

Reconceptualizing Cultural Politics and Resistance: Exploring the ‘Subjugated’ Song Narratives of the Subaltern of Purulia

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Abstract

Song Narratives are an integral part of Indian culture, and Purulia, one of the most underprivileged districts of West Bengal, is home to a vast array of folk song cultures and other performative traditions. These folk songs are celebration of life, love, and human spirit, woven together with intricate rhythms and haunting melodies that speak to the soul. These song cultures are essentially ‘cultures of memory’ as the local performers inherit these traditions from their previous generations and disseminate the inherited memory through several cultural forms, by engaging their human bodies through various speech and gestural articulations. The lyrics of the folk songs of Purulia are simple yet powerful and offer a glimpse into a world often overlooked by the mainstream urban media. Moreover, these song traditions of Purulia are not just mere forms of entertainment, but also serve as powerful tools to challenge the status quo and create subversive narratives that reflect the lived experiences of the subjugated.

This paper attempts to deal with the major song cultures of Purulia—*Tusu* and *Jhumur* and seeks to raise a crucial question— How do these song narratives become the site of resistance against the dominant forces that have been suppressing the marginal voices for centuries? A close analysis of these song-texts will reveal that these folk songs provide a platform for the marginalized communities of Purulia to express their grievances, aspirations, and hopes, and help them challenge the dominant discourse and create an alternative space where the subaltern can articulate their own version of reality. Therefore, these song traditions act as agencies through which the marginalized people of Purulia try to assert their autonomy and reclaim their identity.

Keywords: *Jhumur*, *Tusu*, marginalized, resistance, tradition, culture.

Song Narratives are an important component of Indian culture. Purulia, one of West Bengal's underprivileged districts, is home to a diverse range of folk song narratives and other performative traditions. These folk songs celebrate life, love, and the human spirit via intricate rhythms and evocative melodies that speak to the soul. These song cultures are largely "mnemocultures" or "cultures of memory" to use the terms of Dr. Venkat Rao in his *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*, since local performers acquire these traditions from their forefathers and transmit the inherited memory through diverse cultural forms, such as engaging their human bodies through varied spoken and gestural articulations. Memory in these cultural performances is particularly dynamic; it is dynamic because every time it creates something new to the existing knowledge due to direct physical involvement. Dr. D Venkat Rao argues that memory which is stored in the organic body of human beings, that is the embodied memory plays a crucial role in the proliferation of a vast array of Asian performing traditions. As Dr. Rao says:

Mnemocultures are cultures of memory; mnemocultures draw on the planetary and ancestral memories. As mnemocultures embody and enact/perform memories they put to work the body persistently. Mnemocultures move in musical rhythms and performative reflections. Musically and acoustically composed verbal utterances and gestural inflections articulate these reflections. Thinking comes forth in embodied enactments, which in turn bring forth other such, but variant rhythms of thought. (68)

In Indian culture, the body is accorded special significance, as it is believed that cultural articulations cannot even begin without it. Thus, the body becomes not just a vessel for cultural expression but also an embodiment of cultural identity. Through performative traditions, individuals are able to connect with their heritage and pass it on to future generations, ensuring that their culture remains alive and vibrant for years to come.

From time immemorial human beings have used song cultures to communicate their emotions, sentiments, agony, wrath, despair, and desolation. Thus, singing connects an individual's psychological self and bodily self to others. This may also be seen in the song cultures of Purulia. The songs of Purulia serve as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds of individuals and communities. Whether it's the pain of loss or the joy of celebration or struggle for their rights, these song cultures provide an outlet for the people to share their experiences with others. For the people of Purulia, these song traditions are more than just entertainment; they are lifelines that connect them to their roots and help them navigate the challenges of their daily life. Through singing, they find solace in times of desolation and strength in times of struggle. In this way, these song narratives bring people together in a shared experience that is both universal and unique. These song narratives of Purulia are a testament to the resilience and creativity of the human spirit, providing a voice for those who are often silenced

or ignored. The two major song narratives of Purulia are *Jhumur* and *Tusu*. A close analysis of these song-texts will reveal that these folk songs provide a platform for the marginalized communities of Purulia to express their grievances, aspirations, and hopes, and help them challenge the dominant discourse that seeks to silence their voices. These song narratives can be an effective medium for contesting dominant narratives and power structures in cultural politics by highlighting the experiences of the marginalised population of Purulia and giving them a voice.

The most popular song tradition of Purulia is *Jhumur* which portrays the pleasures and sufferings of the common people, as well as their way of life, hopes, and frustrations. The central theme of these songs revolve around love. Many people believe that these songs are “*adirasatmak*” which means these songs depict love and physical consummation in a crude way. However this idea is entirely incorrect. Despite the fact that love is the primary theme of *Jhumur* songs, it never goes beyond the limit of decency. *Jhumur* songs celebrate the struggles and triumphs of the rural people residing in Purulia and illustrate the oppression endured by the marginalised people of Purulia. The song-text of the following *Jhumur* songs are such instances where the song-texts become powerful tools for resistance and social change:

Jhumur 1:

Purulia Ta Bikaye Gelo Bideshider Haate

Ohore mori hayre hay hayre hayre hay
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Japan Germany r taka dhukchhe jate jaate
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Hydroelectric hoilo bhaiblo sobai bhaloi hoilo
Kaaj paile beshati khabo naito nun bhaate
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Jodi geli kaajer tore Engineer boillo ke re
Ethakar keu kaaj nai pabek bairer hobek hote
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Hirak pathor dolomite titanius laterite
Teen tractor bauxite garnet r ilmenite
Bauxite hoite trucke trucke jachhe adhar raate
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Jorito ei rajyer sorkar montri neta police power
Bidhayak o songe ache ei byaparti te
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Haay go hamder purulia koirlo toke deulia
Baghmundi pahad ke dhodhor korchhe kaite kaite
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Chhilo joto khonij sompod pahad jongol kastho pushpo

*Kaite kuite lilek luite hamder ajante
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshider haate
Sunilen to sarbajan pakhi pahader biboron
Purulia ta bikaye gelo bideshi der haate* (Gupta YouTube)

This *Jhumur* song is composed by Kishore Gupta, who voices his dissidence through this song against the government when the Hydroelectric Project was set up in Ajodhya Hills of Purulia. The *Jhumur* singer undauntedly declares that Purulia has been sold to the outsiders who come and loot the natural resources mercilessly, depriving the local residents of Purulia. The first six lines of the song inform us that the local people of Purulia were really happy when the hydroelectric project was announced in Purulia. They thought that this project would bring employment to the locality. But their dream of getting a job was shattered to pieces when they were told that the labourers for this project would come from other states and districts. The song composer also throws light on the fact that valuable stones and minerals had been secretly sent to other places without the knowledge of the local inhabitants of Purulia, and thus he declares, “*Purulia ta bikaye gyallo bideshider haate*” which means Purulia has been sold to the outsiders, which appears repeatedly in the song. The song also condemns the role of the MLA and the then government, who deprived the marginalized inhabitants of Purulia. Thus, the song becomes a medium of revolt against the subjugation and domination of the powerless marginalized group by the rich and powerful. The lyrics of the song are a powerful critique of the oppressive system that has long plagued the people of Purulia. The repeated use of the phrase “*Purulia ta bikaye gyallo bideshider haate*” throughout the song signifies the repetitive nature of this oppression, and serves as a call to action for those who have been silenced for too long. Therefore, this song becomes a medium of revolt against subjugation and domination, giving voice to those who have been silenced and thus the song inspires others to join the fight for justice.

Jhumur 2:

Odisha Te Loy Odiya Pashchimete Loy Pachhiya

*Odisha te loy Odiya/ Pashchimete loy pachhiya
Banglate loi bangali he/ hamraki uparle tapkili, torai sokol baate saire
lili he
Khonir koyla tama pitol/ lahar kuthi nodir jol
Bon jongol ujaar kore dili he
Lili sobhei jomijoma/hamder chokhei kheda dhunga
Bou bitider digeo choikh baraile he
Pahad kaite lili pathor/ Bonali shokheri ghor
Teen takay kuli khataili he
Humder shil humder nora/ Humder bhaingli daanter gora
Haathe tupa pothe bosain dili he*

Hajari dekhechhe moja/Teer tangi ghosha maja
Bhaag na charile hotei hobek boli re (Goswami 143)

This song composed by Hajari Prasad Rajowar appears in *Simanta Rarh-er Lokosanskriti* by Dilip Kumar Goswami. The song depicts the trouble and agony faced by the people of Purulia who were outcast in Odisha, Bengal, and Bihar, when Purulia was part of the undivided Manbhum district of Eastern India before 1956. In the first few lines of this song, the poet vociferously tries to find his identity and questions, “*Odisha te loy Odiya/ Pashchimete loy pachhiya/Banglate loi bangali he/ hamra ki uparle tapkili*” which means -

“We are not accepted as the people of Odisha, nor are we accepted as Bengali in West Bengal/Then who are we and where have we come from?” The *Jhumur* poet also complains that the local people of Purulia have been deprived by the rich and the powerful who have depredated the natural resources such as coal, copper, brass, and other materials. They have also taken control of the lac factory, as well as the natural resources of Manbhum region, depriving the inhabitants of Purulia. The poet also says, “*Pahad kaite lili pathor/ Bonali shokheri ghor/Teen takay kuli khataili he/ Humder shil humder nora/ Humder bhaingli daanter gora/Haathe tupa pothe bosain dili he*” which means “You have made your fancy buildings with stones by destroying our hill/You have made us work by paying us a meagre amount/You have taken our resources and /Have made us impoverished.” By using a colophon in the last line of the song, the *Jhumur* poet promises to fight back against this injustice and says that they are ready with their weapons and they will not stop fighting until they are given what they truly deserve. The *Jhumur* singer’s words resonate with a sense of defiance and determination, the song-text speaks about the struggles faced by marginalized communities, who are often denied their basic rights and forced to live in poverty. The use of a colophon at the end of the song adds a powerful sense of finality, as if the poet is making a solemn promise to never give up on the fight for justice. It is clear that the *Jhumur* poet sees himself as part of a larger movement, one that is dedicated to challenging the status quo and demanding change.

Jhumur 3:

Bengal bole tui chhut Bihar bole dur hot

Bengal bole tui chhut/ Bihar bole dur hot
Purulia ki jhaap dibek jole/Bangali bhai Bihari bhai de na tuku bole
Pahare jongole ghera/Tao kene he sorbohora
Karkhanay karkhanay chole/ Santaldihi Bijli karkhana Megher opor tar
tana
Tata Kolkata pakha chole/Khapra pitha khorayen gelo
Chipe chaape morayen dil/ Sunil e ki penda kotha bol (Mahato 249)

This song is composed by *Jhumur* poet Sunil Mahato who mocks the rich and the powerful ‘Babus’ of Calcutta who take electricity from Santaldihi power project depriving the people of Purulia, who continue to stay in dark without electricity. The first three lines reveal the anguish and distress of the poverty-stricken people of Purulia who are not welcomed either in Bengal or Bihar. Thus the poet laments, “*Bengal bole tui chhut/Bihar bole dur hot/ Purulia ki jhaanp dibek jole?*” which means “West Bengal says get away, Bihar says get out, will Purulia jump into water?” (Mahato 249). The next few lines of the song convey that, although the thermal power plant has been made in Santaldihi, Purulia, the electricity produced from that plant is not given to the people of Purulia. Rather, it is consumed by the urban people of Kolkata and Jamshedpur. This is a clear example of how the benefits of development are not equally distributed. The people who live closest to the power plant do not reap the rewards of the electricity it produces. Instead, it is those who live in urban areas that benefit. Thus, in this situation, this song becomes a medium through which these marginalized people can voice their resistance against oppression and subjugation.

Tusu Parab also known as *Makar Parab* is a popular festival in the Southern West area of West Bengal which includes Purulia, West-Medinipur, Bankura, Birbhum. *Tusu* festival is also observed in some parts of Odisha and Jharkhand. The main attraction of this festival is *Tusu geet* or song. It starts from *Aghon Sankranti*ⁱ and ends in *Pous Sankranti*ⁱⁱ. *Tusu* songs, which are an integral part of *Tusu* festival, are based on various themes. Various political and social changes have an impact on *Tusu* songs. These songs frequently address social themes such as the prevalent dowry system in society, hypocrisy of several political leaders, and the treatment of a girl by her in-laws. These songs, like *Jhumur* songs, are basically a medium for the people of Purulia, especially the rural women of the locality, to express their sorrows, and their miseries in life. Through these song-texts/lyrics, the people of Purulia are able to voice their dissent. These songs have become an integral part of the cultural fabric of Purulia, embodying the spirit and resilience of its people.

Tusu 1:

Jonom Dukhi Go Ami Pete Nai Danapani

*Jonom dukhi go ami Pete nai danapani/ Dhoinyo Sarkar dhoinyo biboron
Humder gai bachhurgar okal moron/ Dhoinyo Sarkar dhoinyo biboron
Gnaye vaccine ache dactor ache/ Achhe oinyer kalyane
Ar Amra chaite gelei boilbek/ Tora choile jare dokane
Monre amar chal bhaja bali/Ami na paruje ghor kori
Vote er somoy ailei shudhu/ Leader e jay ghor bhori
Keu ba bole chaal daal dibo/ Keu bole jaare kombol dibo
Tar bodole ar kichhu loy/ Vote ti ami tor libo
Monre amar chal bhaja bali/ Ami na paruje ghor kori (Ghosal 59)*

This song ridicules the political leaders of our country, who are only visible during elections. The singer here unveils the reality of rural under-developed districts, where we can see that the domestic animals of these poor people are dying without any treatment despite the availability of doctors and vaccines in the government hospital. This is a heart-breaking reality that is often overlooked by the political leaders. It's easy for them to make promises during election season, but what about the rest of the year? The singer's message sheds light on the struggles faced by those living in Purulia, where even basic healthcare for their domestic animals is a luxury.

The song composer says, “*Gnaye vaccine ache dactor ache/ Achhe oinyer kalyane/Ar Amra chaite gelei boilbek/Tora choile jare dokane*”. If translated it means—Doctors are available at the hospital, so are vaccines/But they are there to help the rich people/When we demand help/They ignore us and advise us to go to private medical shops. This is a concerning issue, as poor people who are unable to afford medical treatment for their animals are being denied the free service that they are entitled to.

The song also takes a dig at political leaders who only visit their houses during elections and make false promises. They promise free rice and blankets during the winter, but in exchange, they only want to win the trust of these needy people so that they can win the election. Thus, by depicting the true character of the political leaders, the *Tusu* song composer here voices the dissent of the marginalized people of Purulia against the corrupt and crooked political leaders of the country.

Tusu 2:

Tirish Bochhore Swadhine tobu Mojdur Bhai Paradhine

*Tirish bochhore swadhine tobu mojdur bhai paradhine
Amra goreeb amra dukhi moder bedon ke jaane
Dukhir dukkho na jaane se vote lite ashe kene
Nitya notun montri koto boschhei je singhashone
Puruliar ei dukkhor ki seema montrira ki na jaane
Deen dukhir prapyo jeta Sarkar diyechhe daane
Daatara sob khatay bujhay tadanta hoy na kene
Lokkho lokkho urchhe taka Bharatbashir kalyane
Tobu kene be-aine ghush chole mane maane
Nityo proyojoniyo drobyer daam baare dine dine
Onno bina moro moro bostro nahi bodone
Krittibas bole seshe joy nai dhormo bine
Amar ei nibedan rakhbe he sorbojone*

(Sen 73)

This song, like the previous one, strikes back against the unscrupulous political leaders and ministers of the country. The very first line of the song expresses the perpetual poverty of the marginalized people of Purulia where the song composer

says “*Tirish bochhore swadhine/Tobu mojdur bhai paradhine/Amra goreeb amra dukhi moder bedon ke jaane*”; if translated it means—“It has been thirty years since India has been a free country/ But we labourers are treated in such a way that we feel we are still in a colonized nation”. This song is a poignant reminder of the struggles of the working class that is still prevalent in India. Despite being free for thirty years, the reality for many labourers is that they are still oppressed and treated unfairly. The sentiment expressed in the song lyrics speaks about a larger issue of inequality and injustice that continues to plague the country.

The song composer goes on saying, “*Nitya notun montri koto boschhei je singhashone/ Puruliar ei dukkhor ki seema montrira ki na jaane/Deen dukhir prapyo jeta Sarkar diyechhe daane/Daatara sob khatay bujhay tadanta hoy na kene*” which means—“Every now and then, a new minister is crowning the throne/They all know the destitute condition of the local people of Purulia/Although the government has declared different schemes to help the impoverished people of Purulia/ But the schemes exist in the government register only and nothing is given to the marginalized people residing in the locality, no investigation is conducted to find the truth”. This part of the song highlights the destitute condition of the local people of Purulia which is a matter of great concern. Despite government’s declaration of different schemes to help the impoverished people, nothing seems to be reaching the marginalized people residing in the locality. The schemes exist only in government registers, and no investigation is conducted to find out why they are not being implemented effectively. The lack of action on the part of the authorities has left many families struggling to make ends meet, with little hope for a better future.

The next few lines of the song reveal that the government has spent a huge amount of money on the development of the country, but that didn’t stop the ill-practice of corruption by the unscrupulous politicians of our country. The song also draws our attention to the rapid inflation in our country, due to which these destitute people are even unable to have a proper square meal (*Lokkho lokkho urchhe taka Bharatbashir kalyane/Tobu kene be-aine ghush chole mane mane/Nityo proyojoniyo drobyer daam baare dine dine/Onno bina moro moro bostro nahi bodone*). In the last two lines of the song, the song composer as well as the performer Krittibas uses a colophon and tries to draw the attention of the common people to the despondent condition of the subjugated people of Purulia, and by doing so, he is expressing his dissidence against the domination of powerful politicians of the country. This *Tusu* song becomes a tool for empowerment and resistance, reminding us that these song traditions can act as agencies through which the marginalized people of Purulia try to assert their autonomy. Like Krittibas, there are innumerable song composers and performers in Purulia who leave lasting impact on the cultural landscape of West Bengal and beyond, inspiring generations to come, to use their voices and creativity to fight for a better world.

These song traditions of *Jhumur* and *Tusu* are essentially micro-narratives that enfold the socio-economic condition of the marginalised inhabitants of Purulia and help us rethink and redefine the concept of resistance as the songs become an important medium through which these marginalized people try to reclaim their autonomy. Through their micro-narratives, these songs capture the complex socio-economic conditions that these inhabitants face on a daily basis. These songs challenge us to rethink our understanding of resistance and redefine it in terms of the creative and innovative ways in which marginalized communities assert their agency. By listening to these songs, one can gain a deeper appreciation for the lived experiences of those who are often silenced and overlooked in mainstream discourse. The songs of Purulia are not just musical expressions, but also powerful political statements that demand our attention and solidarity.

As we continue to grapple with issues of inequality and injustice, we can learn much from the stories and struggles embedded within these micro-narratives. As John Brannigan says, “Dissidence is not opposed diametrically to power, not an antithesis which seeks to reverse the values, trends and strategies of power...It does of course imply a deviation from some aspect or tenet of the dominant ideology or culture” (Brannigan 111). Similarly, these song cultures do not directly aim to challenge the dominant urban culture of Bengal. Rather, these song traditions work as agencies through which the marginalised section tries to reclaim the autonomy. These song lyrics/texts become the sources of power, the site of representation and resistance. Cultural materialists argue that all representations are struggle for meaning and power, representations in society are never neutral. They are always imbued with meaning and power, and as such, they become sites of resistance; this is particularly evident in these song-texts, which often serve as a platform for marginalized voices to challenge the existing power structures. By unravelling the meanings embedded within these texts, we can begin to understand the ways in which those in power have historically exploited and silenced certain groups. In this way, *Tusu* or *Jhumur* song-texts become a powerful tool for resistance and social change. Therefore, through the analysis of the song-narratives, we can uncover the hidden messages and subversive themes that challenge the dominant power structures of the society as these song-narratives offer a space for individuals to assert their agency and fight back against the dominant narratives that seek to maintain the status quo.

In *After Amnesia*, Devy suggests that Indian literature should look beyond those languages which have printed forms of literature and should explore the voices that comes from “the informal, non-institutional, unorganised, marginal”(152) and because these voices are not influenced by the urban elitist civilization and “faceless globalization”(152), they are still vibrant and divergent in nature. Devy writes:

One should add the literature of those who believe that they belong to the earth and not the earth belongs to them alone may recover with

imagination what we lose with the fast-eroding human memory. However, since all such forms of creativity are likely to come from outside the academia and formal institutions, literary criticism in contemporary times will have to be nothing short of activism for espousing the diversity of the marginal and the local as an antidote to the dominant and the global. (152)

Devy rightly points out that digital platforms are gradually overtaking all the other communication media. In such a situation, we should give importance to the unconventional creative forms of expressions expressed through speech and gesture, i.e., the most primordial forms of communication. These unconventional forms are likely to come from the marginalized section of our society, and we should preserve their creations which will become a “primary strategy for the survival of human expression” (Devy 159). Otherwise, we will gradually forget our expressions and will soon become emotionless as machines. Devy, therefore, suggests that our imagination should arise “out of commitment to diversity, to marginal voices and through activist practice” (Devy 159). He proposed “an open eyed nativism as a way of overcoming cultural amnesia induced by colonialism” and “activism for espousing diversity as the means of negotiating the transition from our being human to our becoming cyborgs” (Devy 159). The song traditions of the performers of Purulia bear the voice of the subjugated and marginalised people of the locality, these song cultures also have political roles to create social awareness, to generate dissidence and resistance against the ruler. Therefore, the performers of the “subjugated” song narratives of Purulia are not voiceless. The song cultures of Purulia are their voices, and their voices should be heard and amplified. The song-texts of *Tusu* or *Jhumur* song traditions often convey messages of hope, unity, and empowerment, inspiring the audience to take action and fight for justice. These song-texts shed light on important issues that are often overlooked by mainstream urban media as well as academia. By sharing their personal experiences and struggles through the song traditions, the local performers of Purulia have helped to raise awareness and build solidarity among communities facing oppression. In today’s world, where social justice issues continue to be a pressing concern, it is more important than ever for the artists to use their voices to create positive change. Through their music, they can inspire us all to work towards a more just and equitable society.

Notes

¹*Aghon Sankranti* is the end of the Bengali month *Aghon* or *Aghran* which is around 14th or 15th December.

²*Pous Sankranti* is the end of Bengali month *Pous* which comes after the month of *Aghran* and which is around 14th or 15th January.

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