

THE WOMAN IN THE FOLKSONGS OF UTTARAKHAND

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The Himalayan region in India is endowed with a vibrant oral tradition comprising songs, stories, proverbs, maxims, anecdotes, myths, local history and rituals. The cogent connection between the mountain terrains and the populace is best exemplified in the artefacts of orality, most notably the folklore and folksongs of the mountainous regions. The oral tradition is a powerful medium of communication between one generation and the other that ensures the survival of undocumented knowledge. Most of our history and indigenous native traditions have survived through word of mouth. The first systematized attempt to document the oral traditions in this region was made through the vernacular Garhwali and Kumauni. More than viable sources of entertainment and modes of self-expression, these oral artefacts in the form of stories and ditties epitomize the collective consciousness of the hill folks, specifically the women.



There is an imperative need to investigate these popular folksongs in the backdrop of the socio-economic dynamics of the region. As a welcome paradigmatic shift from yesteryears, folk traditions are fast gaining agency and validation in the mainstream discourses of history, literature and social sciences. Blessed with the abundant bounties of nature manifested in the snow-capped mountain peaks and hilltops, rivers and rivulets, the gorges and ravines and the flora and fauna, the hill state of Uttarakhand is firmly foregrounded in a rich folklorist tradition. The close-knit bond of people with nature is reflected in their steadfast belief in not only the gods and goddesses but equally so in birds and animals, ghosts, spirits and demons and fairies and acturaries-the wood nymphs. Careful listening, memorization and constant narration of these folksongs in variegated narrative forms account for the survival of the folklorist tradition. As listeners and narrators, the rural illiterate and semi-literate hill women can be identified as prime agents in the preservation and proliferation of these folksongs. Implicit in the sub-text of these folk songs is a telling comment on the polemic position of hill women in the patriarchal and social setup that would contest the normative feminist notions of female empowerment in the socio-economic context.

The legendary bird *ghuguti*, the bright red rhododendrons, the tiny wildflower *Fyonli*, the berries with varying hues and flavours, namely *bedu*- the Himalaya fig, *hisalu* -the yellow Himalayan raspberries, *kafal*- the bayberry which is also the state fruit of Uttarakhand are intricately entwined with these melodious ditties. The signification of these folksongs underlies not so much in their musicality or profundity of textual content but in the subtext and intertextuality to offer a feminist critique of the social order in a woman-centric agrarian hill society.

One could begin with the iconic *ghuguti* songs. Among a vast species of birds in the hills of Uttarakhand *ghuguti* is a household name. This small, somewhat long-tailed bird also known as mountain or spotted dove is an integral part of the hill folklore. In the month of Chaitra-March-April, this bird comes to the hills. It is a common sight to behold these birds in large numbers hopping fearlessly in the courtyards picking food grains and foraging on the ground for seeds and fallen fruits. One wonders what is so special about this bird that has endeared the bird to the local bards for generations, especially the female bards since the songs are addressed by married womenfolk to *ghuguti*. The *ghuguti* songs 'Unchi nisi dandu ma, ai ghuguti na bass tu'-O Ghuguti do not sing on the high and low hilltops and 'Ghuguti guryan lagi mera mait kee'- the *ghuguti* of my natal home has begun to sing are some notable folksongs. Much more than a bird whose chirping resounds in the air, *ghuguti* is a metaphor entrusted with the onerous duty to be a messenger reminiscent of Kalidas's Meghdut, a medium as well as an interlocutor for the damsels in distress in their marital home.

In the agrarian hill society, women are the backbone of society as the major workforce. As the prime bread earners for their families toiling hard in the fields and forests ideally they deserve to be placed in the pivotal position of power in the private as well as public domain. Contrarily, the normative defining variables of speaking voice, power and agency are defunct in the case of hill women. A simple wish to visit their natal family in the month of Chaitra which is relatively a month of rest and repose for these labouring womenfolk most of whom are child brides is not fulfilled. The inherent pain and frustration thus transcend into a fervent prayer to the bird to come to their rescue as a messenger. Identifying the cooing of the legendary bird of her natal home with the cooing of the *ghuguti* of her marital home and glancing at the mountain peaks of their natal home the generations of this womenfolk have aged.

Nostalgia is the crux of these folksongs popularly known as '*khuder*' songs. Imbued with profound socio-cultural sensibilities and deep emotions of the womenfolk the Gharwali word '*khud*' roughly translated as nostalgia is an untranslatable word. The sentiment of *khud* permeates through the entire folk tradition in the region, most prominently in the *ghuguti* folksongs. Quite a few of these melancholic *khuder* songs end on an inexplicable elegiac note.

Ironically, despite their major contribution to the four classifying categories of *Khan/jameen* (land), *Ban* (forest), *Pan* (water) and *Vanyata* (wilderness), the familial and social forces work against these 'economically independent' women. When goddess Nanda of the region, the daughter of Himvan and Maina receives the much-awaited invitation to visit her natal home after twelve years celebrated in the region in the form of the famous Nanda Raj jaat, the lot of the ordinary Nandas of the impoverished households is plausible. The hapless married women beseech the high mountain peaks to bend down pleading with the fog to disperse off and beg the dense pine trees to lower down just to let them cast a sweeping glance at their mait- mother's land. 'Hei unchee dandu tum nisi hwawa, mait ko bato mee dekhan dyawa.' -O fog, you disperse off, O lofty mountain peaks you lower down. O dense pine trees you dwarf down. Let me cast a glance at my mother's land.

The fate of widows destined to abide by the injunctions and restrictions of the patriarchal society is far more lamentable. The mournful refrain of children-turned birds in the folksong '*kafal pakyu, mee ni chakhyo*'- the bayberries have ripened. I did not taste the kafal and '*til pura, pur, pur.*'

My hapless dear son, all the sesame seeds are there intact' resounding in the valleys, meadows, pastures and forests in their afterlife is a potent comment on the doubly marginalized position of a widow in the hill society. One frustrated hungry widow returning from the field after a day's work pushed her teenage daughter to fatal injury mistaking her to have eaten *kafals*- the bayberries, the widow too committed the same error of judgment suspecting her seven or eight years old son to have neglected the task of flying away birds from eating sesame seeds drying in the sun that she intended to offer to the moneylender to escape disgrace. The infuriated mother runs after the son to punish him for his negligence and the son in his attempt to escape slips and fatally falls into the river. By the evening the shrunk sesame seeds puff up but it is too late. Interpolations and variations occur in these folktales from one part of the region to another about the identity of the victims in terms of gender, but the content is the same.

"The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is that only one-tenth of it is visible on the surface." The American master storyteller Ernest Hemingway says in *Death in the Afternoon*. Underneath the refrain of the songs lies the poignant desire to undermine and expose the existing social order. What is left unsaid in these folksongs in the form of hidden meanings, inferences and insinuations is far more meaningful than what has been said. Who could have presented such a nuanced example of irony and that too in a folksong than these anonymous female songsters and singers addressing the core feminist issues of voice and agency?