

## Interpreting Culture, Society and Space: Folk Music Perspective

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### Abstract

Cultural Geography per se is one of the marginal sub-disciplines of Geography in India and contributed mainly by practitioners from other disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Architecture, etc. Due to this reason, the sub-fields of Cultural Geography did not grow in this land of rich cultural heritage and traditions. One such field is the Geography of Music. The objective of this brief editorial note is to demonstrate the potential of folk music as a source of knowing the changing trends and patterns in society, culture, and economy and their spatiality. The examples cited are mainly from the Middle Ganga Valley, a region in which Bhojpuri is the language of the common populace, in which the author is currently based.

**Keywords:** Cultural Geography; Cultural Practices; Folk Music; Folk Songs; Identity

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## Introduction

Though culturally rich, Cultural Geography is relatively neglected and marginal sub-disciplines, if seen from the Indian perspective (Singh, 2009). Most of the notable contributors to the fields of social and cultural geographies are by the scholars working abroad and/or working in disciplines other than Geography. In other words, research problems related to society and culture have been not addressed by the (dweller) Indian geographers sufficiently from the indigenous perspective, a problem which was indicated around half a century ago by Sopher (1973). The purpose of the present editorial note is to expose the potential of music (and songs) with special reference to folk and popular music, as the source of people's narrative of change and continuity which could be socio-cultural and economic as well—something which has suffered neglect by social scientists, especially human geographers in India. The thoughts shared here are organised into two broad sections: first, it sketches the general trajectory of cultural geography's evolution with special reference to performing arts, to be precise, music; and, the second, it is dedicated to discussing the Indian scenario with special reference to folk songs.

## Place of Arts in Cultural Geography

Culture though used on and often in everyday conversations, is a highly complex and contested concept around which the human lives revolve. It thus occupies an unmatched centre-stage in any society's discourse. The conception of 'culture' by Williams also includes performance art like music (Williams, 1981, 90). In the geographical tradition, one finds studies of visual art addressing issues like representations of spaces, places, and environments, art production such as artistic traditions; place of arts industries in economy and cities; the spaces of artistic creativity; dissemination, and well-deserved acknowledgement of art and art practices.

Historically speaking, the growth of humanistic geography, through its known emphasis on

subjectivity and human experience, may be seen as generating noticeable academic interest of geographers in the expressive and emotional engagement of art with places. Further, during the decade of the 1980s, engagement of geographers with a critical theory of culture including social histories of art, analysing social conditions and power relations in art production, marks a major shift. This tradition also focussed on varied issues like the idea of landscape, naturalisation of class and property relations, national identities, etc. On the other hand, as part of the feminist project, the emphasis laid on the significance of gender relations and sexuality in this process by the (feminist) critics ably added another dimension to the whole discourse on art in geography (cf. Pinder, 2009). The 21st-Century geographic interest in art has become more diverse and inclusive, simultaneously addressing and giving place to a huge variety of arts and their spatiality, including music.

## Music and Geography

As far as Geography's engagement with arts is concerned, the domination of visual representations does not need any proof. The study of music though claims a long history within the discipline but has been indeed discontinuous. In this connection, J.G. Granö (1929), a Finnish Geographer, is given the credit. After his initial contribution, the development was sporadic till the 1960s. Intensive interest in music among geographers began in the early 1970s when studies in Cultural Geography examined musical performances, association memberships, musical listening and musicians' birthplaces, and a variety of other artefacts which had to do with music in the classical tradition of Berkeley school of identifying 'cultural hearths' and map diffusions considering culture areas, regions, and landscapes (cf. Nash 1975, Carney 1990); and, they reportedly proliferated since the mid-1990s (Smith 1994, Kong 1995). Carney (1998:3-4) has identified "ten general taxonomies" of music as the following:

- Delimitation of music regions and interpretation of regional music;
- Evolution of a music style with a place or place-specific music;
- Origin (cultural hearth) of diffusion of music phenomena;
- The spatial dimension of music dealing with human migration, transportation routes and communication network;
- Psychological and symbolic elements of music pertinent to shaping the character of a place, sense of place and place consciousness;
- Effect of music on the cultural landscape;
- Spatial organisation of the music industry and other music phenomena;
- Relationship of music to the natural environment;
- The function of 'nationalistic' and 'anti-nationalistic' music; and,
- Inter-relationship of music with other cultural traits in a spatial sense.

Early studies focused substantially on rural folk cultures and regional styles in the USA. Later developments were seen in the form of emerging concerns with (a sense of) place, gender, identity, and representation (see, Leyshon, Matless and Revill, 1998; Anderson, Morton and Revill 2005) showing impacts of theoretical developments in other (sister) disciplines. The growth of cultural industries and allied activities gave a fillip to such studies in the emerging context of new digital technologies (cf. Jassal, 2007). Music as a distinctive performing art and the cultural medium has increasingly drawn the attention of geographers who have been conventionally shown concern for the visuals (for the construction and interpretation of landscapes), as indicated above. Richness, diversity, hybridity and inclusive nature of the problems investigated under the geography of music attest tremendous growth in this field as seen in the special issues of two journals in the first decade of current century (cf. Anderson, Morton and Revill 2005; Waterman, 2006).

### Indian Scenario

Writing the 'Foreword' of a book on Indian geography, Anne Buttimer (2009: ix) observed that Geography, having roots in the rich ancient Indian intellectual traditions, is part and parcel of human personality and everyday life. The academic geography enshrined in India during the colonial period has acquired many functions since the attainment of Independence but continues to ignore indigenous roots. Singh (2009) has lamented the marginalisation of cultural geography per se which is also reflected in the country progress reports (Singh and Singh 2004, Singh and Singh 2008, Singh 2012, Singh 2016) prepared for the International Geographical Union by the Indian National Science Academy, INSA (New Delhi). These review reports reveal the predominance of the contributions of non-geographers which is not bad yet indicates the continuing pathetic condition of cultural geography in India. Obviously, music does not find due attention by the community of academic geographers despite the fact that it has immense potential as shown by Grimes (2008) in the case of Hindustani music.

### Placing Folksongs

The world of Indian music is as rich and diverse as any other cultural element attested by the presence of different forms, styles, and *gharanas* ('traditions'), which have developed with time in both instrumental and vocal music, with respective catchment area. Bollywood, together with regional cinema in India, has played the anchor's role in promoting and patronising music through adaptation of not only classical or semi-classical but also folk music. As a matter of fact, music and dance numbers are the hallmarks of popular Indian cinema.

To put in the Robert Redfield's framework, in the world of Indian music too, a two-way exchange may be noticed between the 'great traditions' of classical music and the 'little traditions' formed by the folk music. In between these two, the semi-classical music in the Indian sub-continent could be located, which owes its origin to folk music, which later developed into classical form by the court artists (here, singers) of different

emperors and kings or even big landlords, who used to patronise them through every support. For example, as per the legends, the Punjabi tappa, originally a song of camel-drivers of Punjab and Sindh region of undivided India, is ascribed to Mian Ghulam Nabi Shori alias Shori Mian, a court artist of Asaf-Ud-Dawlah, the nawab of Oudh (Avadh).

Folksongs have a special place in popular literature of common masses. They are not as attractive in written form as in sung form in which emotions and expressions take over the composition part as they are instant and inherited by a present generation from their parents in oral form. Their rhythm is melodious, which attracts a common person more than their elite/aristocratic counterparts. As the source of regional culture, they express not only the occasion but also the prevalent value systems and their changing nature. Thus, it will not be incorrect to observe that they form a folk narrative. In the Gangetic plains of North India, they have been termed as 'Sanskari' songs sung at different occasions during a life-cycle—from birth (Tewari, 1988) to a wedding. Of the largest variety is the wedding songs sung by womenfolk, the variety could be as many as forty-five at different stages of wedding rituals in the Middle Ganga Valley, for example, the Bhojpuri-speaking region (cf. Tiwari and Sharma 2011).

If an attempt to make a broader generalisation of folk music is made, one or a group of the following characteristic features is essentially found, especially in the Indian folk music:

- The sense of collectiveness (in the form of region, dialect, race, ethnicity, gender, religion or philosophy, etc.);
- Function-oriented (cf. sanskar geet);
- Traditional and regional identity;
- Process of socialisation—learning by one generation from the older generation; and, Spiritual/and philosophical content.

Further, seven prominent regional elements in folk songs are found: the structure of tune (or, notation structure); composition of lyrics in a particular dialect; regional perspective in terms of contents of lyrics; cultural activities and social

practices of the concerned region; regional philosophy of masses; oral narratives in the form of stories and associated regional icons; use of regional musical instruments; and, place of the dominant regional economic activities, etc.

*Spontaneity and Contemporality:* Besides the above characteristic features, folk songs are highly responsive in nature, indicating their immense creative energy and capacity to express the change and continuity in regional society and culture through metaphors. In reference to dynamic symbols (of status), changing destinations (of out-migrants), notable episodes in public life are a few examples of it. The outbreak of ongoing pandemic COVID-19 and the measures taken up by the state, including public appeals have appeared prominently in present-day history, especially in Bhojpuri songs echoing the concerns of left-behind family members.

#### **Folk Songs: Some Examples and their Content**

*Kajari*, a very famous folksong, very typical of eastern Uttar Pradesh's districts like Mirzapur, Varanasi, Prayagraj (Allahabad), and the rest of the Bhojpuri region of neighbouring Bihar, sung in monsoon season by a maiden longing for her lover. There are similar other seasonal songs like Chaita/Chaiti, Shravani, or Hori (standard 'Holi') which have strong regional elements depicting the changing nature of social relationships (see, Jassal, 2012).

*Biraha*, literally 'separation (and longing)', a typical folksong of Bhojpuri region, to be more precise in eastern Uttar Pradesh, originated in the latter part of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century, sung mainly by Ahir males (cf. Marcus, 1989) in which social agony and concerns are the hallmarks.

*Alha:* Icon worship, reverence, and exaltation of heroic deeds are common in Indian society from ancient times and intensive in regional cultural traditions. It gets reflected in regional folk songs as well. *Alha* originated in the Bundelkhand region but sung in a larger region of neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is about the heroic deeds of Alha-Udal, legendary generals of Chandel Rajput King Parmal or Parmardideva of Bundela region that

spreads into two present neighbouring states of India Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, *Lorikayan* is another form of folk song that narrates the heroic stories of Lorik—an iconic sub-regional figure associated with Ahirs—the cattle herders. *Pandavani* is a folk theatre and music form based on the Pandavas especially Bhima related stories of the epic Mahabharat particularly in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and also parts of undivided Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

Rhythm in countryside life is tied with the season. In every culture, auspicious/inauspicious-ness is strongly believed in not only in religious/faith-related matters but also the profane ones. It is valid both temporally as well as spatial terms. Therefore, based on the movement and location of *nakshatras* (celestial bodies), certain months/days or specific moment are considered highly auspicious compared to others. And, they govern human activities. Similarly, the sacrality of space could be explained from the macrocosmic to microcosmic scales. Though on their face, festivals appear only associated with a particular stage/phase of peasant life, they are beyond imagination without rituals and celebrations. There is an end number of examples from across the world (see, for example, Goswami 1988, pp. 43-49). Such occasions are incomplete in the absence of music and songs.

Migration in search of employment has been a kind of eternal issue of BIMARU states (a term coined by Ashish Bose after the Indian Census of 1981 to put together the states of undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh which were at the bottom of development ladder) explained as the function of higher pressure on the resources, mainly cultivable land and the absence of alternative source(s) of livelihood. In the case of resource-rich states like Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, employment opportunities

created outside the agriculture sector could not absorb the local (tribal) population which migrated elsewhere in search of jobs. And hence, physical separation of migrating male from left behind families and the longing to meet them, usually husband or lover, is omnipresent in regional folk songs. Such songs have also found a place in the regional cinema as popular numbers (for example, *Ganga maiyya tohe piyari chadhaibo..saiyan se kari da milanava*, from the Bhojpuri movie titled *Ganga Maiyya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo* released in 1963). In such songs, a good amount of information regarding the destination (regions and places) and problems of left-behind families too are found narrated. Middle Ganga Valley, has been known to be a source region for migration at least since the British period in modern times. However, the destination has been changing—Rangoon, Calcutta (now Kolkata), Howrah, coalfields (like Jharia, located in the Damodar Valley, Dhanbad district of Jharkhand state), Gulf countries (referred popularly in Bhojpuri songs together as 'Arab'), etc.

In a Sharada Sinha sung composition, a lady calls upon her husband to come back home as a navy soldier on a ship and puts a reasonably long list of important items of specific places and regions of India.<sup>1</sup>

The same could be seen at the microscale in Dinesh Yadav alias *Nirahua* composed song in which the lover offers to take her ladylove to different places in Varanasi city and get her the famous items for which those places are known (*Ye raja hamake Banaras ghumai da*).<sup>2</sup>

In a composition of Padma Vibhushan Girija Devi (1929-2017) sung by her, a wife cautions her husband not to go eastward (perhaps Bengal/Assam) narrating the beauty features of women of that region like big eyes, long hairs, etc, by which he may get attracted in their 'beauty trap'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paniya ke jahaj se, *Youtube*. Retrieved on 13 June 2020 from, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZskN9fhyjOI>

<sup>2</sup> A Raja Hamke Banaras Ghumaai Da. *Youtube*. Retrieved on 13 June 2020 from, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm7pt\\_iSIQY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm7pt_iSIQY)

<sup>3</sup> Purab Mat Jaiyo More Rajaji. *Youtube*. Retrieved on 13 June 2020 from, <https://gaana.com/song/purabmatjaiyomorerajaji>

An accomplished folk artist Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971), termed 'Shakespeare of Bhojpuri', contributed through his popular melodramas to women's issues, *Dalit* discourse, folk music, and songs (Singh and Mishra 2011). The present generation singers like Manoj Tiwari have addressed the issue of female foeticide and associated issues like dowry and the role of technology in sex determination tests and their fallouts;<sup>4</sup> whereas in a Chandan Tiwari song the nostalgic lyricist quests the vanished āngana ('inner courtyard') and related memories<sup>5</sup> (cf. Singh 2017).

### Conclusion

Though a latecomer in geography, music in the Anglo-phonic world has found a place in geographical works especially since the 1970s and further developments have led to the recognition of sub-field of cultural geography as the Geography of Music. Unlike this trend, in India, even Cultural Geography as a whole still struggles to get due acknowledgement by the professional geographers. Lack of academic enterprises in the field of Geography of Music, therefore, is not surprising despite the fact music, particularly folk music is a vast oral source of information to understand regions and their inhabitants' experiences with regard to social, cultural, economic and other issues, both in contemporary and historical perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup> Beti Janmaval Parhej Ho Gail. *Youtube*. Retrieved on 13 June 2020 from, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkfZ-3ZJM6I>

<sup>5</sup> Mai Re Apana Ghar Ke Angan Kahan Gayil. *Youtube*. Retrieved on 13 June 2020 from, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRiOXgK93X8>

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