

## Understanding Agency through Folk Songs

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### Introduction

Anthropologists have taken different routes to understand social life. The study of oral traditions is one of them. This paper is about folk songs<sup>1</sup> of women in North India<sup>2</sup>. Singing of songs is a part of the everyday life of North Indian women. Women are heard singing songs not only on important festivals like marriage and birth ceremony but also in their daily lives while working or during leisure.

Scholars like Mazrahal Islam (1985) and Roma Chatterji (1986) explain that oral traditions are creative arts through which humans express themselves<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Islam (1985) is of the opinion that sensitive and emotional life can be captured only through arts like folklore. Similarly, Chatterji (1986) argues that oral traditions are rooted in experience and fantasy. She explains that the narrator weaves a coherent narrative relating his or her own and other people's diverse experience. Jack Goody's (1973) work is of importance in discussing oral traditions because he

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<sup>1</sup>Chatterji (2003) explains that the term 'folk' is generally used as a descriptive term to characterise community life where face to face relations predominate. Beyond this, there are multiple usage of the term folk where it is contrasted with civilisation and tribes. Thus, Chatterji (2003) argues that the term 'folk' acquires meaning within a theoretical perspective. In my work, the term 'folk' of folk songs refer to women from small villages in North India who come together on various occasions and during leisure to sing a variety of songs and express themselves.

<sup>2</sup>When I am discussing folk songs of North Indian women, I am using the songs described in the works of Gold and Raheja (1994), Jassal (2012) and Nilsson (2000). Their work on folk songs is around Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. Gold and Raheja's (1994) field sites are Ghatiyali in Rajasthan and Pahansu and Hathchoya in Uttar Pradesh. Jassal's (2012) has carried out intensive field work in Atara, Barsara and Sauraiyan villages in Jaunpur district, Uttar Pradesh. She has also collected songs from Chachakpur village near Jaunpur, rural neighbourhoods around the city of Varanasi, Sadiapur village near Allahabad and Misraulia village in Bihar's Chappra district. Nilsson (2000) is looking at women's folk songs from Awadhi and Bhojpuri speaking areas of North India.

<sup>3</sup>A similar kind of study can be seen in the work of Flueckiger (1996) that explains about the oral traditions like *dalkhai* which is a Chhattisgarhi folk song that are used by women (mostly of lower castes and tribal women) as spaces to openly express themselves and act against the prescribed female roles.

writes on the aspect of communication in societies. He explains that oral and literary writings involve different modes of communication. Literary writings are viewed as going beyond face to face communication where the thought of an author is read by a wider audience and is critically commented upon. On the other hand, oral performances are seen to involve face to face communication with a smaller audience. He further points out that in oral traditions there is no fixed individual authorship. As the tradition gets passed down it is presented with new creativity. However, this does not mean that oral traditions purely emerge and disappear (Barber 2005). Barber (2005) explains that oral performances have something identifiable that is extracted from the immediate context and is registered in the minds of the people which, is later used in future performances. To elucidate this point she refers to African praise poetry that evokes “the past and the present, bringing the powers and potentials of their dead predecessors into the centre of the living community” (Barber 2005: 268). This capacity to transcend the moment is seen as one of the important features of oral traditions. As oral traditions get transmitted over time and space they are re-created. These studies point to us the importance of studying oral traditions as they have certain features that makes them different from other modes of communication. Scholars like Appadurai (1991), Deva (1989) and Trawick (1988) whose work deal with alternative voices argues that oral traditions like folk songs, poems, narratives are other bodies of knowledge that brings forth the views of powerless and low ranking people in the society. The works of Deva (1989) and Trawick (1988) explain that in a society where writing cultures exist along with oral traditions, each one contributes to a different understanding of society. Thus, Trawick’s (1988) work on Paraiyar women’s songs show that through stylistic variations in the lyrics of the songs women are able to convey their complex feelings. Deva’s (1989) work explains that members of the peasant society and women often use folk songs to communicate and comment on a variety of social aspects. Therefore, verbal art in the form of folk songs become a space of alternate or subaltern expression. These studies explain to us that performing arts like folk songs are part of the social life of North Indian society. It is a space where experiences of individual and groups are woven creatively.

## **North Indian Folk songs**

Scholars who have worked on North Indian women's folk songs (Deva 1989; Gold and Raheja 1994; Jassal 2012; Srivastava 1991) view them as commentaries on women's life, spaces of resistance and emotional outbursts. Singing is viewed as subversive acts on the part of the women living in patriarchal society. Before I lay down the questions that I am going to explore in this paper, I would like to define the act of singing folk songs as a social action because apart from being vehicles of communication, they comment on, reflect on and question social life (Deva 1989; Gold and Raheja 1994; Jassal 2012; Srivastava 1991).

My endeavour in this article is to study the concept of action or agency with regard to the singing of folk songs. There is a taken for granted notion in the study of agency that it is human whether individual or group that is solely responsible for an action (Das 2007, 2010). I agree with Das (2007, 2010) that agency needs to be studied in a nuanced manner. The complexity in the study of agency comes in when we consider various factors along with individual action that are responsible for a situation. These factors could be anything from non-humans like machines, signs, technology and others (Ahearn 2001). In this scenario can we limit our understanding of agency to humans? Can we argue that a situation is solely the responsibility of an action of a particular person or group of individuals? Laura Ahearn (2001) explains that there is a tendency among scholars to view free will as synonymous with agency. This is called the action theory which distinguishes an action from an event. Ahearn (2001) argues that such theories are problematic for they ignore the cultural influence on human nature and action. Practice and Structuration theory also gives importance to human action but at the same time they acknowledge the role of structures influencing the actions of individuals. Thus, Giddens (1984) explains that social actions are shaped by social structure and social structures are recreated by routine practices or actions<sup>4</sup>. In a similar vein, Ortner (1984) writes that practice theory tries to explain the relationship between the human action on one hand and system on the other. These theories are important because it shows us that one cannot view individuals outside of society, therefore, individual actions are influenced by social structures. However, it is Veena Das'

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<sup>4</sup>Giddens (1984) argues that agents and structures are not two independent phenomena, but they represent a duality. He states, "According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens 1984: 25).

(2007) work that views agency in a much more nuanced manner. She acknowledges the structural influence on human action and states, “In many situations you cannot decipher which particular individual has the specific responsibility because it is the coming together of various forces that produces a particular action” (Das 2010: 138). I am inspired by Veena Das’ (2007, 2010) way of looking at agency and will argue in this chapter that expressions of complaint and resistance through folk songs is a subversive act on the part of North Indian women but other forces or factors are equally responsible or helpful for women to carry out their actions.

To elucidate this point, I turn to Das’ (2007) discussion on rumour in her celebrated work *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Right after the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards there were a variety of rumours that spread all over the country. This led to the violent attacks on Sikhs by Hindus. Das (2007, 2010) explains that action in these cases cannot be viewed as the responsibility of one person or group. Action should be seen as a result of multiple factors and here one of them is an impersonal factor like rumour. Das (2010) states, “The rumours, I say, exert a kind of field of force in which people get drawn into acting in certain ways” (Das 2010: 137). My analysis of folk songs of North Indian women is along these lines. One of the things I wish to show is that women’s action of expressing themselves through folk songs is possible because of a variety of factors like space, time, audience and genre.

### **Space, Time and Audience**

Songs like *Gali* and *Sita Mangal* are sung during wedding occasions. Unlike *Kesya*<sup>5</sup> songs which are sung in an enclosed space only in front of women audiences, these wedding songs are sung in front of audiences of both men and women. *Sita Mangal* songs are sung throughout the various events that take place during the wedding like the *haldi*<sup>6</sup> ceremony and also during the coming of

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<sup>5</sup>*Kesya* genre is sung during the spring months of *Phalgun* (March-April) and during hot month of *Chaitra* (April-May) (Raheja and Gold: 1994). This is also the period when festival of *Holi*, *Gangaur* and *Sitala* worship takes place in Rajasthan and most of the North Indian states. Raheja and Gold (1994) further explains that *Kesya* is performed even during last month of the rainy season.

<sup>6</sup>*Haldi* or the turmeric ceremony is one of the many ceremonies that take place before marriage. The family members apply paste of turmeric and oil to the bride and groom. In this ceremony women of both families sing folk songs. For more see Smita Tewari Jassal (2012).

the *barat*<sup>7</sup>. *Gali* or abusive songs are hurled against men publicly during the proceedings of the wedding rites. It seems to me that women are able to sing these songs openly because the particular space and time at which these songs are sung attaches a certain meaning to them.

Henry's (1975) work on North Indian wedding songs explains that singing constitutes one of women's roles in society. It is expected out of women that they sing during important rites and rituals. Singing of songs by women is considered auspicious. Henry (1975) states, "songs are thought to augment the glory of the wedding and to insure its success and the success of the marriage" (Henry 1975: 83). In a similar vein, Jassal (2012) explains that people consider *Sita Mangal* songs like sung blessings where the couple is blessed to have an ideal wedded life like *Ram* and *Sita*<sup>8</sup>. However, this seems paradoxical to me because the ideal couple themselves did not have a happy married life<sup>9</sup>. Apart from this, wedding is also a time where there is a play of complex emotions. It is the time of celebration but simultaneously it signifies the permanent departure of the daughter from her natal home. Moreover, it is also the space where a lot of give and take occurs. It involves the payment of dowry and gift giving (Henry 1975; Sharma 1993). Henry (1975) explains that disappointments are likely to arise in these situations when expectations of both parties do not match. He states, "Conflict and competition are inherent in the relationship, with both parties attempting to maximize gain and prestige, and minimize expenditure" (Henry 1975: 86). In such a tense space singing of songs that are abusive or jocular is viewed as relaxing by people. It is viewed to "relax the guest and promote harmony" (ibid.). Through these discussions one important point that can be culled out is that the meaning of the songs are derived from the context. Gold and Raheja (1994) explain that the meanings of the songs are understood as "situationally appropriate- prescribed by season, event, activity or the

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<sup>7</sup>*Barat* or *Baraat* is the coming of the bridegroom with his family members and friends to the bride's house for the wedding ceremony. In North India, the groom usually comes on a mare with bands and dancers.

<sup>8</sup>*Ram* and *Sita* are the protagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana. Theologically, they are viewed as incarnations of *Vishnu* and *Lakshmi*. They are viewed as an ideal couple among the Hindus.

<sup>9</sup>Although *Ram* and *Sita* are taken to be as an ideal couple among the Hindus the mythological story explains that the married life of *Ram* and *Sita* went through a lot of problem. One such incident is the *Agnipariksha* or the trial that *Sita* had to undergo to prove her chastity to *Ram* by jumping into the fire. After she successfully undergoes a trial by fire *Ram* deems her worthy to take her place by his side. However, the continuing rumour about *Sita's* chastity again makes *Ram* abandon her into the forest. [This is not the authorizing telling of the incident, there are varied versions of the story. For more refer to Paula Richman (1994, 2000)].

presence of certain relations” (Gold and Raheja 1994: 43). They elucidate this point by describing an incident that they encountered while doing the fieldwork. Gold and Raheja (1994) explain that the Potter women consulted among themselves before performing a *Kesya* song. The women were enquiring about whether the month of *Phalgun*<sup>10</sup> was over or not because *Kesya* could be sung only during that period. Gold and Raheja (1994) argue that it is the context that provides the meaning as to whether the songs are for play or worship. Thus time, place and company become highly important while considering performances. Taking this premise we can argue that wedding songs like *Gali* and *Sita Mangal* that express complexities, abuses, paradoxes and the questioning of societal values can be sung only during the ceremonies because the space, event, time impacts the meaning of these songs. Even if the songs are radical and open they are viewed as auspicious or jocular within the context of a wedding. Moreover, they are considered to enhance the glory and ensure the success of a wedding ceremony. Thus, the space and time of wedding provides a safe zone for women to express themselves and reflect and comment on social life. *Gali* or abusive songs sung openly to men during normal days would be viewed as disrespectful and open resistance on women’s part. However, singing through a safe zone allows women to carry out their action of resistance and at the same time maintain the social order of the system.

This is one of the many songs that women sing during the wedding ceremony. It belongs to the genre *Gali*.

#### *Gali of the Groom’s mother*

*Bridegroom’s mother asked for a sugarcane stick.  
Take this one, a piece of prick.  
Oh, but it’s sweet! I’ll plant more quick,  
In my cunt I’ll plant that prick,  
In my cunt I’ll plant that prick.* (Gold and Raheja 1994:61)

Gold and Raheja (1994) explain that *Galis* are always sexually oriented. They are generally sung by women against men of opposite family who are related through marriage alliance. However, sometimes they also sing against women. It seems to me that singing against women is not so

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<sup>10</sup>According to the Hindu calendar the spring months i.e. from March to April are termed as *Phalgun*.

much directed against women but more towards men of the opposite family. In a society where women's sexuality is highly controlled<sup>11</sup>, insult hurled against women is equivalent to insult against the entire family. Gold and Raheja (1994) explain the song discussed above as a *gali* or abuse hurled against the bridegroom's mother during a wedding in Rajasthan by women of the bride's family. The song is about the mother whose son is grown up and about to get married and yet her sexual appetite is unsatisfied. At a cursory understanding these songs can be mistaken for the lustful nature of the mother, which is considered as a degrading act among North Indian people. However, a careful analysis of such songs depicts a positive aspect of the sexual act as it has birth giving capacities (Gold and Raheja 1994)<sup>12</sup>. This explains that although women sing songs on sexuality, they do not objectify women's bodies. However, I consider two aspects to be important in these songs. Firstly, even though the songs are abusive in nature and speak of tabooed elements like sexuality which is highly abhorred in North Indian society they are tolerated within a particular context like weddings. Celebratory occasions like weddings or the birth of sons become safe zones where women are able to openly express their feelings. Kirin Narayan's (1997) work on Kangra explains that women use spaces of folk songs that are sung on celebratory occasions to comment on a range of emotions and situations in their life. Narayan (1997) shows this through the discussion on *Pakharu*<sup>13</sup> songs sung by middle and higher caste women in Kangra. Brinda Devi Sud, a woman in her fifties sang *Pakharu* during her nephew's birthday. Later on Narayan (1997) realised that the theme and narrative in the song had some similarity with her past life. Narayan's work is important because it explains how safe spaces encourage women to express themselves. Taking this premise, I see the song discussed above as

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<sup>11</sup>Veena Das' (1985) study of Punjabi society explains that in North India once the women attained adulthood her sexuality is highly guarded. Women are meant to follow a separate kind of lifestyle once they attained adulthood. The onset of menstruation robbed the women of their freedom of childhood. They were required to limit their social interaction with men and learn new ways of communication. Thus, "When a girl begins to menstruate, she learns that one of the most important ways in which women must learn to communicate is by nonverbal gestures, intonation of speech and reading metamessages in ordinary languages." (Das 1985: 3). These actions explain that women are viewed as vulnerable which also risks the family's honour. For more see Veena Das (1985).

<sup>12</sup>Gold and Raheja (1994) explain that women's songs in general tries to bridge the gap between the couple's sexual union and its positive result like the birth of a child. The *Gali* song discussed above explains about the mother-in-law's sexual act (Gold and Raheja 1994). However, the fact that she has given birth to a son i.e. the groom, equates her sexuality with birth giving capacities.

<sup>13</sup>Narayan (1997) explains *Pakharu* as one among the many genres of songs famous among old women singers in Kangra. It describes the travails of married life. These songs are sung on ritual and celebratory occasions. For more see Narayan (1997).

a space where women are able to express their emotions. The song could be a *gali* or abuse for the audiences which, are viewed as a source of entertainment during the wedding but for the singer it could be a safe platform for venting out her emotions like sexual frustration or irritation. The second point I would like to make with regard to the folk songs is on its use of language. Although the space and time of wedding becomes advantageous for women to sing openly, it seems to me that many times the audiences are unable to understand the song fully. Women's folk songs have lots of metaphors that are not comprehensible to all the people. As discussed before men viewed women's songs as 'jokes' (Henry 1975). This explains that either the men did not understand the songs or they considered it to be something non-serious that could hardly challenge the patriarchal structure in reality. However, a closer analysis of the songs shows us that women use 'codes' to carry hidden messages. Radner and Lanser's (1987) work *The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature* is useful for it explain to us that women's text have esoteric messages that men cannot identify quickly. They adopt coding strategies in front of complex audiences<sup>14</sup>. Coding means the "adoption of a system of signals - words, forms, signifiers of some kind- that protect the creator from the dangerous consequences of directly stating particular messages" (Radner and Lanser 1987: 414). This work is of importance for it will help us to explore why women's songs are taken so lightly by men. Gold and Raheja (1994) also put forth that women use metaphors while singing songs. For instance, in the song above, the craving for the sugarcane stick could be equated with women's "desire to copulate" (Gold and Raheja 1994: 61). Lynch (1990) referring to Toomey's (1990) work shows that there are a variety of ways in which emotions are expressed in Indian society<sup>15</sup>. One such is the objectification of emotions through food. It is observed that "food is closely tied to sociability within religious communities and to devotees' relationship with the deity" (Toomey

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<sup>14</sup>Complex audiences are described by Radner and Lanser (1987) as mixed audiences where some are competent enough to decode the message present in the songs but others are unable to do it.

<sup>15</sup>Here Toomey (1990) is trying to explain the different ways in which emotions are conceptualised in the West and Indian society. In Western culture emotions are considered as an irrational aspect of life and talked about in metaphors. Emotions are considered to be a matter of heart and not of head. They were seen as an idea of chaos and not of a conscious mind. On the other hand, among the Hindus (*Krishna* devotees) emotions are not categorised on the basis of the dichotomy between the head and the heart. Emotions are conceptualised through interactions and transactions of various kinds- the human-divine relationship is conceived in idioms borrowed from family life or through the food symbols or practices. This explains that in different social and cultural contexts emotions are constructed and mediated differently.



1990: 158). He explains this point by referring to the practices of *Krishna*<sup>16</sup> devotees where food metaphors are used to conceptualise emotions. A similar trend is visible in the folk songs of North Indian women where they use metaphors and metonyms grounded in food items to express their emotions (A similar case can be seen in the song discussed above). These act as vehicles to carry hidden messages as they are comprehensible only to women.

## Genres

Bakhtin (1986) in his analysis of language as a living dialogue or “metalinguistics” explains that individuals speak in diverse genres (Bakhtin 1986: 114). What an individual wants to communicate is always shaped by the speech genre he chooses to use. The choice of a particular speech genre is in consideration with the speech plan<sup>17</sup> of the author. Speech plan is determined by factors like the choice of the subject, boundaries and semantic exhaustiveness. Along with this, utterance also plays an important role in the choice of the genre. Utterance has to do with “expressive intonation”<sup>18</sup> (ibid.: 110). Therefore, the choice of the words is in consideration with the meanings which can accommodate the expressive goals of an individual. David B Morris (1996) in his study of suffering is of the opinion that the way suffering is conceptualised is always shaped and constrained by the speech genres of specific discourse communities. He explains that the scholarly journal’s understanding of suffering will place a premium on certain aspects of suffering as compared to Methodist hymns that would employ speech genres that will communicate other aspects of suffering. Through all the above discussions, authors emphasise the aspect of conscious thought on the part of the speakers in choosing a genre to communicate something in particular. Chatterji (2002) through her analysis of Bakhtin’s (1986) work explains

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<sup>16</sup>*Krishna* is considered an incarnation of a supreme Hindu god, *Vishnu*. Vaishnavites are an ardent devotee of *Krishna*

<sup>17</sup>Bakhtin (1986) explains that speech plan or speech will of an individual determine the entire utterance, its lengths and boundaries. According to the speech plan, an individual chooses the generic form in which the utterances will be constructed.

<sup>18</sup>Bakhtin (1986) explains expressive intonation as a constitutive marker of the utterance. It does not exist in the system of language as such but when the individual word is pronounced with expressive intonation, it is no longer a word but a completed utterance expressed by one word.

that he uses the concept of genre to point towards “the active role of speakers as agents in the selection, use and institutionalization of language” (Chatterji 2002: 3). She further argues that genres are “self-conscious institutions mediating between individual intention and collective tradition” (ibid.). Taking these premises, I argue that women consciously voice themselves through specific genres because the chosen genre allows women to communicate specific ideas or realities surrounding their life.

The work of anthropologists such as Margaret Trawick (1986, 1990) and Roma Chatterji (2002, 2009) explain the importance of genre for communicating personal emotions or questioning the values of the society. Trawick (1986) explores the process of pattern-formation or meaning making in the Paraiyar women’s “crying songs” in Tamil Nadu. She explains that the metaphors in the song that depict a sign establish a parallel with other signs to explain and communicate new patterns of meaning of the social world. The parallelism of stanzas in the song also plays an important role to establish the full meaning of the song as individual stanzas are abstract in nature. In a different light, Chatterji’s (2002) work on *Jhumur* songs from Purulia explain that the emotion of the devotee against the absent deity which is present in *Jhumur* songs allows the singer a platform to convey his or her own emotion through the songs (This is discussed in detail below). This scholarship is important for it explains to us that genre’s play an important role in helping individuals communicate or express themselves. Taking this premise I would explore the genre of *Sita Mangal* in depth in this chapter and try to show how it is helpful for North Indian women for expressing themselves.

Firstly, I see a possibility of *Sita Mangal* songs having resonances with the individual’s life because of which women are able to associate themselves with the narratives of these songs. Chatterji’s (2002, 2009) work seems to be useful here as she explains that “some songs have histories that link them to particular events in the biographies of their composers” which allows a particular “poetic form greater scope for musical innovation than other genres” (Chatterji 2002: 2). She elucidates this point by describing an interesting case of Shyamola Shutrathar, who composed in *Jhumur* genre which was ideally sung only by men. A *Jhumur* song as explained by Chatterji (2002) embodies the emotional mood of Chaitanya Bhakti which expresses the

relationship of devotee to a personal deity (*Krishna*) in the mode of separation<sup>19</sup>. Chatterji (2002) explains that Shyamola is able to connect with the emotions of the song that embodies the theme of separation because she herself has witnessed varieties of separation in her own life<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, when the devotee is singing for an absent deity, his or her emotion also becomes a personal expression. This explains that the genre privileges Shyamola to express herself. In a similar vein, I see the genre of *Sita Mangal* that explains about the married life of the divine couple and the problems and hardships that *Sita* had to encounter in her conjugal life having some connection with the life of the women. There could be a possibility that when these women are singing about the married life of the divine couple, the situational similarity and the emotions present in the song could remind them of their own married life and its hardships. Therefore, while singing about the emotions of *Sita* or the experience of *Sita*'s married life the singer could also be expressing her personal experiences and educating the bride about the married life. The similarity in the themes of the genre with the history of the composers or the situation itself allows them to connect with the songs and express themselves. Here Bakhtin's (1986) understanding of 'chronotope' becomes important for our analysis. Chronotope is the time and space that constitutes the narrative. Folch-Serra (1990) explains that Bakhtin (1984, 1986)<sup>21</sup> found chronotopes significant for they were representational in nature. It became "places where the 'knots' of narrative are tied and untied" (Folch-Serra 1990: 263). This explains us that space and time gives a form to the narrative. Taking this premise, if we analyse *Sita Mangal* songs sung during weddings, the songs depict the time of the wedding between *Ram* and *Sita* and the space of complex emotions. I am of the view that this representational form of the narrative due to space and time allows people to connect with it in a better way and organise their experience around it. Thus, North Indian women are able to connect with the song and see a situational

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<sup>19</sup>Chaitanya Bhakti has also been termed as Viraha Bhakti [Hardy(1983) quoted in Chatterji (2002)]. It is explained that the desire of a devotee to merge his identity with the deity is "indefinitely deferred" and "the emotion of separation itself becomes the form of the religious experience" (Chatterji 2002: 4)

<sup>20</sup>Shyamola witnessed many separations in her life. Firstly, throughout her married life her husband neglected her and left her alone for long periods of time. Secondly, her child did not bring her much happiness as he was an ill child and Shyamola had turned destitute in the course of providing for his medical treatment. See Chatterji (2002).

<sup>21</sup>For more see (i)Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

(ii)Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986. *Speech, Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University Of Texas Press.

similarity. They probably could see a similarity in time and space of the narratives in the songs and their social life event.

Secondly, I see the potential of the form of the *Sita Mangal* genre that allows women to communicate their feelings. Margaret Trawick (1988) who has worked on women's songs explains to us through her work the flexibility present in the structure of the women's songs. This allows women to creatively use the spaces of the songs to communicate their ideas. Trawick's (1988) work explains the patterned error found in Tamil women's songs. The songs have mixing up of persons, sexes, voices in dialogue which, is seen by Trawick (1988) as deliberate. This is done so that they could express their views and ideas on tabooed topics like love or caste system. Moreover, Trawick (1990) also explains about the commingling of voices that narrows down the distance between the singer and the protagonist of the song which makes expressing oneself easier. She discusses the song of an untouchable Tamil woman named Cevi who sings a hymn dedicated to goddess Singamma<sup>22</sup>. Trawick (1990) notices that in the song there is an incomplete separation between Cevi (I) and the goddess (You). This leads to confusion in the song as to who is the protagonist, as the goddess' feelings are Cevi's feelings, goddess' honour are her honour<sup>23</sup>. However, this should not be seen as a problem but creativity on the part of the women that the form of the song allows them. Similarly, if we analyse *Sita Mangal* songs there is the use of noun "Sita" and pronoun "I" together that heightens the obscurity of the text.

This is one among the many songs that women sing during the wedding ceremony. It belongs to the genre *Sita Mangal*.

*Sing heartily, the song of Sita, keep her image in your heart.*

*Who got the lake dug out, who set the sail?*

*Which kahar filled the water?*

*Sita, ready for her bath, dearest ready she is, sing her praise.*

*Dasrath got the lake dug out, Lakshman set the sail.*

*Rama's kahars filled the water.*

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<sup>22</sup>The story of Singamma sung by Cevi is considered as a hymn sung for local Kuravar goddess Singammal. Kuruvars are untouchable caste in Tamil Nadu but they are lower than Paraiyars in the caste hierarchy. For more, see Trawick (1990).

<sup>23</sup>For the song and the rich description see Trawick (1990).

*Sita ready to bathe, dearest ready she is, sing her praise.*  
*I raised her, raised her on milk and pure foods.*  
*A lad of another village takes her away on a chariot, sing her praise.*  
*If I had known she would belong to another, become's another's,*  
*I would have consumed the dhatura*  
*And aborted the womb, sing the praise of Sita.* (I. Srivastava 1991<sup>24</sup> quoted in Jassal 2012: 172-3)

Jassal (2012) explains that this song is about a sense of loss and grief at the departure of one's daughter. However, it is important to see here that while the song is about *Sita's* wedding and her departure, the composers while singing the song can use the space to express their emotions too. The use of the "I" in the song explains the confluence of the divine narrative and personal expression. As the singers are communicating about the grief of *Sita's* departure they are also capturing the grief of the mother of the bride who is getting married. It seems to me that it becomes very difficult to determine whether the "I" in the song is referred to *Sita's* mother or the singer herself. Karin Barber (2007) in her analysis of genre explains about "entextualisation" as the process in which fluid discourses are made "available for repetition, recreation or copying" (Barber 2007: 71). For instance, she explains that words like "I", "you", "this", "there" are lifted out of an immediate speech context and placed in a different text which heightens the indeterminacy. In this way, the use of personal pronouns and plural speaking positions establishes a "field of indirection and shifting subject positions" in the text (ibid.: 108). In discussing about the African praise poetry, Barber (2007) explains that a variety of subject positions are taken which allows the text to disclose local conceptions of the person. Similarly, in the *Sita Mangal* song discussed above, the genre allows "entextualisation" or the use of personal pronouns like "I" which discloses the emotions of a mother or the singer herself and at the same time allows for the indeterminacy with regard to the reference of "I".

## **Conclusion**

In my concluding remarks, I would like to go back to the discussion on agency. North Indian women live in a patriarchal society where they are hardly allowed to speak. The veiling practices are not only about covering oneself physically but also a symbol to remain mute or not to be seen in social spaces. This has led women to come up with subversive acts through which they can

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<sup>24</sup>For more see Srivastava, I. 1991. 'Women as Portrayed in Women's Folk Songs of North India.' *Asian Folklore Studies* 50(2): 269-310.

express themselves. Thus, folk songs are spaces through which they voice themselves. In this regard, can we see this social action of singing and commenting on personal and social life as solely the responsibility of women? Can we simply view this as agency on women's part? Agency is a complex concept and needs to be studied with care as Das (2007, 2010) points out. In her study on Sikh riots, she explains that individual actions cannot be seen devoid of other forces or factors. Her discussion on rumours explains that impersonal forces could impact the actions of individual or groups. Taking this point from Das, I have argued in this chapter that social action of women like expressing oneself and commenting on society through folk songs is a result of multiple forces or factors. I explain that space, time, audience and genres are factors that help women to carry out their social action. Therefore, I am of the view that a situation could be a result of individual or group agency or action but not devoid of external factors that help them in varied ways.

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