



Existence of Caste in Punjabi Folklore: A Critical Analysis of *Sitthniya'n*

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Abstract:

The purpose of the present article is to critically evaluate the Punjabi folklore- especially in *sitthniyan*, a form of Punjabi folk songs. In this context, the repetitive use of caste or caste-specific words is scrutinised in order to examine the presence of caste that is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural as well as political practices of Punjabi society. In this scenario, the control over economic and political resources enables particular communities to take the charge to target and defame other sections co-existing in the same society. The self-proclamation of these higher castes claims to have ritual, spiritual and racial righteousness which they maintain by keeping the lower castes away from the central position through various kinds of discourses- like 'purity and pollution'.

Folk-literature is of special importance to identify the fundamentals of any culture as well as to represent its uniqueness. This type of literature is considered timeless, self-contained, intuitively expressing the emotions, myths and other cultural phenomena of collective human life. From the point of view of form, folk literature can be divided into many categories, among which folk poetry, folk stories, folk tales, riddles and proverbs are prominent. All these forms of folk literature are ever-innovative, refreshing, a prosperous poetry, orality, vast subject-area, diversity of form structure, socio-political and cultural depiction, language and so on. Moreover, through the symbolical existence, such songs become proof of their greatness and are represented through their unique medium of expression.

Being a dominant caste in Punjab, the position of *jatt* community is uncompromised and holds a significant impact on the social, cultural and political practices of Punjabi society. In this case, the control over the land and strong economical background offers them the designation of being the powerful members of the society. Therefore, the representation of the same community in music, cinema and other forms of Punjabi culture makes them the icons or role models for the mass populace. On the contrary, other communities, existing parallel to it, remain merely the characters of mockery and exploitation. This biasness in the social structure results in the production of the folklore that has caste or caste specific words in order to represent the system that generates power relations.

Caste Issue in Punjabi Society:

Caste, an ancient social stratification system in India, continues to be a complex and deeply ingrained aspect of Indian society. It defines an individual's social status, occupation, and even marriage prospects. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent social reformer and architect of the Indian constitution, once said, “Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind (Mandal 193-200)”. Ambedkar highlighted the psychological nature of caste and how it perpetuates discrimination and inequality. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi, in his pursuit of social justice, stated, ‘caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of the mind’. These critical thinkers recognized the deeply entrenched nature of caste and emphasized the urgent need for its eradication to achieve a truly egalitarian society in India.

Caste in folklore refers to the representation and depiction of caste-based social hierarchy and divisions in traditional Indian tales, myths, and legends. Indian folklore encompasses a rich oral tradition of storytelling passed down through generations, reflecting societal norms, beliefs, and values. In these narratives, characters are often assigned specific castes, which shape their roles, interactions, and destinies within the story. Caste is portrayed as a defining characteristic that influences a person’s identity, privileges, and limitations. These folk tales often explore themes related to caste-based discrimination, social mobility, and the consequences of challenging or adhering to caste norms. Through these stories, caste in folklore becomes a means to reflect, critique, and preserve cultural understandings of social stratification and its impact on individuals and communities.

Overall, the concept of caste in India has often been seen as a uniform system that operated consistently across the entire country. Caste, or the caste system, is considered a fundamental aspect of the traditional social order and serves as a typical example of how Indian society is socially classified. However, in Punjab, the subjugation of non-*jatts*, particularly in rural areas, appears to be ingrained within the prevailing structures of agrarian relations. The *jatt* community, which holds dominance among the castes in Punjab, is primarily concentrated in rural regions and consists mostly of landowners and farmers. They are widely recognized as the driving force behind Punjab’s agricultural sector, granting them significant influence in the social, economic, and political spheres. The *jatt* Sikhs, as the dominant caste, have monopolized both religious and secular affairs in the state. Their elevated status can be attributed to their numerical strength, constituting one-third of the state’s total population, and their extensive land ownership, accounting for over 80% of available agricultural land.

Consequently, caste-based prejudice against certain ‘lower castes’ has existed for a very long period of time. In this context, the maltreatment of non-upper castes, especially dalits, in India has been described by Anand Teltumbde, as “India’s hidden apartheid” (Teltumbde 1). In this context, one can analyse how the non-*jatt* communities in Punjab have faced diverse forms of discrimination and oppression completely based on their caste. They have endured social exclusion, the denial of fundamental rights, and limited access to resources and opportunities. Discrimination has manifested itself through practices like untouchability, imposing restrictions on

their access to public spaces, and limiting opportunities for education and employment. In terms of socioeconomic conditions, these communities generally experience lower indicators compared to other communities. They often encounter difficulties in accessing land, acquiring property, and securing housing. The economic opportunities and avenues for entrepreneurship are frequently restricted, resulting in higher poverty rates among these communities.

The emerging popular culture has witnessed how individuals from the so-called 'high castes' proudly embracing and displaying their caste identity and considering themselves liberated to engage in various activities. This display of caste-specific identity takes various forms, with music being one of the mediums used. As a result, the dominant and recurring theme in contemporary Punjabi folk and popular songs revolves around *jatt* identity, masculinity, and the glorification of caste. These songs frequently depict and promote misogyny, the use of weapons, violence, and a luxurious lifestyle, all of which contribute in shaping a caste-oriented identity. Notably, the folk songs often feature a protagonist who embodies the *jatt* character and is assigned the responsibility of upholding Punjabi culture (known as *punjabiya*) and preserving Punjabi traditions within the cinematic narratives. The leading actor meticulously cultivates a persona of being daring and relentless—the embodiment of a heroic *Jatt* or a saviour figure. Consequently, *Jatt* hegemony and identity have successfully emerged as prominent themes within the Punjabi music industry.

Keeping this caste separation and classification into consideration, the article is an extensive critical examination of the Punjabi folk songs *sitthaniya 'n*. Punjab and its folklores have gained recognition all around the globe. These songs not only serve as a form of cultural expression but also act as a means of representing social hierarchies and the oppressive structures. In this critical analysis, the article will examine how Punjabi folk songs offer power to particular sections and contribute to the social injustice against the masses. Hall, in this context, argues that representation involves the ability to describe or imagine something. It is crucial because culture is constantly shaped through meaning and language, where language serves as a symbolic form or a means of representation (Hall 18-20). The portrayal of a specific caste or class in various forms of art, music, literature, social media, cinema, and more often establishes a long-standing norm or organized representation of that particular group, serving as a touchstone for understanding or observing society. However, under the influence of dominant discourse, the popular representation of minority groups such as dalits and other minorities have often been subject to stereotypes.

Speaking about *sitthni*, it is an independent and unique variety of folk-poetry or the predominant form of folk-literature. It is derived from the word '*sitth*', which means unworthy speech or indecent speech or a speech uttered with abuse and sarcasm. In previous times, when people were angry with their patron or landlord, the *bhatt* or *bhand* used *sitths* to defame them or to create a shameful environment for not getting full compensation or food grain from them. The literal meaning of *sitth* is unsightly speech, slander, disobedience or slander. In this context, the word *sitth*, in fact, is the proper Punjabi synonym of the English word 'satire'.

According to Dr. Nahar Singh – “*Sitthani* is a direct address from the daughter’s party to the son’s party at the time of marriage. It is a characteristic song full of bitter sarcasm and mockery, in which the moral life values are made immoral by creating an unusual image and is hurt by associating it with the son’s party. The other party is ridiculed on a moral level (Singh 20)”. Similarly, Dr. Vanjara Bedi contextualises, “In the *sitthnias*, the maidens of the girl’s side make fun of the male side, expose the faults and their errors (Bedi 361)”.

Sitthniyan is a form of Punjabi folk songs related to marriage, which aims to impress the audience through humour in a satirical, sarcastic or mocking style. In ancient times, when the means of propagandizing the mind were very limited, then in the marriage omens, the *sitthniyan* played a special role in terms of entertainment. When the *bhands* and *marasis* were given less charity than expected, they would go so far as to embarrass the next one by adding *sitthanis*. The moral-immorality test does not fall into the study. They are recited only when they are already composed or as the occasion arises. The custom of giving *sitthnias* has been prevalent not only in Punjab but also in other states.

The reference to *sitthni* is not only in the groom’s house but also in the bride’s house on different occasions. For instance, during the arrival of *nanke mel*, the coming of *janjh*, the main occasions of bread, the awakening, the ceremony of holidays, prostration at religious places, and during exhibition of *vari*. Many relationships exist in *sitthnias* like *kudam*, *kudmani*, bridegroom, bridegroom’s sister, maternal and paternal uncles and aunts, *janeti*, *sarbala*, *vichola* or middleman and many more.

The language or the lyrics of *sitthniyan* songs are rooted in traditional Punjabi culture and often contain colloquial language and local dialects. The themes revolve around the various rituals and customs of Punjabi weddings, expressing emotions of love, joy, and anticipation. *Sitthniyan* often follow a narrative structure, telling stories and anecdotes related to marriage, love, and relationships. They may include playful teasing, humorous elements, and sometimes even social commentary. In this context, it is significant to approach these songs with a critical lens, as the lyrics and themes can vary depending on the specific rendition or interpretation.

Critical Analysis of *Sitthniyan*:

While analysing such *sitthanis*, a question demands special critical attention that whether the creators of these folklores would have been only high caste women? Secondly, what could have been the reasons that women from the upper caste are shown to be defiling the dynasty by having relations with men of lower caste? The reasons may be anything, but there are many situations in which women of the opposite party spontaneously form relationships with *marassis*, *sainsis*, *nayis* (barbers). For instance;

“*Jandi kudi da ghaggra luha ke dhona, dheerowe baniya di kehndi jatt de palang te sauna*”

In the above *sitthani*, the person has explicitly mentioned the caste of the other people involved in. The lines represent the dominance of *jatt* community in Punjabi society. In rural Punjab, the *jatts* are always associated with power and physical strength and in comparison all other communities are weak. In this context, the *sitthani* has targeted the *baniya* community which is considered physically a weak personality. This kind of folk songs has symbolical meanings that represent the socio-cultural structure of the society. Being a dominant caste in Punjab,

the values of *jatt* community has a significant impact on the social and cultural practices of the Punjabi society. The control over land and economy makes them the powerful members of the society. The representation of the same community in music, cinema, folklores and other forms of popular culture makes them the icons or role models for the mass populace.

Apart from the power and wealth, the major point that comes out very surprisingly from the critical evaluation of *sitthniyan* is that in these songs, there has been a strong attempt to defame the women of the opposite party by linking them with the men of lower caste, like *marasis*, *naiyas*, *dooms* and *bazigars*. It can be easily estimated that in the period in which these *sitthanis* were composed, caste differences, ups and downs and conflicts between castes would have prevailed. In many *sitthnias*, the women of the other party have been told to have extra marital relations which is said to embarrass them. All these relationships are associated with the non-*jatt* communities. In order to comment on the wealth, power and respect of the family, women (involved in *sitthanis*) compare them with the lower castes and attempt to create a hypothesis.

For instance,

“*Andro nikal Kartaro ni veere ter'rhe aaye, bhabiya'n teeram reeriya'n veere saisiya'n de jaaye*”

(Come out Kartaro your brother come, you sister-in-laws with squint eyes and brothers are son of *sainsis*).

Above *sitthani* describes how the lower caste is used to defame and disrespect the respected family of the groom. In this situation, one party attempts to create a joyful environment by targeting the opposite party. The women prefer certain words as a satire and compare the entire family either with animals or people from lower caste. The *sainsi* caste in Punjab has a lower status as compare to other dominant castes in terms of power, wealth and other resources. In the above *sitthani*, the brothers of a woman are compared with *sainsi* to indicate the low status and cheap in the society. It does not only target the sisters of the bride or the groom but also question the character of the mother.

“*Vichola ta kehnda si munda aapne ee baap da, saqlo'n ta kise baazigar da jaapda*”

(The mediator was saying the son belongs to his father, but he looks like a *baazigar* from his outlooks)

In this case, the person involved in the *sitthani* is framed in a situation to prove his identity. The *vichola* or go-between is also questioned who claimed that the son belongs to the father. From his outer looks the *sitth* has passed a judgement that the boy has the appearance similar to that of a *baazigar*. The term *baazigar* here symbolises the lower status, ugly appearance and disempowered position of a person. Such folk songs pictures the derogatory remarks faced by people for being the blue-collar workers. The dominant section of the society uses the names of castes for their pleasure, to tease, to defame and disrespect the other person. The low-caste men are not shown to respond in the scenes, but often they are ‘still’ or silent characters in the scenes. In order to disrespect the women of the opposite party, the writer of the *sitthnias* use low caste men as a subject.

The Mother of a Brideroom in Sitthniyan:

The mother of a groom becomes the centre in every *sitthani* that is sung by women of the bride side. She is targeted for her characterless behaviour or actions. In these songs, she is referred as *chhanal*, a lady who multiple extra marital relations with people from lower castes. The critical analysis of these folk songs demands to research whether these *sitthnias* were composed only by women of the upper caste because almost every folk song refer only to the upper caste as being stained because of the downtrodden. In number of *sitthnias*, the women of the opposite party have been portrayed as having relations with the *nayis* or barbers and *marasis*, which is considered as act of embarrassment to the family. In this context, one's caste becomes a medium for the privilege section to feel proud about their high standards in the same society.

For example,

“Laarha ta mangda chaula'n di pichh naale kaddua'n di daal, maa ta uddhal gayo ve pind marasiya'n de nal, nerhe ta milni ni ja ke teshan te bhal” (Charanjeet 127)

Or

“Jal murgi ni bheno'n jal murgi, kurhma joro pa ke ghaggri pind de marasi nal tur gayi”

Or

“Kurhma joro mangdi ae ji ambarsar di barhiya'n, akhan ta toonehariya'n ni ja marasi nal larhiya'n” (Charanjeet 128)

In above songs, the *marasi* caste is used in order to distort the respected image of groom's mother. Moreover, the groom is shown as shameless who is not concerned about the image of the family rather asking for a special meal. The creator of such songs offers an attractive and bold look to the mother in order to defame her for unwanted and unexpected actions. She becomes merely a subject which is suitable for multiple situations.

“Chunni ta meri malmal di jeeja ve koi utte gote da jaal, maa ta teri uddhal gayi ve jeeja pind de gadriya'n nal, othe bakkriya'n chardi ae ve jeeja naale munndi ae bheda'n de vaal” (Charanjeet 128)

The profession of the person involved in has a great significance which describes the royal and merely surviving lifestyle. For instance, the lines mentioned above indirectly expose the value of a land in Punjab, especially for *jatt* community. The control over land provides a status to them to dominate the society. But the *sitthani* explains how the mother of the groom has eloped with the gypsies and trims the sheep along with grazing the goats. In comparison to farming and other professions related to upper caste, grazing and trimming goats do not have the equivalent status and respect. The adaptation of a profession of other community is used to show the shame that is brought by engaging with the below to the privilege that she has being an upper caste person.

“Laarhe maa de ladle chaar, peyo da ikk vi nahi'n, do marasi de, do gadriya'n de saqla'n mildiya'n baapa'n naal, peyo da ikk bi nahi'n, mildiya'n marasi dooma'n naal, peyo da ikk vi nahi'n” (Charanjeet 128)

Or

“*Kurhti seeme darhi jeeja, saggi gharhe suniyar, tu maa aapni nu pucch le jeeja kinne ne ohde yaar, do mochi ne do marasi ne, do taaje ne do baasi ne, do pind de lambarhdar, nee bhaina gindi jaah, do Nabhe de ghumiyar, nee bhaina gindi jaah*” (Charanjeet 128)

In upper caste Punjabi society or culture, it is considered disgraceful to send their women to the men of lower caste. Due to the relationships with the lower caste people, the *laarha* or groom is also targeted for his outer appearances and facial expressions. “Groom’s mother has four children, no one is like the father” represents that the mother has crossed all boundaries and had allegations of an intercourse with several men due to which the faces of children do not match with the father. The creator remarks that two of them look like either *marasi* or the gypsies.

By emphasising the outer appearances, the groom is also compared with *dooms*. The woman of the family, that is considered pride, is portrayed as having countless relations with men like *mochi*, *lambarhdar*, *ghumiyar* and so on. This challenges the royalty, prosperity or respect of the entire family as the woman of the family has brought shame that is labelled as a ‘*daagh*’ on their ‘*izzat*’. In previous times as well as in the contemporary period, this extra-ordinary relationship used to be a cause of shame and embarrassment for the whole life. The person and the family used to live in a kind of crime-conscious state. Moreover, this kind of relationships with ‘others’ consider a stain on the family that often becomes a hindrance in search of a suitable *rishta* and also results in social ridicule. It also becomes a topic of discussion in the society and the family faces the shame. For example,

“*Pagg ta liaya’n jeeja maangmi, vet u jhal fara ke paaye gehne, maa da pichhoka gadriyan’n da, tere nankeya’n de ki kehne*” (Charanjeet 126)

In this context, the women from bride’s side interrogate the family background of the groom. The groom is blamed for borrowing the turban from others even on the day of marriage. The creator attempts to question the economic status of the family. Furthermore, the groom’s mother is accused of having a background of gypsies and the *sitthani* is left open ended without having any particular information about the *nanke*. This kind of charges is used by the upper caste people in order to create a joyful environment during wedding. They intentionally compare the groom with lower castes (*nayis*, *marasis*, *dooms* and gypsies) just to offend the opposite party and challenge their patriarchy by blaming that their women are out of control and mating with people with low standards.

Among the *sitthanis*, the *nayi* is completely silent, only the women of the opposite party drag him into the ground. If the first one does something, the other party takes an offense and responds in the same manner. In the following *sitthanis*, the bridegroom’s mother only is associated with the *nayi* multiple times by using his caste name and derogatory linked to it. These men (*nayis*, *dooms*, *marasis*) from the lower caste do not take any initiative and have not done anything wrong in reality but it is the woman on the other side who takes pride in using castes to mock the *nanke* or *dadke*.

The references related to *marasis*, *nayis* or barbers and *baazigars* occur multiple times. However, more *sitths* are created by telling the background of the groom's mother that has an extraordinary relation with these castes. The surprising aspect is that the participation of these men in these *sitths* is only to the extent that women from the opposite party come to them. There are many references in which only high caste women are told to run away and enter the houses of these low caste men and are portrayed having fun with them. However, all the folk literatures observe and explore the inner and thinner layers of the ancient and contemporary life. Similarly, the *sitthnias* also describes the innermost structured lifestyle of the socio-cultural phenomena in scrupulous manners.

To conclude, it can be observed that the times have changed and caste consciousness has great importance in the society. Although, the inter-caste marriages are being recognized by the society but it cannot be labelled as the end of caste system. In the contemporary period other forms of caste system have been evolved. One can trace the presence of *jatt* identity in the popular Punjabi of these days. Such songs promote the caste based society on the national as well as international levels. In this context, caste has created a gulf between the lower castes and the upper castes that cannot be filled. Moreover, dalit historiography is often oral rather than written, an accumulation of folk narratives, commemorations, celebrations and festivities, creation of new symbols like flags and emblems, engrained in memory (Narayan193–6). Rising consciousness among dalits about oppression is playing an important role in their identity formation and reinvention of history (Sikka 44)

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