



Classification and Structure of Maithili Folksongs

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From south to north and east to west India has a rich and glorious tradition of folklore study. Here, in Mithila, folk musical transmission is in vogue rather than the ethno-musical publications. It is the folksong of Bhilini that influenced Gautam, the Buddha, to draw the essence of his all-time great philosophy - *Madhyama marg*. Mithila has been established as a great cultural center and *Vidya-kshetra*. It's cultural, mainly scholastician, history dates back to millenniums. Its pristine glory is recorded in the Vedas and the *Satpath Brahmana*. Mithila comprises the Gangetic plains of North Bihar and the *Terai* region of Nepal. Tradition of folklore has always helped the scholars of the region. Prominent ancient and medieval Maithili scholars viz., Vachaspati, Jyotirishwar, Vidyapati etc, have used the elements of folk, in their classical works.

In fact, the systematic study of Maithili folksongs, from anthropological viewpoint is relatively new. In Mithila, anthropologists and sociologists have not made any comprehensive attempt in this direction. The only substantial study was by Makhan Jha (1979) who classified the songs. But he has also not gone into the details. There is a wide range of classification of the Maithili folksongs. With the help of my respondents I have classified Maithili folksongs into seven groups elaborated below:

Songs representing the life-cycle events: There are many songs that represent life-cycle events -birth, initiation rites, marriage etc. Women start singing *Sahara* songs on the sixth day of the birth of a baby to please and express thanks to Mother Goddess Sastika. Literary *Sahara* songs are sung with the description of the birth of Krishna and Rama. These are also sung on *Upnayana* (sacred-thread-ceremony), *Mundana* (tonsure ceremony) and marriage. Some *Saharas* depict the husband's anxiety to relieve his wife's labour pains. The cradlesongs or lullabies are sung to please the child and keep him happy. These songs are usually composed of jingling rhymes. Many women sing lullabies with a high and very soft falsetto voice. Carrying a baby on her shoulder or back a woman sometimes sings the same song with a normal voice. The song usually begins with some meaningless syllables. Marriage is an important social and religious event when several songs are sung. Women most often classify wedding songs according to the name of the rituals or ritual stages. In the marriage, the auspicious day begins with the *Suhag* songs and concludes with *Samdaun* (*vidai*).

Songs representing the annual calendar of events: Songs that fall under this classification, are further categorized in two groups: a) Agricultural songs and b) Festival songs. Agricultural songs are sung during sowing, ploughing, winnowing, etc. Couplets and rural adages, predicting good and bad crops, according to the people's indigenous knowledge of bio-diversity, can also be included in this category. Ghagh and Daka are two famous folk poets-cum-scientists, whose couplets and verses are often cited by the villagers. Through these verses, farmers are advised on the crops and weather. One such example

is given below:

Savan shukla saptami, tah-tah rain karant,

rum Jao pia malba main jaun gujrant.

The above verse warns in advance about the famine. It says, "if at night of the 7th day of *Shuklapaksha* in the month of *Savan* the sky is clear and easily visible, famine is bound to occur. My dear husband, says a wife to her husband, now I may advise you to go to Malva for earning our livelihood and I should move towards the state of Gujarat".

The cycle of festivals, begins with the month of *Chaitra*. Several songs are sung during the celebration of the festivals of *Ramnavami*, *Batsavitri*, *Nagapanchami*, *Madhushrabani*, *Kojegra*, *Sama-chakeba*, *Bhardutia*.

Seasonal songs: In a climate where knowledge system health, life and everything including comfort depend on the regularity of the seasons, songs of the whole year with specific months are particularly popular. The basic themes include frustration or sometimes disappointment in love, often due to the callous absence of the lover/ husband. The common songs, included under the category are *Barahmasa*, *Chahomasa* and *Chanmasa*. These songs describe twelve, six and four months of separation. Each month comes with its charms and has its individual reaction on the feelings of the separated partner. These songs may be reduced to six basic types: a) Religious, b) agricultural c) narrative, d) lamentation of deserted love e) womanhood and chastity f) new experiments.

Wisdom songs: Every song reflects wisdom of the people but there are some specific songs that explain how people retain their knowledge system consciously and there are some dietic and social restrictions to be followed every month. Such proscriptions are being retained through songs. One such example is given below in a *Barahmasa*:

Do not consume leafy vegetables in the month of *Savan* and curd in *Bhadab*.

Keep away from the dewdrops in *Aswin* and avoid eating buttermilk in *Kartik*

Avoid the use of cumin-seed in *Agahan* and Coriander in *Pusa*.

Avoid sugar candy in *Magh* and gram in *Phalgun*.

Do not consume raw-sugar in *Chait* and rub mustard oil in *Baishakh*.

Keep away from the direct sun-heat in *Jetha* and avoid eating wood-apple in *Asadha*.

Those who follow these proscriptions strictly never need to consult a doctor and get the medicine, says the great doctor Dhanwantari.

Devotional songs: Devotional songs are then further categorized as follows:

- a) *Bhajan* and *Kirtan* -- sung generally in praise of Lord Vishnu, Ganga, Shiva and Shakti.
- b) *Prati* (Morning songs) -Reverential songs sung in the morning in praise of

gods and goddesses. The major varieties of the *Prati* include *Bhairavi*, *Jajamanti*, *Vihaga* etc.

- c) *Gosaunik-git* and *Bhagabati-git* -sung generally in praise of the family deities.
- d) Songs of Shiva -These are further classified as i) *Nachari*, in which a devotee by singing and dancing explains her helplessness to the Lord and ii) *Mahesbani*, in which the story of Shiva and his family members are narrated.
- e) The mendicant's songs: These are the songs of the beggars or helpless. The texts express the disabled condition and distress of the singer.

Songs of love and beauty: Some songs express the inner most feelings of a lover or beloved. The most important type of such songs is called *lirahut*. These are sung on ritual occasions as well as in leisure time. All aspects of love affairs are unfolded through these melodious sweet and touching songs. *lirahuts* are songs on separation as well as union. The songs of this category include: *Batgamani*: It portrays the beloved in *abhisara* mainly during the point of time when she goes to meet her lover. It is sung in a peculiar melody; *Gwalari*: These are the songs of *Gopis*, the cowherd women that depict the sports and youthful pranks of Krishna in their company; *Raasa*: These are again songs that deal with Krishna's sportive *Lilas* with *Gopis*,. *Maana*: These songs represent a sort of dramatic lyric and also depict the annoyance of *Strimaana* and request to mend matters with the *Purushmaana*. Besides this, Caravan songs, and folk - dramatic songs etc., also fall under this category.

Songs of glory: These songs describe the glory, history, beauty of the land and the people etc. Glorious deeds of historical and mythical characters are sung and performed on the stage or in the street through drama and storytelling. These lyrics, known as *Katha-gathas*, give a detailed account of the incidents.

These classifications and descriptions unfold the immense significance of Maithili folksongs in the understanding of the structure and function of society. These folksongs are representative of the universal creativity of humanity. The society retains total system of knowledge through these songs. Mithila is a great cultural land where this significant tradition of the folksong has been flowing like the sacred water flows in the supreme Ganga.