

**DIALOGUE OF CHHATTISGARH:
BHARTHARI-A FOLK NARRATIVE POEM**

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Abstract

Art forms are one of the best paradigms of cultural representation. Originating in the socio-cultural milieu of the artist it is imbued in the richness of its ethos. Folk art forms are more genuine in this representation of society and culture as they are more close to the native roots and are largely untouched by alien influences.

Chhattisgarh is a state that has a rich tribal cultural heritage. Tribal art forms in the form of paintings, mural art, songs, folk theatre, dance, sculpture, etc portray the native ethos and culture of Chhattisgarh in all their vividness and exuberant beauty. Bharthari is one such art form that echoes with the spirit and soul of the region. Life, culture, society, faith and devotion of the people are vocalized through these beautiful musical renditions that reveal the local customs, tradition and beliefs.

Bharthari as a cultural paradigm not only preserves the heritage of Chhattisgarh but also is an important cultural signifier that represents the region's ethos and identity.

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Art is a form of expression that reflects the socio-cultural nuances of the people and times through various mediums. Representing the contemporary life and culture, art also provides an alternative voice to the people positioned in the periphery. Folk arts in particular are closely linked to the native roots of the people and represent their life, thoughts and custom vividly. Rich and exuberant, folk arts are the socio-cultural signifiers of the people and community. In fact works of art "like words, are literally pregnant with meaning" (Dewey, 1934: 123); that renders the joys, sorrows, hopes, frustrations, failures, triumphs, struggle and laments audible and expressible.

Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist stressed that:

Art is the social within . . . Art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into

the circle of social life. It would be more correct to say that emotion becomes personal when every one of us experiences a work of art; it becomes personal without ceasing to be social. (Vygotsky, 1971: 249)

Chhattisgarh is a state rich in folk art and cultural heritage that represents the ethos of the region in particular and the nation as a whole. Folk art can be defined as something that “often implies rural life, community, simplicity, tradition, and authenticity, provides a powerful image on which to build community” (Fine, 2004: 29). In other words folk art can be termed as a form of collective self expression of a community, race or tribe.

Visual art forms such as Gond paintings, bell metal statues and artefacts, Dokra art; performing arts like Pandvani, Bharthari, Sua, Karma, Panthi, etc are all important artistic representations that reveal the customs, tradition and ethos of the Chhattisgarhi people and their culture. Attuned closely to nature the folk art and culture of the region depict the changing seasons and occasions in the life of the people. For every occasion of life there are specific folk songs that reveal their varying hues and shades in many different tunes and rhythms; sometimes revelling in joy and sometimes lamenting in sorrow.

Folk songs are intrinsically songs of the people as they go about their life working, celebrating a marriage, a birth, a festival or mourning the loss of a loved one. Drawing a true picture of contemporary life and society, folk songs are also a medium of instruction that mentors the young generation in the traditions, customs and morals of the community.

Folk songs, literature and lore belong to the oral tradition and are usually handed down to generations through the word of mouth. Like most myths and legends these folklores expresses the life, customs, traditions and ethos of the people. The folklores in the words of D. P. Patnaik, expresses the life values and offers a shared understanding of life apart from preserving the past. Disseminated and preserved through the oral tradition, they link the present to the shared collective consciousness and knowledge of the past through tales, songs, myths and proverbs.

Orality is intertwined in the human society and it reflects the people’s way of living, food habits, mannerisms, ethics, attitudes to name a few. It is an expression of various multi-faceted feelings and emotions about any simple or complex issue and brings meaning to life. It is a colourful expression with multiple versions and is not static but involves change. (Nonglait, 2013)

The oral tradition of these folklore and literature travel far and wide, and are subject to variations owing to the changing socio-cultural milieu and times.

A distinctive aspect of Indian folk art, specifically songs, dances and stories is that they transcend regional borders and are essentially national in character and spirit. Bhartari and Dhola-Maru are some of the songs, which sources its stories from other regions and are yet as much an integral part of Chhattisgarh as of the region from where they are originally sourced. Taking on a regional colour they sometimes deviate from the original story and include regional nuances of customs, traditions and characters. Bhartari is one such art form that is rooted in the culture and society of the region. The story of King Bhartari along with that of his nephew, Gopi Chand is sung in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Punjab and Haryana. A legendary figure, his story is appropriated to complement the regional socio-cultural milieu of Chhattisgarh.

Historically Bhartari was the King of Ujjain who belonging to the 1st century BC, and the brother of the legendary ruler of Ujjain, King Vikramaditya. Abdicating his kingship in the favour was his brother. King Bhartari chose the path of renunciation and spiritualism under the tutelage of saint Gorakhnath. Various stories related to the renunciation of King Bhartari are prevalent in various regions of India. The killing of the deer, the condition put forth by Saint Gorakhnath, his marriage with Samdai, his renunciation, begging of alms from his wife is some of the stories prevalent in Chhattisgarh. The story of King Bhartari is similar irrespective of the region where they are widespread. However in every region where the folk song form is found, regional variations make it distinct and different from the others. The story of Bhartari mostly sung in Chhattisgarh is about the childless royal couple - King Bhartari and Queen Pingla.

The story of King Bhartari is invariably linked with the Nath sampraday. King Bhartari's spiritual mentor, Guru Gorakhnath is one of the most prominent Gurus in the lineage Gurus belonging to the Nath sampraday.

The Naths, living widely throughout the northern portions of India, are seen by anthropologists as representing both a social group or caste and a spiritual lineage or sampraday. Because the Naths are found everywhere in the north, their oral narratives and legends are sung and discussed from Punjab and Rajasthan in the west to Bengal and Orissa in the east. Although a semi-codified system of esoteric beliefs heavily steeped in tantric and yogic practices relating to austerity and perfection of the body, connect the disparate Nath communities of North India in theory and ritual, a great deal of variation exists in local contexts.

The central theme in the narrative of King Bhartari is the conflict between the life of the householder and that of the renunciant. This theme is reflected in social reality as well as in song. That is, although the textual ideal of the Nath practitioner as a celibate ascetic still remains a vital part of the tradition, many Nath live normal married lives. Though this contradiction in their way of life confused many westerners, it is however not so alien to the Indian thought and philosophy. Gold points out “that there are many kinds of renouncers, many degrees of asceticism, and many transitions, both gross and subtle, between those degrees.” (47). However the tension between the polar extremes exist in everyday life and is reflected in the life of King Bhartari also who chooses the path of asceticism while his queen urges him to live the life of a householder.

The songs of King Bhartari, thus expresses the conflict between materialistic life and the spiritual life travelled far and wide across India: from the north to the west and from the east to central India.

In his book, Dr. R. N. Dhurve has done an extensive study of the folk art form of Bhartari prevalent in Chhattisgarh. According to him the genre is distinguished by various distinctive characteristics that clearly portray and represent the socio-cultural milieu of the region; its way of life, customs and rituals.

In Chhattisgarh various rituals are followed celebrating the various milestones in life; right from birth. The birth of the son in the tenth month was considered auspicious traditionally. King Bhartari was also born in the tenth month.

Eke mahina wo, dusraiya na
Lage panch ke chahe, mor das eke chaav
Godi m balak khelat ye o
Khelat ye o, bhai jai hari

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 128)

‘Chatti’ on the sixth day or ‘Barhi’ on the twelfth day are rituals that are celebrated after the birth of a child. Songs related to this ritual can be evidenced in the folk song, Bhartari, wherein the ritual of washing the mother’s head with ‘mitti’ or soil on the twelfth day is described.

Chatti ke din nikrgey
Ye de barhi ke aaj
Shyamdei didi
Mudi-misey naa

Beithe palang maa
Bhartari laa
Leika dekhawat hey,
Dekhawat hey, bhaai jai hari.

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 129)

A similar custom of the region is associated with the marriage which begins with the responsibility being placed squarely on the shoulders of the barber, 'naai'.

Aeise fulwa sochike
Soon le maharaj
Ka to naau la balaawat hey
Keina khoje bar na
Likh paati bhejey
Khoj ke aava giyaa.

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 131)

Child marriage was prevalent earlier in Chhattisgarh, and the bride was sent to her in-laws home only after she attained maturity, which is known as 'Gavna'. There is a description of this Chhattisgarhi tradition in Bhartari.

Ghar m laanat he na
Gavna l karay
Mor rangmahal ma giya
Hira-sanhi didi
Duno dikhat hai n

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 131-2)

A distinguishing feature of Chhattisgarhi culture and society is its belief in superstitions, magic and sorcery. This salient feature of the region finds an expression in the story of King Bhartari that is sung in Chhattisgarh. There is mention of Kumari Naina, the girl from Kaamrup who holds King Bhartari captive under a magic spell she casts with the help of a 'sugga' (parrot).

Kaamrup kumar naina rani
Nain ka maaray
Ka to maaray he ram
Sua ke jadu l maarat he

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 140)

Samdai and Rupdai go the forests of Kaamrup and gradually destroy the magic of Naina rani, parrot, cat, deer and so on.

Naina ke baan l toray
Suva maarat he n
Suva ke jadu l nei chalan dey
Bilaai maarat he na
Bilaai ke jadu l torat he
Mirga-jadu ye ram
Haathi-ghoda kar jadu ye
Kukur-bichchi ke re
Jadu l torat he ram
Dekh to tetka ao mechka ke
Machchar-maachi ke n
Jammo jadu l beiri torat he
Samdai ao rupdai ye o,
Jaun l dekhat he bhartari, rama ye de ji.

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 141)

Though the story sung in Chhattisgarh is about a King and his journey on the path of asceticism and renunciation, yet the way the characters and situations are described makes it a true voice of the common man and woman, thereby representing the thoughts, ideas and perspectives of the common people. Dr. Dhurve says that the one characteristic that distinguishes the folklore of Bhartari is its affinity to the life and ethos of the people of the region; wherein the queen is not a queen but a common village woman whose pain and suffering find an expression in the pain and suffering of the queen.

Ghoda rowaya ghod saar m
Ghodsar m o
Haathi rowaya haathi saar m
Mor rani ye o, mahlo m rowaya
Mor raja rowaya darbare o,
Darbare o, bhai ye de ji

(As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 132)

Pain and suffering is the same for man and animals, and this is what the folklore represents. Though the place of each is different, yet in their pain and suffering of being

childless they are akin to each other. The intensity of a woman's pain on being childless is poignantly portrayed in Bhartari.

Another unique feature of the Chhattisgarhi ethos is the presence of faith, beliefs and superstitions. Dr. Dhurve quotes several stanzas of verses, highlighting the various aspects and characteristics of the genre, including the presence of the various forms of 'Rasa' types like shaant, shringaar, karunaa and raaudra. Words like 'Satnaam' that is closely associated with the followers of Guru Ghasidas can be found in Bhartari – "Taihar le le beti, satnam le o" (As quoted in *Bhartari-Lokgaatha ki Parampara* by Dr. R. Dhurve, 2010: 186).

The culture of Chhattisgarh is richly imbued with religious philosophy; the folk art form of Bhartari also resonates with this flavour that lays importance on the development of the soul. Spiritual leanings are emphasized in the Hindu way of life. In Bhartari, the King's renunciation of worldly luxuries and power for the sake of spiritual enlightenment stresses this very important characteristic of our society and ethos. When King Bhartari realizes the truth of existence and decides to walk on the path shown by his Guru, he sees the manifestation of the divine mother even in his wife. The folklore not only conveys the eternal truth of life always integral to the Indian ethos but also reiterates it in today's time when everyone is obsessed with materialistic achievements and possessions.

A tale originating in the choice of an individual; a King's choice to let go of all materialistic and emotional attachments in favour of a life of spiritual enlightenment and renunciation reveals the essential socio-cultural ethos of the region that is enfolded within the community and family; social customs and rituals. Content in their simple life, the people of the region are religious in their approach and still cherish a close affinity and link with nature. The issues like childlessness, belief in black magic and superstitions, rebirth and reincarnation; 'lokaachar' or community's customs, mannerisms, behaviour and celebrations form an integral part of Bhartari. In fact it can be said that Bhartari is more than a musical rendition of the life and story of a legendary figure: it is a saga of exploration of the regional identity and way of life.

Folk literature in Chhattisgarh has been preserved through generations in the form of oral tradition. It is a simple representation of the life of people and a reflection of their traditions. In the tradition of folk literature of Chhattisgarh can be found the 'lok nayak' (hero) and local characters. Whatever form of folk literature or lore it might be, it takes on the regional characteristics wherever it goes. Many of the folk lores and literature prevalent in Chhattisgarh have originated in other regions. Dhola-Maru or Chandaini for instance are from Rajasthan, Lorikayan from Uttar Pradesh, etc. The story of Bhartari is also from Ujjain

in Madhya Pradesh. It is thus said that, “Folklores and legends walk without feet and fly without wings and gets imbued in the local colour of the specific region where it goes.” (Dhurve, 2010: 181).

The folklore of Bhartari on which the specific style of singing is based is one of the prominent folk art forms of Chhattisgarh. Rendered in the local language of the region, Bhartari has stood the test of time due to its assimilation in the local ethos and culture. It is richly imbued in the native way of life, philosophy, imagination, faith and values. Another dimension of folk literature is the presence of customs and behaviour of the people that is clearly evidenced in the portrayal of local customs, rituals, traditions and faith of Chhattisgarh in Bhartari. Though originating in the Nath sampradaya, the art form has undergone a transformation in the region owing to the influence of Satnam, a belief and philosophy propounded by Guru Ghasidas.

Bhartari is still sung in Chhattisgarh but instead of rendering the complete character of King Bhartari, it is performed incompletely. Often a single episode of the story is repeated by the singers. However the art form is a beautiful amalgamation of ancient history and imagination, and a genuine representation of the region, its society and its culture.

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