* to come and rescue them.

The situation is very grave and since he is not responding the people starts threatening the ferryman *Jigana* that if he does not come quickly they will cut off his hands with which he rows the boat. So, if he does not have the hands he would become useless in his profession and, therefore, he will not be able to earn his livelihood. But they are well aware of the situation and know that, he is the only person to rescue them. They again start calling him and ask him to take them to their destination.

The concluding two lines are worth noting. It says while on one side, one of the ferrymen is busy rowing the boat, on another side, the ferryman *Jigana* is laughing at the situation and seems to be unaware of the situation.

I feel this laughter is very spontaneous and obvious because the people otherwise do not notice how these ferrymen risk their lives daily while rowing from one place to another. These selfish people have come to realize his importance only when they were in danger. I think that this is true when taken in the real life scenario. We do not recognize the worth of others unless the situation demands and this for me is the moral of the song.

What appears to be a realistic account of a devastating flood on the rural side, on closer observation lends itself to subtler strands of the benign and generous aspects of the elements that pervade life. These elements re-appropriately associated with the goddess *Kali* - who is at once the nurturing mother and the fiercest goddess

routing out evil from the world. No wonder, the women's voice, even while pointing to the fury of the flood (which has already engulfed another village), does not curse the river and water. On the contrary, the voice appeals to the goddess to protect.

Secondly, the ferryman is no simple transporter of people; he is the one who transports lives, moves them from the grip of death to the shore of living. He changes fates as it were. Since he knows the play of life, he laughs even in the teeth of calamity. But what can't be missed in the song is the women's address of such a significant figure who changes fates. The singer threatens him that she will cut off the hands if he doesn't hurry up. He laughs at the naivety and intimacy of the woman. The divine and the deity here are no frightful or vengeful figures distancing themselves into invisible realms from the common folk. They too are part of everyday elements. Thus what appears to be a simple lyric actually unfolds the deeper metaphysical threads that weave the lives of rural subaltern women.

Conclusion

Among Methors we find a rich heritage of songs for different occasions. Women play a vital role in keeping Methor identity. Songs are sung by women on different occasions of social gatherings related to religious festivals, full moon day, at the time of holy festivals, marriages etc. which speak about their culture and living modes. No ceremony, festival, or ritual, however, in the Methor world is complete without the women's songs.

The information and insights pertaining to Methors, drawn from their songs, will be useful and serve us as more realistic and concrete sources to gain a perspective on their work of culture and song. Even in mainstream feminist researches, though there is a lot of work on women in general, rural and tribal women have not got as much attention as they deserve. It is even worse in the case of subaltern Methor women. We hardly find anything written (in fact there is none) on Methor women, as well as on their oral culture.

The Methor songs are associated with specific themes and concerns. These songs are not yet recorded or published, yet they are critical to understanding the symbolic significance of the rituals and the way the traditions of this community are carried on. Even if these texts were recorded, we would need to examine their ritual contexts and the concerns of their users in order to fully “read” them.

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