



THE ORATURE OF NAT COMMUNITY IN AWADH: READING SELECT CULTURAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

As far as the song, dance and performance are concerned, the Nat community is one of the most colourful communities in India. They are excellent singers and performers, having their closed community songs and dances, and showing rich knowledge of the traditions of the castes, communities, and myths in the vicinities. In the present paper, my concern is to explore the trajectories of life and vision of the Nat community as expressed in their select orature. I have collected these songs directly from the people of the Nat community in the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh. The oratures of the Nat people are very significant in the contemporary context when we are looking at the margin and even believe in the patterns of canons of alternative modernity. The tradition and practices of this community have offered rich cultural texts that are found in the form of orature. With the intermixing of cultures in the contemporary milieu, the cultural texts are vanishing very fast. The young Nat people have almost forgotten their cultural and mythological history, and in the lack of awareness, they are least concerned with collecting and documenting it. Lack of education and resources and even the lack of interest stand as the primary factor behind it. These texts are a kind of intangible cultural heritage of our colourful land. More efforts by intellectuals, cultural anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and media are expected for conserving, documenting, and disseminating the texts.

Key Words: Orature, Nat, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Origin of Nat, Nat Mythology, Culture.

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INTRODUCTION

I got fascinated with the colourful life of Nat people during my interaction with them in the first decade of this century. Although I was observing their life, manners, and culture for quite a long back, my studies became more systematic and focused during this phase. In this series, my first publication got shaped as "Women in Nat Tribe (A Case Study of their condition in Barabanki District of Uttar Pradesh)", published as a chapter in the book The Marginal (Bookshelf: 2008), edited by R.B. Singh. For this research, I explored the socio-cultural trajectories of the Nat people residing in the Barabanki district of Uttar Pradesh. In the Barabanki district of Uttar Pradesh, their population is opulently found in Ram Sahehi Ghat, Sirauli Gauspur, and Nawabganj Tehsils. They are living in permanent settlements, yet some of them are found spending the nomadic life as well. Karen Hightower writes in "Nat: Hindu Tradition in India" that "people prefer to be known as Raj Nat as they claim to have Rajput origins and originate from Rajasthan. They are also called Bhanmati, meaning "something amazing." Nat is classed as a scheduled caste, except in Delhi, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh. ...The Nat of India is professional dancers, singers, and acrobats by tradition.

The low caste position of the Nat means they are denied many benefits except when the government provides them. Their work and semi-nomadic lifestyle has caused them to be impoverished. ... Nat people are predominantly Hindu. There are many forms of Hinduism with its own deities and beliefs." (Hightower,)

Discussion: Nat is a landless community found in north Indian states- Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab. They are also found in West Bengal and Gujrat. Generally, they are recognized as the scheduled castes in these states. They claim their mythology, origin and caste.'

On the origin of the Nat people, other versions are also found. The People Group of India write on their website:

Also spelled "Nut", the name Nat is derived from the Sanskrit word nata (dancer), a term associated with their acrobatic skills. Their origin is obscure. It is said they have descended from two Chamar (tanner) brothers, Asa and Basa. The anthropologist, Rose (1919), records the legend that the Nat were originally Brahmins whose duty was to supply fuel for funeral pyres. On one occasion they delivered a supply of fuel to a patron just in case someone died as they did not want to be inconvenienced as they had to attend a wedding. The patrons regarded this as a bad omen and dispensed with the Nats'

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services. The Nat approached a fakir (Muslim recluse) for help. He had a monkey (Hanuman) who taught them how to entertain. ('People Group of India', Para 3).

This myth is subjective and does not find an association with the Nat people in the Awadh region. Citing William Crooke, People Group of India writes that, "the real fact seems to be that the name Nat is an occupational term which includes several different clans who have been grouped merely on account of their common occupation of dancing, prostitution, and performance of various primitive industries." (People Group of India, Para 4).. Their oral traditions, however, trace their ancestry to a Rajput lineage, the warrior caste that is second to the Brahmin. The Nat speak their language called Bagri or Nati that belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. They are also conversant with Hindi, as well as other languages and dialects of the regions they reside. Traditionally, the higher Hindu castes do not accept food and water from the hands of the Nat, and at the same time the Nat does not accept the same from certain castes lower than them such as the Dhobi (washerman), Bhangi (sweeper or scavenger), Mochi (cobbler) or the Dhanuk (cotton carder). (People Group of India, Para, Para 4). All these tales and myths of origin are subjective, and they are not universally accepted.

In the present paper my concern is not to discuss the issue of their origin caste and other related factors, but to focus on their cultural texts, especially the folk songs, my sample size mainly relates to the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh. These songs provide a new version and vision of their life, culture and tradition. I agree with Video artist and theorist, Martha Rosler, who has to say that, "it is only on the margins that one can still call attention to what the 'universal system' leaves out." (qt in John Tagg, 'Postmodernism and the Born-Again Avant-Garde'⁴) The fringes and margins are always fascinating and exotic. They give the satisfying feeling of "other", and the other always entices. Steven Conner states that "The romance of the marginal is to be found throughout postmodern cultural politics."(228).

As said earlier, the Nat community is the most colourful in India as far as the song, dance and performance are concerned. They are excellent singers and performers, having their representative community songs and dances, and showing rich knowledge of the traditions of the castes, communities, and traditions of the fellow communities as well. Men Nat are good singers and dancers. Mostly they use Dhol (a special kind of drum) as an accompanying musical instrument while singing. During my survey on folk songs in the course of my research, I collected 17 texts. For the research question of this paper, the three most representative songs are given. My focus is not to provide any analytical study or to indulge in the intrigues of literary and cultural theories, but to provide firsthand ready information on the translation of their emotions into expression.

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Text 1

Soy para re toi kahe

This is a song sung by a Nat woman stirring up her man for daily household work. In the complaining tone, she narrates that the animals, birds –almost every fauna and flora are awakened, and the man is still in slumber. She suspects that the man Nat has consumed some intoxicating stuff.

*Bilari jugari patahi pakariya
lokhadi badava siyar
sabai sakaare dolat phekarat
kae soyis hai -
ka tu kuchhu soongh.*

*Chalatis chalatis pedhaki bolai
purava chale au sonka dolay ,
soy para re toi kahe
soi raha kachhu soonghi ?*

*Bhainsa , gadaha, kookur jaage
dolis dera sabai nat bhaage
lai -lai jaangar- janavar saare ,
kukuri, bilari , gohata , keera
lokhadi , badava siyaar
nikar sabay gaye dera walen ,
lagga bhar chadha ghaam ,
lagga bhar chadh aava ghaam .*

English Rendition :

*The cat, Jugree¹-the buffalo and the Pakar² tree
everyone awakened,
awakened are the fox and the jackal too.
At the dawn everyone is up and kicking,
what comes - you still slept!
Intoxicated hey?*

¹ A common name for the buffalo , cows, etc

² A big tree for shade



*Dove is singing while its move,
with the eastern wind blowing trees' young shoot
why the man you still slept?
Have you taken the intoxicant?*

*Bull-the male buffalo, the donkey, and the dog
all are awake
the habitat in action,
every Nat on move
with his self and livestock.
The kennel, the kitten , the reptiles, the snake
the fox, and even the scratched jackal-
every member of our habitat is on.
The sun is up ,
The sun is quite awake.*

The text of the song is self-explanatory. It shows the status of Nat woman performing the equal work with her man in the household chores. The song offers a co-existence of humans and animal in the life of Nat people.

Text 2

Kahe chalis hai tirchhi Natiniya

The present song mentioned here as text 2 shows the community pride of the Nat people. The man Nat is telling the secret of their pride to her lady. For them nature is everything, and they feel happy with the household, environment and livestock. He expresses his reluctance toward the luxurious lifestyle and believes in the contentment, that he finds with his earth and locale.

*Kaahe chalis hai tirchhi natiniya
tedhi medhi chaal
apani atariya
sirki re palva
apani dagariya bana beech.*

*Na chahi -na chahi
hamka atariya
hiyahin bahai purvay ,*

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*jangal bana bichh raaj apan has,
hamaka kaahe kaam teer natiniya.
Bhainsa Bhains Kookur hamare tagade
dehi hamari hamra nisan.
sagari duniya chales hain purakhay
hamara samulla harera.
re samajhis ?
samajh sake to pakki natiniya
samjahan kerai hai tav ya baat !*

English Rendition :

*Hey darling, why these curves and curls !
Why are the guiles so?
Our habitat is thatched one
and our route across the forest.*

*We don't need high raisers
it is our place, it is here-
where the soothing eastern winds blow
we are the dons of the jungle so.
you don't underrate me –my love!
Our buffalo and bulls are sturdy
our body shows our strength so.*

*Our ancestors traversed across the world,
ours is the entire vegetation around !
Hey –realize it all, just realize.
If you could follow –you're the Natini³ perfect ,
it's nothing but a secret to comprehending!
The song is self-explanatory. The ecological concern and the community pride
are visible.*

Text 3

Kahan gaye Nat Beer more Baba

The Nat people believe in the power of their dead ancestors. This(Text 3) is a very popular song in the Nat community for invoking the dead head of the clan. In their spiritual tradition,

³ The lady Nat



it is believed by the community that the dead Nat is blessed with super powers, and is fondly remembered and known as Natbeer. This song invokes the Natbeer . At the death of the Nat the whole habitat felt sad , and so felt the fauna and flora around.

*Kahan gaye Natbeer more baba
aavav milaav phir aay
chale aavav,
chale aavav,
chale aavav ho,
Natbeer more baba
chale aavav ho.*

*Tumhare gaye mora dera royis
royis jangal siyar
kukur royis
lokhari royis, royis badva siyar .*

*Sahati jo hamare rahen sultanawa
gaye bad jangal beech
gaye bad jangal beech.
unke gaye sabai dera royis
royis jag dyohaar.*

*Barakha royis
sookhi naddi
machhari milai na bhaat
nahi milai ab neeki kaaliya ,
nahin chaugada siyaar.*

*Chale aavav , chale aavav , chale aavav ho
more baba
Natbeer more baba
chale aavav ho.*

*Dokari Pakariya bhar bhar rovai
pati girai hazzar.
natbeer more baba
natbeer mor baba ,
nikasai paati harer*

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*chale aavav. chale aavav
chale aavav ho.*

English Rendition :

*Where have you gone-
our Natbeer baba,
do come
come
please
please
do come
Our Natbeer Baba !*

*At your departure the habitat wept
and bereaved felt the jackal in the forest,
and the dog wept.
the fox moaned.*

*Sahati⁴ -our Sultan who donned,
now as he has departed to the Grand Forest⁵,
the rain suppurated,
the dried up rivulets,
we get neither fish nor rice even ,
neither do we get staple meat, nor even
small preys – the hare or jackal.*

*Where have you gone-
our Natbeer baba!
Do come
Come!
Please,
Please,
do come
our Natbeer Baba!*

The old Pakariya tree bemoans full eyed tears,

⁴ A name . A Nat who lived some 60 years ago. Now no more

⁵ Here connotes Heaven



*thousands of the leaves fall,
Hey Natbeer Baba.*

*Green leaves shall come
once you will be here-
our Nat Beer Baba!
do come,
come!
please!
please
do come!*

These songs are directly collected from the members of the people of the Nat community and are records of orature. Orality is the real testimony of feelings. If we agree with Jayalaxmi, Phurailatpam, when she says that it is the symbol of culture and identity; Jayalaxmi finds that "orality is often considered a symbol of culture and identity. Oral tradition has been preserved through the ages. It may take the form of not only the narrative genres like myths, legends, anecdotes, jokes, fairy tales, ballads, epics, proverbs, and riddles but also folk painting, folk costumes, folk theatre, etcetera." (Jayalaxmi, 2010/09/11). This way, the oratures of the Nat people are very significant in the contemporary context when we have started looking at the margin, and even believe in the patterns and canons of alternative modernity. These are rich cultural texts but with the social and economic changes, are vanishing very fast. The young Nat people have almost forgotten their cultural and mythological history, and they are least bothered to collect and document it. Lack of education and resources, and even the lack of interest in cultural heritage are the major factors behind it. These songs are a kind of intangible cultural heritage of our colourful land. More efforts by intellectuals, cultural anthropologists, linguists and sociologists, and media are expected towards conserving the colours of our land.

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