

The Image of Women in Folk Traditions of Migration

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In India's largest linguistic region, the Bhojpur region, migration has created three distinct folk traditions: the *banijiya* (trader) tradition, the *sipahiya* (soldier) tradition, and the *bidesiya* (foreigner) tradition. Despite being entrenched in social and cultural differences, the sentiments in these traditions have had mutual interactions. The present paper throws light on the image of women in these three traditions.

Migration in the Bhojpur region has primarily meant out-migration of men, the effects of which are serious on women. In the absence of men, several responsibilities have to be shouldered by women, which involve a wide array of roles. In this process, women have to emotionally suffer separation on the one hand, and endure familial and social oppression (including sexual exploitation) on the other. The upshot of this is, of course, that women become empowered in the process—to undertake agriculture and skilfully fulfil social responsibilities, although they are not able to claim economic independence. A cursory look at any aspect of folk traditions is enough to show that while the exploited side of separated women is highlighted, the empowered facet is underplayed. This negative yet idealistic imagery of women is particularly true of songs and stories sung and told by men, and to a lesser degree, those by upper-caste women. The image is of an oppressed, betrayed and downtrodden woman who has not found her voice to protest. In contrast some of the folk songs of low-caste women are powerful symbols of resistance, sometimes quite shrill and even vulgar going by the standards of the language. Vulgarity and frivolity in language create an image of an empowered entity in the minds of the opposition, even though they cast these songs and songstresses as uncivilised, rustic, backward, etc.

At this transitional stage towards the establishment of ideological hegemony, the end of every idea and artefact has been declared by globalised cultural imperialism on the one hand, while on the other, oppressed identities are not merely trying to find their past but writing their histories afresh. On the one hand, imperialism is strengthening traditional authorities and on the other hand oppressed identities are coming to the fore. It is a clash between forces that are attempting to stub out regional identities and those that are asserting regional identities. The latter are looking for histories of their oppression, which in turn provides them a sense of unity and the strength to resist.

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History is being erected on memory, as women are writing about their historical oppression and strengthening their voices. Folk songs are oral traditions stored in memory, locked inside which a feminine ideology has historically questioned traditional hierarchies and revealed cruel social realities; and this is being rediscovered by the new woman. But this search is not without complexities and several streams of thought stand divided.

At the centre of the ideological tussle over women's identity and struggle are voices from cinema, media, universities, schools, offices, factories and slums. The 'mute' (those not permitted to speak outside the home) voices of the countryside, veiled and imprisoned by the household, have still not found entry into the mainstream discourse of resistance. It is a different matter that their songs contain fighting images of women and the echoes of those songs have reverberated for eras. It is certain that these women are the marginalised among the marginalised. On this subject, can feminist ideologues excuse themselves by merely stating that they have limited resources and reaching rural women is difficult? Or should they reflect upon and accept that even the theorists of the marginalised are ridden with the baggage of their own religious, upper-caste and elite-class identities and are opportunistically using women's issues? It is in this context that the voices of the women living inside the four walls of the house and those who have been forced to flee become even more important.

In this paper, I try to look at how life for married women becomes an ebb and flow of hope and despair in the context of systematic male out-migration. I will try to situate a wife-of-a-migrant identity negotiating familial and social relationships, and locate its interface with her class, religion and caste identities. How can the tension between her personal memory and shared history be characterised? In what form can her values and interests be found in oral traditions? What questions are raised about her chastity by her migrant husband on his return? Besides, I try to research the issue of women out-migrants, most of who were practically forced to migrate: what is their social and cultural image, and what is the larger society's attitude/behaviour towards them. The answers to these questions are enmeshed in folk literature to a degree, and with a piercing honesty no other form of literature can replicate.

The Folk Imagination of Rural Women in a Migrant's Family

Let us look at the image of migration-affected women in folk culture. Most folk tales are sung by men, and in these the migrant's wife generally conforms to an ideal image; but exceptions to this image also exist. The communication between the husband and wife can be a dynamic and lively duet, as in the song below:

*'Run-jhun khol na kevariya,
Hum bideswa jaibo na'
'Jo more saiyan tuhu bideswa jaiba na
tu bideswa jaiba na
Humra bhaiya ke bola de, hum naiharwa jaiba na'
'Jo more dhaniya tuhu naiharwa jaibu na
naiharwa jaibu na
Jatana lagal ba rupaiya*

Otna dei ke jaiha na'
'Jo more saiyan tuhu leba ab rupaiya
Tu rupaiya leba na
Jaisan baba gharwa rahti
Aisan karike dih na'
'Run-jhun khol na kevariya,
Hum bideswa jaibo na' (Upadhyay 1990, 73–74)

In this song the husband wants to migrate to foreign lands and requests his wife to unlock the door. The wife answers that if he must go, then she must be sent off to her natal home. To this the husband responds by asking for the repayment of all the money he had spent on her until now, but the wife cleverly asks for the repayment of the chastity (the way she was in her father's home) that she has parted with since then. The husband does not have an answer to this.

In other songs, even if the wife agrees to her husband leaving, she shares her worries with her husband as to how will she find any interest in household duties after he is gone, and that the big city is not right for her husband. Look at the song below:

Kalkatva tu jan jaa raja, hamar dil kaise lagi
Ohi Kalkatva me randi bastu hai, mojra kare hai din raati
hamar dil kaise lagi
Ohi Kalkatva me malaria bastu hai, gajla kare hai din raati
hamar dil kaise lagi
Ohi Kalkatva me tamoliya bastu hai, beerwa lage hai din raati
hamar dil kaise lagi (Archer and Prasad 1943, 171)

Here the wife warns the husband against taking off to Calcutta (now Kolkata) as it is full of prostitutes, rampant with malaria and dotted with paan-cigarette shops. In Bhikhari Thakur's popular play *Bidesiya* too, the heroine Pyari Sundari imagines Calcutta to be something similar. (But Calcutta does appear with positive imagery in several folk traditions.)

The change of residence of a woman from natal to conjugal after marriage has been analysed as a kind of migration, and it presents a history true for almost the entire world. To accentuate her own dislocated context when her husband has to depart, a wife has no one to talk with about her desolation. The husband no doubt becomes a stranger in an unknown land, uprooted from his own world, but his wife too feels like a stranger in his household. When she was in her natal home, she could take a walk in the fields, enjoy the swings with her friends, go for a swim in the river or village lake; she could even go as far as the local market and buy a trinket of her choice. But at her in-laws' she has to take utmost care about customs and rules. It is almost as if the house and the courtyard have become her only arena. In a distant land while her husband is imprisoned within the claws of his *malik* (literally means owner; here it denotes contractor or employer), here she is under the surveillance of her mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law and many others. The separation from her own family and migration of her husband makes her feel like a migrant too. She still has memories of her past life, and there is constant strife between her memory and the

historical fact of a woman's fate in a patriarchal set-up. She cries, 'My treasure has gone to Dhanbad to earn, my days are spent in pain, the courtyard seems like a foreign land.' When she tries to be free of the memories of her past life, she finds herself lost in the memory of the time she spent with her husband. If she tries to fight both, she feels lonely. She wishes to communicate with her loved ones, but how can she? Where would those loved ones be? And how will her message reach them? There flies a crow to her terrace; that one will do the job. The small tree on the courtyard will be her companion. She lures the crow with milk and rice in exchange for a promise to take her message to her lover.

*Nanadi ke angna chanan ghan gachiya ho Rama
Tahi chadhi bolela kagwa chulcchan ho Rama
Debau re kagwa, dudha bhaat doniya ho Rama
Khabar na la de balam pardesiya ho Rama (Amin 2005, 267)*

'What do you say, crow, my loved one has taken another woman and she is prettier than me. Such an insult!' In situations of such insecurity and insult women live their lives and give vent to their emotions in the songs while they work. When a child is born her responsibilities increase; in this culture, child-bearing and rearing are considered to be woman's nature and religion, not considered as her labour. By the time she has conceived she has spent considerable time in her in-laws' household and has become accustomed to its conditions. The surveillance of her in-laws seems to have slackened. But even then she is helpless in some ways. In the song below, the new mother's helplessness finds expression:

*Sut sut babuwa, kui mai ke debuwa
Baap gaile naukri, matari aksaruwa
Aja aji chanan ke, pitiya sahodar ke
May khilona chain ke, babuwa re tu kathi ke
Anan chanan kasturi ke
(http://ignca.nic.in/coilnet/pdf_data/kvbhoj06.pdf)*

A young mother is having difficulty putting her infant to sleep, and what can she do alone? Her husband has gone out to work, and her parents-in-law have passed away. She can hardly call her own parents her own. All the toys are made of silver, but what is her baby made of? He must be made of sandal and musk. This lullaby is a song about the daily life of a woman whose mind has now settled inside the household. As the child grows, her attachment to the household will grow too. Her joys and sorrows will now rotate around the in-laws' house; if she was to separate from this joint family set-up, she will have to bear scornful remarks not from her in-laws, but her own friends and female relatives:

*Chotki gotaniya mare tanwa ke batiya
Patiya rai-rai na, likhawe Rajmatiya patiya...
Sosti Shri chithi raur bhejni tamey likhal
Chotka pathruwa likhi katna mai bikai
Dukhwa ke patal khichat bani jatiya
(http://ignca.nic.in/coilnet/pdf_data/kvbhoj07.pdf)*

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This song is based on the form of a letter: a migrant's wife called Rajmatiya is being taunted by her young sister-in-law, so Rajmatiya is having a letter written to her husband. She says to her husband that she received the eighty rupees he had sent, but that won't suffice. Girls have become clever with age. If one doesn't have a swing then another doesn't have clothes. The goat is bleating as she is feeling cold and the goat-kid's selling price has not been decided. The wife asks for her husband's quick advice. Mangra is going to school every day, but he broke maulviji's (teacher) lock (to his room/house/chamber) and has found friends. The migrant's wife asks for news of the entire neighbourhood to be written down in the letter to her husband. This song reveals how far removed from his home, yet attached to it a migrant husband is. All his worries and hopes are pinned to his home in the village, but he must take decisions from afar.

The autobiography of the Dalit writer Tulsiram, *Murdahiya*, paints another portrait of the pain of migrants' wives left alone in villages:

The summer of 1959 ... many people from the villages were working as labourers in Calcutta and collieries in Bengal. For their families these labourers were as much hope as clouds during a midsummer day. Particularly when women in the villages came to me for having letters written to their migrant labourer husbands, they presented a strange predicament for me. Many of them would start weeping as they described their near-starvation conditions. I had my own share of sorrows to drown and swim in, but these village women crying constantly like machines irked me no end. My tears would mix with theirs many a time. Among these crying machines was one Kisuni Bhoji, whose husband was a miner in the Katras colliery. His name was Munnilal. Kisuni Bhoji was the mother of two, though she was hardly twenty-two. She was extraordinarily talented in describing tales of sorrow. When she made me write letters, it seemed that sad sagas were describing themselves. Had she been educated, she would surely have become a stalwart in tragic literature. I remember one particular letter she had me write describing a drought in the village, a few lines of which were as follows:

Oh Khedan *ke bapu* (Khedan's father: this is how people in several parts of the subcontinent address their spouses, indirectly by their offspring's name rather their own)! What all can I summarise in this letter? Babuni (a daughter is called Babuni) cries a lot; I fear she might die but even then my breasts will not produce any milk. If I try to milk the cow, it kicks me away. Bansuwa pays rotten grain in wage; and to top it he keeps a lustful watch over me. When the married women go looking for their cattle in the grazing fields in the evening, we feel the need of a torch. Night frightens me like a vulture. Chhotwa (her son) almost never recovers from an upset stomach. What should I feed my children? What should I eat? I cannot understand a thing! From where should I bring milk for Babuni? When she weeps, sometimes I take her out to the courtyard and try to soothe her, saying, look, there comes your father, and she quiets for a moment. How are you? I heard about the incidence of fire in the colliery! Quit this job! Take a daily wage job in the village itself. We will still be able to live our lives in peace. Why spend such troublesome lives! Alone, my heart is in nothing I do, and moreover resources are so scarce that there is nothing to eat! If possible, send us twenty rupees

and do not forget to bring Tulsi Babu a sheaf of plain paper whenever you visit next. He writes letters for everyone in the village and so efficiently. What more should I tell you? How much one can write, hope you will understand everything!

At the time this letter was being written, Kisuni Bhoji had a four-year-old son Khedan and a one-and-half-year-old daughter Babuni. Kisuni Bhoji says that she is working as a daily wage labourer at the residence of Bansu Pandey, the zamindar ... Many women made me write many similar letters during the drought. I myself posted those 'crazy' letters in the letterbox on the school premises in the village (Tulsiram 2010, 90).

I must have written many similar lines to migrant husbands countless times in my schooldays (1985–90). Many a time I was reprimanded for penning down the exact emotion expressed in speech and tears.

The Ideal Woman's Purity vs. Pressures of Her Context

In the Indian marriage system a woman's chastity occupies prime importance. Bhojpuri folk literature is rich in imageries of monogamous and devotional love. This can be seen in the *banijiya* folk tales sung by heroines of the Kewat and Dom castes, like Bihula, Lachiya and Devsundari, or the ballads of Parvati, Hevanti, Sobhnayak Banjara's Jasumatiya, Lorikayan's Manjari and Bhagwati. We can see similar motifs in *sipahiya* folk traditions such as Jalim Singh's drama where low-caste heroine Dilmohini upholds the value of fidelity and in *bidesiya* plays where mythical heroines like Pyari Sundari and other characters teach these values to their societies. For the protection of their purity, the heroines have not only turned down proposals from other men, but have fought valiantly and killed oppressive men who have tried to hurt their dignity by force, or have detached themselves from life by killing themselves to maintain their chastity. The heroine's husband has migrated and has not returned for twelve long years; the wife waits for him, guarding her chastity. When the husband is on his way back to the village after twelve years he spots his wife on the road, but the wife is unable to recognise him. How can she? After all, her husband deserted her at such a young age, and she had not even looked at his face properly. So the husband plays a prank on the unaware wife by proposing to her and promising her gifts of gold and pearls. The wife takes this as an affront from an unscrupulous man and reproaches him angrily: *aag laage daal bhar sonva mein, bajjar pare motiya ke harva* (May fire swallow your gold, to hell with your pearl necklaces)!

Pyari Sundari in Bhikhari Thakur's *bidesiya* play, as well the Pyari Sundari in Duniyabai's play, are seen to be waiting for their husbands for several years. A young male neighbour (*dewar* or brother-in-law) makes an indecent proposal, but the heroine rejects his lustful desires and maintains her purity till her migrant husband returns. It is interesting that no matter how many illicit relations the husband may have entertained, it is unthinkable for the rustic wife to follow in his footsteps. Even to declare or prove her fidelity becomes a challenge for her many a time. Folk literature stands witness to the fact that the wife fights for her dignity as if protecting her husband's honour, while her husband enters into romantic and sexual relationships with other women in the city, as well as comes back home only to question the fidelity of his wife. In one *banijiya*

folk song, the mythical character Shiv comes back from a twelve-year-long business tour, and rather than inquiring how his wife has fared in his absence, he grills her about how pure she still is:

*Lavangiya ladaniya ho Mahadev, Tirsul dihlan uthangayi
Barah baris par ailan Mahadev, gaura se mangelan vichar
Jab hi je gaura deyi Baramha Gaud lagelan, Baramha Bisun dihlan asis
Ehu kiriaba gaura hum nahi maanab ho, humro ke da Suraj vichar
Ehu kiriaba gaura hum nahi maanab ho, Gangiya vichar mohi dehu
Faatu hu dharti samaai balu jaibo, aisan purukh muh na dekhbo*
(Ramdin 1989, 165)

This is a Shiv– and Parvati (god and goddess in Hindu mythology) song sung by women during weddings and is considered auspicious. Shiva has returned home after twelve years. He was away from home on account of his trade in cloves. Shiva instead of asking how Parvati is doing expresses his suspicion on her chastity and asks how is he to believe in her purity. He demands proof. In her reply Parvati touches the feet of Brahma (Hindu god of creation) and gets his blessing. When she took a dip in the Ganges she did not drown. In similar vein Shiva tested Parvati and she passed all the tests. Finally, Parvati pleads with the earth to engulf her and said wistfully as to why she should face such a man.

This ritualistic song shows the systematic fashion in which a husband is sanctioned to suspect the sexual purity of the wife, and that there is an old and well-established tradition of examining the wife to clear his doubts. The tradition socialises women to believe that if an ideal husband like Lord Shiva had the right to suspect his wife, the lot of us don't stand a chance! Further, they strongly believe that it is they who have to prove their incorruptibility to allay their husband's worries. In women's minds, therefore, this is a legitimate demand by the husband and society. Similarly, in a Jantsari¹ song of the *sipahiya* folk tradition, a soldier returns from distant lands only to suspect his wife's fidelity, upon which he tries to leave without giving her a chance to explain:

*Mora pichhuvarva re nibiya ke gachiya, se nibiya seetal juri chaan
Re daiya nibiya seetal juri chaan
Aahi tare aile re julmi sipahiya, se pagiya atki gaile daar
Re daiya pagiya atki gaile daar
Mora pichhuvarva badhaiya bhaiya hitva, se nibiya he deu na girai
Re daiya nibiya he deu na girai
Ek cheb marle dosar cheb marlen, se nibiya girele ararai
Re daiya nibiya girele ararai
Aahi re nibiya ke palang salbalo, se palang baile majeydaar
Re daiya palang baile majeydaar
Aahi par sutilen julmi sipahiya, se paati choli bheegele humar
Re daiya paati choli bheegele humar
Bhaile garamiyare bheegi gaile choliya, se taniek sut bachai
Re daiya taniek sut bachai
Eta bachan jalim sune hi na pavlan, se ghodi peethi bhailan savaar*

Re daiya ghodi peethi bhailan savaar
Saas ke jagavalo nanad ke jagavalo, se saiyan mor risal jaye
Re daiya saiyan mor risal jaye
Saas dhaili atuka nanad dhaili patuka, se hum dhani ghoda ka lagaam
Re daiya hum dhani ghoda ka lagaam
Chaaruu chaaruu atuka o chaaruu chaaruu patuka, se chaaruu dhani ghoda ka lagaam
Re daiya chaaruu dhani ghoda ka lagaam
Aisan baat dhani hum nahi sahbo, se hum karbo dosar biyah
Re daiya hum karbo dosar biyah
Patina vachan suni kadhla katariya, se maaru saiyan jiyara humar
Re daiya maaru saiyan jiyara humar
Saas samjhauli nanad samjhauli, se maani gaile balmu humar
Re daiya maani gaile balmu humar (Fraser 1883, 12-13)

The soldier's wife tells a tale of a lemon tree in their backyard, whose shade was cool. The soldier was passing by it when his *pagdi* (turban) got stuck on one of its branches. The wife requested her carpenter neighbour to fell the tree and had a bed made out of it. This bed had strange properties; while the soldier slept on it, the wife's blouse turned moist, so she requested him to shift a little bit. The husband did not even care to let her complete what she was saying; suspecting her of infidelity he sprang upon his horse and was ready to be off. She narrates that she had to wake his mother-in-law and sister-in-law to help her stop him from dashing off in anger. While she held the horse and her in-laws held him, the cruel soldier vowed he would now remarry. Hearing this, the wife challenged him to take out his sword and kill her before leaving. After a lot of coaxing and cajoling the husband agreed to stay.

As mentioned at the outset, there is some amount of similarity in the sentiments and narratives amongst the three folk traditions of the region. The social topography of the region is one and the same, even though the castes and professions of the migrants differ somewhat. The topography and society of Bhojpur prepares the psyche of women in such a fashion, from much before her marriage, that she is ready for the tortures of her in-laws; she bears the scornful remarks directed at her and her parents; she does not answer back if people are keen to find fault in her work. Bhojpuri society has created a helpless bride as its ideal through its literature, and it is more or less the same picture in the literature of all castes and classes.

But it is in this same region that certain castes have given pre-eminence to their social reality and overcome the tension of their oppressed history and exploitative culture. We can see this in the *bidesiya* tradition of low-caste communities. Bhikhari Thakur's play *Gabarghichor* is the most familiar example of this. In some of the songs of working-class women too, the so-called purity of women is oft derided. This is because among the lower classes men and women contribute equal or similar labour to the production process, giving rise to a different kind of bonding between them. (However, this is not

1. Jantsari folksong is sung while grinding grains in a *janta*. *Janta* is a round-shaped stone grinder found in rural households. The duration of these songs depends on the length of the grain. The quantity of grain depicted helps understanding the social inequities of the Bhojpuri region.

to say that social and cultural beliefs have been completely obliterated for the making of this bond.) Women of the Gaud, Nat and other Dalit castes, who put in labour equal to that contributed by a man, can become vocal critics of social customs in the face of oppression. Note the song below:

*Phool ek phooli gaile, phooleva va dabanva
Piya mor gaile bideswa, kaike ke gavanwa
Jaangh tor thake re piyva, bahiya lago ghunwa
Jahi haathe dale re muana, sir me senurva
Forbo mai sankar churiya, metbi senurva
Hatbox mai alhar jiyara, tohre karanva
Mati for sankh ke churiya, mati methu senurva
Jani hat alhar jiyara, rahbo hajurva (Upadhyay 1966, 306)*

This song is sung by the Gaud caste which is considered low-born by the larger Hindu society. Here, a Gaud woman, contemplating the blossoming of the *dauma* flower, laments her separation from her husband who left her right after their wedding. She curses the one who has caused her this pain, wishing that his legs start to ache as he walks to foreign lands and that the hands with which he had put vermilion on her forehead (a customary symbol of married Hindu women) become numb. She further threatens to smash her shell bangles (another customary symbol of married Hindu women) and rub off the vermilion, saying she would kill herself for her husband's sake. The husband beseeches her not to do so and promises that he will not leave her side. The language in which this song taunts the migrating man gives a clear picture of the low-caste working-class Gaud community amidst the contesting traditions within Bhojpuri society. But often the uniqueness of caste-based sociality is not so clear from folk songs. In the song below, the woman has become pregnant through illegitimate sexual relationships while her migrant husband is away. She wishes to make a claim of legitimacy and, with the help of her sister-in-law, turns into a *natin* (performer/rope dancer, an occupation associated with a low caste in India) and goes to her husband.

*Mora pichhuvarva e nanadi, champawa ke phulwa nu re ji
champawa ke phulwa e nanadi, rahela garabhva nu re ji
The garabhva e nanadi, kekara sire dharbi nu re ji
Arre Saami mor gaile e nanadi, Rajwa ke nokriya nu re ji
Jinhi kar hoihe e nanadi, haath ke mundariya nu re ji
Unkar janmal e nanadi, rovela horilva nu re ji (Mishra 1970, 91)*

In this long Jantsari song (only a part of it is reproduced above), the wife of the migrant man is telling her neighbour/sister-in-law that there is a flower tree behind her house and that she has been impregnated by the bees who came to suck honey from the flowers. She shares her worry about who will give the child a father's name as her husband has been called away on duty by the king and her brother-in-law is too young. The sister-in-law advises her to dress up as a *natin*, with a thin bamboo stick in her hands and a bamboo basket under her arms, and go to her husband. The pregnant woman takes her neighbour's advice and walks several miles. People shout that a *natin* is coming to their locality. She reaches the place where her husband is living and finds him. The man asks

what the *natin* would charge to allay his pain, and how much she would charge for her beauty. The *natin* replies that to allay his pain she will only charge one rupee and two paise, but that her beauty is priceless. The man persists, offering her other currencies, but the *natin* demands his ring. She comes back with the ring and gives birth to a son. After twelve years, the husband returns home and the sister-in-law asks whose son it is who is crying. The wife replies that the one who had given her the ring is the father of her son.

The motifs in this song are unlike those present in other folk songs of the region, irrespective of tradition; and this indicates that other than the Nat caste, free sexual relationships are not the norm in Bhojpuri society. In the *banijiya* and *sipahiya* folk traditions on migration, we often see that the migrant husband kills the pregnant wife (usually by drowning), or she is driven out of the home. In the famous *banijiya* folktale of Shobhnayak, the pregnant woman is driven out of her husband's home even though she has conceived her husband's offspring from their intimacy on the wedding night. But her in-laws do not listen to her and force her to leave.

Bhauji apne tu naihra me ijate gaublu ho na
Bhauji bhaiya sir ab tuhu thoklu ho na
Mata bhaiya bahre bahar gaile morang deswa ho na
Rama baari ke chabey ta mahina ke garabhva ho na
Rama mare lagli baari kar sasui ho na
Rama chhini lele ab abharanva ho na
Rama khedi dele ghar se baharwa ho na (Grierson 1889, 506)

In folk literary traditions, we see a sympathetic depiction of such women who are made to live outside the village and with the forced labour of collecting dry leaves from the forests imposed on them. In the songs sung by men and upper-caste women, the migrants' wives are not seen to protest the punishment meted out to them. But in the songs of lower-caste/class women, the voices of protest are heard and some songs evince signs of rebellion.

The Social and Cultural Image of *Urhari* Women

There is a popular saying in Bhojpuri—'*Urhari aurat, temporary naukri aa tatihar ghar ke or-chhor na ha*'—which means that *urhari* women (mistresses), temporary jobs and a hovel-like-home can't be trusted. Ghaag, a folk poet of this linguistic belt, has also warned men about *urhari* women: '*muwe chaam-se-chaam katave, bhui sankri ma sovey, kahe Ghaag ye teeno bhakuva, urhar par rovey*' (Tripathi 1952, 207). According to Ghaag, those who wear tight shoes and try to sleep in cramped spaces, and those who elope with women who are not their wives, away from the comforts of their family, are all ignorant fools.

To understand the social behaviour towards *urhari* women we must delve into the cultural meanings of the word. Historian Shahid Amin defines the term thus: 'urari, a woman who has been enticed away; a woman not his wife who lives with a man' (Amin 2005, 47–48). The word *urhari* has roots in the word 'urhaar' which means to kidnap/elope with. Such women are also called *ardhi* but the difference between them is that an *ardhi* woman gets married to the man she elopes with and society accepts this marriage to an extent, which is not true for *urhari* women.

From the literary meaning of the word and their overwhelming presence in folk literature we can see that the label *urhari* is not only fixed on women who wilfully run away with men to whom they are not married, but also those women who are kidnapped by men. In the folk tale 'Loriki', the hero Lorik abducts Chanva and the scene is called 'Chanva ka urhaar'; in another play Jalim Singh abducts a Dom's daughter. This is a common feature in folk songs as well. In many parts of the subcontinent, the abduction of women and keeping the abductees as mistresses was a common tradition before colonisation. Grierson mentions a song in his writings containing the word *urharle*:

Hathva me daarle Ram-Rekhwa
Garwa me daarle udrach
Lalki pagariya banha ke yarva
Jaani ke urharle ba jaat (Grierson 1886, 231)²

This tells of a woman called Ram-Rekha who is wearing bangles in her hand and a Rudraksh necklace; her *yarva* (lover) has donned a red turban and is taking his *jaani* (sweetheart) away. What must be noted is that if a woman elopes in such a manner, the loss of honour is the woman's. She is disrespected because she is not married to the man and yet staying with him, with or without their children.

During colonial times, women who migrated from the Bhojpur region were mostly widowed, barren, abandoned or extremely poor—that is, the most exploited and downtrodden women. One of Pandit Totaram Sanaday's anecdotes is worth mentioning. A nineteen-year-old widow is harassed by her mother-in-law and elder sister-in-law. The latter's husband had sexually exploited the widow, and she was pregnant from this illicit relationship. She was asked to abort the pregnancy but she refused. She is beaten up and driven out of home, with the threat that if she returned she would be murdered. Totaram says that stories like these keep coming to him from villages around Allahabad, Kanpur, Agra, Faizabad, Ayodhya, Benaras, Mathura and so on, and in fact, one could just observe the sheer number of widows wandering about aimlessly in towns. 'Be it in shacks or in bungalows, forty out of every hundred household would reverberate with the sorrowful voices of widows' (Sanaday 1994, 141). These women did not migrate voluntarily; from oral traditions it is not difficult to gather that oppressed women were forced to flee their homes in the countryside. For example, in *Kauvahankni*, a folktale, the heroine empathetically talks about the ordeals of such women.

Describing the profile of jute mill workers of Calcutta, historian Samita Sen says that most of the temporary workers were migrant men; the few women there were widows or low-caste barren women who had left their homes to come to Calcutta. She adds that many such women, after migrating to the cities, became domestic workers, cooking and cleaning for households; large numbers became prostitutes (Sen 1999, 25). Women who had to stay outside of the accepted family set-up during the time of migration were branded prostitutes by the society of the time. Strikingly, as Samita Sen points out, whether nationalist, reformist or working class, organisations and activists of all shades were reinforcing the existing social suspicion about migrant women workers. Women workers had become symbols of disrepute and denigration on the factory floors and in the slums where workers lived. Sen observes that even women who entered into

2. Grierson translates the song as 'Ram-Rekha has put bangles on his arm, and on his neck Ud'rachh. The lover has tied on a red turban, and is carrying off his sweetheart'.

'temporary marriages' to escape the branding were called prostitutes. Many of these women lived in particular ghettos or areas which were considered sleazy—infested with illicit sex work, kept women and use-and-throw marriages (176).

Official statistics of the colonial government tell us that men migrating from the Bhojpur region rarely took their wives with them. Even when they did bring their wives to the cities, they considered it improper and lowly to make their wives work for daily wages. Despite this we do see, particularly in plantations, that exploitative owners and supervisors forced a rupture in this cultural belief by extracting forced labour from entire families. On the other hand, government commissions such as the Royal Commission on Labour in India revealed the persistence of these traditional beliefs. A jute mill worker hailing from Darbhanga reported to the Commission that in his district men did not bring their families to towns, and if he did not abide by this custom, people would mock him. A Bengali worker said that his wife did not work in the mill because in Bengal women do not go out to work. Digambari, a woman worker in a Howrah jute mill, told the Commission that unless Bengali women were widowed they did not come to work in mills. A contrary point of view was presented by a woman from Chhapra who had brought her granddaughters to work in the mills apparently because she was getting old (The Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931 cited in Sen 1999, 180). We may conclude from these assertions that the sense of honour of these migrants is enmeshed with the ideals of the community and their own identity has collapsed into the community identity. The community is the mirror that reflects their shame or pride, as the case may be.

But why is such an ideal being constructed about the women of their community? Why does the working class believe that if women work, it is an insult or dishonour for them? It is obvious that the working class constructing this image is male-dominated; assuming women to be an object of personal honour/status is a result of their social conditioning and tied to their community's 'purity'. Another contemporary official report collected inputs from the manager of the jute mill who said that most women working in the mill were engaged in paid sex work as well (Curjel Report, 1-2, cited in Sen 1999, 186–187). All these women were migrant labourers who had been uprooted from their families. One woman worker from a jute mill in Calcutta, who was considered by all to be a prostitute, said that most women of the factories live with male co-workers, even though they were not their wives. Some women moved in alone while some moved in with their children. The household scenario was not exactly that of a traditional family (Curjel Report, 1-2, cited in Sen 1999, 186–187). These are the *urhari* or *urhariya* women of Bhojpuri folk literature.

It has already been indicated that in the era of colonisation women of the Bhojpur region migrated to Calcutta, Jharia, Dhanbad, Assam, etc. which were contemporary industrial hubs or plantation areas. But women were also sent to other colonies by the English, to balance the sex-ratio at workplaces. In those days women who got lost in traditional carnivals and fairs became a prime source of income for the *arkatiya* (local tout). The latter would mislead lost women to booths where coolies were signed up for labour (Amin 2005, 47–48).³ These women had lived their entire lives in villages and would come in flocks from their villages to fairs during religious/social festivals. One or two women getting lost from these flocks was very common in those days; police

records stand witness to how common this phenomena was. Bhikhari Thakur's play *Ganga Snaan* and Mahadev Prasad Singh's *Melaghumni* (a tale in verse) are based on these *melaghumni* women – women who roam around fairs and get lost.⁴ The *arkatiya* would lure these lost women to board trains going to Calcutta and, once a woman spent a night outside her home without her family member's supervision, she would not be admitted home ever again. This knowledge would further compel such women to not return, and they took to professions which are looked down upon by society. Munshi Premchand's famous story 'Shudra' is an account of the travails of women lured from villages and sent to other colonies as cheap labour. They would be put on board, by deceit, a ship sailing to Mauritius from Calcutta. Premchand describes the environment in a different country and the changes in the attitudes of the emigrating women. Some were lucky (or unlucky, in many cases) to come back to their own country, and even their journey back was guided by trickery. Indian English author Amitav Ghosh's magnum opus *Sea of Poppies* looks at the life of women who have been rejected by society and are forced to migrate, through the character of Aditi (Ghosh 2008). From these myriad narratives we can conclude that migration of women from the Bhojpur region became synonymous to their becoming *urhari*.

The literary works of Bhikhari Thakur give us vivid glimpses into the lives of *urhari* migrant women. In his play *Bidesiya* the character referred to as *randi* (Hindi slang similar in meaning to the English 'whore'), whose name is Saloni, is presented as a *urhari* migrant. Before living with a *bidesi* or migrant man in Calcutta, she was an ordinary migrant labourer. She did not marry Bidesi; he was her co-worker and she started living with him and brought her children along too. They had a 'temporary marriage' which was a few years old in the play. Bhikhari Thakur refers to this woman as *rakhailin*, a Bhojpuri word for kept woman. In today's metropolitan societies we find similar set-ups which are referred to as live-in relationships. But of course the notions of temporary marriage and live-in relationships are very different, as are the societies and times in which they have been established. The temporariness is the only commonality in them. In terms of social attitudes towards a *urhari* woman and a woman living with her partner in contemporary times, there is a huge difference. The *urhari*

3. North Indian women, particularly those from Bhojpur region who were married and had run away, gotten lost or were forced to flee were known by several names. Shahid Amin says, 'These (ahiwati, duah, tiuah, dholkarhi, gharkaili, dhemnani, urhari etc.) terms are indications of the ability of some Bhojpuri women to walk out of unhappy homes, whether natal or of the in-laws. The standard police reports about women getting lost in melas never to return home, and the significant migration of single women to the plantations of Assam and in Fiji make sense in terms of pre-existing mobility of women, which cannot be reduced to the attractions and enticements of a distant labour market alone' (Amin 2005, 47–48). See also Sen 1996; Lal 2000, Chapter 5: 'Origin of the Girmittiyas'. Women cheated into entering coolie admission depots by *arkatiyas* or local touts have been noted in Mannan Dwivedi's novel *Ramlal* (published 1917) and Premchand's novel *Godaan* (published 1936).
4. Tulsiram refers to nautch girls/female performers as *melaghumni* in his autobiography *Murdahiya*. He writes: 'According to traditions (in temples), along with ritual sacrifices performances by dancers/prostitutes also took place in front of the deity. A mob of dancer girls would be present in the premises as well. In my village they were called *melaghumni*. My father found one for two rupees and brought her to the village. There would be a percussionist with each of these *melaghumnis*' (Tulsiram 2010, 100)

woman had always been treated as someone of low status and folk literature too portrayed them the same way.

Saloni in Bhikari Thakur's play is treated that way. In a scene a messenger comes from Bidesi's village bearing a letter from his wife Pyari Sundari. The messenger reminds Bidesi of every little detail of his village and home, and Bidesi becomes restless to return home. The messenger addresses Saloni as *randi* and behaves with her in a manner socially prescribed towards those of her station:

*Randi me kuch na baate, kutta jaise haad chaate, eko ghaat nahi tu hu lagab
bidesiya
Chhodi de adharam, mijaj karke naram, tu manva me kar lehu saram bidesiya
(Yadav and Singh 2005, 46)*

Such women may make many promises and shed false tears, but they are not faithful to anyone, neither her villagers, nor her in-laws, nor even her parents. The messenger does not stop at convincing Bidesi; he even turns to advising Saloni: 'Hey landlady, listen to me, don't do anything without thinking about it first. I will only hint at the problem and you must understand the entire conundrum. Turn your life around, your demeanour and whereabouts, your way of life. Let Bidesiya come back with me. You have a ready market here, you will find a lot many lewd men' (Yadav and Singh 2005, 46). But Saloni does not give in, because she has struggled hard against the cruelties of society in the absence of a husband. With Bidesi, she had finally found a haven where she felt safe and now even that was being taken away.

The time when Bhikari Thakur sketched this image of a *rakhailan* was the third decade of the twentieth century. It was at this time that Pandit Totaram, who himself had been a migrant for twenty-one long years, was writing and fighting for the rights of migrants. For him, it was also important to paint the image of those male migrant labourers who would cheat women into relationships and then come back home. He wrote in 1914: 'The Brahman, Khsatriya and Vaishya men returning from Fiji start discussing whether they would be able to make society accept those women as wives. With the excuse of this doubt they desert the women of Fiji and come back; they give the women wrong addresses of their house in the village, so that they cannot be traced. While departing they offer half of their savings to these wives in Fiji' (Sanaday 1994, 143–144).

We can refer to the words of Baba Ramchandra, who was writing around the same time, about how he separated from his wife: 'I wrote my house and land in the *chamarin's* (low-born woman) name with whom I had committed a marriage and thereby I annulled the marriage. I left all my belongings like clothes, bedding, utensils, photos, handwritten papers with that woman' (*Baba Ramchandra*, nd, 20). It is interesting to note that it is this Baba Ramchandra, a Marathi Brahmin, who had led the peasant agitation in Awadh. In all his writings he refers to the woman he had married in Fiji as nothing but 'beautiful *chamarin*'. In his later writings he states that the woman was of 'dissolute cruel character'; at this time he had become overtly religious. One could easily wash their hands of any responsibility of wives in distant lands by giving them some money and property, whether this was acceptable to the wife or not. Such treachery was not

only common for those coming back from Fiji or other colonised countries, but those in Calcutta too. Saloni in *Bidesiya* was deceived in the very same fashion, though she tried to stop Bidesi in every way possible:

*Ghare chali jaiba latbi kena aiba, tu aas turi ke sab naas kaila balamua
Jaiba bhavanwa paraanva teyagi dehab, paka jaan janih kahanva balamua
Asal ke hai beti, irikhe fasal ba neti, kar turi ghar jani jaiha balamua* (Yadav and Singh 2005, 46)

This translates as: ‘Darling, you will go back home and never come back; you have smashed all my hopes. If you go back to the village I will give up my life; this is my final decision. I am a daughter of honesty but my neck is stuck in the noose of someone’s envy. So do not leave me. Don’t believe the words of this oafish traveller and let your heart grow sad. For you I have forsaken my mother and father, what more will you have me do? I have shunned my mother and father, brother and sister-in-law, household, caste and kin, family, and my entire community and turned to you. Think about the situation judiciously and be patient, love will take its tests. Oh owner of my heart! Hold my hands and protect the little bit of honour I have left’ (Yadav and Singh 2005, 46). Saloni’s words communicate to us the depth of her emotions for Bidesi. It is such blind love that makes women like Saloni put up with alcoholic husbands and other tribulations, as this folk song shows:

*Babu darogaji kavne gunahiye banhali piyva mor
Na mor piyva char re chamarva, na mor piyva chor
Mor ta piyva madhuva ke maatal, rahle sadakiya par soyi
Anni du-anni sipahiya ke debo, paanch rupaiya jamadar
Ee duno jobna kalatar ke debo, piyva ke leba chhodai* (Singh 1994, 230)

This translates to: ‘Inspector babu (sir)! Why have you tied up my husband? My husband is not a thief or *chamar* (low-caste deemed criminal in British India), he had only drunk and passed out on the streets. I will give the constable an anna or two (16 annas made one rupee at the time), and five rupees to the jailor/officer. I will gift my youth to the Collector to set my husband free.’ When we read this song in its socio-political context, we see how the colonial government had identified certain castes and tribes as criminal by their very nature. On this casteist basis the police would arrest people. The second thing that comes to light is that in big cities, if a married woman is working to earn an income, the husband is generally a drunkard or spineless, while the wife is sharp and versatile. She is open to sex work. In this song the wife openly says that she is ready to bribe the police with money, and to use her body to influence the key decision-maker of her husband’s fate. The wives of such husbands have an additional dimension of struggle throughout their lives, immortalised in the songs of folk performers. What is surprising is that even an economically independent married woman has moorings in the values that the husband is divine and that the marital bond is holy, and that she must not forsake him even if he is an alcoholic, a thief, or is abusive or unemployed. She fights with the colonial police and the remnants of feudal forces simultaneously.

Bhikhari Thakur’s Saloni knows well the social derision in the labels *urhari*, *randi*, *rakhailan*, etc. She knows that she will find protection and respect in a family and be

free of societal scorn to an extent. When her ‘husband’ leaves her to go back to his village, her hopes are shattered. She knows that people will now call her *urhari* to her face. Interestingly, she *was*, in fact, living an *urhari*’s life with Bidesi—that is, they were not married in the eyes of society—but she did not see it that way till she was abandoned. It is ironic that no matter how much society disapproves of someone and tries to make one feel lowly, one’s values are only to redeem oneself in this cruel order and prove oneself to be high-born. ‘The migrant *urhariyas* valued the ideal family set up and other values and customs of their communities’ (Singh 2008, 44). One is simply not able to reject community values; they live on in our psyche in extremely adverse conditions. In a contemporary Bengali newspaper of Calcutta called *Vishwamitra*, A.P. Mishra wrote:

women of several Hindu castes live in brothels. The interesting thing is that once they enter this profession they become relatively free of the oppression of norms of Hindu society, so to say. Even then, when it came to inter-dining with co-workers, a strict code was maintained. In fact their customers would be of different castes and even Muslims, and all of them would be entertained, yet they would not give up the orthodoxy in inter-dining norms (*Vishwamitra* 1934).

And if Hindu social values could persist in brothels which bore no resemblance with the society outside in terms of social intercourse, then how could they not endure in the hearts of migrant *urhariya* women who were living in a set-up more similar to a family? Those women brought back from the east to their villages or those who chose to go back presented problems for their communities; social behaviour was not defined for such a context. The arrival of these women posed a serious challenge to the family structure idealised in the village. Folk literature points towards this uneasiness. Whoever returned from the towns and cities to their villages, came back with money and goods, but what was most significant was that s/he came back with the attitudes that prevail there. Harbhajan Singh writes in his autobiography:

A migrant when he returns brings some conscious and some unconscious narratives. There is, knowingly or otherwise, a separation between the country and the city. A well turned up man about town may be a quality in the city. In a village for some, though, clothes can become a matter of life and death (Singh 2001, 31).

Along with different outlooks, some dared to bring back women too. Before and during colonisation several men (labourers, traders and soldiers) would bring back women they considered to be their wives. These women would bring along the culture and customs of their own community as well as values inculcated during their stay in the city. From folk songs, particularly from those sung by women who have always lived in villages, we can clearly see how ruthless the village was to these ‘foreign’ women. They considered them uncouth and lose, and called them *randi*, the reason being that the actual religion/caste/community of the women could not be traced beyond doubt. It was taken for granted that they were from a low caste and treated as such. Some of these women were driven to return to Bengal (from where they had come) by the regular taunts and exploitation (Tulsiram 2010), while some committed suicide in local wells and ponds, or by consuming poison. Bhojpuri folk songs are inundated with such images

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of women from Bengal and Morang (Nepal). What is interesting is that no matter from where the migrant men brought a wife to the village, she would be called 'Bangalin'. The punishing treatment meted out to those considered second-grade beings would come from 'true' families, which were considered to be the primary unit of society. Look at the following song:

*Boalo mai gohua upji gaily ankri, medva baithal prabhu jhankheli re ki
Jani prabhu jhanhu jani prabhu jhurbahu, ankri badli gohuva peesab re ki
Pasat kutat mora dhani dubraili, kahtu ta cheriya le aito re ki
Cheriya aane gaile savat le aile, sabti Bihariya kaise sahib re ki
Ek paina marle, doosre paina marle, purbi Bangalin nahi boli li re ki*
(Singh 1994, 78)

In this Jantsari folk song we see that a man has brought home a *purbi* (woman from the east) Bangalin as his new wife. The man goes off to work in the field, while his first wife, conspiring with her elder sister-in-law, offers the new wife poisoned food. Her head starts spinning when she eats it, and so she goes and lies down. When her husband comes back from the field and sees everybody but her, he enquires where she is. His first wife replies that the new wife is vain and lazy, and that she has gone off to sleep. The husband is angry to hear this and dashes off to where his wife is sleeping, and hits her twice with the *paina* (the metallic object with which the bullocks are controlled while ploughing). The wife does not speak, because she has already died. It is paradoxical that the same Bengali women who were known in the Bhojpur region to practise black magic on men from Bihar's countryside—and were believed to turn them into cocks and sheep—were not able to use any of their tricks when they came to the village with their husbands. This sentiment too is expressed in many folk songs.

Conclusion

Through the colourful images of women in Bhojpuri folk culture or the literature of migration, it is clear that the women *suffer* from migration, in a way—whether they have been left behind, or if they have been forced to migrate themselves, or if they have come with their 'husband' to his village as *urharis*. Bhikhari Thakur deals with the travails of these women with utmost seriousness. In his *Bidesiya* he shows Pyari Sundari's suffering as the ideal chaste wife waiting for her husband in the village, while in *Gabarghichor* he shows the heroine to have succumbed to the pain of separation and given up on one husband for another. That is, as a result of the competing pressures of the ideals of tradition and reality, chastity is violated. However, this issue is not important. On the contrary, the importance lies in her assertion for right of motherhood. In *Bidesiya*, the second wife (concubine) Saloni gets social recognition. This is a progressive move. In the folk culture of the East, a woman from the village did not get this status.

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