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Hierarchical Inversion in Magadh: Analysing Select *Gāri-Gīt* through Bakhtin's Carnivalesque in Dr Ram Prasad Singh's *Magahī Lokgīt ke Bṛhad Saṅgrah*

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Abstract

North Indian society is fundamentally patriarchal and hierarchical in nature, subjecting women to a twofold suppression and alienation rooted in both caste and gender. Within this rigid societal structure, Magahi folk tradition offers a rejuvenating space for marginalised voices to create alternative identities and subvert the existing hierarchy. In the Magadh region of Bihar, this subversive and disruptive power is most vividly articulated through *gari/gali-geet* performed by women during various rituals (*Jewnar, Chheka, Tilak, Barati,* etc.) in marriage ceremonies. While the traditional wedding framework typically reinforces male dominance and bride's subordination, the performance of these folk songs temporarily challenges these established power dynamics. By conducting a textual analysis of Dr Ram Prasad Singh's *Magahī Lokgīt ke Bṛhad Saṅgrah* (1999) as the primary text, this paper studies the inherent power dynamics rooted within select *gari-geet*. The study applies Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque to explore how these songs sustain a hierarchical rupture, facilitating the temporary subversion and inner transformation of marginalised social identities. This research paper primarily aims to address a critical scholarly gap by bridging the marginalised Magahi oral tradition with mainstream literary discourse. Through the application of a modern theoretical framework, it demonstrates that these folk practices function as highly dynamic and subversive means of resistance, challenging the prevailing misconception of regional folk culture as a fixed, backward, and rigid tradition.

Keywords: *Gāri-gīt,* Carnivalesque, Magahi folk songs, Subversion, Gender and Caste, Rituals, *Vivah-gīt*

Introduction

In the Magahi-speaking society of northern India, marital alliances reproduce rigid hierarchies, subordinating the bride's kin to the exalted *barātis* (groom's party). Women bear a twofold marginalisation, policed by codes of female modesty (*saram*) and caste boundaries. Yet, this silence is contested. As Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold argue in *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (1994), rural North

Indian women use expressive traditions to "subtly mock many conventions concerning kinship, gender, sexuality, and 'modesty' (saram)" (xxiv), asserting agency directly from the domestic sphere.

Understanding Magahi folk tradition requires moving past colonial-era linguistic umbrellas. Dr Vishwanath Prasad notes in the preface to his *Magahī Saṁskāra Gīt* (1962) that George Grierson's administrative label "*Behari*" ignores its organic and distinct nature (2). Magahi possesses its own history, and the subversive humour of *gārī-gīt* (ritual insult songs) draws its power directly from Magadh's specific local idiom and kinship ties.

Linguistically, *gārī-gīt* employs visceral, sexually explicit vocabulary typically categorised as vulgar. However, Dr Ram Prasad Singh observes that within the ritual context, these verses are culturally savoured. He notes that even when bordering on the obscene, "'phīke para nīke lage jyo vivāha meṁ gārī' ko loga baṛe cāva se sunate haiṁ aura svāda lekara khāne meṁ derī karate haiṁ" (73). Male guests do not take offence; instead, they linger, relishing the song as indispensable festive seasoning.

Crucially, this ritual rupture destabilises both gender subordination and caste insularity. Singh's collection demonstrates that *gārī-gīt* interrogates patriarchal supremacy, targeting male kin and sacred authorities like the Brahmin priest while integrating marginalised service castes—such as the *nāun* (barber woman), *kumhrain* (potter's wife), *telin* (oil-presser), *camār* (drummer), and others—into the ceremonial space through reciprocal teasing. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's framework of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism, this paper examines select verses to show how *gārī-gīt* suspends rigid hierarchies, transforming it into rhetorical sovereignty within an egalitarian ritual space.

Textual Corpus & Methodology

The primary text for this study is drawn from Dr Ram Prasad Singh's folk anthology *Magahī Lokgīt ke Bṛhad Saṅgrah* (1999), focusing primarily on uncensored *gārī-gīt* and *jevanār* (banquet) songs within the *Vivāh Gīt* section. Singh's collection preserves the oral vernacular without the sanitising censorship typical of elite print culture. The methodology uses textual and thematic close-reading of these Magahi songs alongside English translations (by the author), mapping vernacular motifs, hyperbole, and grotesque imagery onto Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. It will analyse the songs as performative "speech acts" (J.L. Austin's conceptualisation), demonstrating how the folk rituals provide a space where women sing *gārī-gīt* to temporarily dismantle caste and gender hierarchies.

Dissolving the Sacred and the Profane

Within the carnivalesque space of the *jevanār* (banquet), no hierarchical authority is immune to rhetorical degradation—not even the divine. The most revered figures of Hindu theology (Ram and Lakshman) are dragged into the dirt of grotesque realism, their mothers and sisters labelled as prostitutes (*chhinār*). Yet, the deities do not unleash divine wrath; ironically, they smile (*muskāye*) and feel blessed:

Bajkā, bhabhrā, dilorī, danorī, sabhī bhānti sajāyo jī,
Sab sakhi mil-jul gārī gāvat, Rām-Lakhan muskāy jī. [...]
Tohar maīyā baṛī chhināro, rīkhī-muni se janamal jī.
Bahinī tor janamo ke chhāṭal sādhu sang jangal bharme jī...
Suni-suni Rām Lakhan muskāye, dhan-dhan bhāg hamārī jī... (Singh 176)

Translation: All kinds of delicacies—bajka, bhabhra, and dilori (local cuisine of Magadh)—are served; all the women sing *gārī* together, and Ram and Lakhan smile. [...] Your mother is a great whore; she birthed you with sages. Your sister is a known tramp, roaming the jungle with ascetics... Hearing this, Ram and Lakhan smile, feeling deeply blessed...

This situational irony acts as a rhetorical strategy to validate the ritual space: if the gods themselves accept this extreme verbal abuse with grace, the mortal men are structurally obligated to sit quietly and endure their own public insult.

Deflating Patriarchal Pretence and Staunch Masculinity

The groom and his father (*samdhī*) arrive at the bride's village carrying patriarchal entitlements. The singing women weaponise hyperbole and animalistic imagery to shatter their honour:

"Hāthī-hāthī sorakayle gadaho na labalẽ re, dūr maīyā-chodnā damād banake alayalẽ re." (Singh 199)

Translation: You bragged of bringing elephants, yet failed to bring even an ass; get out, you motherfucker, you dare come as our *damād* (son-in-law).

The physical body of the patriarch is similarly caricatured, with the women labelling the *samdhī* a *bhaḍuvā* (pimp) possessing a monkey's face: "*Samdhī bhaḍuvā ke muhavā kaisan lokelā, jaisan banarā ke muhavā oisan lokelā*" (Singh 178).

The women singers mock the groom's staunch masculinity through a highly symbolic vernacular motif regarding his sexual prowess:

"...likhate-likhate jhar-gelain siyāhī ge māī ki Rām dulārī ge māī.

Taīyo na bharalaī korā kagajavā ge māī ki Rām dulārī ge māī." (Singh 202-203)

Translation: Writing and writing, ink ran dry, O Mai, Ramdulari, O Mai.

Yet, the page remains dissatisfied, O Mai, Ramdulari, O Mai.

The song shows women's unapologetic critique of marital sexuality and masculine inadequacy; a core confessional style as seen in poets like Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath, the women use the pen-and-paper metaphor as a rhetorical device to taunt the groom for his inability to satisfy the bride's physical needs. While women are conventionally expected to remain shy under patriarchal dominion, this linguistic space provides a sanctioned arena for female verbal mastery, allowing them to tame traditional intimidators through mocking laughter and bold phrasing.

Transgressing Caste Boundaries and Alienation

In everyday village life, strict spatial and ritual alienation separates upper castes from service and marginalised communities. However, the carnivalesque nature of the wedding songs suspends untouchability and caste deference. At the apex of this hierarchy sits the Brahmin priest (*pandit ji*). In *gārī-gīt*, he is stripped of his sanctity:

"Lākh rupaiyā ke dulahā brāhman bhaḍḍuvā ṭhag le le." (Singh 53)

Translation: A lakh rupees groom cheated the pimp Brahmin.

By labelling the Brahmin a *bhaḍḍuvā* (a Magahi slang), the women strip the marital transaction of its religious authority. Simultaneously, marginalised castes are drawn directly into the lyrical core of the ceremony. During the *māṭikoṛā* (mud-digging) ritual, the drum-beating *chamar* (leatherworker) and the *nauwa* (barber) are explicitly sung into the narrative:

"Māṭī koḍe gel chhinaro ohe maṭakhān he, camarā dhelak ḍholavā bajāy he.

Māṭī koḍe gel chhinaro ohe maṭakhān he, nauvā dhelak nokhar dekhāy he." (Singh 207)

Translation:

Chhinaro (characterless women) went to dig soil in the pit; the *Chamar* (leather worker / drummer) grabbed her, playing his drum.

Chhinaro went to dig soil; the barber showed *nokhar* and clutched her. (a nail-cutting tool used by traditional Indian barbers).

Women singers temporarily suspend rigid caste laws by using grotesque eroticism to playfully mock the women performing rituals (married women called *sawasin*). By imagining a transgressive physical intimacy between high-caste women and marginalised men, the performance creates a carnivalesque rupture. The service castes cease to be alienated labourers; through the power of sanctioned vernacular abuse, they are elevated into vital, recognised participants within a unified ceremonial whole.

Subverting Female Modesty (*Saram*) through Grotesque Eroticism

Under normative patriarchal rules, women are expected to have *saram* (modesty, shame) through soft speech and sexual reticence. *Gārī-gīt* provides a sanctioned arena for women to completely discard this persona, using visceral, explicit imagery.

"Kā tuhũ rasiyā ho māre dhasorā ki vāh-bāh jī, torā pākal he dāṛhī ki vāh-bāh jī.

Jab morā chhinaro he pākal dāṛhī ki vāh-bāh jī, torā chūch he purānī kī vāh-bāh jī." (Singh 185)

Translation: You act like a passionate lover making thrusts, though your beard has grown white *vāh-bāh jī*!

(He replies): Even if my beard is white, you *chhinaro*, your breasts are loose and dry, *vāh-bāh jī!*

Through speech acts like "*māre dhasorā*" (sexual thrusts) and sagging anatomy, the singers claim absolute verbal and sexual agency. The sexual imagery focuses on the unfiltered reality of the ageing material body. They do not sing as passive as aggressive, sexually liberated participants; the obscenity works as a deliberate, performative subversion of the suffocating modesty codes imposed upon the women in Magahi society.

Theoretical Synthesis & Conclusion

Through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the *jevanār* feast appears not merely as a feast but as a utopian zone where orthodox modesty and boundaries are temporarily dissolved. The *gārī-gīt* uses grotesque realism to bring proud patriarchs, elite lineages, and Brahminical supremacy down to the earthly realm of physical flaw and economic deceit. In this ritualised carnival, the bride's female kin weaponise abusive vernacular to claim the dominant subject position, turning the groom's party into passive objects of satire. Dr Ram Prasad Singh's rigorous transcription of these unfiltered lyrics in *Magahī Lokgīt ke Bṛhad Saṅgrah* is of profound archival importance. Preserving this vital female counter-discourse against social sanitisation proves that women have historically possessed sophisticated institutional mechanisms to resist, mock, and subvert the patriarchal and caste hierarchies governing their lives.

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