

Resistance in the Dalit Folklores of Bihar

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Abstract

Dalit of Bihar has a rich culture of the folk art form. From worshipping caste deities to song and dance, these folklores have been popular among masses. The stories, myths, language and presentation showcase cultural resistance to the hegemonic tradition. The struggle of Dalit life is the main focal point of all folklore. This article analyses different caste deities popular among Dalit people and how it creates a sense of pride and collective consciousness to fight against caste oppression.

Keywords: Dalit, folklore, folk culture, casteism.

Introduction

In every part of the world folk songs have been a major instrument in communicating daily experiences, aspirations and struggles of the people since the advent of civilisation. It is the knowledge and traditions of a particular group, frequently passed along by word of mouth. Even in India, this medium of expression has been a tradition since the ancient days. All linguistic regions, communities and castes in the country have their own traditional folklore. Among the Dalit, there has been a strong tradition of folk songs. In almost every part of the country and in all local languages and dialects through folklore, the Dalit have found their expression of aspirations, dreams and struggles.

In English language folklore has two components—folk and lore. Folk is used for common people and lore means learning. Thus the meaning of folklore is what can be learned by common people. The word was for the first time coined by W.J. Thomas in 1846 to express the beliefs, practices, customs, and idioms of the common people mainly rural, frequently poor and illiterate peasants. Now it is used for more expanded groups which have common traits and who express their shared identity through distinctive traditions. Normally it is believed that folklore is the oral literature that verbally reaches one generation to other generations, which includes folk dance, folk music, folk art, folk tale, folk song, folk myth, folk faith and superstitions (Parmar 13).

According to Charlotte Sophia Burne, folklore is now being used for the caste worldview, in which residual beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and proverbs, devotional songs, festivals, folk tales, ballads, songs, riddles, rhymes sayings are also its subject. Folklore is virtually the psychological manifestation of primitive human beings, whether it is in the fields of philosophy, religion, science, even in social organizations and rituals, or especially in history verses of poetry and literature (Burne 2).

The word 'lok' has been used since ancient times in Indian tradition. It has been used with the word 'Veda' and opposite to each other. Panini has written in the conclusion of many words that the meaning of the word in the 'Veda' and in 'Lok', should be understood differently. Similarly, Vararuchi used a different meaning of the same word in Veda and lok in his work. Patanjali in *Mahavasya* used 'Lok' and 'Veda' in opposition and difference. Bharatununi in chapter fourteen of his 'Natyashastra' mentions two different forms of dances- 'Natyadharmi' and 'Lokdharmi'. From above it becomes clear that *lok* and Vedas represent two different lives, worlds and worldviews.

This leads to the conclusion that in the Indian context, there was also paradoxical and opposing ideological beliefs outside Vedic traditions and beliefs. It would have been running from prehistoric times. But due to non-recognition of its existence or in the absence of the

honest efforts from the scholars and historians all efforts were centred around the Vedic culture, narratives and stories and establish its racial superiority over others. The competition and struggle between Vedic and Brahmanical tradition and folk culture continued. It tried to enforce rules of grammar and art form upon folk culture in spite of that folk culture kept defining its own way of expression and provided background for great creation in Veda and Brahman literature. *Brihatkatha* and *Kathaharitsagar* both got stories from popular folk stories. Jagdish Trigunayat wrote that *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Padmcharit*, *Raso* all creations were developed and further written with the influence of folk culture stories. Vedic and Brahmanical texts in Sanskrit were written in influences of the folk civilization, though they were absorbed in the free environment of the ashrams, they were not for the masses. Folk culture and tradition were popular among the masses, both traditions ran continuously competing and influencing each other.

Dalit Folk Culture of Bihar

The study on folk culture in Bihar started during British period Buchannan research papers and Giarson book *India Antiquary Maithili Chrestomathy*. Sahlesh Gatha and Dina-Bhadri Gatha were included in these papers, however it did not analyse it with Dalit life view and their purpose was only to collect these stories. In independent India, Acharya Nalin Wilochan Sharma in his book *Lokagatha Parichay*, gave a brief introduction of the folklore of Bihar in 1959 in the episode to explore the local and regional cultures in independent India. In 1971, Indian Publication, Calcutta published an edited book by Shankar Sen Gupta named *'Bihar in Folklore Study'*, which provided important information regarding the folklores of Bihar. . In this direction, there two popular books were *'Lokgatha Vivechan'* (1973) written by Pandit Rajeshwar Jha, and, *'Lok Jeevan and Lok Sahitya'* (1986) written by Dr. Yogananda Jha. With the rise of Dalit political consciousness, major efforts were taken to compile folk culture

popular among the Dalit. In Bhojpuri, Dr. Mahadev Prasad Singh compiled the song 'Reshma-Chharmal' in ten volumes. Shri Naresh Pandey Chokor compiled 'Sailas Bhagat Nutua Dayal' and 'Ghogale Ghatma' in *Angika* with the help of traditional singers. Written of the history of folk songs in Bihar, the book by Dr. Viswanath Jha *Chaupal Jati ka Sach*, published in 1997, was a milestone in Dalit folk culture writings. He established characteristics of the heroes, heroines of popular folk dances among the Dalit and their worshipping of the goddess or god as follows:

- 1) The rise of these folk goddesses has happened against Brahmanism. There is a lack of rituals in their worship.
2. The cultural background is based on ethnicity and caste.
- 3 Their reputation is relatively more among Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Backward Castes.
4. The worship process is based on *Raga-taal, laya-chand* (raga-rhythm and rhyme-rhythm).
- 5 It has promoted ethnic thinking, artistic conscience, social conduct etc. (Singh 5).

The book establishes the fact that Dalit folk culture has its root in its caste world view and it is counter culture, distinct from Brahmanical culture. It creates caste/class consciousness and provides the ideological basis for political, social, economic and cultural rights. This is resistance against the cultural hegemony of upper caste. Dalit folk culture is their life world view and the dream, reality, struggle and representation of life cycle.

Research Methodology

The objective of this research is to find out the elements of resistance in Dalit folk culture and how it is used as a cultural weapon for resistance against caste oppression, class/caste inequality and economic. For this research, we selected three linguistic are as altogether ten districts. Jahanabad, Patna and Lakhisarai from Maghi spoken area, Gopalganj

and Siwan from Bhojpur spoken area and Begusarai, Madhubani, Saharsha, Supaul and Madhepura from Maithili spoken area were selected for the survey. Total of 300 audiences was interviewed from these areas. Similarly, 150 folk artists from fifty-three villages of eight districts excluding Lakhisarai and Siwan were interviewed. We watched performances of Reshama Chuharmal, Raja Sahlesh, Sheet Basnant, Buhra Godhni and listened to songs of Alha Udal, Dina Bhadri, Sati Bihula.

Brief of Selected Folklores

Raja Shalesh

Raja Shalesh is a very popular god among Dusadh castes and other castes mainly in the northern part of Bihar. He was born in Morang near Nepal valley. He became a sanyasi and worked for poor, sick and common people. He served his whole life for humanity, with his yogabal (strength earned due to the practice of yoga and meditation) he used to control lion. He fought for temple entry and made Dalit go into the temple of Nanmahri. He marries to kshatriya princess Sanwarmati, his brother Motiram marries princess Kusmawati and other brother Budheshar gets married to the other princess Shyamalvati. These marriages were done after the war between Raja Shalesh and his brothers against three Kings where these Kings and army were defeated. His sister Banashpati also get married to Kshatriya King Saini. His temples are found in Samastipur, Darbhanga and Madhubani. He is shown with a sword and a horse. Every year, a mela is organized in Raja Shalesh garden, place on the way to Janakpuri on the day of Ramnavami. It is believed that Raja Sahlesh used to do his yoga sadhana/meditation in this garden and due to his blessing that place is pure, calm and without any fear.

Veer Chuharmal

Veer Chauharmal was born in Patna in Aijani Turkain village near Mokama tal (pond). His uncle was a wrestler so he also became a wrestler. For his bravery and kind work, he became popular. His stories of the brave fight against the feudal system and his fight with the dangerous tiger are found all over Magadha region today. A tiger is kept near his statue. He defeated a famous wrestler Maniram of Biharsharif. He used to serve as a bodyguard to Raja Kuleshar's daughter Chandra. Chandra got attracted to Chuharmal and proposed him which Chuharmal refused. Chandra plots a plan and removes him from service and he is accused of stealing jewellery of Chandra and he is not paid for the job. His clothes are removed from his body on account that he owes money to the King. Chuharmal with the help of the river Ganga makes a tunnel from Mokama to Pakaria royal court and steals jewellery. When he is caught he defends that he had never stolen anything and to take revenge to an injustice done to him, he stole jewellery.

The love story of Reshma and Chuharmal is very popular. Reshma was the sister of Veer Chuharmal's friend. She was attracted to Veer Chuharmal and wanted to get married. But Veer Chuharmal denied her being guru brother to Ajab Singh. She tried all means to get him but Veer Chuharmal was determined and kept his chastity. She plotted a plan to take revenge. His father the King captured Veer Chuharmal's father and uncle. Veer Chuharmal rushed into the fort and killed all soldiers and rescued his father and uncle. He defeated and killed all the army. King and his son were killed by Veer Chuharmal. Reshma took aide of witchcraft and attacked Veer Chuharmal village with hundreds of tigers Chuharmal killed all of them with his sword and left one old tigress. Then she attacked Chuharmal but Veer Chuharmal refused to fight her because she was a woman. He prayed to Goddess Durga and Durga made *kund* of *agni*. Veer Chuharmal passed through the *kund* without any harm as his soul was pure. Reshama who was following her got burnt to death. In Mokama Chairdih, on the day of Chaitra Purnima, ten days of *mela* (fair) is organized on the name of Veer Chuharmal.

Dina-Bhadri

Dina and Bhadri were two Musahar brothers. They were very brave and were against *begari* system. The king of Yogiya Nagar, where they lived, was very cruel and made common people do work in *begari*. The King and his sister were not happy that Dina-Bhadri and his family do not work for them. King came to Dina-Bhadri's house and asked them to work in 200 bigha land in *begari* and disrespected their mother. Dina-Bhadri beat the King and tied his hands and legs. So the king's sister, as she knew witchcraft, worshipped Raja Shales and Devi Bahosari and by treachery made them owe to kill both brothers. In Katiakhap jungle, when they were looking for dead pig as Bahasari told them in the dream, there was no pig but they found a baby deer which turned into a tiger. Brothers fought for seven days, they tore the tiger apart with their bare hands but Raja Shalesh came in form of hyena and joined tiger's body. The tiger at last killed Dina-Bhadri. Both became *pret*/spirit and they killed King and his sister and whole family except two daughters who once had helped Dina- Bhadri. Both sisters were married to two Musahars youth by Dina- Bhadri. Dina-Bhadri killed other Rajput King who used to make Musahars to work for *begari*. Both brothers went to Jagganathpuri to pray Lord Jagganath. But priests did not allow them; they waited without food for seven days in front of the temple. After that, they started to shake the main pillar of the temple by their chest. The temple started to crumble by their strength and was going to be dusted; Lord Jagganath himself came to rescue. And with the blessing of him both brothers got rid of *pretyoni*/spirit.

Characteristics of Dalit Folk Culture

Gender Equality and Fight against Sexual Exploitation

The folklores exhibit a deep respect for dignity of human being both for woman and man. Dalit God and Goddess fought for the respect of women and against sexual exploitation. Raja Shalesh freed Sabajpari and Lalpari two Dalit women from prison of King Narayan who tried to sexually exploit these sisters. The folklores challenge caste prohibition to love women and men of different caste. It sets an example of inter-caste marriage and freedom of women to choose their life partners. Raja Shalesh, his brothers and sister all have inter-caste marriages. Similarly the love and inter-caste marriages are depicted in many folk tales. In Dina-Bhadri folktale two Musahar brothers Rujhana and Bhujna are married to daughters of King. So these folklores oppose caste restriction of blood purity and directly attack Brahmanical tradition.

Fight against Feudalism and Begari System

The Dalit are agricultural labourers and in past begari system was prevalent in Bihar. The King and landlords used to take work without pay. Some crops were given to them after the production of crops in a year. That was meagre and the whole family had to depend on landlords and mahajans or rich family of the village. It was a sort of slavery. These Dalit Gods fought against this oppressive system and freed their people. The demand for reward for work was the main cause of their struggle. Dina-Bhadri mobilised people against Jorwarar Singh who refused to pay money after taking work from 700 musahars. Jorwarar Singh is killed and Musahars were freed. These two brothers moved place to place and freed Musahars from exploitative zamindars. They even went to Bombay and defeated the cruel zamindar named Apsadha.

Struggle for Natural Resources and Respect of Labour

All folklores are stories about the struggle for equality. Dalits were denied to use natural resources like ponds, pasture land, river and others for their livelihood. There was strict order to follow caste-based occupation and not to violate social restrictions. Similarly, Veer

Chuharmal kills King and his army when King's nephew take away cows grazing in restricted land and is caught and put into prison. Reshma ordered that villagers cannot use King's land for their cattle. Raja Shalesh kills Bachotar a snake and soldiers and freed hundreds of cows from King's possession. There is high respect for labour and production in Dalit culture. On the same stream, Dina Bhadri takes control of Paniyadharain (hippopotamus-like creature) after defeating it. Bachia, the sister of King Kanakdhami creates a pond and Paniyadharain by use of magic and any cattle which goes to the pond is eaten by the creature. Dina Bhadri freed pond for the villagers (Ram 57).

Temple Entry and Right to Worship

Raja Narayan of Mahisautha prohibited Dalit people to worship in Mahadev temple in Nanmarhi village. Raja Sahlesh took the challenge and defeated the King and his army and led Dalit to the temple. When he rang the bell of the temple, a tiger came out roaring from the door, Sahlesh's brother Motiram challenged the tiger flexing his muscle and tiger returned. Heavy rocks of the Nanmahri hill broke down and fell in the Jhahuri pond. The incidence reflects the fight of Dalit against social ostracism of temple entry. Since then the Dalit have been gathering at the Jhahuri pond and celebrate their success of temple entry. Similarly, in Dina-Bhadri story, Lord Jagananth had to appear and relieve both brothers from pretyoni. Both brothers challenged Brahmin control and destroyed temple signifying tear down socio-cultural norms.

Struggle against Exploitative Market

Economic system and market has denied Dalit access to it and has exploited them. Dina Bhadri fought against this when their wives went to the market to exchange 120 kg rice with goods for a communal feast in respect of their husband's death; the *baniya* named Rupchanwa of Kunauli market weighs it incorrectly and tells that it was 20 kg. The shopkeepers and trades men have

always been buying agricultural products from poor and farmers at very fewer prices and imply the wrong weigh machine. Dina Bhadri in form of yogis saw this and remembers yogi Kirati. Yogi Kiratai sits in weighing scale and Baniya is taught a lesson, his whole shop gets empty in course of giving equal products for equal rice to Dina Bhadri's wives. This way they teach a lesson to the exploitative baniya.

Conclusion

Dalit folklores create consciousness among Dalit about their suffering, history and bring solidarity among them to fight caste oppression. It has a great social mission. In the folk-arts, there is no distinction between the actor and the spectator. As the spectator himself becomes a part of the art the artist becomes a part of social integrity. The folk artists and spectators we interviewed belonged to Dalit and lower castes and even in time of television and entertainment media youth relate them to these folklores. They are mostly illiterate or less educated and primarily belong to the labour class. These folklores are more realistic and each tale is related to real situation like fight for fishing right, fight for temple entry, fight for dignity, and struggle for land rights, wage and fight against sexual exploitation and so on, the description of cattle, agriculture, love, feudal relation makes them connect easily with the struggle of these communities. These folklores and cultural practices of the Dalit not only show their distinct belief and value system but also resist to a dominant oppressive culture. The situation remains similar today. So in the grass-root movement and mass-struggle, these folklores are told and sang.

The Dalit have own belief and values. They challenge many beliefs which are intrinsic to the Brahmanical system. Caste inequality, hierarchy, caste superiority, gender inequality, complexity and *karmakaand* in worship all are vehemently opposed in these folklores. These folklores propagate culture where there is no exploitation, no one is bonded labourer or denied

equal pay, women are not exploited, where there is freedom to love and choose partners. The God and Goddess are pure not corrupted; they are brave, honest, loyal and yogis. They get victory over upper caste and Brahmin, Vaisya and Kshatriya Kings are punished. This makes them so popular among the Dalit. The Dalit don't believe it as mythology but believe that these are real struggles where they trampled feudal and caste oppression.

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