

Resistance from the roots: Exploring dalit consciousness in *Nautanki* tradition

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Abstract

Folk traditions as channels of communication not only transmit the ideas and pictures of indigenous social structures, but also play a pivotal role in the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of a particular set of values in a given culture. Along with their entertainment value, they provide alternative ontological as well as epistemological frameworks to understand the prevalent socio-cultural patterns. With the study of two popular narratives *Sultana Daku* and *Phoolan Devi* performed in the *Nautanki* tradition of north India, we present an analysis of the various ways through which the protagonists belonging to lower castes/classes, often marginally represented in the mainstream cultural discourses, challenge or subvert the exploitative practices of caste/class discrimination prevalent in the north Indian society. We read these subversive acts through the lens of Dalit Consciousness as conceptualized by two prominent Dalit thinkers, Sharankumar Limbale and Badri Narayan. This Dalit Consciousness is reflected not only in the performed narratives but also in the entire performative tradition at various levels. Through this analysis, we look at the possibilities of relating folk traditions such as *nautanki* to aesthetic concerns of the contemporary Dalit discourse.

Keywords: *nautanki*, resistance, dalit consciousness, casteism, hegemony

Introduction

Situating *Nautanki* as a folk tradition in the historical perspective

Since time immemorial, India has had a historically rich and diverse corpus of folk Literature in all of her languages. The idea of *Lok Utsav* and *Lok Natya* has been present since Pre-Vedic times (Ojha 2013) ^[13]. From 14th to 16th century, a paradigm shift is visible in terms of knowledge production as during this period the *bhakt* poets, who mostly came from lower/marginalized sections of the society, start a movement against authoritarian/orthodox/hegemonic values and emphasize over democratizing socio-religious practices (Ali Sardar Jafri 2010:7). As Badri Narayan (2014 ^[2]:16 has rightly pointed out that the “consciousness of resistance owes largely to the Bhakti movement.” Along with the proliferation of literatures in modern Indian Languages or vernaculars, folk traditions too were at boom. Bhakti period grounded itself in the *desi* (folk) tradition at the same time criticizing the *margi* (classical/Sanskritic) tradition. Kabir at one place even calls (cited in Jafri 2010:137) Sanskrit as ‘water of a well (*koop-jal*)’ while calling *bhasha*/vernacular as flowing water (*bahta jal*), thus jeering at the rigidity and fixity associated with Sanskritic/brahmanical orthodoxy. During the colonial period, literary critics/historians trained in and influenced by the Orientalist thinking as well as the Victorian canons of taste, determined to exhume the pristine mythical ‘golden age’ of the Indian civilization, relegated the traditional/folk culture onto the periphery and dubbed these traditions as not fit for respectable classes/castes. Since then, the nexus between the classical and the folk art forms has been of conflicting nature, in which, the former represents the standard and the sacred art form belonging to the people of upper classes/castes while the latter is dubbed

as the lowly and the profane art form suitable for the people of lower section of the society. Even, the performers of the latter forms who mainly belong to nomadic tribes such as *bedia* and *nat* were, and are, considered untouchables.

Despite facing such neglect and harsh treatment from the mainstream discourses for so long, folk traditions such as *nautanki*, *tamahsa*, *birha*, *alha*, *dhola* have survived and flourished. The reasons for their survival lie in their inherent strength and the value system which keep them relevant till date. Folk/oral traditions function as channels of communication/mass communication transmitting ideas and pictures of indigenous/regional social structures. They work as the media of literary and cultural expression of the people who are at the bottom of the society. They provide us with unique forms of entertainment rooted in day to day life of the common people. They speak in an idiom which is intelligible even to illiterate masses. They open a new vista of alternative ontological and epistemological frameworks which help us in looking into deeper most layers of a society. They truly embody the idea of ‘versions as visions’. In the words of Alan Dundes, ‘folklore is a people’s “symbolic autobiography,” it (folklore) gives an “inside out” view of society. Folklore, he affirmed, is a mirror of culture, a lens for society, a key to behaviour, a projection of mind (cited in the Preface by Bronner in Dundes 2007 ^[4]: viii). Folk traditions are located at the core of the ‘Local Knowledge’ Systems (Geertz 1973).

Nautanki is one such popular folk tradition of South Asia, particularly in north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. *Nautanki* performances are musicals/musical plays based on the familiar themes derived from popular romantic tales, mythologies, folklore or biographies of local heroes/legends (Sharma 2006) ^[14]. The *nautanki* performers

usually belong to the lower castes or/and nomadic tribes such as *bedia* and *nat* tribes. These performers, due to their lowly social and economic status, have been carrying on the family traditions of singing and dancing since generations. Because, *nautanki* is music and dance based performing tradition, these performers have been somehow able to earn their livelihood, which, however, does not exceed to satisfying their daily needs. They keep a joint family comprising two or three generations (Bharadwaj 2013). Although, constitutionally they have been categorised as SCs and STs, very few of them are able to receive the benefits of this privilege, and are unable to provide good educational or medical facilities to their young ones. One of the greatest ironies of their life is that, despite the fact that they not only belong to SC and ST categories but they also are folk artists of a state art form, and yet they remain at the margins of the society (Mishra, 2017; personal interview with Munna Master, a veteran *nautanki* artist). This societal marginalization runs parallel to the aesthetic marginalization of the art forms they work in.

An important feature of the *Nautanki* is that the *nautanki* performances involve a lot of community participation from audiences. For instance, community members provide logistical support, financial support, and talented actors for *nautanki* performances. Also, the audience members choose which play will be performed, and often intervene during the performance to demand an encore of a particular song or skit of their choice (Sharma, 2006:45) ^[14]. In this community participation, we also find an instance of the hierarchical relationship among the audiences as well as performers. For example, among the audience, the upper caste villagers are usually given the frontal space to sit, while villagers belonging to the lower castes are assigned the back space to sit (from Author's experience of actual performance as part of field study, 2017). In case of performers, we find a very special type of hierarchical relationship. For example, during *nautanki* performance, if a situation arrives when some roles of a pundit or *poojniya* (respectable/divine) characters such as gods are required, these roles are either played by those actors who are higher in caste in comparison to the other actors in the *nautanki mandali*/troupe, or some high caste persons from the audience itself are called upon the stage to play these roles (ibid.). However, the structure of *nautanki* performance provides these low caste performers with several opportunities where they can speak out their resistance and protest towards the static and exploitative social and cultural practices. These opportunities may come out of the theme and dialogues of the narrative itself, or they may form part of the improvisations that the actors present in the form of extempore jokes, songs, skits, and satirical remarks especially made by Joker/*vidushak* or chorus. Scholars such as Darius L. Swann (1995:189-206) ^[16] have talked about this invocative possibility of Indian folk traditions, in his case of *nautanki*, by applying Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre model. But his approach has totally ignored the caste issue which, in my view, is an important factor of this 'carnavalesque' feature of the *nautanki*, or most of the Indian folk traditions.

***Nautanki* and Dalit Consciousness**

The above description indicates towards an important issue which is also the central question of the present paper, that is how folk traditions such as *nautanki* are/can be seen as

the sites of performance of the Dalit Consciousness which thinkers such as Sharankumar Limbale have talked about. Limbale's views on Dalit Aesthetic have been expressed in his ground breaking work on Dalit Aesthetics namely *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (Limbale 1996/2004) ^[12]. According to Alok Mukherjee, the translator of the work, 'Limbale defines Dalit in broadest possible way to include all the dispossessed and oppressed of India' (2004:11). To quote Limbale himself "Harijans and neo - Buddhists are not the only Dalits... In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included." And he suggests including "Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes." (ibid.) While describing about literature produced with a Dalit Consciousness as its guiding force, Limbale lists Suffering, Poverty, Rejection and Revolt as its salient features. Badri Narayan (2001:3923) ^[1] locates the "emergence of new heroes in literature especially through and in folk literature. These heroes are the cultural icons of the age long neglected and marginalised Dalit-Bahujans" (italics mine). They are the living embodiments of Dalit Consciousness which inspires not only to these Dalit cultural icons but also to the Dalit-Bahujan community itself to acquire self-respect and social acceptance through the rejection of the dominant brahmanical forms of social and cultural representation.

The abovementioned views of two prominent theorists of Dalit studies can be helpful in answering the question how *Nautanki*, a folk art form, can be compared with Dalit aesthetic models. Here, our attempt is not only to relate *Nautanki* with Dalit literature, but we also suggest to extend the boundary of Dalit literature so as to include the folk traditions as one of the specimens of marginalised forms of art which have always been, like Dalits and their literature, neglected and left aside by the mainstream academic and critical circles describing them as of low literary and artistic merit.

Our claim gets substantiated when we see that folk traditions such as *Nautanki* have always been the literary and cultural expression of the people who are at the bottom of the society. They, therefore, are replete with the ethos and sentiments of these marginalised people. These forms are full of stories which represent their beliefs, anxieties, rituals, fears, aspirations, and the lived experiences of their day to day life. They also provide these underprivileged people with the opportunity to write and interpret their own history, to create their own culture, to invent their own cultural symbols, to discover their own heroes, and to criticise the dominant ideological forms prevalent in the society. These forms are much closer to their daily reality than other sophisticated or high art forms which are usually produced with an outsider's perspective projecting these marginalised people as 'other'. They give a voice to the voiceless, function as literature of the people, for the people, by the people. Literary merit has been denied by the main stream aesthetic discourses to both Folk Traditions and Dalit literature. Folk/dalit literature can be seen as Counter-literature rooted in a corpus of counter knowledge. Both folk and dalit cultural practices problematize/negate the supremacist claims of brahmanical/hegemonic culture. Folk tradition is similar to dalit tradition in being a representation of the 'unofficial culture' in Bakhtinian terms, endorsing a heterogeneous and dialogic world view. Even in dalit

literary and cultural discourses, 'folk tradition' has priority over other discourses as it provides the discursive tools to reclaim the rightful place to the hitherto neglected, degraded, and marginalized classes who have been dispossessed from the instrument and power of 'symbol production' (Geertz 1973) in the society. In this process of 'symbolic production', conflicting forces re-explore, reinterpret and reinvent tradition, myths, popular memory and history to present an alternative view of the cultural discourses. Folk traditions put forth 'the deconstruction of the dominant discourses' through the re/de-construction of dominant myths and history/metanarratives (cf. Narayan 2001) [1]. Exploring history, caste history, glorifying local myths/legends of dalit castes and narrating the life stories of dalit leaders, saints and social reformers, the folk traditions give a concrete shape to the unrecorded part of cultural history of a society.

Dalit Consciousness in *Nautanki* narratives of *Sultana Daku* and *Phoolan Devi*

The reason for selecting *Sultana Daku* and *Phoolan Devi* as the exemplary narratives in which a strong presence of Dalit Consciousness can be felt is that both of these *nautankis/sangits* are among the most popular *nautankis* in the tradition and also their heroes belong to two different genders i.e. while *nautanki Sultana Daku* is the life story of a male protagonist, the protagonist of the other *nautanki* is a female. In addition to this, the choice of the two *nautankis* also provides us with a broad temporal set-up which is to say that, while *nautanki Sultana Daku* belongs to the pre-independence socio-cultural milieu, *nautanki Phoolan Devi* is set in the post-independence times. The two *nautankis*, thus, provide us with an opportunity to compare and contrast the conditions of socially and economically backward people in the pre- and post-independent era, and to make sure whether, with the change of the political set-up, there has been any change in the condition of the underprivileged or not?

Based on a living or recently deceased individual, the two *nautankis* present an instance of the process of myth in the making—folklore visibly emanating from people's lives (Hansen 1992:135) [6]. The *nautankis* vividly present a realistic picture of the oppressive socio-cultural practices which empower a privileged section of society to exploit a large section of society. The *nautankis* are full of social criticism of such oppressive practices. Both the *nautankis* weave their narrative universe around the life story of some unjustly victimized villager who turns to a life of banditry as a means of correcting social and economic wrongs. In the case of *Sultana*, he is shown to be coming from a lower caste background (*bhantu* tribe), and came to the path of 'banditry and crime' when he had to go through extreme poverty, such that his own mother had to ask him to steal a chicken to save the family from starvation (cited in Hansen 1992:140) [6]. To rectify the injustice that he had to undergo due to the exploitative social-economic system, *Sultana* turns out to be the most dreaded dacoit of his time among the rich and wealthy people but loved by the poor and the underprivileged. He is a Robin Hood-like figure in his deeds. *Sultana's* commitment to aiding the poor is illustrated throughout the play. The opening *chaubola* (quatrain- a poetic meter specific to *nautanki* tradition) states:

'Thaa uskaa ye kaam ameeron ka bas loot khazaana...

bekas aur gharibon ko aaraam sadaa pahunchaana...' (Gaur 1994:1) [5].

"It was his job to loot the treasuries of the rich / and always bring relief to the poor and helpless" (tr. Hansen 1992:139) [6]. At one instance in the *nautanki*, *Sultana* himself pronounces his philosophy of life:

'Madad gharibon ki har dam mere ai dosto karna. lekin daulatmandon ki dahshat se kabhi na darna. lana kul zar loot be-khatar gallon pe khanjar dharna. jahan talak ho pet yateemon ke us jar se bharna' (Gaur 1994:2) [5].

'Always help the poor, friends, but never fear the wealthy. Do loot and put knife on the throats (of the rich), but feed the helpless as much as possible' (tr. Authors).

He is the perfect example of a 'social rebel' or as Hobsbawm (1969/2001) [8] has theorized 'a social bandit' who works as a social reformer and leveller with 'strategically violent' means of resistance. He embodies the spirit of revolt by the subjugated people against the oppressive structures of society and is a symbol of 'subaltern' resistance. He surrenders or accepts authority only when they are treated at par and guaranteed respect and freedom of expression.

In the *nautanki Phoolan Devi*, the focus shifts from socio-economic oppression to social/caste and gender based oppression. The protagonist *Phoolan* belongs to a dalit caste of *mallah* (of the boatman caste) is sexually abused and tortured by the *Thakurs* (a high caste community belonging to *Kshatriya/warrior* varna/caste). Despite her lowly background and facing oppressive social structure, she embodies all the qualities which make a person respectable and dignified. She is born beautiful, is brave enough to challenge even the most powerful hegemony, and protests against the oppression. Instances of her fearless attitude are present everywhere in the *nautanki* narrative. For instance, in a scene when *Lalaram* (an accomplice to the main antagonist *Thakur Shree Ram*) tries to assault *Phoolan*, she fiercely challenges him saying:

'Tan me mere is samaya garche lagaya haath ko. phor doongi int se ai dusht tere maath ko' (Banwari Lal, n. d.:5).

'if you dared to touch me anyhow... I'll burst your head into pieces...' (tr. Authors).

Kathryn Hansen (1992:197) [6] has aptly remarked about the character of *Phoolan*:

'*Phoolan Devi's* lack of privilege/the litany of rapes, molestations, beatings, and dislocations of her youth is the stuff of drama. But so is her exceptionalism, her ability to step beyond the norm, seemingly beyond the objective conditions that produce her'.

Phoolan is even prepared to face any consequence to fight against the oppression. At one place in the narrative when she is a captive of *Thakur Shree Ram* and his goons, she shouts:

'Jis ghari aabru meri lut jaaegi, us ghari phoolan zahrili ban jayegi. marne-jeene ki parwaah mujhko nahi, thhakuron se baghaawat phir thhan jaayegi' (Banwari Lal, n. d.:6)

'if I am dishonoured, I'll be as venomous as a snake...I won't care about my life or death, there will be a revolt against the thakur. (tr. Authors)

Kathryn Hansen (1988:WS25) ^[7] in her reading of Phoolan's character, uses concept of 'female agency' to highlight the potential inherent in the folk tradition's treatment of such historical underprivileged female figures. The traditions provide the underdogs with a symbolic tool to express their views and concerns from their own perspectives. Hansen also (1992:196) ^[6] sees 'rape' as the articulation of class/ caste privilege, and therefore we can associate the oppression faced by Phulan Devi as a living example of the universal oppression borne by the Dalits and other dispossessed people in their day to day lives. She is also an embodiment of an insurgent female subaltern (Ghosh 2005) ^[9]. Even at the time of her surrender at the end of the drama, she shows the same fearlessness towards the state power warning the state officials;

'Ek aadmi gar kahin mera maara gaya, badle me sau ko maarungi mai jaan se.

Ab talak julm maine saha to saha, usaka badla chukaungi main shaan se.'

(Banwari Lal, n. d.:35)

'if anyone of my gang members is killed, it will count for 100 lives... enough have I borne injustices, now I'll avenge bravely' (tr. Authors).

Thus the analysis of the two *nautanki* narratives provides ample evidence supporting our claim in the early part of our discussion on the possibility of reading *nautanki* narratives as a specimen of textual/performative form. The portrayals of the underprivileged characters such as Sultana and Phoolan in the *nautanki* narratives are comparable to the aesthetic principles of dalit literature as both the *nautanki* and the dalit literature amply display certain common thematic concerns with the popular forms of protest and resistance against the oppressive socio-economic structure; exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged; the presence and prevalence of unequal social privileges etc. Although themes of social inequality, oppression and exploitation maybe present in many other cultural forms too, the folk traditions being closer to the common people's expressive idiom are most suited to look for the possibility of relating dalit narrative concerns with folk narrative themes. They can serve as the best possible medium of expressing the varied concerns of the underprivileged section of the society.

Conclusion

The present paper attempted to understand the possibility of reading the folk traditions such as *nautanki* from a Dalit perspective. We also attempted at building up a bridge between the folk traditions and Dalit literature by highlighting some of the traits which can be taken as the common ground to analyse and interpret folk traditions for their specific position as a cultural form by, of, and for the marginalised section of our society. As the critical reading of the two popular *nautankis* *Sultana Daku* and *Phulan Devi* suggests how the narrative corpus of *Nautanki* tradition is replete with the stories of struggles of the lower caste people to reclaim and restore their respectful place in the society, the study of the folk traditions may provide us with the new models of studying popular resistance. It may also help us in

the expanding our knowledge of the idea of Dalit literature as well as Dalit Consciousness.

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