

Bhakti in Women's folk songs of Rajasthan

Key Words – Women's Songs, Devotional, Bhakti, Rajasthan, Caste, Cultural memory, Intertextuality, Folk songs, Performance, Gender, Marginalized, Local, Vernacular, Oral history

Rajasthan, a state in western India, is largely a patriarchal-feudal society in which caste and class relationships also mediate cultural production, including in song. Many of the lower-caste singers are women, who must express themselves metaphorically through different genres, including wedding songs, birth songs, death songs, devotional songs, songs of desire, labour songs, *gali* (abuse) songs, songs of separation.

My Project seeks to study the *bhakti* (devotional) songs sung by women and their relation to the hegemonic caste, cultural, religious and gender power structures. The term *bhakti*, in my title, refers to the devotional genre of songs. The other translation of *bhakti* is participation. I would like to look at the community i.e. participatory aspect of women's folk songs in the region of western Rajasthan.

Geographically, I am looking at the districts of Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Barmer and Jodhpur of Western Rajasthan. All these four districts form the major part of Thar desert in India. The songs I will focus on are sung for local folk deities. I will examine these songs in relation to *bhakti*, a movement which has historically exhibited strong opposition to upper-caste hegemony.

Under the Royal Holloway Travel Grant, I travelled to Western Rajasthan for my fieldwork in the months of March to May 2018. The focus of my preliminary fieldwork has been to collect all the local literature available pertaining to my research from various sources. I travelled to Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Ajmer. This fieldwork has allowed me to sharpen my understanding of the geographical area of my proposed year-long fieldwork.

In Bikaner, I focused on Bikaner city and villages close by. In Jodhpur, my focus was in the Phalodi Block. In Jaisalmer, I am looked at Pokaran block. In Barmer, Mahabar and villages on Gadra road were potential sites of study. I collected handwritten manuscripts from women singers and spoke in depth about the practice of Bhakti singing as part of their lives. By design, I kept the discussions open-ended so that I could understand the larger patriarchal, class, caste and gender dynamics at play around the practice of ritualised singing. This has allowed me to think deeply about the methodologies that I can effectively deploy during the upcoming fieldwork.

I have also been able to understand the diverse saint figures of the region in whose praise the women sing devotional folk songs during *Ratijoga*. During my fieldwork, the women identified *Nakhat Banna*, *Pabu Ji*, *Harbu Ji*, *Devu Ji*, *Maajhi Sa*, *Mehu Ji*, *Om Banna*, *Tulsi Das Ji* from

Sanwra Gaon and *Karni Mata* as main figures in these folk songs. Apart from these, many families have *Pitar Ji* and *Bhomiya Ji* as their family deity. Through conversation with women, I have been able to map out the folk figure within my intended geographical area of research.

Apart from speaking with women, who formed the bulk of my fieldwork activities, I was also able to interview four scholars working on Bhakti to get a local framework of devotional music and women's songs. I spoke to eminent scholars like Chandra Prakash Dewal and Malchand Tiwari from Rajasthan. And for a pan-India perspective, I spoke to Professor H.S. Shivaprakash who is based in New Delhi whose work on the role of women in other Bhakti traditions is well known. I also had an enriching conversation with Professor Rustom Bharucha, where he emphasized the importance of focusing on memory in the singing tradition.

The aim of my research is to bring the common woman's voice into the larger discourse of *bhakti* studies and women's songs. This research will address the issues of women performers, women singing in familial spaces, folk genres of devotional songs, the categories and the hierarchies within the genres, and their spatial and temporal aspects. The study of songs can significantly contribute to the understanding of caste hierarchy because the often-neglected folk and local deities are evoked through these songs and narratives. Thus I would like to shift the focus of existing research from male performers to female performers and from individual artists to the community's experience of singing, thus making the field more equal.