

Journey, Movement, Affect and Rhythm: Migration Through North Indian Folk Songs

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Abstract

This paper captures the lived experiences and affect associated with migration, through the folk songs of North India. While migration is usually studied as a larger demographic movement involving temporary or permanent displacement and departure, our project captures the pain and apprehension it entails. We have tried to retrieve the vital connection between gender and migration through an analysis of folk songs about the experiences of women. These songs passed down as a part of the oral tradition, articulate how a woman engages and interacts with migration – both due to her marriage and also when her husband leaves home in search of work. Thus, *bidaai* and *birah* are the two prisms within which this paper addresses the theme of migration and highlights the sociological factors immersed within the songs.

Keywords: Women, folk songs, North India, emotion, gender, migration.



This paper is an exploration and uncovering of women’s migration narratives encapsulated within the tradition of North Indian folk songs. A conscious effort to leverage the aural-emotional over data-driven statistical arguments, this paper is an endeavour to highlight movement and displacement through a sociological and phenomenological lens. Folk songs are archives of effect and experientiality; from the seeds of these emotions germinate the larger structures they represent. Therefore, we shall be analysing the content of the songs– the nuances and symbolism in the lyrics, following which, we will focus on the larger social reality they embody.

The selection of songs we have chosen spans across the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which linguistically belong to the “Northern Zone” (Karve 1994, 51). These regions share a common cultural stock of oral literature. A linguistic area includes various languages and dialects belonging to the same language family (ibid). Owing to this, being well versed in Hindi², we share a familiarity with the lyrics even though we do not speak all the affiliated languages.

It is believed that the kinship practises and structures within a linguistic area are largely similar. Family systems in this region are predominantly patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Marriage partners are

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² Hindi is a major language in north India.

chosen from within one's caste, but outside one's clan and village. A clear line of demarcation is drawn between consanguineal and affinal kin (Gould 1961, Berremen 1962, Karve 1994). There is also the prevalence of joint families, which means that women will be living with their in-laws post-marriage (Karve 1994).

These sociological factors are reflected in the migration-related experiences immersed within the songs. The pain, apprehension, fear and longing, felt by the women who are affected by the experience of the migration, are expressed through the lyrical realm. The collection of songs we have chosen have been accessed through our family archive, some have reached us through popular culture accessed for the paper, through online folk song performances and secondary literature.

Faced with the daunting task of choosing from a seemingly infinite repertoire of songs, dealing with a variety of issues related to migration, we have focused on the lived experiences of women as highlighted through two perspectives. Marriage and the inevitability of the woman leaving behind her natal home, and the pathos of separation from her husband as he leaves his home in search of work, are the two prisms within which this paper addresses the theme of migration.

Bidaai: From Natal to Affinal Home

Folk songs usually follow the rhythm of festivals, seasons, and rites of passage like birth, puberty, the transition to adulthood, and marriage. *Bidaai* or *Vidaai* is one such event. It is a ceremony that takes place after the wedding rituals about the bride's side have culminated and the daughter of the house has to accompany her husband, leaving her parents' home forever. From then on, her affinal home will be considered her permanent abode. It is an intensely emotional moment, with the bride and her loved ones embracing each other and crying as they bid her farewell. In earlier times, the moment was especially traumatic for the young bride as transportation systems were not developed and she could not think of coming back soon.

Though marriages are always much talked about in all families and are enacted playfully as little girls marry off their dolls, the girls presume weddings to be the time they get to wear good clothes, enjoy the music and dance; only at the time of their own *Vidaai* do they realise the finality of the separation.

During our childhood onwards, we have attended several wedding Sangeet ceremonies that involved the customary singing and dancing accompanying wedding rituals, but *Vidaai* songs were left out of the repertory to be sung only at the time of the actual ceremony, post the wedding rituals. The reason being, that these songs touched a very sensitive chord articulating all the pain and sorrow and never ceased to make the members cry, especially the bride-to-be and her close family and friends. Such is the emotional charge of the ceremony, and the songs were sung, that even when women hear such songs later in life, or parents of young daughters hear them at weddings, they cannot hold back their tears.

The song we wish to analyse in this context is an Awadhi folk song which has been written between the 13th and 14th century by the Sufi singer Amir Khusrau, and was subsequently adopted by the popular folk traditions. We encountered this song through folk singer Malini Awasthi's³ performance at a literary festival, which we accessed on YouTube.⁴ Awasthi has training in classical and folk music, which she combines in her performances thereby foregrounding the symbiotic relationship between the two traditions. Often one is led to question whether expressions of women's emotions in songs and literature authored by men, affect the authenticity of the experiences they speak about, but drawing from Nitin Sinha, "...the male authorship of these songs does not foreclose the option of reading women's social reality into them. Their oral articulations in the light of limited or no access to the written word, when collected, authored, and published by male literati, still invoke women's silenced perspectives." (Jassal 2012 quoted in Sinha 2018).

This song *Kahe ko Biyahe Bides* is a conversation between a bride and her father as she is about to cross the threshold from her natal to her affinal home. Unable to bid her final goodbye, she first poses a powerful question to her father asking him why he has chosen to send her to a foreign land.

Kahe ko biyahi bides– Why are you getting me married off to a foreign land?

Kahe ko biyahe bides

Kahe ko biyahi bides

Arre lakhiyaan baabul more

Kahe ko biyahi bides

"Why are you getting me married off to a foreign land?" [A pained daughter questions her father.]

Hum toh babul tori pinjare ki muniya

Arre jis angana kaho udi jaaye

Arre lakhiya.....

"I'm your caged bird" [she says,] "Now being asked to fly away to someplace else."

³ She is a renowned folk singer from Uttar Pradesh.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxOwoO40xJw> Accessed on 12 August, 2021.

Bhaiya ko dinho baabul mahala do mahale

Bhaiya ko dinho mahala do mahale

Arre hum ko dinho pardes

Arre lakhiya.....

“You gave my brother your mansion, and gave me away to a foreign land. Why?”

Kaahe ko biyahi bides

“Why are you getting me married off to a foreign land?”

Nimiya taley, nimiya taley, nimiya talesi mora dola jo utha

More biran ne khay bauchhar

Arre lakhiya.....

“My brother wept profusely as my palanquin was lifted from beneath the Neem tree. Why did you get me married off to a foreign land?”

This song is written from a woman’s perspective, and what is noticeable is the particular reference to one’s affinal house as *bides* or a foreign land. This is a common trope found in several folk songs sung in Northern India. The practice of village exogamy is common in this region, and this ensures that there is a wide geographical distance that separates the woman’s consanguineal home from her affinal home (Gould 1961, Karve 1994). Along with this physical distancing, social norms and expectations are also attached. A strict difference is maintained in terms of one’s blood kin and kin formed through marriage. As Harold A. Gould explains,

Patrilineal kinship systems by their very nature purposefully exclude such overlapping obligational ties inherent in consanguineal and affinal forms of relations...The rule enjoining village exogamy achieves this end. Affines and agnates are kept spatially separate with great consistency in this fashion. The latter are free to conduct their lives in comparative freedom from interference by the former... (1961, 298).

It is within this physical, the social and obligatory distance between one’s natal and affinal family, that the notion of *bides* arises in these folk songs. The new home and the in-laws appear to be a ‘strange’ and ‘foreign’ set of people, with whom the woman is supposed to maintain formal ties. It is also not common

for the woman's parents to come and visit her in her affinal house, and it is only the brother who is given this liberty (Gould 1961). Due to the separation observed between blood and marriage based kinship ties, a strict division is also maintained between daughter and daughter-in-law (Karve 1994). Most northern languages also linguistically divide the two (ibid), in Hindi we use the terms *beti* to refer to daughter and *bahu* referring to daughter-in-law.

It is also commonly believed in this region that a daughter is someone else's property and that her time with her parents and siblings is a transitory phase before she makes it to her permanent abode after marriage. This assumption also guides the practice of village exogamy, because this abrupt, drastic shift, though heartbreaking for the parents and the daughter, is considered necessary to ensure that she can adjust to her affinal home without much interference from her natal family (Chanana 1993). The geographical distance coupled with the lack of advanced communication technology during the times when these songs were composed, makes interaction with one's parents and siblings less frequent and more inconvenient.

These are some reasons for the close association between one's affinal home being and foreign land or *bides*. In a context where the migration of a woman is supposed to maintain formal and obligatory relationships with her new family, she is initially a stranger and an outsider. There is also a sense of permanence in this movement. She cannot visit her natal home whenever she wishes.

This tussle is also envisaged in the song when a daughter is pleading with her father not to send her away after marriage. This song has been revived from our family archive, women from the family used to sing these songs together.⁵

Mera Seeko ka Bangla Ri : My House made of Straws⁶

⁵ There is a Punjabi song to this effect : *Sada chirian da chamba ve, /babal assan ud jana.*

Sadi lammi udari ve, babal kehre des jana...

Ours is a flock of sparrows, dear father,

We'll fly away

On a long, long flight,

We know not to which land we shall go. Accessed from <http://ilovepunjabifolk.blogspot.com/2013/12/punjabi-folk-song-sada-chirian-da.html> on 23 September, 2021.

⁶ This song is from a diary which has scribbles and lyrics of various folk songs written by women in our family. Flipping through the pages and trying to remember the tunes to the familiar yet forgotten lyrics always stirs up conversations steeped in nostalgia. "Remember mummy used to dance to this song?" Or, "Remember when we performed this at so-and-so's wedding?" For us, these diaries are an archive of emotions, a memory of the women who sang, danced, laughed and wept at these songs.

This song is a conversation between a daughter and her father

Mera seeko ka bangla ri

Babul chidiya tod chali

“Father, the bird has broken her house made of straws”

Tera khana bana doongi

Babul mujhe ghar rakh le

“I will cook for you father, please retain me in this house”

Meri bahuye bana lengi

Laado ghar jaa apne

[The father replies,] “ My daughters-in-law will cook for me, dear daughter, you go to your own home”

Tere kapde dho doongi

Babul mujhe ghar rakh le

The daughter adds, “I’ll wash your clothes, please don't send me away”

Main dhoban laga loonga laado

Laado ghar jaa apne

“I’ll hire a washerwoman, dear daughter, you go to your own home” [he replies]

Main tere bartan mal doongi

Baadul mujhe ghar rakh le

[She tries again, this time saying,] “I’ll wash your utensils father, please keep me in this house”

Main mehri laga loonga

Laado ghar jaa apne

“I’ll hire someone to wash the utensils, my sweetheart you go to your own home”

Maine gudiya chhodi re

Babul tere aaley mein

[As a last resort she pleads] “I’ve left my dolls in this house father, in a tiny niche in the wall.”

Meri poti⁷ khelengi

Laado ghar jaa apne

[It’s not a problem,] “My granddaughters will play with them, now sweetheart, you go to your home.”

⁷ In Hindi and most languages within the Northern zone, there also exist separate terms for grandchildren of one’s daughter and of one’s son. In Hindi we use the terms *dhevti* for a daughter’s daughter, while her son would be *dhevti*. A son’s daughter is known as *poti* and his son is *pota*.

This song captures the angst and anguish of a daughter at having to migrate to her patrilocal residence, or what the father in this song refers to as her “own home” (*apne ghar*). Songs such as these allow an outlet for these emotions. A daughter is imploring her father to not send her away, trying to prove that she can be useful and help with household chores. Her father negates each of her requests and this song captures the desperation and helplessness that the daughter feels.

Marriage is considered an integral and inevitable fact of life in this part of India, and while parents of daughters may always be aware that they will ultimately belong to their husband's family, the transition is never easy. These songs draw upon this contradiction between cognition and affect, between facts of life, and sentiment. Leela Dube mentions that it is through lullabies and nursery rhymes that the inevitability of marriage and migration to one's husband's house is first communicated to a daughter (2001). The Bengali⁸ rhyme she mentions is,

“Rock a-bye-baby, combs in your pretty hair,
The bridegroom will come soon and take you away”
[Then the daughter says to her friends]
“... Let us play, for I shall never play again
When I go off to a stranger's house” (Dube 2001, 94)

As marriages were (and still are) traditionally arranged by the elders of families, often the bride and groom were not familiar with each other— and may not even have seen or spoken to each other prior to their marriage⁹. Thus there are various layers to the ‘strangeness’ a woman feels in her house after marriage.

The symbolism of a bird cuts across both the *bidai* songs mentioned in this section. While in the former, the bird is caged in her father's home and is getting ready to take flight, in the latter, the bird is living in a house of straws. This can be taken as a metaphor for the fragility of the daughter's status at her home, and the transitory nature and impermanence of the time she is meant to spend at her natal home.

***Birah*: Angst and Loneliness**

While the previous section has dealt with the woman's pain of separating from her natal home, this section continues her ordeal of experiencing the pain of separation, albeit of a different kind. In the Indian Classical tradition, the representation of women or *Nayikas* includes the special aesthetics of the suffering

⁸ West Bengal, though a state geographically located in Eastern India, linguistically and culturally falls within the Northern Zone (Karve 1994).

⁹ While arranged marriages still take place, interactions between the couple prior to marriage are more common now.

woman or *Virahotkanthita Nayika*¹⁰. *Virah* or *Birah* is a very layered term imbricating the emotional charge of love, longing, hope, devotion, desire and indefinite waiting.

In the folk traditions also, this word finds a repeated occurrence, for it encapsulates the figuration of the suffering, desiring, lonely woman. This word can be used for an unmarried girl concerning her lover, as well as for a wife, whose husband has migrated to a far-off land, mostly to earn money. While a woman's role is to silently and obediently endure her destiny without complaining, *birhan* songs articulate her emotions of not just yearning, but also anger, thereby giving it a voice. We can imagine women sitting in a group, singing this song, cursing the employer, as well as the train which has taken the woman's husband away to a strange land— in some ways mitigating the pain through the verbalising and the playfulness involved. The *birhan* song we are analysing has also been sung by Malini Awasthi.¹¹

What was particularly noticeable during the performance we are referring to, is the community of listeners that the singer established by the serious as well as playful interaction with the audience, punctuating the beautiful song. This interaction also served an important function – of explaining the subtle nuances of the lyrics to those not familiar with them and also of elucidating the context of the song, thereby evoking a participative community experience –more mutual and informal.

Reliya Beran, Piya ko Liye Jaayire– The Cursed Train is Taking my Lover Away

Reliya bairan piya ko liye jayire

Reliya bairan piya ko liye jayire haaye

Reliya bairan

The cursed train is taking my lover away

Jaun tikasva se, saiyyaan more jaiyhe

Saiyyan more jaiyhe

Balma more jaiyhe

Jaun tikasva se, saiyyaan more jaiyhe

Paani barse tikas gal jayire

Paani barse tikas gal jayire

¹⁰ <https://indianculture.gov.in/nayikas-indian-classics-their-genesis-and-rise-glory> Accessed on 30 September, 2021.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bHKHyjZRs4> Accessed on 16 August, 2021.

Reliya bairan piya ko liye jayire¹²

I hope that the ticket that will take my lover away, disintegrates in the rain.

Jaun sehariya ko saiyyan more jaiyhe ooh

The city my lover is going to....

[Awasthi addresses the audience which we have translated here for reference]

(“How many people living here are from Delhi? Raise your hands with honesty. On behalf of how many of your wives am I singing this song? Raise your hands. Who all have left their brides and lovers and come here?... Very honest people have raised their hands. I’ll also raise my hands as my husband is also far away.”)

Jaun seharva ko saiyyan more jaiyhe ooh

Aagi lagai saher jali jaaire

Reliya bairan piya ko liye jayire

May the city that my husband is going to... burn down

Jaun sahabwa ke

(Kya baat hai)

Arre jaun sahabwa ke saiyan more naukar

I hope his future employer...

([Awasthi says], “In this world, has anyone ever been born who is not in the service of someone else? Even self-employed people are at service of their customers, and those without jobs are at least in service of their wives!”)

¹² The style of singing has a lot of repetitions which add to the dramatic quality of the singing. We have tried to retain the repetitions mainly pertaining to the lyrics,

Arre jaun, jaun jaun sahabwa ke saiyan more naukar

Saiyan more naukar

Balma more naukar

Goli daage (sound of shooting) goli daage sahab mar jaaire

Goli daage ghayal kar jaiyve

I hope his future employer, gets shot and dies... that he is injured

Reliya bairan...

("The story doesn't end here. The husband went to work and the bride was left alone. The line "I hope his future employer gets shot and dies" is referring to the British Colonizers. Her husband is going to the city to work for them. If the ticket that will take my lover away, disintegrates in the rain, and he still doesn't return, then may the city has an outbreak of riots, forcing my husband to return out of fear. If he still doesn't return, then the suspicion point towards her husband loving another woman (*sautan*). If such is the case, may the other woman consume something that makes her insane.")

Arre jaune sautaniya ke saiyaan more aasiq

Saiyan more aasiq

Balma more aasiq

[The singer is referring to the replacement of the word meaning 'lover' (*ashik*) to its indigenous form of (*asik*), wherein the "sh" sound is replaced by "s". According to her, this makes the word softer and more delicate.]

Arre jaune sautaniya ki saiyan mori aashiq

Khaye dhatura saut baurayre

Khaye dhatura saut baurayre

Reliya bairan.....

The performance ends with the singer repeating the last line of each stanza as a climax; the beat and tempo increase and the audience claps along enthusiastically, immersed in the experiential quality of the song.

This particular performance communicates the liveness and charged atmosphere of the space where Awasthi is singing. The lyrics of the song are of course the focus, but equally relevant are the segments where she engages with the audience, which is largely composed of migrants, as revealed through the show of hands. Thus, this piece, composed during colonial times, is resonating with an audience sitting in 2018.

While searching for songs of migration, we came across the “Bidesia Project”, which is a project archiving songs of migration¹³. The term *bidesia* again is a term used to refer to a ‘foreign land’ which could have referred to a literal foreign land, as indentured labourers were taken to work on plantations overseas as well. However, in the space of popular imagination, any place or city within the country, where the migrant goes, is also referred to as *bides*. A possible reason for using this word may be explained due to lack of advanced communication channels. The following song has been sourced from the Bidesia project archives available on YouTube.

*Kahave Gaile Na- Where Have you Gone*¹⁴

Birha ko aag mein

Din raat jala karte hain

Khali banamali

Bin haath mala karte hain

This rift has caused a fire in my heart¹⁵

And I burn in it night and day

The gardener’s labours don’t bear any fruit

In a desert, he looks for a garden to tend

One trial after another

¹³<https://scroll.in/article/969113/in-these-bhojpuri-folk-songs-forgotten-foes-of-indian-slaves-in-british-colonies> Accessed on 8 September, 2021.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tjx8pJVam6w> Accessed on 8 September, 2021.

¹⁵ Translation accessed from the video subtitles.

Shehte sehte har sadma

Mere dil mein arman kho gaya

Malte malte ab kaleje

Dard paida ho gaya

Rote rote aasuon se

Aankh jale jaate hain

Pritam mera milta nahi

Haddi bhi gale jaate hain

Yet my heart has only yearned
I have tried tending to the sore
But it has only deepened the wound
Like sparks from a fire within
My tears have set my eyes ablaze
Meeting my lover is a distant dream
My bones will rot before I see him again

Mujhe birah birahini aake

Chhaari mora balma

Bedardi kahan gayi laina

Humro pran ke adharvay

You left me deprived
And went away without a second thought
How heartless can you be
Leaving my soul wanting and starved
My dear, where in the world will you be found

Balmay kahanwa gayi le naa

Jaise mandir peeche diyara jarela

Balma waise jaale na

Humro alahara karejava balma

Waise jalae naa

Humro pranke adharva

Balmay kahanwa gayi lainay

If you have seen a light
Burning inside a temple
So my mind is ablaze
Flaming with thoughts of you
These flames have burned a hole in my heart
You left my soul wanting and starved
My dear where in the world can you be found?

This song is another intense manifestation of the wife's pain at separation from her husband who is geographically removed from her. As Gloria Goodwin Raheja mentions, "[T]he theme of male absence, a common one in Kangra¹⁶ oral traditions... refers quite literally to enforced separation from ones husband brought about by the economic necessity of migrant labour (2003,14). The lyrics once again articulate the woman's unquenchable desires and unmitigated pain. The dominant imagery is of burning (The rift has caused a *fire* in my heart; Like *sparks* from a *fire* within/ My tears have set my eyes *ablaze*; These *flames* have *burned* a hole in my heart etc). The song has been sung soulfully by the male singer and the high pitch and quivering voice does justice to the emotional content.

The experience of migration finds a continuum in the comments on the video of this song. The comments are mostly from the Indian diasporic community which responds to this song with a degree of familiarity and nostalgia. There are people from Trinidad and Guyana talking about their Indian roots, recounting

¹⁶ A hilly region in Himachal Pradesh which is also a north Indian state.

While migration is mostly dealt with in the context of pain and separation, there is always an element of surprise and serendipity when themes are encountered within the constantly shifting and rich tapestry of our folk tradition.

In the next song that we analyse, from Kangra– a hilly region in Himachal Pradesh we come across a contrasting sentimentality of playfulness.

Kala kot tangaya kiliya – The Black Coat is hanging from the Nail

“Kala kot tangaya kiliya

tangaya kiliya

apu chhoru rahenda Dilliya....

... chitti likhna jo pen dei ja

pen dei ja

nahi ta chhoru nal lei ja

A black coat is hanging from a nail

hanging from a nail

My fellow lives in Delhi

...leave me a pen to write a letter

Leave me a pen

Else fellow take me along” (Narayan 2003, 48-49)

This song from Kangra, in Himachal Pradesh, is a dance song (*nach git*) which deals with the theme of migration in a lighthearted manner. The destination where the migrant husband is located is clearly mentioned. As Kirin Narayan explicates, the song uses “English words like ‘coat’, and ‘pen’, refers to the metropolis Delhi, playfully invokes women’s education, and speaks to the emerging possibility that women may accompany their migrant men” (ibid).

Conclusion

While migration is a complex of economic, political, historical and social currents, the analysis in this paper does not start from these macro perspectives. Instead, it privileges the voice of the suffering woman as excavated from some folk songs of Northern India. These songs, some of which are available on the internet, help to form a virtual community of listeners and viewers who have been impacted by migration in some way or the other.

The songs transport us into an experiential domain of intense emotions, as marriage gets implicated within a form of migration.

These songs from indigenous folk traditions, transferred largely through oral traditions have interesting stories to tell which need to be heard, retold and documented. In the words of

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