

# Folklore as Location of Protest and Resistance: A Critical Study of the North Indian Folktale “Bavan Gagna”

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**Abstract:** *Folklore, as generally understood, is related to common people and construed in relation to higher or literate culture. This relationship with popular culture gives a dimension of resistance and critique to folk culture, where stories, proverbs, sayings, etc., apart from condensed wisdom, also become an expression of resistance and protests against dominant/hegemonic culture. Folklore records the real lives of common people with uncomfortable fidelity which also reflects their protests against authority or existing social structures, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. This paper, through a critical and careful analysis of a folktale titled ‘Bavan Gagna’, attempts to identify central themes on the subject of caste and gender and correlate them with similar ideas and concepts found in religious/philosophical movements, especially the Bhakti Movement in north India.*

**Keywords:** Folklore, Social Protest, Contestation, Caste, Hegemony

## INTRODUCTION

American folklorist Alan Dundes famously called ‘folklore’ includes myths, folktales, legends, folksongs, proverbs, riddles, gestures, games, dances, etc. as the mirror of culture (Dundes, 1969, p. 471). Folklore, as a popular product of the everyday reality of common people, is the result of the experience of not a person but of the community or the society at large (Islam, 1985, p. 16). Folklore is a product of the masses’ articulation of culture. It is an expression of their attitudes, worldviews, dreams, and desires, as well as a depiction of a way of life. However, the ‘folk’ are not a homogeneous category. Thus, neither is the vast corpus of ‘folklore’ produced by the ‘folk’. Different communities or social groups based on seemingly ‘natural’ categories like sex, ethnicity, religion, race, caste, etc., as well as social categories like workplace and class have their own set of folklore-making meanings within the social universe of each category.

As a mirror of society, folklore plays an important function in a society that is divided based on categories such as caste, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion, with differential power relations. In such a divided society, the social function of folklore ranges from simple entertainment to a device of social control and tool for resistance. Therefore, folklore is not homogeneous, unitary, or noncontroversial. In this essay, we proceed from the understanding that ‘folklore is generated in a field of conflict where competing moral claims are made by various social groups’ (Mojares, 2002, p. 4) and therefore can perform the contradictory functions of legitimising the dominant social order or its demystification and subversion.

## FUNCTIONS OF FOLKLORE

William R. Bascom identified four interrelated functions of folklore in society: The first function of folklore, according to Bascom, was that it was a source of amusement and humour. The second function of folklore is to validate and strengthen the culture of the concerned society by justifying its rituals and institutions. Thirdly, folklore plays an important role in education, particularly in no-literate societies, and lastly, folklore plays an important function in maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior (Bascom, 1954, p. 346). Emphasising the social control function of folklore, Bascom acknowledges that folklore also provides a ‘socially approved outlet for the repression’ of marginalised sections but calls it a ‘paradox’ of folklore. Folktales, proverbs, riddles, maxims, humour, stories, games, etc. are the mediums that not only reflect the values and morality of the dominant classes, but also

become the tools through which those norms, values, morality, and pattern behaviour are reaffirmed for successive generations by being in continuous circulation.

In opposition to the functionalist theory, there is the conflict theory of folklore, which emphasises the aspects of resistance, protest, and critique of the dominant cultural system/worldview present in folklore. According to Betty Wang, "one of the most important functions of folklore is its service as a vehicle for social protest. Wherever there is injustice and oppression, one can be sure that the victims will find some solace in folklore. Through jokes, songs, and proverbs, the anger of the folk is vented upon the often frighteningly unassailable individual or institution" (Wang, 1965, p. 308). Both these understandings, though coming from the opposite spectrum of sociological theories, present folklore as a 'solace' or 'outlet' for the repressed emotions of oppressed communities; folklore acts like a societal pressure cooker, whose role is to release pressure and ease tension.

In both the functional and conflict theories of folklore, folklore thus becomes a form of discourse in the Foucauldian sense, serving the interests of hegemonic groups. Iara Lessa sums up Foucault's understanding of discourse 'as systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak' (Lessa, 2005, p. 285). The role of discourse is to legitimise power structures and systems of domination in any given society, which is done by providing outlets for frustration and repressed emotions emanating from that system of hegemony. It is precisely for this reason that a variety of folklore with messages of subversion and critique is tolerated to a great degree in any society at any point in time.

In contrast to both these theories, Lombardi Satriani, drawing upon Marxist theory, proposes that folklore should also be understood as a culture of contestation, where contestation means 'opposing testimony' to the dominant culture. This contestation takes place between the dominated and the dominators and between the weak and the strong. In this perspective, "folklore is understood as product of special culture that derives from the lower classes with the function to oppose the hegemonic culture" (Lombardi-Satriani, 1974, p. 108). Satriani further deconstructs the 'dominator' to include not only economic domination but also gender and other forms of oppression operating in society. As a culture of contestation, folklore marks the outer limits of the hegemonic culture whose ideological tricks it reveals, contesting at times only with its presence, the universality, which is only superficial, of the official culture's concepts of the world and life (Lombardi-Satriani, 1974, p. 104). On a similar note, Jose Limon argues that folklore can contest the hegemony of dominant social order at two levels; a) direct contestation- where the name of the 'class enemy' is mentioned directly or symbolically in poems, songs, tales, jokes etc. and b) indirect contestation- whereby merely the 'presence' of folklore (produced by subordinate classes) limits the total hegemony of dominant social order (Limon, 1983, p. 45).

Folklore as a collective product of any community is a reflection not only of their everyday life but also of the challenges and struggles that the community faces in everyday life. Wherever there are hierarchies, whenever there are discriminative and undue plays of power, there are bound to be modes of resistance (Bhaduri, 2006, p. 191). For marginalized communities/groups, folklore is not only a mode through which they condemn social injustice, exploitation, and oppression but also a tool for resistance and reclamation (Lo, 2021, p. 118).

## CONTESTATION IN INDIAN FOLKLORE

Indian society is divided on the basis of caste and tribal identities, with differential power relations and gender-based differentiation. Social conflicts emanating from these realities are mirrored in the Indian folklore. As Mazharul Islam claims, social conflict forms one of the basic characteristics of many elements of Indic folklore, and it is full of conflicts and tensions arising from caste, tribal/non-tribal, and gender relations (Islam, 1985, pp. 243-244). Folklore becomes a medium through which, as Praphulladatta Goswami in his study of Assamese folktales says, the lower castes 'prick the bubble of orthodoxy and caste superiority' (Goswami, 1985, p. 63).

Folk culture has and continues to play a pivotal role in rural India, especially in providing space and scope to protest against social and economic atrocities. Neerja Singh and Namit Vikram Singh in their analysis of Birha songs (a popular Bhojpuri folk song genre associated with cattle rearing Ahir Community of Bihar) have shown how those songs became a medium for voicing the 'anger against the atrocities committed by the members of the higher castes against the womenfolk of the lower caste communities' (Singh & Singh, 2021, p. 135). The authors further show that embedded within the Birha songs are the themes of reluctant acceptance of the existential reality of their community and the struggle to reject that reality imposed by dominant groups. In her ethnographic study of the Dhobi community of Delhi, Subhadra Mitra Channa has shown the existence of a subversive culture expressed through tropes of jokes, rituals, gossip, and rabid satire, etc., centred around upper caste/class clients of the Dhobis who belong to a lower hierarchy in the caste structure. Channa asserts that the existence of this 'subversive culture'—an outcome of caste conflict—plays an important role in identity formation and assertion of the Dhobis as a community (*biradari*) and provides an adaptive mechanism that enables them to retain their humanity under socially oppressive discourse and practice of caste (Channa, 2021, pp. 103-120).

The presence of elements of subversion and resistance in Maithili folklore has been brought out by Dev Nath Pathak who claims that 'subversion of caste surface in Maithili folklore through barbs, wit and wisdom' (Pathak, 2021, p. 137). However, while noting the presence of subversion, Pathak makes an important point that these subversions do not necessarily lead to any radical change in the structure of the caste system. This point, to a great extent, holds for many such genres of folklore where criticism is present, and resistance is offered but with little or no impact upon the structures of domination. However, it is necessary to recognise that the themes of resistance,

subversion, and critique present in folklore are expressions of the dreams and desires of oppressed communities and have the potential to be used as a resource for social movements. Although in most cases folklores with such themes are tolerated, there are often cases where their performance might invite violence from hegemonic groups.

One such folklore is the popular folktale from Bihar of 'Reshma and Chuharmal', a story of love between an 'upper' caste woman and a 'lower' caste man. This story as Badri Narayan has shown, has been the cultural and ritual vehicle through which the 'lower' castes (especially the Dausad community) have articulated their protest against feudal hegemony and its oppressive discrimination (Narayan, 2010, p. 166). The element of contestation is so strong in the Reshma and Chuharmal story that its performance has led to bloodshed in the Mokama region of Bihar, from where the story originates.

### THEMES OF SUBVERSION IN *BAWAN GANGA*

In the theoretical backdrop, I analyse a popular folktale from Bihar titled '*Bawan Ganga*' for the themes of contestation and subversion. The story goes like this...

*"Once, there was a poor low-caste man who eked out his living by hiring himself out as a field-labourer and by rearing pigs. The man had a daughter whose duty was to drive pigs to the field. While grazing pigs one day on the full moon of an important festival, the girl saw a young Brahmin hurrying past. She was curious as to why he was almost running and asked him the reason. The Brahmin replied that he wanted to reach the river Ganges and bathe at the time of a full moon. The girl smiled and told him that he could not possibly reach the river Ganges in time, as the river was far away, but that she could solve his problem. The Brahmin wanted to know what she was thinking. The girl pointed to a dirty pool where her pigs were wallowing and told him that if he had real faith in his heart and complete trust in her, he should dip into the pool, and she would bring about the exact auspicious moment of the full moon, and he, in turn, would earn all the merit of bathing in the Ganges. The Brahmin dived into the pool and found the bottom full of jewels and brought out a handful. The girl wanted him to dive again, and he did so once more. This time, he found mud at the bottom. The girl then told him that he had received the reward he deserved for the implicit faith and confidence he had in her. The astonished Brahmin was very attracted to the girl and proposed marriage. The girl blushed, but smilingly said that she could not marry without her father's consent".*

*"The Brahmin youth approached the father, but the father did not wish to accept a high caste man. The young Brahmin is heartbroken at the refusal and threatens to commit suicide. The father was frightened of being responsible for the death of a Brahmin and reluctantly gave his consent... When the bride and groom were leaving, the father wanted to give a dowry. The girl secretly told her husband that he should only ask for a particular cow, pig, and parrot. The poor man was taken aback at the son-in-law's request, but was obliged to grant the gifts asked for..."*

*"The parrot was not an ordinary bird. It had access to Lord Indra's court and visited it every day, bringing its*

*mistress news of the happenings in the court. The pig was the leader of all the pigs in the country; the cow was a "Surabhi" or the auspicious cow that yields plenty".*

*"...One day the parrot brought the girl news that Indra had decided that in the approaching rainy season there would be no rain anywhere in the districts except for on the barren hills and valleys of Rajgir. Everywhere else, there would be famine. Hearing the news, the girl asked her pig to dig up the entire barren hillside and valleys with its herd of swine, which it did. She then asked Suravi Cow to manure the fields, and this was also done. The girl then asked her husband to sow rice in the dug-up area. The Brahmin husband was perplexed but complied with his wife's request. After some time, it rained and that particular area was congested with rice..."*

*"Indra was perturbed that his plan to bring about a famine had been thwarted. He ordered an army of rats to destroy crops. The parrot smuggled the news out to its mistress, and the Brahmin husband procured an army of cats to guard the crop, and the rats fled. Indra was furious and ordered a storm to be raised when paddy was being cut and stored on the threshing floor, the idea being that the grain would thus be blown away. Again, the parrot brought the news and the girl advised her husband to dig a deep moat round the wall at the foot of the hill... The storm came, but the paddy remained safe in the trench. This way, the country was saved from famine because of the virtues, cleverness, and resourcefulness of the girl". (Choudhury, 1968, pp. 99-100)*

The folktale presents a striking reversal of the dominant Brahmanical and patriarchal worldviews through multiple narrative elements. In Puranic lore, the divine cow Surabhi is traditionally associated with Brahmin sages, such as Jamadagni and Vashista. However, in this story, she is possessed by a person belonging to an 'untouchable' caste, thereby shifting sacred authority from the uppermost position in the caste hierarchy to those placed outside the varna system. Similarly, the pig rearer's control over powerful beings, such as the 'king of pigs' and a parrot with access to Lord Indra's court, symbolically relocates power and prestige to a marginalised caste.

The story also challenges caste and gender hierarchies through the interaction between a Brahmin boy and an 'untouchable' family. The Brahmin boy approaches the 'untouchable' man seeking the hand of his daughter in marriage, thus reversing the expected hierarchy. However, the father initially refuses and only reluctantly agrees, indicating agency and authority on the part of the marginalised caste. The daughter further subverts the social order. She teaches a Brahmin a lesson in religion, displays control over astronomical events, and ultimately saves others from divine wrath through her intelligence and foresight, emerging as the central decision-maker.

Another significant element of the tale is the emphasis on faith over ritual purity and the caste hierarchy. The story equates the water of the Ganges with the water of a dirty pool where pigs were wallowing, suggesting that sacredness does not lie in ritual purity but in belief alone. It is faith that transforms ordinary water into something sacred, thereby challenging the ritualistic foundations of Brahmanism. This underscores the influence of the Bhakti

movement, which emphasised personal devotion and faith over ritual practices.

There is another impact of the Bhakti movement on both the folktales. As noted above, the traditional Brahmanical order has been turned upside-down or reversed in both tales. This aspect shows the influence of a literary tool used mostly by fifteenth-century Bhakti poet Kabir, known as 'ulatbani' or 'ultabamsi'. The word is a compound made of two words: *ulat* and *bani* or *bamsi*. *Ulat* means upside-down, and *bani/bamsi* means speech/language. *Ulatbani* signifies a genre of subversive poetic tradition that developed during the medieval period among vernacular and oral literary culture, mostly of the mystic tradition (Verma 2017, 44). Apart from recognising *ulat* as the 'upside-downness of the natural world', Linda Hess also makes the case for understanding it as reversed"; in her words, the *ultabamsi* poems associated with Kabir and Nath Yogi are based on the reversal of roles, personalities, laws of nature (Hess and Singh 2002, 145).

In the folktale, the Brahmin, a figure normally associated with knowledge and religious authority, receives wisdom from an 'untouchable' girl. Such narrative reversals destabilise the assumed naturalness of the Brahmanical social order and serve as an example of *ultabamsi*.

## CONCLUSION

Even though the tale subverts the dominant Brahmanical worldview and expresses values that challenge the 'official culture', this contestation does not completely reject that culture; rather, it appropriates its symbols and concepts to subvert them. This is an example of Santos's notion of counter-hegemonic appropriation, where ideas developed by dominant groups are reinterpreted and creatively transformed by oppressed communities into tools of resistance (Santos 2018, 30-31). The multiple reversals present in *Bawan Ganga* demonstrate how marginalised groups reinterpret elements of hegemonic culture to critique domination and imagine an alternative social reality. At the same time, these narratives exemplify everyday forms of resistance, that is, cultural expressions through which subaltern groups challenge and negotiate oppressive structures.

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