

Laughter as Resistance: Gender, Humour, and the Carnavalesque in *Jakari* Folk Songs of Haryanvi Women

Neha Dagar

PhD English Scholar

Dr B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Email- dagarneha23@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper investigates how the *Jakari* folk songs of Haryanvi women use wit and humour to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes within the highly patriarchal state. These songs are sung exclusively by women in informal domestic spaces, away from male surveillance or interaction. Women's oral traditions, especially *Jakari*, have been neglected by mainstream folklore scholarship. Drawing on Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Dundes's folklore methodology, and ethnographic scholarship by Smita Tewari Jassal and Devender Kumar, the paper addresses the witty nature of *Jakari*, which creates a safe space for the collective articulation, transmission, and assertion of female agency by temporarily inverting the state's patriarchal structures. The paper analyses the coercive dowry practice, female desire, and marital responsibilities and ethics, as voiced by women through these folk songs. The paper further calls for an urgent need to document this oral tradition of Haryanvi women before modernisation renders it irretrievable.

Keywords: *Jakari*, Haryanvi Folk Songs, Carnavalesque, Gender Resistance, Oral Tradition

Introduction

Jakari folk songs are the most intimate oral expressions of the women of Haryana, a highly patriarchal North Indian state. These songs span every phase of women's lives and offer a compelling case for the study of gendered orality, encouraging empathy and understanding of women's experiences in Haryana. Every nook and corner of the state speaks for its past, traditions, and culture, which mirror the society's views, principles, and ethics. However, folk songs, exclusively of women, have suffered and have always been secondary in this patriarchal state, despite being a crucial part of every woman's life. The expression of wit and humour in these folk songs, particularly in challenging conventional gender roles and stereotypes, serves as a powerful tool for social commentary and critique. Despite their humorous and entertaining nature, *Jakari* folk songs reinforce gender norms and challenge societal issues prevalent in the state. In his preface to *Interpreting Folklore*, Alan Dundes propounds that "Folklore as a mirror of culture provides unique raw material for those eager to better understand themselves and others" (viii). As an indispensable part of Haryana's male-dominated society, *Jakari* songs provide an insight into the position of Haryanvi women and embody the social issues they face, making them a collective form of articulation that empowers women to voice their concerns. These songs do not end. Instead, they signify a state of beginning, initiating new conversations among participants or the community. The paper aims to highlight that *Jakari* folk songs not only serve as entertainment but also function as tools of social discourse, women's solidarity, and symbolic resistance against patriarchal domination in the state. It situates them within the feminist frameworks and emerging scholarship to emphasise how these oral expressions negotiate for a safe environment and represent women's positions through their humorous moments.

Literature Review

Folk songs have always been a powerful medium of expression for riveting over cultures, traditions, and, most importantly, societal nuances. Scholarly attention to women's folk traditions has been gaining momentum over the past three decades. Alan Dundes asserts that in folklore, great importance is given to the 'lore' while neglecting the 'folk' or the community's people. As Simon J. Bronner in *The Meaning of Folklore* has also put forth, "Dundes argued that humanizing folklore, or emphasizing the folk, would lead to psychological and social interpretations of people rather than a superficial 'literal' (and therefore literary/historical) emphasis on lore" (11). These songs, imbued with wit and humour, challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, inviting the audience to discover the rebellious spirit of women in Haryana. Smita Tewari Jassal's landmark study *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (2012) studies women's folk songs and establishes that "songs have constituted one of the few spaces for resistance traditionally available to lower caste women" (23), strongly emphasising Haryanvi women's position in society. Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold's *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (1994) also presents women's oral traditions as narratives that subvert the dominant patriarchal structures, especially discourses of kinship and marriage. Women have passed down narratives, songs, art forms, and rituals throughout generations, keeping the traditions alive. Bakhtin's carnivalesque, as developed in *Rabelais and His World*

(1984), is central to this study, as these songs serve as a symbolic space where existing ideologies are temporarily reversed, and social norms are suspended through laughter. These frameworks highlight the grounds through which *Jakari* folk songs transform the playful humour into a medium for feminist critique.

The word *Jakari* or '*Jakdi*' is unique in itself. It is difficult to trace its origins, as it takes various forms across different linguistic cultures. However, among multiple connotations, the word seems to emanate from the Hindi word '*jakadna*,' which means 'to tie,' 'to bind,' or 'to constrict,' and could be understood as a 'rhymed or non-rhyming utterance.' The word's literal meaning seems to justify the position of women of Haryana who sing it daily, as these folk songs epitomise the restrictions and portray the life of Haryanvi women bound in the shackles of an intensely patriarchal realm. Moreover, this justifies the spontaneity of these songs, as men have always neglected women's folk songs and have had minimal interference during such cultural performances. Since these songs depict women's daily experiences and household tasks, it would be appropriate to describe them as life or work songs. They can be sung anywhere, and there are songs for almost all occasions. Navigating social boundaries, these oral expressions make a mark on a Haryanvi woman's existence, rather than merely becoming, as she struggles with patriarchal oppression. Richard Weiss asserts, "Man creates the spiritual bond between natural conditions and objective cultural items, so that the cultural landscape with his stamp upon it can be seen, to use the terminology of the philosophy of culture, as 'objectified intelligence'" (150). The folk songs of the women of Haryana are one of the numerous other manifestations of what Richard termed 'objectified intelligence' because these women speak for a specific community and use the word 'I' frequently to emphasise their thoughts and desires in unison. Furthermore, *Jakari* songs depict women who dare to contemplate and study their emotions and who are not afraid to accept their artfulness, falsehoods, and deception as weapons to maintain their survival in a patriarchal society. Through rebellious yet playful means, women challenge patriarchal norms, express their frustrations, and articulate their desires, all of which are carnivalesque elements that reveal how these songs, as a form of collective expression, navigate and negotiate Haryanvi women's social and cultural realities.

Analysis and Discussion

Jakari songs present the female perspective on Haryanvi women and how they become so consumed by their domestic lives and responsibilities that they forget everything they have desired and wished for. Dr Devender Kumar brings this up in his book जकड़ी: हरियाणवी महिलाओं के सर्व-सुलभ लोकगीत (2015) through a famous proverb that goes as follows:

Bhūl gaī rang chāh, bhūl gaī Jākari.

Tīn chīz yād rahgī: nūn, tel, lakṛī. (Kumar 1)

(Translation: She forgot her love for colours and adornments, forgot *Jakari*,

Only three things remained on her mind: salt, oil, and firewood.)

With their witty and satirical lyrics, these oral narratives aim to challenge the prevailing discourses of society by bringing attention to social concerns like misogyny, domestic abuse, dowries, illiteracy, and so forth. Women are only able to express the sensitive issues addressed above through these light-hearted songs and clever wordplays; otherwise, they would be contentious, given Haryana's profoundly patriarchal image. The freedom to choose their husbands, arranged marriages, extramarital affairs, expressing desires, and celebrating

female sexuality are some of the off-limit topics that are brought up during these performances, which serve as counter-narratives challenging the established norms, in addition to the joys and laughter that accompany them. Carnavalesque imagery is inspired by the Carnival's mischievous and playful attitude, which pokes fun at authority, challenges power dynamics, and attempts to build a new world through the body, laughter, and role-play. Women are burdened with societal expectations, resulting in the witty portrayal of gender discrimination and set gender roles in their songs. They are treated as objects in the hands of men and are 'traded' from one family/clan to another for the sake of the institution of marriage. However, *Jakari* songs are considered ground-breaking because they often portray strong women who are unafraid to speak out against society's ills. As Shanti Elliot in *Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore* also asserts, "Singing is not only a festive act but also a philosophical concept: it provides for the possibility of change, re-ordering of life at all levels, public and private, external and internal" (134), we see that women project a female-oriented image of the socio-cultural sphere through *Jakari*, where they fight and attempt to overthrow society's hegemonic narratives. The performative nature of *Jakari* is itself carnivalesque, as they are sung in settings that Bakhtin might call the "nonofficial" sphere (Bakhtin 6). The overt protest by women is suppressed in Haryana; therefore, the humorous nature of *Jakari* allows them to articulate without direct confrontation or challenge to patriarchy.

The song "*Bijli kaisa palka lagya*" ("Struck by Lightning") presents a witty narrative against the practice of dowry, in which the girl stands up and fights for her and her parents' honour, painting a vivid picture of the harsh realities of Haryanvi society (Kumar 26). This *Jakari* song is a narrative about a girl reprimanding her dowry-hungry in-laws. A girl from the village is engaged to a 12th-pass boy from Delhi. The girl's father is unable to pay the enormous dowry (accessories, jewellery, vehicles, etc.) that the boy's family expects. On the wedding day, her family becomes apprehensive. She encourages them by asserting that they have not come to drag down our honour but their own. At the wedding, she walks down the aisle dressed like a modern, confident bride. Her beauty and charm blinded him. However, she dismisses the groom, saying, "You liked me, of course, but I do not like you. You skunk fool." The severe yet humorous anecdote highlights the idea that women lack agency in choosing their life partners and expressing their discontent. In addition to giving women a platform to express themselves, these spoken words serve as catalysts, educating, inspiring, and sowing the seeds of revolution in listeners' minds. The groomsmen flee after the crowd mocks his future. This is a strong action, or a Bakhtinian "uncrowning", as the groom, an embodiment of patriarchy and dowry culture, is humiliated and exposed through humour and laughter (Bakhtin 197). The man who was assessing a woman's value proved to be worthless by her assessment of him. As Jassal puts forth, women "sing what they often cannot talk about" (6). The song is not merely a source of entertainment. Rather, it becomes a powerful medium to educate younger women about the importance and possibilities of self-determination within the forceful realms of patriarchy and arranged marriage systems.

Furthermore, through these songs, subjects like lust, extramarital affairs, breach of marital dignity, etc., are comically addressed. They present women being abandoned by their husbands when they are unable to give birth, especially to a male child. While some songs openly depict this dominance, others attempt to challenge Haryana's predominantly male society. Even in the ethos, an illicit relationship between a woman and her brothers-in-law, initiated and forced by the latter, is not questioned. Nevertheless, women vehemently oppose these evil notions and denounce such relationships through these *Jakari* songs. When a woman complains to her husband about her brother-in-law's inappropriate behaviour, for

instance, the husband tells her not to worry about it since they are both descended from the same womb and therefore are no different by saying- “*Gorī rai ke ho gyā merī mā kā jāyā chhoṭā bīr*” (Translation: O dear, so what, he is my younger brother from the same mother) (Kumar 179). However, the woman does not forfeit her identity. She chastises her husband, telling him that he should have died of shame before even thinking about such a disgusting trade, by saying- “*Dūb kyū na mar gyā, jīnde nai saūp deī nair*” (Translation: You should have died of shame before handing your wife to another man while you are still alive). In this context, a woman’s thought process appears to be more logical and contemporary than a man’s. Moreover, these songs articulate and celebrate female sexuality, where women express their thoughts and feelings under the pretext of wit and humour. For instance, a song depicts a woman expressing her annoyance at her husband being busy working in the field day in and day out, presenting hilarious complaints and reasons she gives him to make him stay at home. The humour in such songs is celebratory, often camouflaged with domestic discourse, rejecting the patriarchal notions of women’s sexuality that are otherwise neglected or considered shameful. The wife is adamant that the husband stay with her. She finds issues in each month of the year (extreme heat, harsh winter, ruthless monsoon, etc.) to prevent him from going to the fields, which irritates him, and he responds, “Where would I acquire food and *panjiri* when you will give birth to children every nine months?” Such expressions not only capture the struggles of rural marital life but also illuminate the complexities of love and relationships. Moreover, they portray women as proactive leaders in romantic relationships, demonstrating their agency and autonomy and, in the process, changing society’s perceptions, subverting rigid power structures, and offering a vibrant, dynamic understanding of the carnivalesque.

Conclusion

Jakari folk songs depict Haryanvi women’s daily lives and struggles within the backdrop of confidence, wit, and humour. Not only do these songs challenge gender norms, but they also offer women a sense of empowerment by providing a safe space to collectively articulate their suppressed desires. That being said, women talk their hearts out through *Jakari*, carefree as ever, since “women’s folk songs are a kind of safety valve meant to provide an outlet for women through which they can express their bottled-up resentment against the social order” (Srivastava 283). However, it is one of the most neglected and undeveloped oral traditions despite being fundamental to Haryanvi women’s lives, cultures, and very existence. Through carnivalesque inversion and by serving as catalysts, these songs advocate for social change, going beyond their surface role as mere folk entertainment. Women stand together and contribute to the progressive transformation of societal consciousness. Wit and humour act as powerful agents in folk songs by providing the lighter winds of change in conversations that would otherwise be difficult to address. Thus, in the wake of preserving cultural traditions under the rug of wit and humour, *Jakari* folk songs are a living archive of women’s thoughts and shared knowledge.

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