

# SOOTHING METERS OR COMPLEX NEGOTIATIONS: THE POLEMICS OF SELECT LULLABIES FROM PUNJAB

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**Abstract :** Lullabies and childhood are inextricably linked; mothers warble sweet lyrics creating a dream world for their children to waft in. They are the first cultural, literary and linguistic impressions on the child's tabula rasa. Simple and repetitive, formulaic and structured, the lullabies simulate the rhythmic pulsating beat of the foetus in the womb, an assurance of succour and security. These are of amorphous origin and are passed on from one generation to the next with minor variations. An analysis of select lullabies from Punjab reveal complex structures and dynamic spaces hidden beneath these soothing meters wherein the personal and collective intervene in a dialogic banter to negotiate resistance and incorporation, structure and anti-structure, and wherein parochial hegemonies are consolidated, and gendered stereotypes reinforced. Though these songs essentially present a feminine worldview, they encompass the aspirations of male fiefdom. They are also the vibrant spaces wherein the dialectical paradigms of individual desires and societal conformity are negotiated. This paper proposes to bring to the fore how patriarchal stereotypes, gendered identities and stratified hegemonies are clearly defined and delineated, embedded deeply in cultural memories, and fixated in the collective identities through the lullaby.

**Keywords -** Lullaby, Songs, Punjab, Identity, Patriarchy, Society.

The fact that change is the only constant is a well-known adage. The life of an individual is punctuated with a series of transitions, be it biological or sociological, occupational or psychological. All such changes involve leaving one's comfort zone for a territory which one has experienced only as a voyeur. The transit is a huge leap of faith and it is natural to be subsumed by apprehensions and angst. From childhood to adulthood, from being single to marriage, from the joys of youth to the onset of age-linked travails, each sphere is distinct and the move from one to the other is fraught with doubts and tension. It is here that the support of the family and community is integral to the smooth transition of the individual which is also imperative to the functioning of society at large. Rites of passage rituals and their accompanying songs are ideological forces that not only guide and instruct ritualistic performance but also aid the initiates in adjustment and help contain anxieties that accompany change in status and identities. This function of maintaining social conformity to ensure that potential deviates are brought into the fold to maintain social harmony is evident from the first songs that a child is exposed to right after birth i.e. the lullaby. The lullabies in the Indian context insidiously weave a web of social diktats, define gender stereotypes and negotiate with personal aspirations and social compliance, as the mother lulls the baby both literally and metaphorically to sleep. Compliance to community norms are reinforced, genders are constructed and subtly ingrained through the primary narratives that we are exposed to. The purpose of this study is to establish links between select Punjabi lullabies and patriarchal forces that create normative moulds that we are expected to fit into.

Lullabies and childhood are inextricably linked; mothers warble sweet lyrics creating a dream world for their children to waft in. They create a utopian fantasy for themselves and their children as they imagine them to be kings reigning supreme or beautiful princess in a world far far away from the drudgery of their daily existence. For their *kaka* (sons), they envisage a future full of huge iron cauldrons brimming with mustard oil, granaries overflowing with sesame seeds, a household with gold and silver in abundance. For the *nikki* (daughters), their primary desire and wish is for a brother to follow soon or/and an ideal marital home for her with respectable and loving in-laws. It is in the lullabies, that there is a wish fulfilment, an articulation of their aspirations and at a sub-conscious level, reinforcement of identity structures which aids in consolidating constructions of *punjabiyaat*. Unlike the other rites of passage songs, like those associated with pregnancy, childbirth and weddings, these are private utterances, purely in a realm where the mother and child exist in a world of their own. Her affection and concern for his/her well being though find expression in formulaic patterns usually echoing the loris she recollects from her own childhood.

<i>So jaa raja so jaa ve</i>	Sleep little prince, go to sleep
<i>Tera bapu aaya ve</i>	Your father came
<i>Khel khelone laya ve</i>	He brought games
<i>Teri bua aayi ve</i>	Your auntie came
<i>Kurta topi laayi ve</i>	She brought a hat and shirt
<i>Tera baba aaya ve</i>	Your grandpa came
<i>Sone diya mohra laaya ve.</i>	He brought gold coins. (Singh & Gill 181)

*Loriyan* sung for male children are replete with references to not just Gods in their infant state, e.g. Kanha (Lord Krishna), but also historical rulers, such as Maharaja Ranjit Singh in particular, whose reign is considered to be the golden period for Punjab. Following is a translation of a *lori* by Ranjeet Singh Bajwa.

Son boast/ Continue to boast  
 Soldiers are at your command/ Sahib Devan is your mother  
 And the King Ranjit Singh / Is your brother.  
 Son boast/ Continue to boast  
 The king Ranjit Singh / Is at your beck and call  
 The maid servant holds the fan/ And your tresses swing... (Bajwa 83)

The *loris* are replete with references to gifts, which signify acceptance and affection, an affirmation of one's presence and identity within the familial structure. Gifts from the *nanke*, the maternal grandparents are even more significant as they hold a special place in a woman's heart.

<i>Laal nu lori dewan</i>	I give loris to my dear son
<i>Saun ja mere puttia</i>	Go to sleep, my son
<i>Nanakian nu jawange</i>	We shall go to your nanke
<i>Jhagga chunni liawange</i>	We shall get Jhagga's blessings
<i>Nani ditto ghio</i>	Nani gave ghee
<i>Jiwe lal da pio</i>	May your father be blessed
<i>Laal nu lori dewan...</i> (Kent 115)	I give loris to my dear son...

These lullabies also fortify the roles the children are expected to play as they grow. The males will occupy the space outside the home while the females will take care of the home and the hearth. *Alarh balarh bawe da/ Bawa kanak liawega/ Biwi baithi chategi/ Maa punian wattegi/ Bawi mann pakawegi/ Bawa bhaitha khawega* (Kent 116). It is the male's responsibility to get the grain while the woman will ensure food on the table. Societal construction and orientation of gender roles begin with the *loris*, which slot and compartmentalize ideal Punjabi males and females ensuring that deviates are brought into the fold.

<i>Chhi chha jiwe maa...</i>	Chhi Chaa May the mother live
<i>Munde khedan gulli danda</i>	Boys play gulli danda
<i>Kurian chirian nhuandian</i>	Girls give bath to the birds
<i>Marad karan lekha patta</i>	While men study
<i>Rannan ghar wasaundian...</i> (Kent 125)	Wives set up homes...

Simple and repetitive, formulaic and hypnotic, the *loris* or *loriyan* in Punjab, speak the universal language of lullabies the world over. The meter imitates the rocking motion, inducing sleep as the mother subconsciously weaves her dreams for her son articulating her need for social acceptance and an upward movement in the rigid hierarchy. These utterances, though apparently simplistic, become the first few impressions on the child's tabula rasa, firmly reinforcing gendered stereotypes and reinforcing patriarchal *punjabiyyat*. They are also the dynamic space wherein the dialectical paradigms of her individual desires and societal conformity are negotiated. The lullabies are not just melodies to cajole the baby to sleep, but are also expressions of the mother's aspirations and fears, and as Abdulkadir Emeksiz in his article, 'Are Lullabies to Sleep?' published in 2011 encapsulates,

lullabies tend to be an instrument to capture the despair of the past, the conditions of the current day and the dreams of tomorrow. Both personal and national feelings are expressed through lullabies ... some of the lullabies with their content are understood to carry the function of maintaining so-called 'individual and collective awakening'. (153)

The use of the first person and endearing nicknames for the child denotes a personalized sacral space in which the mother and child are in a harmonious accord, a dialogic banter wherein the mother speaks for both herself and the child, the latter being perhaps the only one to whom she can articulate her desires in a mode that is intrinsically private. This though soon moves into the collective and the communal sphere, as public/social acceptance transcends her private world dominated by heartfelt longings for more visits from her parental home or her aspirations for her offspring. She desires heroic fame and wealth akin to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, blessings by Jhagga, social acceptance and respect. The collective imagination of Punjab and *punjabiyyat* gets reinforced in the constant recollection of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, popularly known as 'Sher-e-Punjab' or the Lion of Punjab, the first Sikh emperor whose reign from 1780 to 1839 marks the forging of a powerful unified Punjab, which was earlier a conglomeration of warring misls. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a legendary cult figure remembered not only for his military accomplishments but also for his wisdom, generosity and secular practices. Iconic reiteration of Ranjit Singh and Kanha (Lord Krishna) and other mythical and historical figures merge and reinforce both individual and collective aspirations. The lyrics are simple and repetitive, formulaic and structured, usually the same *lori*, the mother remembers from her own childhood with some variations. They simulate the rhythmic pulsating beat of the fetus in the womb, an assurance of succor and security. These lullabies are also the first cultural, literary and linguistic impressions upon a child. These lyrical patterns remain embedded in our memories forever and a gentle nudge brings forth the entire repertoire, which helped frame our worldview, implicitly and insidiously.

On a field visit to village Kuthala, near Malerkotla in Punjab, the researcher asked a select group of Punjabi women to sing the *loris* that they used to sing to their children. The researcher was surprised that they did not emerge spontaneously, as they are an intrinsic part of child rearing. On prompting, the subjects asserted that they could sing only if they had a child in their lap. It is only after a child and that too a male one was placed on the lead singer's lap, did the *lori* flow, spontaneously and mellifluously, reiterating the symbiotic connection between these songs and their lived experiences.

Though these songs present essentially a feminine worldview, they encompass the aspirations of male fiefdom. Even the songs sung to girls or sung by girls themselves when young, reflect a deep rooted parochial structure, so deeply embedded that girls repeat

these endlessly in gay abandon as they play, but they work into their psyche so insidiously that even these apparent innocent refrains are protective loving mantras for their brothers and not about themselves.

*Kikli kaleer di, pag mere veer di,  
Dupatta mere bhai da, fitte muh jawai da...* (Kent 13)

*Kikli* refers to the game when *Kaleer* (young girl) goes twirling around, her hands entwined with another *Kaleer*. The second line of this refrain, *pag mere veer di, pag* referring to the turban of her *veer*, i.e. her brother. The *pag/* turban carries the weight of respectability and acceptability in a rigidly hierarchical society and perhaps even more significantly, in the role played by the girl in ensuring the same. She is the repository of his *pag*, i.e. she is the carrier of his *izzat* or social respectability and her conduct must be in accordance with what is expected. Prof Kirpal Kazak has offered an interesting explanation for the next two lines, *Dupatta mere bhai da, fitte muh jawai da*. He links the last two lines with influences from Islamic culture wherein marriages between first cousins were not uncommon. Thereby, the one who is a brother may be one's husband later and thereby the *bhai* may become the *jawai*, the very idea being repugnant to her. This is probable though may not be the only explanation. There are many variations of this particular lullaby and has inveigled its way into the popular mass media as well. Often, the third line is sung as, *Dupatta mere mai da*, referring to the veil of the mother, an association with the strongest links to childhood. Which version pre-empted the other is difficult to pin down, due to its amorphous origin and trajectory. Several compilations, those by Amrit Kent, N Kaur, M.S Randhawa and Devendra Satyarthi, to name a few, though adhere to *Dupatta mere 'bhai' da*. The last stanza, *Kikli pawan aiiyan, Badam khawan aiiyan, Badam mera mitha, Main veer de muh ditha* i.e. I came forth to do kikli, I came to eat almonds, my almond was sweet, I fed it to my brother. The brother is an overpowering presence in most of the *loris* sung to girls or the songs associated with their games played during childhood. Yet another song goes as,

*Kothe utte ganna, veer mera lamma,  
Bhabho meri patli, jihde nakk machhali...  
Rab mainu bhag laya, veeran deean jodiya...* (Kent 130)

This is a typical number game, with objects increasing or decreasing with interspersions of apparent nonsense lyrics. But even amidst the nonsensical components, what stands out, are the hyperboles associated with the *veer*. In this particular song, he is tall, embodying manly attributes of an ideal Punjabi male, but more significant perhaps are the last two quoted lines above. The girl is blessed as her brother is blessed with a wife and the continuance of his family will ensure her own wellbeing.

Patriarchal stereotypes and gendered identities are clearly defined and delineated, embedded deeply in cultural memories, fixated in the collective, affirmed in our individuated identities through our first encounters, be it literary, linguistic or cultural. They are not just soothing meters to lull the baby to sleep but also reflexive of the mother's fears and hopes. They are private utterances of the mother reflecting her innermost hopes and fears in a dynamic negotiation with her desire for social acceptance of her kin. The reference to multiple key relations i.e. grandparents, uncles (*Taya, Chacha, Mama, Phupha*) and aunts (*Tai, Chachi, Mami, Bua*) reinforces kinship and familial hierarchy and references to their arrival with suitable gifts also alludes to rites of aggregation wherein the new entrant is firmly ensconced in the familial structure. The lullabies or *loris* also hold a world of promise and optimism, a utopic wonder of all things precious,

<i>Hoote mate, Khand kheer khete</i>	Swing and things, sugar puddings
<i>Sone di gad ghara de...</i>	Make the cart of gold ...
<i>Roope pinj pawa de</i>	On it put a silver grill
<i>Uthe kake nu bhitaade...</i>	Seat Kaka (son) on the top

(Harvinder Singh n.pag.)

Not all *loris* though are expressions of optimism, they warn of impending dangers in the form of natural and supernatural powers which endanger the wellbeing of the child who is in a liminal stage and therefore vulnerable to such threats. The following *lori* refers to barking dogs, dense forests and battles, hardly the material to be expected as soothing rhymes for children. *Dure Dure Kuttia/ Jangal sutia/ Jangal pai larai/ jiwe munde di tai/ lal nun lori dewan/ saun ja mere puttia* (Kent 115). A comparison to the popular English lullaby "Rock a bye baby" will not be out of place.

Rock- a- bye baby/ On the tree top  
When the wind blows/ The cradle will rock  
When the bough breaks/ The cradle will fall  
And down will fall baby/ Cradle and all.

This is believed to have emerged from the songs of Native American women who tied cloth cradles on birch trees to rock their babies while they worked. The lullabies become protective mantras or chants firmly rooted in the belief that naming of these malignant forces will safeguard the child from the same. These appropriate the magical function of language wherein curses may find their way into these soothing lyrics to keep jealous evil eyes at bay.

These apparent simple and soothing meters carry the weight of the mother's aspirations and anxieties, her need to conform and be accepted, for her child to be the centre of not just her universe but of the entire familial structure. Her individual desires may or may not be in consonance with societal expectations, but this is the only space in which she traverses the gap. She can be true to herself only in a lullaby, it is a form of therapy as she fights her own demons. The lullaby has multifarious roles and serves purposes far more intense than just lulling a baby to sleep. Pedagogical, psychological, magical and political, lullabies are complex

structures and dynamic spaces wherein the personal and collective intervene in a dialogic banter to negotiate resistance and incorporation, structure and anti-structure, and wherein parochial hegemonies are consolidated.

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