

UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION AND CONDITION OF WOMEN THROUGH THE FOLK SONGS OF GARHWAL

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Folklore implies knowledge of folks. This knowledge is embedded in their folk narratives like legends, myths, stories, ballads, epics, songs, and in folk performances, food, belief system, and arts and crafts. As these folk elements are an integral part of their lives, it would not be wrong to replace folklore with the term 'folklife'. Folklife does not only mean the study of the life of folks but also the factors which shape this very life. Therefore, how do these folkloric elements matter to the lives of folks become significant primarily for that group of scholars and intellectuals (or to say the 'civilised' people) who question the very presence and study of folklore in the twenty-first century. What is, however, remarkable to be noted here is that it is not the scientific validity or invalidity that folks ground their folklore on. It is the belief system which provides strength to the existence of folklore.

The Garhwali folk songs in this paper are a case in point. The songs in this paper have been taken from a book by Govind Chatak who collected the folksongs from the numerous villages of different districts of Garhwal. The songs revolve around the migration of men leaving their families back in the villages. Where the cursory reading of the songs only conveys the migration process, the minute reading lays out the causes of migration and its overall impact primarily on women. Thus, besides being a part of the culture, these songs tell a great deal of the lives of folks and their contemporary situation. Though collected in the mid-twentieth century, they are still relevant to investigate the historical event of migration in the hills of Garhwal. Being

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the part of folk's life, these songs are enriched with not only the local language i.e., Garhwali but also the local culture (food, dress, ornaments, festival etc.), and the scenic beauty of nature including its flora and fauna. These songs consist of all these folkloric elements giving them their meanings.

In Garhwal the men would migrate either to cities within the state or would move to the plains. This migration would neither be for education nor for better livelihood but in order to pay off the debts. The song below, in the form of a conversation between a husband and wife, explains the cause of migration explicitly:

O dear! Stay happily, I am leaving for Mussoorie.
This saukar has made me to leave for videsh.
O my suva, I will sell my nathuli, please don't go away!
Nathuli will not suffice the debts.
We just united, and now this separation!
Children of poor families are destined to be in exile
With flowers I am going, and will come back with fog.
Write about your well-being in letters.
Keep my love always in your heart,
Do not betray on me.
My worried suva fled to pardesh,
And the cage is emptied.
Suva is away in the jungle, maynah remained staring. (Song 1, p. 172).

The song is in the form of a farewell conversation between a husband and a wife. The husband is set for Mussoorie, a city in Uttarakhand. It is clear from the song that the couple has recently married but the need to leave for Mussoorie is separating them. When it comes to see the cause of this separation, we find that a debt must be paid off to a saukar ("moneylender"). Interestingly, the wife offers her nathuli ("a big round nose-ring") to pay off the debts. But the amount of debt is too high to be paid off selling a nose-ring. Here, it is important to note that in the Garhwali culture, the nose-ring is equivalent to the honour of the house. Thus, selling it to pay off the money cannot be accepted even if it suffices the need. Moreover, the wife addresses

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her husband in local language as suva 'parrot' and herself as a 'mynah'. Where the parrot has fled to the city, the 'mynah' is alone in the 'cage' or house. Further, the husband consoles the wife promising to come back with 'fog'. The expression going with flowers and coming with fog has cultural manifestations. It suggests that the husband is leaving during the month of spring (when flowers bloom) and will come back when it is the rainy season. In the hills, the rainy season brings fog with itself. Likewise, nathuli and suva are part of culture which find unconscious expressions in the song.

Now the question arises what the folks borrow the money for. Also, the Garhwali folks (with the entire population of Uttarakhand) would be dependent on agriculture and forest products, so why was there a need to borrow that too from a saukar in the first place. If we look at the historical documents, it would be clear that with the advent of British rule in the vast part of Uttarakhand the lives of the folks changed drastically. Keeping aside the 'developments' done by the Britishers, the forest laws imposed on the folks were life-threatening. Therefore, people looked outside for survival. It is rightly said by Chatak that the presence of Britishers broke the familial setup, and the sole reliance on the agricultural land also started disappearing. As a result, the samanti (feudal) norms appeared more clearly in the form of saukars. This is more obvious from the following verses:

Since this rail has started,
My unkind swami doesn't send any letter.
No idea where he turned to with ships.
He doesn't come home.
All flowers are bloomed,
And he has forgotten me.
O my father, I was made for the kings.
I did not get a partner of my age.
The parat my father gave me,
Was taken by saukar last night.
My swami left for videsh and

Saukar fixed his seat in the balcony.
O swami, come home for a night and
Pacify the saukar.
I will sell my nathuli,
And will bring my husband back (Song-2, p.201).

The reference to rail and ship directly hints at the development under progress with the coming of British rule. The rail refers to the networks of railways and ship suggests recruitment in the army (navy). Thus, the husband left his house to join the navy only to pay off debts. The mentioned song underlines the fact that letters would be the only way to contact, and that too the women does not receive. In this song, a slight hint of patriarchal social life has also been highlighted. The term swami used in this song for the husband is recurrent in Garhwali folksongs. The woman-singer has also hinted at the parat (“a high hipped platter”) given by her parents as a dowry on her marriage. This very parat is now taken by the saukar in lieu of the money. The husband is gone leaving all the burden on the wife. As soon as her husband left for pardesh, the saukar set his foot inside their house. His presence is threatening to the wife and thus, she is pleading her husband to come at least for a night to make the saukar understand not to trouble her.

In the “Introductory Words” to the mentioned text, Chatak says that with the advent of Britishers, Garhwali folks turned towards towns and cities leaving their fields behind. British cantonments were set up near Garhwal. With education, professions like kuligiri (job of a porter) and recruitment in the army also started. For the first time, the Garhwali man looked outside its territory and saw the miracles and the lifestyle of Britishers. This made him compare his living with Britishers which filled him with complexity. Undoubtedly, he did get recruited in the army but his contempt for it finds its space in lok-geet. It did lead people to earn both ends but at the cost of breaking familial ties and separating people from Garhwal. The following song, a dialogue between husband and wife, explains this situation more gravely:

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O Ganeshi, leave my coat! I must be at war now.
O my swami, I will go there you stay back.
Ganeshi, you are expecting a child.
If it is a son, teach him in English school
If it is a girl, kanyadan her
No idea what fate has in store for us, my eye is twitching. (Song-3, p. 193).

According to the introduction to this song by Govind Chatak, this war is the War of Jhansi. The wife, Ganeshi, aware of the scenes of the battlefield, is convincing her husband not to leave for war. Holding his coat, she asked him to stay back and showed her will to go in his place. Here, the situation becomes a bit emotional. Both, wife and husband, are well-aware of the untoward happenings at war. The wife does not want the husband to go, and the poor husband is not even sure of the future. He can only assume the birth of his child as he is not sure whether he would be able to see the face of the baby ever or not. There is uncertainty to come alive from the war. Further, as hinted above, the husband wants an 'English' school for his son. It means the British have already established English schools here and there. On the other hand, if the child happens to be a girl she would be married off (kanyadan) only. In all, this farewell segment is disheartening. The last line aggravates the situation more. The twitching of (wife's) eye becomes an ill-omen. Like her husband, she is also unsure of the aftermath of the war. Most probably, the outcomes would be unfavourable. What is interesting to look at is the war he is set for. The War of Jhansi, as history suggests, was against the British. It follows that Garhwali men recruited in the army were serving the British army against their own countrymen.

The mental and emotional state of a woman living on her own without being in contact with her husband is equally important to look at. The following song exemplifies her condition well:

He went to pardesh making the house brazen.
You could not protect my soft heart.

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My suva, missing you every day kills me!
My childlike heart sank like embers.
My heart is deadened, and body is withered.
My lips are parched.
Had I known writing, I would have written you
Had I been a bird, I would have come to you
I have failed to console my heart.
The sky is filled with millions of stars but is lightened by the Moon
only
Many men are here to woo, but my heart is with you only.
O my suva, I am your jogin and you are my devotee. (Song-4, p. 176).

The 'childlike' and 'soft' (baalo) heart hint at the common practice once prevalent in Garhwal where the little teenage girls would be married off. Thus, the couple is, as in the first song, newly married, and the husband has left. The only person whom she relied on has left, and now she is facing the challenges of the life alone. The imagery given in the second stanza is explicit of her emotional state. Her heart is losing hope like smouldering embers. Her 'withered' heart and 'parched' lips are suggestive of her pain of separation from the husband. She is helpless as she cannot even write a letter to him nor can she visit him. She wishes herself to be a bird so that she could fly off to her husband.

There is also an implicit suggestion of the physical need of a woman. The last stanza underlines the fact that being a woman without her husband she is approached by men. But she is tied to her husband only. The last line also hints at the spiritual bond she has created with her husband. She calls herself jogin ("female ascetic") underlining the fact she has devoted herself completely to the husband irrespective of his visits to see her. She assumes her husband is her devotee as well. This assumption is probably to console herself to serve a remote marriage. In reality, she is worried about her husband's love for her. The second stanza of the first song reflects the true concern of a wife who has left for pardesh. In this song, she asks her husband not to forget her and her love. Her worry that the husband might have an

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affair in the city is what reflects here. The last line of the fourth song is a way to cover that concern which is present in the first song.

The agony of a single but married woman is touched upon again in another song where she sings:

O peacock, don't coo in the Bhaadu's dark nights.
The shepherds are playing flute!
The bells of cattle are clinging!
My swami, why have you turned stone hearted?
My dhoti is all wet with tears. (Song-5, p.192).

It is a rainy month of the Bhaadu (mid-August to mid-September). The cooing of peacocks, melody of the flutes, and the clanking sound of cattle's bells are making the season lively, but the forlorn wife is saddened. Her sari is wet with her tears. Thus, this song primarily tells of her mental condition. What is disheartening is the unresponsive behaviour of the husband. The fourth line suggests that the wife has not heard from him since long. He has neither visited her nor communicated through letters. This has been articulated well in song number one, two and four also. In song two, the wife is open enough to say that her swami is nirdayi ('unkind'). He does not come home and has forgotten her.

Happening month has arrived
The hills are laden with colourful flowers
Ghughuti and kaafu are cooing
But my lord is settled in pardesh
He has forgotten us in the swing of a coat-pant. (Song-6, p. 207).

In the lively month of spring when flowers are blooming, and ghughuti (dove of hills) and kafu (a bird found in Garhwal) are singing, the wife is waiting for husband's arrival. She is convinced that the husband is 'settled' in pardesh. Here, the uniform coat-pant suggests that she is aware of the job he is doing there. He is indulged in the city-life forgetting his family back in the village. Thus, it confirms

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that such cases were also there when men did not return to their roots and families. And this is why there is a constant fear on women's part of their husbands' leaving for cities.

With the husband's departure, the burden of family is totally upon the wife. The song discusses it well:

My swami went pardesh
It has been two years since you left.
Neither you nor your letter came.
Without you, O swami, perils are multiple.
Saukar has stopped our sleeping and eating
Neither clothes nor a morsel I have.
I gave all grain to saukar and am eating koda myself.
The roof is broken, who would thatch it?
The boundary of fields is also broken.
There is no cattle and no dung.
My youth went away in vain.
Now the body is as black as coal.
Come soon to water this withered plant. (Song-7, p. 204).

It has been two years since the husband left and, in his absence, it is the wife who has borne the brunt of debts. At the back of the husband, it is the wife who has to face the ill-treatment of saukar. The situation is very pathetic. Where in the above song we find the wife willing to sell their nose-rings to pay off debts, and few have given their vessels like parat as well, here the moneylender has forced her to hand over the agricultural produce as well. She, with her family, is forced to feed on koda (a local flour also known as finger millet). The saukar is threatening as she cannot even have a sound sleep. The roof of the house is also broken but could not be renovated as there is no one to support. There is also a hint that she has also sold her cattle. Therefore, no manure to enrich the fields with. What is questionable here is whether the migrated husband is earning anything or not. There can be two possibilities. Either the debt is too much to be paid off or the husband is still unable

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to find a secured and stable job outside as well. The possibility of ‘forgetting’ the wife can also be not denied here as other songs suggest this fact again and again.

And another song aggravates the pain further:
Write to me when you will come!
Our kids are dying in this famine.
The son studying in seventh grade died last night.
O husband, the buffalo I bought also fell to death.
For the sake of our kids, I sold my nathuli!
Saukar arrives at any moment of the day. (Song-8, p. 206).

In the earlier song wheat is given to the saukar, so the famine has afflicted the house. The dearth of food has engulfed their son. The buffalo has also died. Thus, the songs are simple in the sense that they are conveying the issues of everyday a woman is going through. The nathuli which is saved so far in other songs has been sold here to satiate the hunger of the kids.

Despite the mental, emotional, and physical hardships, the wife is also optimistic that the husband would come back. She dreams of going to the city with him when he comes this time. What all she dreams of is:

O dear! I will also go with you when you come this time.
We will live together happily!
We will walk hand in hand.
We will enjoy in hotels, and sweets. (Song-9, p.135).

Further, she imagines her husband replying to her, “I will wear a shirt/ And you will flaunt in a sari.” This imagination of her is the same as what the wife assumes in the fourth song of being jogin and the husband as her devotee.

The above- mentioned songs comprise cultural elements. The use of the word suva (“parrot”) for husband as a term of endearment is recurrent. The use of koyla (“coal”) and angare (“embers”) as metaphors to express women’s physical condition is inspired by day-to-day lives only. The frequent mention of happening seasons like

spring and rainy is in sharp contrast to the saddening condition of women. Thus, though the imagery is used inadvertently to convey the message only, it also shows folks' creativity in terms of expressions. The metaphors of stars and Moon suggesting the wooers and the beloved respectively serve the same purpose. Thus, the songs do not lose any skills in terms of creativity. They cannot be overlooked only because of being created in the rural background. The term swami (lord) is again a part of culture. Several women can still be found using the word malik for their husbands. These terms have connotations not only of patriarchy but of the fact as well that women had no option except being dependent on their husbands. Most important thing in terms of local understanding is the meaning of videsh and pardesh. For folks, the very place outside their own villages or known territories will become foreign. No matter whether it is a city like Mussoorie (within the territory of Uttarakhand) or Jhansi (outside Uttarakhand), both will be treated as foreign places. In the prefatory remarks to the mentioned text by Chatak, Dr. RN Saxena says that the harsh life of hills is lightened finding its place in the folk songs. As the songs come directly from the hearts of folks and encompass the emotions of folks, they are a way to release their tensions. (p. 9). More than the release of the tension, the songs portray the reality of a time. The analysis of the above-mentioned songs traces the reasons and effects of migration. These songs have noted the cause which altered the lives of folks. They are no more dependent on the fields. English schools are there to study. For outsiders and the present generation, these songs would merely serve as a past, but for folks this past was a living reality. From this reality comes out the songs full of creativity. Hardly any historical document would have noted the migration of Garhwal hills with these minute details. And hardly did any historical text have ever noted down the agony and suffering of a single married women due to migration. Thus, they are significant to peep into the lives of the folks.

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