

Goalbandhani Gaan of North Bengal: A Translation and Study of an Oral Tradition in**Rajbanshi Rural Life¹****Smita Basu**

One wonders why North Bengal has a name that sets it apart as a distinct entity within the state of West Bengal. And when one travels through the green expanses dotted with neat villages and bamboo groves, streaked with many temperamental rivers, surrounded by the dense breathlessness of the Dooars forests, and peopled by a bewildering range of ethnicities, one realizes that this is, indeed, a region that is unique. It might be said to have more in common with Assam and some other north-eastern states than with “South Bengal”. The majority of the native “Bengali” population here is actually Rajbanshi, and at home speaks a tongue that many linguists believe to be a prototype of standard modern Bangla. The dialect of Bangla spoken here is much closer to those of East Bengal (Bangladesh) than to many other dialects in West Bengal. But so many other languages are also spoken here that one is made acutely aware that this is a border zone, though the borders that exist today are probably the wrong ones.

This region is also special because it is steeped in music, myth and lore. This paper deals with two songs associated with a particular annual ritual practised by the Rajbanshis. The Rajbanshis of North Bengal are essentially an agrarian people, and the art they produce is pervaded by themes, tropes and idioms that reflect their intimate relationship with and total dependence on the elements: natural, temporal and spiritual; hence, the leit motifs of fertility, the play (often cruel) of seasons, growth, death and renewal, and of the spirit that moves these agents of human fate.

It is natural, therefore, that cattle should figure large in Rajbanshi rural life. Once a year, between the months of *Agrahayan* (mid- November to mid-December) and *Phalgun* (mid- February to mid-March) Hindu Rajbanshi farmers must ritually purify and fortify their cowsheds. The two songs that form the subject of this piece are sung as part of the process. This is an extremely important ritual that is meant to ensure the health, life and fertility of the cows, and also, by extension, the welfare of the farmer. How this relationship between man and beast is marked, celebrated and negotiated and the aspects of Rajbanshi life that are captured in these songs will be explored here. As far as I know, these songs have not been documented or studied before.

I had gone on a field trip to North Bengal, for a translation project at the Centre for Translation of Indian Literatures, Jadavpur University, under the UGC UPE Phase II Scheme. There, I happened to become acquainted with Nagen Mohanta, who lives in Sholsholabari, near Alipurduar and is an itinerant “priest” of the cowshed, with these songs in his repertoire. Beginning in Agrahayan, Mohanta walks from village to village in the Alipurduar subdivision, visiting the farmsteads and performing the Goalbandhani rite. (“Goal” is cowshed and “bandhani” literally means to tie up). This is Mohanta’s only occupation, which means that he must subsist for the rest of the year on what he earns in these four months.

The songs are erratic in rhythm and metre, and follow a doggerel style of rhyming. The only instrumental accompaniment is a kind of *kartal* (a pair of small cymbals). However, Mohanta does not play it in the usual way, holding a disc in each hand; rather, he holds one disc in his right hand, with the other dangling from it on a string. In time to the song, and in jerky movements, he swings the dangling disc up to strike repeatedly against the one he is holding.

The women of the households he visits have an especial role to play, as it is they who must assist him in the ritual and later, listen to his songs. Indeed, these songs are unique in that they are aimed specifically at a female audience. This aspect of the songs will be explored at length.

Even today, Mohanta is paid in kind for his services. Each household he visits must give him some paddy and a one-rupee coin. On an average day, he can collect about twenty-five kilograms of paddy. His family subsists on the paddy for the rest of the year, and he might sell some of it during the course of the year for cash to meet other expenses.

Goalbandhani Gaan is also sometimes called Kaawali (not to be confused with Qawwali) or Horo-Gouri¹ Bandhan. The latter name suggests that this genre of song may be related in some way with the general Hindu belief in the complementary male and female forces or principles of the universe.

I shall here present a translation of the two songs, which are sung as a pair, and the hearing of which is believed to be auspicious.

Song 1:

(Now) let us worship Bhogoboti and Jogotgouri Rai³.

Before visiting the cowshed the girl claps her hands,

Shibo, Durga and Narayon uppermost in her mind;

She has bowed herself in every birth at Horo-Gouri's feet.

I bow to Horo, I bow to Shibo, and I bow to Moheshwor

And then to the thirty-three *koti*⁴ gods who dwell in Kamakhya.

In this way, I shall tell you of these things,

Now, listen attentively to some words of Gorokkhonath.

If a woman balks at throwing out the cowdung,

In her cowshed the cows won't last very long.

If a woman flings cowdung through the slats of a broken fence, The

cows in her cowshed will, by Gorokkhonath, be taken thence. If a

woman visits the cowshed with loose hair and wet clothes, The

dhokdhokey skin disease will kill off the cows.

If a woman eats paan and spits in the cowshed,

The cows and calves soon turn weak and wasted.

If a woman on Saturdays and Tuesdays gives turmeric away, From

her home certainly will Lokkhi⁵ run away.

If one sells cattle that are nephew and uncle,

One's cowshed will soon be empty of cattle.

For the cow is wealth, *ma go*⁶, the cow is wealth,

Life's futile if one has no cows in his shed.

In this way, I have told you of all these things,

Now listen carefully to the tale of the Hoistani⁷ woman.

I am now telling you of the Hoistani woman,

Who walks like a she-elephant, with a she-elephant's gait. She

follows no rules in cooking and gobbles her food,

In fear of such a woman, Lokkhi leaves the neighbourhood. If a

woman has unkempt hair and goes gallivanting about, Know for

sure, *ma*, she has cast Lokkhi out.

If a woman wears new clothes and casts glances around,

An early death is what she will bring upon her husband.

If a woman cooks and eats before her husband's done,

The water in a brimming pot dries up and is gone.

If a woman kicks at her husband's prepared bed,

Her Lokkhi has already left in the dead of night.

Thus I end the tale of the Hoistani woman,

Now listen well to the tale of the Chintini woman.

There was once a woman called Chintini

Whose only thought was her husband's feet,

And her speech was low and her voice was sweet.

When her in-laws came to visit, she tended them with care,

Thus I end the tale of the Chintini woman here.

Now listen well to the tale of the Poidyani woman:

There was once a woman, Poidyani was her name;

She had lotus hands, lotus feet and lotus brow above,

In her home is Lokkhi bound with the rope of love.

Thus I end the tale of the Poidyani woman.

Listen well to the tale of the Shonkhani woman.

There was once a woman, Shonkhani by name,

Her face was like a conch-shell, like a living flame;

She bathed and finished the *chhora*⁸ at dawn, at dusk she lit the lamp,

Lokkhi says *ma go*, in this home I shall make camp.

If a woman bathes and then fills her mouth with paan,

And distributes sindoor for the weal of her man,

She is equal to Lokkhi in all things.

Give me a full *kula*⁹ of paddy and a pair of *gua-paan*¹⁰,

Biday Bidhan

And give me nine paise as Gorokkhonath's alms.

This song has two main themes, presented one after the other. The first is, of course, the do-s and don't-s of the cowshed. In a society that is almost entirely dependent on agriculture and cattle-rearing, disease of the cattle spells doom; hence, perhaps, so many rules (both practical and superstitious) relating to the cowshed. How intimately is the conduct of a woman made to connect with the welfare of the cows! Good conduct on the woman's part includes cleanliness, hard work, the close following of ritual, (indicating piety), and, of course, obedience and docility. In agrarian Bengal, it is women who have traditionally looked after cows and calves, incorporating, even in their daily schedule, certain customs like lighting incense in the cowshed at dusk to keep away mosquitoes, or feeding the cows before eating one's own meal.

The second major theme is the four different kinds of women and their descriptions. It is easy to see the parallel with Kalyana Malla's *Ananga Ranga*, where women are classified as being Padmini (lotus woman), Chitrini (art woman), Shankhini (conch-shell woman) or Hastini (elephant woman), according to their assumed physical and sexual attributes (Burton 2) but the women in this song are not objects of desire clinically scrutinized for their sensual potential. Rather, their

attributes are extrapolated and made to fit the scenes of domesticity brought so vividly to life in the

song. In rural farming societies, women are prized more for being good savers, managers and workers than for courtesan-like skills.

The last two lines of the song are called Biday Bidhan, in which the singer indicates to the householder how much he expects as payment.

Song 2:

(Now) let us worship Bhogoboti and Jogotgouri Rai.

Before visiting the cowshed the girl claps her hands,

Shib, Durga and Narayon uppermost in her mind;

She has bowed herself in every birth at Horo-Gouri's feet.

I bow to Horo, I bow to Shibo, and I bow to Moheshwor And then to

the thirty-three *koti* gods who dwell in Kamakhya. In this way, I

shall tell you of these things - Of how the divine milkmaid found

Gorokkhonath.

Eleven years old was she, and yet she wasn't blessed,

So she began to worship Gorokkhonath instead.

She worshipped Gorokkhonath for long years eleven,

But Horo-Gouri blessed her not with a single boon.

“I’ll kill myself!” cried the girl, and snatched up a cleaver, When lo!

Suddenly Gorokkhonath stood before her.

“Why, Kopila¹¹, Kopila, dear”, he said again and again,

And calling her too, came Kopeshwori¹², visible plain.

And Gorokkhonath said “Kopila, listen to me now,

You will take re-birth and be born as a cow.”

“Why, o why?” said poor Kopila, sobbing and crying,

“O Gorokkhonath, lord of the three worlds, what is my sin?

I was happy in heaven, breathing sandal scent,

For eating grass now, to earth must I descend?

If I fall into a good ploughman’s hands, he will yoke me right, And

if he’s a bad ploughman, I’ll slave for threepohors¹³ straight. The

one will take care of the cow while milking,

The other won’t leave a drop for the calf’s drinking.”

That’s why it’s said, *ma go*, that if you leave milk for the calf, You

will receive Gorokkhonath’s blessings.

If you are blessed by Gorokkhonath,

Your cowshed will be full of cows and your fields full of paddy,

And by his blessings your coffers will brim.

Give me a full *kula* of paddy and a pair of *gua-paan*,

And give me nine paise as Gorokkhonath’s alms.

Biday Bidhan

In this song, too, we notice the fluidity between the human female and the bovine identities.

Indeed, here the relationship is made even more explicit than in the first song. The poignant tragedy of Kopila's sacrifice is deliberately evoked to acknowledge the relationship between man and the cow. This song might be seen as a commemoration of man's debt to the cow, and a warning against the exploitation of the bovine species.

In order to locate these songs in socio-historical terms, we need to ask a few questions:

1. What is the significance of these songs in the sexual politics of the society that created them?
2. What is the time in which they might have been composed?
3. Who is Gorokkhonath?

That the songs are intensely patriarchal in spirit and tone is without doubt. The women of the house must listen to their educational and moral strictures as part of the ritual process. The pedagogy works on the simple principle of first stereotyping women from a male gaze, exemplifying them and then glorifying or castigating them. As I have noted before, "womanly" virtues like economy, piety, docility and maritoriousness are the lessons imparted, while "unladylike" qualities like love of food, the perceived slighting of one's husband, or being vain about new clothes are condemned. Kopila, so unfairly treated, is glorified, much in the same way as other unfortunate women in myth and legend.

It would be relevant to bring to mind that traditional Rajbanshi society followed the system of bride price, and that the effect on the situation of women was as pernicious as the effect of dowry in other cultures. Many Bhawaiya songs lament the situation in which parents have "sold off" their daughter, often to a completely unsuitable groom.

There are two possible indications as to the time when these songs may have been composed and incorporated as part of the Goalbandhani ritual. The first is the repeated reference to Gorakshanath, the great guru of Laya Yoga, who is believed to have lived in the eleventh or twelfth century CE (Briggs 249). The second is the classification of the women into four types corresponding with the four types of women mentioned in Kalyana Malla's work, composed in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It could be safely said, therefore, that these songs were composed well after the sixteenth century, by which time both Gorakshanath's cult and the *Ananga Ranga* had gained enough popularity as to become open to varied interpretation and extrapolation.

It is interesting to see how the figure of Gorakshanath has been domesticated here: the Natha guru who so deeply influenced a great swathe of culture spanning Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Punjab, Sindh, Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, Assam, Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and even Sri Lanka, is here literally what his name means: Protector of the Cows, both benevolent and terrible. He is also identified, according to the Natha tradition, as being in a direct line of spiritual teachers headed by Shiva himself as Adinatha (the First Natha) ; hence, perhaps, the coupling of his name with those of Hara and Gauri. However, these two songs are different from the genre of songs prevalent in North Bengal called *Gopichand-Moynamotir Gaan*, which explores directly the spiritual journey of the principal characters under the guidance of Nath gurus. The Goalbandhani Gaan is thus a unique instance of the evolution and modification of popular myth and legend.

Goalbandhani is a ritual that is under threat from the gradual decline of the old agrarian society and the concurrent expansion of urban, industrialized, globalized India. Thus, not only does Nagen Mohanta have fewer patrons today than he did a decade ago, but his son, too, has taken up another trade. These songs will soon become a relic of an age when farmers were still

dependent on natural forces, wary of divine wrath, and ignorant of the “scientific” causes of damage to livestock and crops. This paper is an attempt at recognizing and preserving (albeit in a different form), an aspect of culture that is on its way to extinction.

Notes

1. Smita Basu is a Project Fellow with the Centre for Translation of Indian Literatures, Jadavpur University, under the UGC-UPE Scheme (Cultural Resources and Social Sciences) Phase 2, Jadavpur University. She has an MPhil from the University of Hyderabad.
2. Horo-Gouri: The local pronunciation of Hara-Gauri, another name for the dual entity of Shiva and Shakti, the two creative principles of the universe. For all subsequent proper names, I have retained the local pronunciation. Thus, Bhagavati is Bhogoboti, Jagatgauri is Jogotgouri, Shiva is Shibo, Narayan is Narayon, Hara is Horo and Gorakshanath is Gorokkhonath.
3. Jogotgouri Rai: It is unclear which deity this name indicates.
4. Thirty three *koti*: There are thirty three crore deities in the Hindu pantheon. *Koti* means a crore, or ten million.
5. Lokkhi: The local pronunciation of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity.
6. *Ma go*: An exclamation, literally meaning “O Mother!” However, *ma* may be the respectful form of address towards any woman, younger or older. In this case, it is probably an address to the female audience.
7. Hoistani: The local pronunciation of “Hastini”, or elephant-woman. Similarly, Padmini becomes Poidyani, Chitrini becomes Chintini, and Shankhini becomes Shonkhani. The references are, of course, to the four classes of women described in Kalyana Malla’s work.
8. *Chhora*: The daily practice of mopping a floor of packed earth with a solution of cowdung and water. This helps to strengthen the floor.
9. *Kula*: A kind of elongated tray made of woven bamboo or cane, curved at one end and straight at the other. It is used for winnowing chaff from grain, or for separating coarser particles from finer ones. It is also an auspicious ritual accessory.
10. *Guapaan*: A combination of areca nut and betel leaf, considered auspicious, and figuring in many rituals and social occasions, or as part of the hospitality offered to a guest.
11. Kopila: The local pronunciation of Kapila. In Hindu mythology, Kapila is a celestial cow of plenty. Here, however, the myth is modified and Kopila becomes the name of a girl who is reborn as the cow.
12. Kopeshwori: It is unclear which goddess this name refers to, but it is likely that it is a name for Shiva’s consort.
13. *Pohor*: The local pronunciation of *prahara*, a traditional Indian time unit comprising three hours. Thus, threepohors amounts to nine hours.

Works Cited

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