

Song of Resistance and Resilience: Locating Different Spaces of Liminality, Marginality and Hybridity in Bhawaiya Folk Music

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Abstract

Bhawaiya is one of the most important folk music traditions of North Bengal, lower Assam and northern parts of Bangladesh. The music is popular among the Rajbanshi speaking people who are now divided by national and international boundaries. The land of Bhawaiya, erstwhile Cooch Behar state, was once ruled by Koch dynasty. In the colonial period Cooch Behar enjoyed the status of a British princely state. On the other hand, liminality as a philosophical thought first appeared in anthropology. Later the concept has been used in cultural and literary analysis to describe a space which is located in an “in-between” space. This paper aims to interpret Bhawaiya folk music in respect of liminality. It intends to show how Bhawaiya represents different aspects of liminality in relation to its people, language and culture. Hybridity and marginality are also very important philosophical thoughts in postcolonial study. This also aims to explore different marginal spaces articulated in Bhawaiya. This paper tries to explore how Bhawaiya, influenced by different cultural events in history, embodies a sense of hybridity in its nature. This paper also aims to explore how Bhawaiya resists dominant cultural push in different phases of history and emerges as unique cultural medium rooted in the folk traditions of the land it represents.

Keywords: Bhawaiya, Resistance, Liminality, Marginality, Hybridity

Introduction:

Liminality as a philosophical concept first appeared in Arnold Van Genep's text *The Rites of Passage* (1909) in which he defines liminality as an in 'betwixt and between' stage that marks the transition of an individual from one stage to another in an individual's growth. Every rite, through which a person goes, consists of three stages- separation, transition and incorporation (Janusz and Walkiewicz 152). In separation an individual separates himself from his previous stage. Liminal or transitional stage is ambiguous in nature and it enables an individual to suspend

normal social laws through social validation. In the incorporation stage he or she enters into the society with a new social status. Marriage, initiation or death rituals are some examples of these rites. Later, scholars like Victor Turner and Stuart Hall contributed to this idea and incorporated it in the field of literary and cultural studies. Marginality and hybridity are also important concept in the field of cultural studies especially in the field of postcolonial studies.

On the other hand, Bhawaiya as a dominant folk music tradition primarily belongs to the Rajbanshi speaking people residing in the areas of Northern part of West Bengal, Lower Assam, Rangpur Division of Bangladesh and in few areas of Nepal. Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshi is the predominant community living in this land. Apart from the Rajbanshi, Nashya Seikh, Rava, Mechh also speak this language in their everyday life. The geographical area, in which Bhawaiya dominates as a music tradition, previously was ruled by The Koch Dynasty of the Cooch Behar established by Maharaja Biswa Singha in the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is believed that with the rise of the kingdom Bhawaiya started to get its momentum, worth and popularity. Since then, Bhawaiya has been greatest source of entertainment for the people of this land and it has become the voice of pain, pleasure and pastoral life. Bhawaiya constitutes a very important part of their ritual, religion, social negotiation and harmony. Bhawaiya is, no doubt, the most important music of this vast geographical area that has survived, succeeded and flourished through colonial and postcolonial realities.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

This paper intends to understand different aspects of liminality, marginality and hybridity as articulated in Bhawaiya tradition. Liminality, marginality and hybridity- all are established philosophical thought in literary and cultural studies. For Victor Turner, a liminal space is a creative and subversive space that consists high potential to disrupt an established hierarchical chain. This is vital in the transformation for a drastic change in social fabric or in the field of art, literature or culture. This creative space enables series of new meanings, values or social negotiations in a society. Stuart Hall develops this anthropological idea into the field of cultural studies to explore different aspects like cultural identity, hegemony, hybridity or diaspora. He believes that any identity is located in an 'in-between' space. He thought that Cultural Identity is a specific collective identity which gives people a sense of belonging. "Cultural identity is dynamic... Cultural Identity belongs to both the past and the future. This change is due to the historical or the change of time and space" (Yang 180). Identity is more a 'becoming' than fixed 'being'. Meaning is produced through a continuous negotiation between and among different factors like caste, creed, gender, location or class. Bhawaiya itself is huge when we think of its quantity; there are thousands of songs about hundreds of subjects. Hence a few of the songs are selected for analysis according to the subjects this article intends to deal. The purposive sampling method is used to select songs which would enable to expose the mentioned issues.

Discussion:

Bhawaiya as a cultural text generates a space which combines different ideology, language and culture. Bhawaiya becomes a 'liminoid' space where multiple identities merge and a beautiful coherence is achieved. For Victor Turner, liminoid space is characteristically different from liminal space. A liminal phenomenon is "collective and centrally integrated into the total social process, forming with all other aspects a complete whole and representing its necessary negativity and subjectivity" (Turner 54). A liminoid phenomenon, on the other hand, "develops apart from central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions- they are plural, fragmentary, and experimental in character. A liminoid phenomena is 'quirky', creative, and imaginative. This liminoid space is a voluntary creative space which attach subversion and resistance. The artists of Bhawaiya resist the dominant official language, culture and attitude. In the precolonial time the land of Bhawaiya, Cooch Behar, was ruled by Koch kings who were indigenous by birth and culture. With the rise of colonialism entire subcontinent came under violent political and cultural upheaval. Colonialism brought new ideology, new perspective and new thought. The European way of life penetrated into the Indian life and cultural exchanges was mainly one way traffic; they infused their culture through education as Macaulay specified in his minutes, "Indian in Blood and Color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morale, and in intellect" (qtd in Cutts 825). Cultural communication became speedy and all pervasive. Colonialism brought different communities of India under one administrative umbrella which enabled inter-cultural and inter community communication between different communities which used to exist separately for ages.

Cooch Behar has never been under the direct control of British rule. On 5th of April 1773 the then King of Cooch Behar Maharaja Dhairjendra Narayan and East India Company signed an agreement to protect the Kingdom following a Bhutanese aggression. The treaty gave the company fifty percent of its access to the revenue and indirect control to the administration. The state remained the status of a princely feudatory state till 18th of August, 1949 when Cooch Behar signed a treaty to join Indian dominion with the status of a C category state. Later Cooch Behar was merged with West Bengal and it is reduced to the status of a district of West Bengal. Though most of the people of the region speak Rajbanshi language, the court language was Bengali and English from the colonial period. The inclination to organized Hindu traditions from the part of the King encouraged a shift for the people to devote themselves to organized Vaishnavism. Prior to this they were inclined to animistic tradition. Bhawaiya as an intimate part of their cultural life experienced all these historical changes. Naturally, Bhawaiya reflects the marks of all these changes in its lyrics, tone, theme and presentation.

Stuart Hall believes that any cultural expression unfolds a battlefield which gives space for cultural struggle. In his media reception theory, he explains how the dominant group tries to naturalize their position and authority as common and true. The marginalized or subcultures react to that ideology. The dominant group encodes their meanings in different representations of culture

and the marginalized group reads (decodes and reacts) to these messages with an alternative attitude. The reading can be of three type- Dominant Reading, Negotiated reading, and Oppositional Reading. (Louw 206). Dominant reading suggests that the marginalized group accepts everything the dominant offers. Negotiated reading enables them to partly accept some components and resists some. The oppositional reading rejects all ideologies. Bhawaiya imbibes the spirit of negotiation in relation to the dominant Bengali culture. The influence of Bengali culture on Bhawaiya in colonial and postcolonial scenario has been huge and pervasive. The Bengali way of life influenced local Rajbanshi life. As a result, Bhawaiya was influenced by their cultural ideology and narrative. Though the language of Bhawaiya is predominantly Rajbanshi language, a huge number of Bengali words infiltrated into the lyrics of Bhawaiya because of the dominant administrative and cultural influence. These words brought new perspective, meaning and theme to the music.

Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) explains how the space of border impacts any individual or community's psyche. She observes many determining factors which influence the life of people residing in US -Mexican border. For her it is a location where the "Third World grates against the first world and bleeds". These two worlds create "a third country- a border".

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them...A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants (Anzaldua 3).

Thus, a border is not only a physical boundary drawn between two countries or states of different connotation; it is more a metaphysical or psychological border drawn in the imagination of the people residing in both the sides of the border. This border gives birth to a set of borders for the people – linguistic, cultural, sexual or spiritual realized under compulsion. This borderline results in creating "Mestiza Consciousness"; this is a creative space where the two worlds collide, merge and 'transform into a new and distinct'. This borderland itself represents a different country and the people living there are more tolerant towards different worldviews, ideology and any dominant narrative. They develop a sharp defense mechanism to survive oppression. They metaphorically belong to a 'third country'. They connect and conflict with both the sides at the same time.

Bhawaiya as a musical heritage belongs to a huge population who are themselves divided by borders and hence it belongs to 'a border land', a liminal space. Bhawaiya tradition represents a liminal space between India and Bangladesh border. Though the Radcliffe line has divided the Rangpur Division of Bangladesh from India in 1947 with the independence from British Rule, the people on the both sides of the border could not be divided along their language line. In both the countries Rajbanshi is the spoken language under the affirmation of dialect. In the Indian states the language does not come under schedule list of languages. The language is in a vulnerable state

and under the threat of extinction. Bhawaiya heels and pleases the people's mind in both the nations. Bhawaiya is equally popular in both the nations across the border.

Bhawaiya also imbibes and represents a liminal space of the Rajbanshi identity which finds itself far away from the central politics in West Bengal as well as Assam. The song "*Ekbar Uttar Bangla Asia Jao*" is perhaps the most important and most celebrated song in this respect and the lyric is worth mentioning here-

oo... boidesha bondhu re, oo mor sona bondhu re

o mor praner bondhu re

ekbar uttarbangla Asiya jan, hamar jagata dekhiya jan

moner kotha suniya jan ree...bondhu

tomar kotha koiya jan re...(Roy)

Composed by legendary Bhawaiya singer Dhaneswar Roy, the song was also featured in a Rajbanshi movie *Moyna Chokur Jol*. The song is a direct address to an unnamed *bondhu* (friend), who is from southern part of West Bengal. He is invited to see the beauty of North Bengal- hills of Darjeeling, the dooars of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. He will also enjoy a ride through the dense forest of Jaldapara and Garumara. He can also enjoy different local fruits and dishes. Most importantly, the friend will listen the tale of their pain to be located in a place which is far removed from the Kolkata centric discourse of development and state identity. *Uttar Bangla* (North Bengal) is marginalized socially, culturally and politically. The pain of being in the margin is clearly evident in the song. The song invites a sympathetic consideration on this issue. In the state of Assam Bhawaiya showcases a same kind insecurity, inferiority and self-doubts for a huge population living there. The districts of Goalpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar are known for Bhawaiya in Assam. It constitutes an important cultural heritage. But it has never got the exaltation and validation that it deserved in the dominant cultural discourse. It was merely termed as *Goalparia Geet* (after the name of Goalpara district) in their popular understanding. It was in the year 1991 famous Bhawaiya singer Pratima Barua Pandey was awarded with Padmashree for her musical contribution; with her Bhawaiya got its recognition in national stage. If Bhawaiya represents the marginal condition of a huge Rajbanshi speaking population residing in both the states, the Bhawaiya itself also belonged to that marginal space as a folk genre of music in both the states even in the current socio-political scenario.

Bhawaiya works as an active force in the affirmation of greater Rajbanshis identity 'in-between' the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. Bhawaiya has become the voice of resistance to the dominant Bengali or Assamese narrative for a uniformity which drags Rajbanshi identity towards their respective center (Assamese or Bengali) but divides Rajbanshi unity and hinders a greater Rajbanshi identification. Hence Bhawaiya becomes the voice of their unity across

State borders and demand for their unified right and claim for a separate state. The politicians and workers devoted to this cause strategically employ Bhawaiya songs in their cultural and political program to appeal public emotion. Bhawaiya becomes a political weapon for them as it has that public acceptance and exultation. The song “*Joy Kamatapurer Joy*” composed in the contemporary political scenario serves to them as an anthem to this movement for the demand of a separate state, recognition of Rajbanshi language and their ethnological and cultural identity separate from mainstream Bengali or Assamese culture-

Sono sono jonogon

Sogai mili ek hon

Koch raja Naranaryaner bongsho jodi

Rajbanshi buli kon... ... (Ramkrishna)

This particular song is highly political and it invokes their golden past, Koch Rajbanshi dynasty, their heritage. This also pays tribute to their heroes like Mahabir Chilaray, Maharaja Naranarayan. The lyric gives tribute to Thakur Panchanan Barma, one of the influential political figures in the struggle for Rajbanshi identity and upliftment. This also openly admits every Rajbanshi as brother ‘*bhai-bhai*’ and invites them to hail Kamatapur (a term synonymously used as idealized Cooch Behar State) as a land of power, unity and self-assertion.

If men occupy the central space in the political discourse of gender, women find themselves in the periphery; they are at the margin of this system. Bhawaiya is a space in which the marginality of women is uniquely represented with a definite resolution. The tradition explicates the marginal voice of women in which the women show their resilience against patriarchy and refuse to be marginal in most of the cases. Their tone gets a bold and strong representation in many songs. These songs beautifully represent women subject- their assertion of identity, desire and position in a male dominated world. They refute to be in the margins of the society. A huge number of love songs express a balance between male and female partner. The females are not merely the recipient of love proposed by the male partner. Female dominates the love affair. They are not even shy to voice their extramarital affair in the absence of husbands. They are aggressive expressing their emotions. They demand their rights. They refuse to be the victims; they are assertive of their desires, their body and sexuality. They are conscious of their subjectivity. They know that their body belongs to them. The lyric of the song “*Aar Kato Dine Aasibe*” is representative of the tradition which show this deviance from popular understanding of women’s position-

Oki Mahut re ...

Tor mahuuter dantal hati

Mahut re

Mui o mahout vor juboti re

Na dekhile man uirang bairang kore ... (Barua)

The woman compares her sexuality and desire for husband with an elephant. It is irresistible for her and she cannot be at ease without meeting her husband who is a mahout in profession and has gone to some distant place.

In *Location of Culture*, Homi K Bhaba defines the concepts of ‘third space’. It is an ‘in between’ space in a colonial and postcolonial setting where cultural identities are negotiated or merged and a new meaning is created. For Bhabha,

Hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; ...Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects (150).

In this postcolonial scenario no cultural identities can remain distinct and separate. Multiple identities come together and make a hybrid identity. No culture dominates. It is an accepted negotiation which challenges any authorized identity. In this space binaries are rejected- native and foreign, self and other, colonized and colonizer. Ambiguity and ambivalence dominate over any distinction and exclusivity. New possibilities, perspectives, prospective thoughts and cultural enunciations become reality. It advocates for new meaning which believes in fluidity, multiculturalism and conflicting attitude. This space rejects the idea of essentialism, purity or authenticity of any culture in contemporary time. The current status of Bhawaiya as a medium of entertainment is a hybrid one. A debate is going on the purity and sanctity of Bhawaiya as many non-Bhawaiya elements have entered into the arena, as a result of modernization, globalization, and technological injections into the tradition. All these factors along with the individual artists own way of creativity have been continuously pushing it towards a hybrid identity.

Conclusion:

Today Bhawaiya is not limited to the Rajbanshi speaking community. It is also not limited to any geographical location like North Bengal or Assam. It has surpassed the domestic boundary which is inevitable in this age of multimedia and advance communication technology. The streaming of songs with well-organized and beautifully choreographed videos on YouTube, Facebook or any other medium has contributed to the acceptance of this music to the global audience shattering any geographical boundaries. Bhawaiya got a boom in its popularity with the boom of social media culture. The current politics about Rajbanshi identity and right hugely contributed to its popularity. It has entered the arena of global music community with the gift of technology specially with the outburst of various social media platforms. There are multiple instances when some classic Bhawaiya songs are misrepresented as Bengali or Baul songs which is normal if we think it as an effect of modernization project. But there is also a huge push from individual artist or group to present Bhawaiya in the global music tradition which would not at all be possible without the extensive surge of multimedia and social media culture. Today Bhawaiya stands supreme imbibing

its history with the present and it is looking towards a great future with its adaptability, plurality and above all for its heart touching melody.

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