

Bidyash'* (foreign country) and its Performative Landscape in *Bhawaiya* and *Chatka* songs of North Bengal*Mekhala Chattopadhyay**

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Abstract

Bhawaiya and Chatka songs manifest as representative songs of the people of North Bengal primarily the Rajbongshi community that resides in these northern districts and different areas of Bangladesh. As popular 'folk' song genres, these songs capture a whole range of emotions and articulate them as an amalgamation of the cultural expression of the Rajbongshi community. They emerge (or are rather done/acted out) from a specific cultural context and either thrives through or dissolves in the process of changing history. This very dynamism is also evident in the songs through the use of the cultural idioms of separation (bichhed), longing (biraha) and desire for the 'mahout bondhu' (the friend who is an elephant rider). Moving within the realms of the endless journeys of the *mahout bondhu* and the *gariyal bhai* (bullock cart driver) the notion of '*bidyash*' (foreign country) or '*boideshi bondhu*' (friend from a foreign place) attains a central position in these songs. This paper would engage with this concept of '*bidyash*' as it plays out in the various Bhawaiya and Chatka songs of North Bengal, specifically of Coochbehar and Alipurduar. Through the analysis and interpretation of Bhawaiya and Chatka songs, the paper wishes to contextualize the performative aspect of '*bidyash*' in the life of a Rajbongshi woman and the myriad ways in which the concept helps in exploring the poetic and philosophical dynamics between the home and the beyond.

Keywords: Folk Song, Performance, Foreign, Self, Rajbongshi

Introduction:

In my recent fieldtrip to Alipurduar and Coochbehar, I was confronted with the regular references to the linguistic term '*bidyash*' (/bidesh) to refer to some place which was not a part of the speaker's place of origin. However, this concept doesn't flow as easily as it seems when we try to understand the nuances of the reference, both philosophically and performatively. This nuanced understanding of the concept of '*bidyash*' will unravel the threads that the Bhawaiya and Chatka songs of North Bengal culturally embody. These threads work on a multidimensional level in the context of the Rajbongshi community of North Bengal. The idiom of '*bidyashi bondhu*' or '*boideshi mahout*' predominates in the palette in which the Bhawaiya songs are arranged in the memories of the Rajbongshi people. There are primarily two levels in which this idiom sets to work: the cultural and reflective level and the fundamentally sexual level of desire of the women of the community. This paper aims to study the way in which this cultural idiom pervades the memory of the people and proliferates across generations. Through this study, the argument that this paper seeks to establish is that the poetic and philosophical level at which these idioms work coincide with the socio-political life that a woman in a Rajbongshi community lives. These idioms cannot be imagined as singular and isolated entities. Rather, these represent the modes of thinking and being of the women of the community. My paper primarily focuses on the Bhawaiya songs of the Rajbongshi community of Coochbehar in North Bengal to analyze the ways in which these songs act as conduits for understanding the dynamics of the imaginations of the women regarding the conceptions of the 'foreign country' or the 'other'.

For the purpose of the paper, I have utilized my field work in Coochbehar and Alipurduar conducted in the year 2019 in which I have tried to understand such nuances. The paper will be divided into four distinct parts. The first part is a brief overview of the Koch-Rajbongshi community as it has existed across centuries in the regions of North Bengal and Assam. The second part tries to locate the body of the woman in the Rajbongshi community of North Bengal, particularly in Coochbehar. The third part will try to link the thread of political and the philosophical levels in which the concept of *bidyash* pervades through the Bhawaiya songs. The

last part focuses on the relation between the philosophical level and the political body of the woman of the community that seeks to transcend such boundaries between the 'home' and the 'bidyash' and establish a realization of the self through such songs.

1. The Historical Background of the Rajbongshi Community:

The *Koch* tribe is considered to be an ethnographic tribe of northern regions of the political boundaries of Bengal. This tribe abounds in regions like Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Darjeeling in West Bengal and Goalpara in Assam. A significant population of this community is situated in the region of Rangpur in Bangladesh as it came into existence after the Partition of Bengal. Though there is a lot of debate among prominent scholars related to the origin of the Rajbongshi community, it is more or less roughly considered that the Rajbongshis are the successors of the Koches in the region. According to Sir Edward Gait, "True Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the *Meches* and *Garos*; and we find that in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates." (Gait 48) There is an intermingling of culture and interests between the Koches and the Rajbongshis. The political historiography of the Rajbongshis after the annexation of Coochbehar by West Bengal can also be seen as an essential element in developing the identity of the Rajbongshis in the present time.

In this process of annexation by Bengal, the important point to focus is the way in which the cultural and philosophical idioms of the Rajbongshi language are taken within the ambit of the Bengali language and distinguished only as a dialect of a region. This process of appropriation is a necessary element of colonization as it has existed over time. This is a brief overview of the presence and location of the Rajbongshi community in the historical context of West Bengal.

2. The Location of the Woman in the Rajbongshi Community:

Coochbehar is a quaint town situated in the Northern region of Bengal, surrounded by Assam, Nepal, and Jharkhand on its sides and has been the centre for the development of the folk song

genre known as *Bhawaiya*. The other regions in which this song makes its presence visible are Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Goalpara in Assam, and parts of Bangladesh.

Owing to the origin of the Rajbongshi people from the cultural encounter between Rajbongshis and the Koches, both of which were matrilineal societies, the significance of women in the Rajbongshi cultural set-up should be a given attribute. According to Nirmalendu Bhowmick, however, there is a historical intervention in such a set-up, where, with the influence of the Brahminical mode of thinking, the restrictions upon the society and its women increased. It is because of this historical intervention that Bhawaiya songs got restricted only to men as the singing by the women would appear as outside the limits of female agency and power. (Ahmed 233) The sexual repression of women and confinement within the limits of the household became a general norm owing to the image of the ‘female subject’ in the patriarchal set-up.

In this set-up, the Bhawaiya songs were primarily sung by men like Abbasuddin Ahmed, Surendranath Basunia, Kasim Uddin, Rathindranath Ray and others. In fact, most of the popular Bhawaiya songs are available to us which have been sung by the male members of the Rajbongshi community. One of the most prominent example is the song ‘*Kajol Bhomora re*’ whose lyrics read as,

“*Oki o bondhu kajol bhromora re-*

Kondin asiben bondhu, koya jao koya jao re.”

(O my friend, *kajol bhromora*¹,

Tell me when you will come back again.)

A song depicting the sense of longing of the women residing within the confines of the houses for the desirable partners, this song places the man as the mouthpiece of the woman. The location of the woman, in this sphere is thus at the liminal point of existence, with no voice and consequently, with no song.

¹ *Kajol bhromora* is a metaphorical phrase which refers to the lover in Bengali folk songs.

A rupture first appears in this set-up with the coming of Pratima Barua Pandey into the cultural scene. This rupture can be viewed as a completely distinct cultural event which was to shape the future of Bhawaiya songs in general. The marginalized Goalpariya folk songs and the Bhawaiya songs saw the advent of a new dawn with Pratima Barua. She is often depicted and revered as the voice of the people, lending her voice to the varied cultural expressions of the people of the region and Rajbongshis. It occurred almost as a distinct cultural event with its repercussions being visible through the response that her huge repertoire of songs received. A particular song by Pratima Barua is,

“Are tomra geyle ki asiben mor mahut bondhure?”

Hostire noran hostire choran, hostir golay dori

(Ore) soityo koriya konre mahut, konba deshe barire...”

“Will my mahout friend come back if you go away/He deals with the elephants, cares for them, keeps them safe/Tell me the truth mahout, where is your home?”

This song can be taken as the representative of the Rajbongshi women and their longing and curiosity for the mahout who goes about his days’ work in the fields. This can be seen as the subtle entry point into the woman’s desire for the mahout. Another of her songs expresses the strong desire in the mind of the woman being oppressed under the highly oppressive structure of marriage. She, in this song says,

“O my loving brother-in-law

Take me to my father’s place;

My father and brother has done great injustice by marrying me to an alcoholic... In your desire, I have forgotten my home,

My heart doesn’t rest here, and keeps longing for the outside all the time.”

From this song, we finally arrive at the concept of the dichotomy between the inside and the outside or the home and the beyond. In the next section of the paper, I will try to decode this dichotomy from the specific use of the idiom (/s) of ‘*bidyash*’. The confinement of the women

within limits of expression and emotions has led to alternative ways of expression emerging out of that liminal space of existence allowed for them.

3. Political and Philosophical Trajectories of 'Bidyash'

In the imagination of the people from the Rajbongshi community of Assam or North Bengal, the significance of the term '*bidyash*' is immense. In my encounter with the Rajbongshi women from Alipurduar and Coochbehar, I was occasionally bombarded with the question of being from '*bidesh*' (foreign place). My place of origin is South Bengal (geographically) and hence my arrival there was not considered endemic to their culture. In all such encounters, I was able to decipher the fact that there is an imagination of the nation or the boundaries of the space of the community which is essential for the survival of a particular tribe or community. In the analysis of imagined communities by Benedict Anderson, we find him talking about nationalism as imagining and thereby creating a community of shared interests, dreams and desires. The nation "is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson). This sense of shared political and cultural interests pervades through the imagination of people of the Rajbongshi community.

The poetic and philosophical aspect of the territory of *bidesh* is closely linked with the Sanskrit reflective tradition of *viraha* as it has pervaded the cultural memory of the people of rural Bengal. The absence of the loved one, in the case of the Rajbongshi woman, has echoes from Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* and his treatment of *viraha* in the oral traditions that have existed since long.² Jayadeva's verses about Krishna and Radha have remained a significant reflective tradition in rural Bengal, mainly the Vaishnavas. In the traditional story of Radha and Krishna, the tradition of *viraha* or longing and separation is a major point which recurs. The pain of separation in both Radha and Krishna was emphasized by Jayadeva. This pain of separation is explored by the concept of *viraha* in the Bhawaiya songs.

"*Ore gadiyal bondhu re,*

Bondhu chhariya roite parina re,

² Jayadeva was a court poet in the court of Lakshman Sena who ruled Bengal in the 12th century and was a ruler at a place called Navadwip on the Bhagirathi River.

Ore praner bondhu re.
Bondhu garir chakay bhoroya gaan,
Adiya adiya choliya jan re,
Ore gadiyal bondhu re.”
 (O gadiyal³ friend of mine,
 I cannot live in your absence here,
 My heart's closest friend.
 Filling up your bullock cart with the songs,
 Slowly you are leaving this place,
 O my gadiyal friend.) (My translation)

The pain of separation between the bullock cart driver and the Rajbongshi woman confined within the space of the home becomes prominent in this song. This pain of separation symbolizes the position of woman as I have tried to portray in the initial part of the paper. In the domestic life of the woman in the community, the ‘*moishal bondhu*’⁴ is representative of that person who is outside of the realm of existence of the woman. He is an object of desire in the absence of the husband of the woman. This object of desire outside the legality of a marital relationship can be seen as the ‘foreign’ space towards which the woman is attracted and seeks an escape from the confinement of sexual desires. Through this engagement with the foreign space, the woman is slowly seen to be articulating her identity within the larger community structure. The woman understands the political space of the woman's body and her voice within the ambit of the ‘imagined community’. In expressing her erotic desire (Burman) of not being able to live without the ‘friend’ from this foreign space, she is not situated in a simple relation between the self and the other. There is a persistent juxtaposition of the desire and the identity in which there is a need to bring the foreign within the cultural and political sphere of the ‘self’⁵. This need of assimilation will be clearer as I delve into the songs dealing extensively with the idiom of *bidyash* in the next part of the paper.

³ Gadiyal is a Rajbongshi reference to the bullock cart driver in North Bengal and Assam.

⁴ The term *moishal* refers to the cattle herders of the region.

⁵ I am using ‘self’ here not as a philosophical term derived from Western philosophy but as the indicator of the cultural community to which the speaker belongs.

“*Re bidi nidoya-*

Porthom joibonkale na hoilo mor biya,

Ar kotoykal rohim ghore ekakini hoyya.”

In this song, the desire for *biya* (marriage) of a woman whose loneliness has an overwhelming presence in her life depicts the agency that the female voice tries to get over the subversive system of oppressive structures in a family. The loneliness (*ekakini hoiya*) of the life within the domestic sphere of the community is focused in the song. This inability to open the structures of repression by being within the domestic sphere is then projected onto the idioms of desire for the foreign place or person. In the same song, the phrase ‘*Tusher Agun*’ (burning desire) is used to portray the idea of the desire that the woman is trying to express. In the same song, however, there is a part which recognizes the societal constructs regarding a woman’s expressions where she is not allowed to voice her strong emotions of desire for union with a partner. The part reads as, “*Bapok na kou sorome mui maok n kou laaje.*” (I can’t tell these to my father and mother due to my shyness) The societal limitations get recognized at the same time that they are attempted to be overcome through song. This co-habitation of both the strands of meaning-making portrays the grappling of the woman subject with the acceptable and non-acceptable boundaries of behaviour in the Rajbongshi society.

The repetitive usage of the terms ‘*joibon*’, ‘*moner agun*’, ‘*peeriti*’ and other such terms open up the vast arena of expressions of the erotic self, and its reclamation of self. *Joibon* is a term generally used to denote youth, but in these songs it primarily means the idea of youth in a sensual sense, with the erotic desire at the core of its understanding. *Moner agun* is a term which expresses the strong desire of the *manas*⁶. Similar is the case with the word ‘*peeriti*’ which generally denotes an ‘illegitimate’ liking or attraction towards some person outside the confines of a legal marriage as understood by the society. The youth, here, symbolizes the erotic desire of the female subject. This centrality of desire as an element of expression transgresses the acceptable boundaries set in a society, for women. Singers like Ayesha Sarkar, Suniti Ray, Putul

⁶ Manas is a Sanskrit term used to denote the internal faculty which is the abode of memory and desire. There are four internal faculties in the body; the others are buddhi, chitta, and ahankara.

Pal, Sushila Roy and Shefali Das Adhikari have all incorporated this idea of desire in their songs, over the course of time. All these terms are used as projections of desire upon the ‘boideshi bondhu’ or the ‘mahout bondhu’.

4. *Bidyash* and its Performative Landscape

“O boideshi pranbondhua re

Tor baade mor praan kande,

Ekbaar tui aseki nai re...”

(O my friend from the foreign land,

My heart weeps for you,

Come here in this land)

The woman in the song expresses the desire for the friend from the foreign land and wants that entity to get assimilated within the self. While she struggles but is not able to transcend the boundaries between the self and the other, the desire for the other entity to transcend the boundaries of social limitations emerges as the overpowering narrative of these songs. This aspect of assimilation forms a crucial point of analysis in these songs. Another such song in which the knowledge of the ‘foreign land’ is desired by the woman as the mahout passes by her home is,

“*Kon dyashe jan moishal bondhure, moisher palo loiya,*

Ore aaj kyan ba moishal tomra, moisher bathan thuiya re,

Kon dyashe jan moishal bondhu re.”

(In which country do you go my moishal friend, taking all the buffalos with you,

Why do all of you take your buffalos from here?

To which country are you going, my moishal friend?) (My translation)

The question of the foreign country repeats a number of times in such songs by the Rajbongshi women. The foreign country can be simply taken as an imagined sphere outside the home⁷. If we travel a little back in the story of Rajbongshi *moishals*, we will see that these moishals are in a constant state of movement from one place to another, traversing long distances along these journeys. This constant state of movement of the moishal is contrasted against the static nature of existence of the Rajbongshi women. Therefore, the desire of the woman for escaping the static state of existence is projected on the journey of the moishals. This journey can be understood in two different levels of analysis: The literal and the metaphorical. In the literal sense, the journey is towards the outside of the domestic sphere. In this sense, the socio-political positioning of the woman in a 'subversive' hierarchy comes into play. In locating the woman in a Rajbongshi community, I have explored this aspect of the existence and being of the women.

In the deeper and the metaphorical sense of analysis, the aspect of journey can be translated into the Sanskrit reflective tradition of *manastirtha*. Sudipta Sen, in his book *Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River*, refers to the idea of *tirtha* which is explored in the *Skanda Purana* as having three different levels in which it manifests: *Jangam Tirtha* (to a movable place), *Sthawar Tirtha* (to an immovable place), and *Manastirtha* (to an inward journey). The association with these *tirthas* is embedded in the cultural memory of the people and communities across generations. All the three layers and levels of the *tirtha* have the journey as the immediate beginning point. This idea of *tirtha* which refers to a 'ford' or that part of the water that can be crossed in order to go to the other side, manifests itself lucidly in the Rajbongshi woman's association with the 'foreign country'. The foreign country or *bidyash*, via the song, is the ford which guides the path towards the assertion of the self by the woman. The song becomes the mouthpiece of her mode of being and reflection. The other side of the woman's life is the life with movement and the realization of the mind about the desires and dreams of being. In this context of this turning within and turning outside, another excerpt from a song comes to my mind,

⁷ I am using home here to mean the domestic sphere of the Rajbongshi women where the structures of repression pervade.

“Salar⁸ Dotara,

Mok kollung tui dyash re chara...”

(That wretched person’s Dotara,

Has made me leave this country of mine)

Here, the woman clearly talks about the escape from the place where she belongs, i.e, her domestic sphere. The effect of the tunes of the dotara on the woman is such that drives her mind away from this confined sphere of existence. She undergoes this journey through the performance of the song, via her voice. The metaphorical journey attains a performative manifestation through the song. The song is that which enables her journey to the outside as well as within. In this constant turning inside and turning outside towards the ‘foreign’ space, the boundaries between the two get significantly blurred. As a result of the blurring, in most of these songs with the idiom of the ‘bidyash’, we see the woman pleading for the presence of the person from the foreign space into her own domestic space. The assimilation of the journey of the ‘moishal bondhu’ or the ‘pranobondhu’ or the ‘boideshi bondhu’ within the journey of the realization of the self for the woman is thus, immensely significant. The journey of the woman into the foreign space is closely associated with the journey of the boideshi bondhu towards other geographical locations. These two journeys might not meet but run parallel to each other. It is for this reason that there is always a gap between the arrival of the woman and the departure of the moishal bondhu from the location. In another excerpt of a Bhawaiya song,

“O mor chand re, O mor sona,

O mok chhariya na jaan boidyash bondore.”

(O my moon, O my dear,

Do not leave me here and go further into the foreign port.)

⁸ Sala is a slang used frequently in Rajbongshi and Bengali languages. It is used as an insult to the wife’s brother. In this song, however, the meaning of the word is of less importance as it is just denoted to show the playful relationship between the Rajbongshi woman and the moishal who plays the tunes of Bhawaiya accompanied by his dotara (a amusical instrument).

This gap of arrival and departure is essential for the continuation of the journey of both towards their individual *manastirthas*. In all these excerpts using the idiom of ‘*boidesh*’, we can thus see that the term itself attains a significant metaphorical position in Bhawaiya songs. It is at once political and sensual as well as philosophical. The motif of ‘*boidesh*’ gets performed through the voice of the female subject. In turn, the performative aspect of the term integrally connects with the socio-political location of the female subject in a Rajbongshi community. The woman of the Rajbongshi community traverses these journeys through the motifs that she occasionally weaves within her songs.

Conclusion

In exploration of the way in which *boidesh* is used in the Bhawaiya songs, we can say that the term works in a multidimensional manner. It is not simply a political term or a philosophical idiom. *Bidyash* is politically an ‘imagined community’ outside the domestic sphere. *Boidesh* is philosophically an integral association with the mind of the woman which turns towards the assertion of the self through the journey. *Bidyash*, on a sexual level of analysis, represents the other side of sexual desires, i.e, sexual union between people from two different modes of being and away from the social norms of a legal marriage. All these threads of reflection need to be taken into account in order to locate the term in the cultural and social imagination of the women of the Rajbongshi community. These songs and their use of the idiom of *bidyash* helps in transgressing the limits of the ‘self’ created by the society (including acceptable normative modes of behaviour) and the ‘self’ created by the engagement with the lived experience of the woman in a Rajbongshi community. Therefore, the threads of all these levels of lived experience

are weaved together in the form of a tapestry of vibrant colours of desire, philosophical reflection into the self, and the coveted ‘transgression of boundaries’ (Khandoker).

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