



Preserving Literary Heritage Through Orality and Music: A Study of Ganga Sati's Bhajans

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ABSTRACT

The present paper entitled *Preserving Literary Heritage Through Orality and Music: A Study of Ganga Sati's Bhajans* offers a unique window into the confluence of literary heritage and musical tradition, specifically within the context of Gujarati Folk music. The present study explores her bhajans from 3 different angles i.e. musicology, orality and Dhvani, as her bhajans, the outcome of intuitive poetic inspiration, rich in suggestiveness in the true sense of the term are preserved through oral tradition in the form of singing. The present study focuses on the function and impact of Gangasati's bhajans on the community, on how they are passed from one generation to another, taught, and performed. It examines how these bhajans embody the cultural and spiritual ethos of the time. The bhajans of Gangasati were original compositions and became widespread entirely through oral tradition. The orality aspect of transmission made her music widely accessible to a large population of non-literates, encouraging active community participation and spiritual engagement. The emphatic role of orality is highlighted since perpetuating and preserving the spiritual legacy along with the literary heritage was made possible through the persistent performances of Ganga Sati's bhajans and life story in the form of folk tales and singing in *satsangs* (devotional gatherings) and *daira*. The present study will examine the elements of Ganga Sati's bhajans, namely melody, rhythm, and improvisational aspects. The current study will also explore the use of Bhupali raga, a common raga facilitating easy memorization, to convey suggestive and mystical meanings to common people/laymen.

Introduction

Ganga Sati, a devotional poet from Gujarat (1856-1884) believed in the Nirgun type of Bhakti i.e. worshipping the formless form of God. Bhandev considers Ganga Sati as Meerabhai of Gujarat. (Bhandev 05)

Ganga Sati's Bhajans have been considered as a storehouse of moral lessons on the day to day issues of life. They serve as an oral treatise for the people of Gujarat who seek guidance in their everyday life and enhance their spiritual life. According to Lakshman Pingalshibhai Gadhwani, "Ganga Sati is the Bhrahmavadini" (Gadhwani 6)

Ganga Sati's bhajans set a moral tone in the society for a harmonious social structure and help people lead their life in a proper manner. Ganga Sati has given guidance in almost all aspects of social life and moral social behaviour along with exploring the mystic way of salvation. She believed in Navadha Bhakti Marg which focuses on nine forms of devotions including Shravan, Kirtan, Smaran, Padasevan, Archana, Vandana, Dasya, Sakhya, and Atma Nivedana.

Objectives:

Objectives of the present study are as follows:

- To analyze the journey of Ganga Sati's devotional songs through various forms of orality.
- To analyze the musical quality and composition of Ganga Sati's bhajans.
- To explore the qualities of Ganga Sati's bhajans that made them immortal.
- To analyze the Ganga Sati's bhajans using literary theory.
- To explore the literary devices leading to the successful transmission of mystic and complex ideas.

Historical Context:

Ganga Sati although illiterate, was a profound and influential devotional poet. Her compositions offer rich suggestive expressions that convey profound wisdom. She is referred to as 'Mother of Knowledge' as she imparts wisdom from classical literature which conveys spiritual lessons through oral tradition. Despite having no formal education, her compositions offer the truth of life, philosophical insights and practical teachings that are relevant even in contemporary times. Ganga sati's Bhajans reflect the aspects of *Navadh Bhakti* and guidelines with regards to the *Guru-Shisya* tradition conveyed in the oral traditions. Ganga sati's legacy of Bhajans includes 52 compositions majorly. They are comprehensive in nature providing insights on moral lessons from various Indian Classical texts. Due to the deep and profound spiritual resonance in her thoughts, the community believes her to be the incarnation of a devoted and blessed soul.

Ganga Sati in her childhood days would mould the clay into idols of deities, and worship it before distributing the prasad. The spiritual journey of her life had the sole goal of merging with the Brahma, the supreme divinity. She had a close friend Pankhi, also known as Paanbai Hameerbhai Padhiyar.

Ganga Sati's family recognized her spiritual inclination and sought an appropriate match for her. Her family found Kahalsang who shared her devotional temperament and was from Samadhiyala in Gujarat. Both of them shared a fulfilled and spiritual marriage since 1864 which strengthened the image of GangaSati not only as a wife but also as a spiritual guru and teacher. According to the traditional customs of that era, a female servant shall accompany the bride to her new household. Paanbai was a close companion of GangaSati and she was eventually chosen for this role. Some oral traditions regarded Paanbai as the daughter-in-law of GangaSati, whereas the other oral narratives present her as a devoted disciple of GangaSati. During their time together, Paanbai served GangaSati and received invaluable teachings of spirituality from her.

The life of Kahalsang and GangaSati was dedicated to spiritual pursuits. They both wanted to find the ultimate purpose of life and sang the Bhajans together. They were deeply compassionate beings helping those who were in need. Their spiritual journey was centered around fighting and overcoming the internal enemies of the human mind like fear, anger, lust, jealousy, pride, etc. The primary goal of doing this was to attain the state of Nirmal, which is the state of the human mind being free from all these negative elements. According to them once an individual is free from this negativity, he/she is ready for the Union with the Almighty.

Certain accounts comment upon the death of Kahalsang's father around 31st Jan 1889. Kahalsang did not feel deep grief as he had received the state of Nirmal by that time. Following the death of his father, Kahalsang and GangaSati relocated to a farm as the fort they initially lived in had become too small to accommodate many visitors that came to meet them. On this farm, a Hanuman temple was established followed later by the construction of Ram temple. Additionally, 12 rooms were made for people to stay. Even today, this temple is greatly significant in Samadhiyala, preserving the spiritual legacy left behind Kahalsang and GangaSati.

Bhudardas, a literate and a devotional rhapsodist was once believed to be invited to their farm. Upon his special request, he secured an accommodation near to both of them and accompanied them in singing bhajans. He too followed the path of Navadh Bhakti. Bhudardas is credited for documenting the oral bhajans sung by GangaSati and Kahalsang. His efforts to preserve their compositions played a very important role in spreading spiritual awareness in Gujarat. Bhudardas went to various villages, performing these bhajans for both literate and illiterate, preserving them through oral traditions. However, these bhajans were unfortunately lost in the flood according to some rhapsodists. Yet, the role of Bhudardas remains a significant one for sustaining the spiritual legacy of Kahalsang and GangaSati.

Kahalsang was believed to possess a spiritual power through which he could revive the dead. Kahalsang did this out of compassion and love for helpless animals and people. On one occasion, however, he used this spiritual power out of his pride for his devotional life. GangaSati pointed out the error of ego and pride in Kahalsang's attitude. Realizing his mistake, to leave his body and partake the journey towards the spiritual eternity.

Ganga Sati also wanted to accompany her husband However, as her disciple Paanbai was not complete (Nirmal state) she was advised by her husband to teach her before she leaves her body. Kahalsang left her body in 1894. Right after Kahalsang's passing, GangaSati would compose and sing a bhajan each day, explaining it's meaning to Paanbai. She continued this practice for 52 days, until Paanbai became a complete devotee and attained the Nirmal state. At this point, Ganga Sati helped Paanbai attain a divine vision of God. Once, Paanbai became a complete devotee and gained all the spiritual insights, Ganga Sati decided to leave her body on March 15, 1884.

After GangaSati's departure, Paanbai composed one bhajan for three consecutive days and on fourth day March 19, 1894 she too left her body.

Journey of Ganga Sati's Bhajans through various forms of orality

Despite the gradual documentation of Ganga Sati's Bhajans in written form, they have been majorly preserved through oral traditions. These bhajans have stood the test of time. They reflect the enduring strength of orality as they're still continuously transmitted amongst today's youth. Saint Bhudardasji was historically the first person to record the Bhajans of GangaSati in written form. Bhudardasji wanted to ensure that these Bhajans remain easily accessible for the future generations to come and the youth of tomorrow can get better acquainted with the rich lyrics and composition of Ganga Sati. These documented Bhajans of Ganga Sati, Paanbai and Kahalsang were lost in the flood. It was reported that the flood completely destroyed the treatise made by Bhudardasji. However, it was through the oral traditions that these compositions were revived later until they were re-documented. The survival of Ganga Sati's compositions even in contemporary times is a reflection of the resilience of oral traditions and its preservation.

Residual Orality is evidently exemplified in the Bhajans of Ganga Sati with all its characteristics. The co-existence of the oral and written traditions is reflected in the cultural landscape of Kathiyawad region of Gujarat. This is the prime example of Residual Orality as opposed to the Primary Orality, which is witnessed in communities that lack literacy and resources for written script. Despite the presence of literacy in Gujarat, various stories and compositions are still predominantly carried forward across the generations by folk artists and rhapsodists. For Ganga Sati's Bhajans, oral transmission is the dominant mode through the mediums of singing, followed by explanation and illustrations in the form of preaching and poetic analysis. Even the listeners prefer to gain an in-depth understanding of compositions and interpretation through auditory means. Over the time, Bhajans of Ganga Sati transitioned into the oral-literate tradition manifesting various characteristics of it. This was marked by the proper documentation as well as the systematic study of these Bhajans. The Bhajans of Ganga Sati later were integrated into the academic curriculum of the Gujarati School Textbooks as well as in the University Syllabus for undergraduate students pursuing their degrees in Gujarati Literature. The scope of research with regards to Ganga Sati's bhajan has widened primarily concerning the thematic analysis of Bhajans and Mysticism. However, with respect to other perspectives, Ganga Sati's Bhajans have remained untouched and unexplored. It requires further research study and needs detailed scholarly attention.

Evolving times saw the integration of Ganga Sati's Bhajan in Digital Orality. Through the mediums of technology, Ganga Sati's Bhajan marked a shift in the oral transmission in digital media. These Bhajans are easily accessible to the youth and shared widely via radio, television (TV serials, dairas), you tube videos, shorts, and other social media statuses. This evolution of oral transmission through contemporary digital platforms has contributed to widening the reach of oral traditions. It has also ensured their continuous relevance in current cultural landscapes.

Apart from Digital Orality, Performative Orality has been a major mode of transmitting Ganga Sati's Bhajans. The transmission of Bhajans is conducted mainly at religious places and community gatherings for devotional purposes or even someone's funeral ceremonies. The staged musical performances, theatrical productions, and different kinds of contemporary modes through which the Bhajans of Ganga Sati are presented in front of modern audiences. The well-balanced blend of traditional and contemporary styles of performance reflects the way in which these Bhajan continue to evolve and sustain.

Bhajans of Ganga Sati can be regarded as Poetic Orality. Poetic Orality is characterized by figurative language, and poetic devices, employing vivid imagery and musical quality. Thus, the survey shows that the Bhajans have gone through various forms of Orality including the Residual Orality, Digital Orality, Oral-literate traditions, and lastly Performative Orality. Each of these forms has distinctive characteristics such as verbal transmission based on memory, repetition, musical elements and artistic performances. These qualities have made the Bhajans of Ganga Sati immortal and remain culturally significant.

It is important to note that Ganga Sati's bhajans have continued to survive primarily through oral transmission. They have even garnered widespread popularity in Gujarat. It is pertaining to the form and composition of these Bhajans that has contributed to the faithful preservation of Bhajans across generations. Ganga Sati's compositions are notably performed in a specific manner and style. It is very distinctive. The framework of Indian Classical Music Theory will be used for the analysis of Ganga Sati's Bhajans in this research study. An attempt will be made to explore the musical techniques as well as the intricate structures in the undertones of Ganga Sati's composition.

Analysis of the musical composition of Ganga Sati's Bhajans

Performances of Ganga Sati's Bhajans, throughout their course of evolution, have consistently showcased their connection to Raga Bhupali. Despite the developments and changes in forms of orality, Ganga Sati's bhajans have retained the core elements of their original compositions. This preservation is a testament to the significance these devotional songs hold in the community. In recent times, there has been some modifications

in the style of singing and composition of the bhajans. These changes are reflection of the contemporary influences and evolving cultural practices while maintaining the essence of Ganga Sati's spiritual legacy.

Raga Bhupali is a fundamental and melodious raga in Indian classical music. Ganga Sati's bhajans are traditionally composed and sung in Raga Bhupali. Raga Bhupali is known for its simplicity. It holds significant aesthetic value in both Hindustani and Carnatic classical music traditions. The deep resonance of spirituality and emotional expression that Raga Bhupali allows perfectly aligns with Ganga Sati's Bhajans.

Various poetic devices along with Raga Bhupali serves as an ideal medium for conveying the profound mystic ideas in Ganga Sati Bhajans. "Raga Bhupali is being known to have an awakening effect on someone who is in deep sleep." (Priyanka 166) According to Barderkar "Depending on the way sound waves are listened to or pronounced, they have an impact in the way the neurological (brain nerve) system works in human body." (Bardekar 129) The melodious and simple quality of Raga Bhupali allows the listeners to focus on the message of Bhajans without getting distracted by complex musical elements. The usage of Raga Bhupali in the composition ensures that attention is maintained on the philosophical aspects, not compromising the crux of the bhajans.

To better understand why Raga Bhupali is such a befitting choice, the nature of this Raga shall be understood in detail. "Raga Bhupali belongs to Thaata Kalyan in Indian Classical music." (Jha 212)

The Ragas in Indian music are divided on the basis of the number of notes that are used in Raga. A Raga is formed with a minimum combination of five notes to seven notes. These different note structures are classified into three parts mainly - Odhav (Five notes), Shadhav (Six notes), Sampurna (Seven notes). Odhav-Odhav, Odhav-Shadhav, Odhav-Sampurna etc. are various kinds of combinations that can be made using these notes. There are nine distinct categories of Ragas. It should be taken into account that the composition consisting of less than five notes cannot be counted as a Raga, although they may make melodic tunes.

The pentatonic scale (five notes) is the characteristic of Raga Bhupali. The notes used in Raga Bhupali are: SRGPDS. The Odhav-Odhav type of musical structure indicates the use of five notes in aaroh (ascending) and avaroh (descending) scales. G (Ga) is Vadi i.e. the main note. It is the most prominent note and defines the character of Raga Bhupali. It holds the critical position of keynote in Raga. It is used repeatedly. D (Dha) is known as the Samvadi i.e. the second main note. It compliments the vadi note. The D note is not overly emphasized upon in Raga Bhupali or else it will result in composition of an entirely different Raga. Other important notes in Raga Bhupali are S, P and G. S is the founding note of Raga. It forms the base of the Raga Bhupali structure.

The time period from 7 PM to 9 PM is associated with the singing of Raga Bhupali. It was predetermined by the scholars of Indian Classical music from the past. The specific arrangements and use of swaras in particular manner suggests that Raga Bhupali may have its roots in Indian Folk Music traditions. The tone of this Raga is serious and melodious. Raga Bhupali primarily uses Mandra and Madhyak saptaks (lower and higher octaves). Whenever Raga Bhupali is performed in Higher Octaves, it will be transformed into another Raga. Thumari Dadara altogether can't be sung in Raga Bhupali. They are incompatible with the structure of Raga Bhupali.

Uttarang and Purvag are the later and earlier part of a Raga. Vadi and Samvadi are often found in different parts of the Raga. If Vadi is found in the later parts of the Raga, eventually Samvadi will be found in the first part of the composition before P. Typically, the distance between vadi and samvadi is said to be 3-4 swaras. It establishes the harmonious balance between Vadi and Samvadi and is followed by Sa. As explained in Raga Chandrika Sagar, "Arohi Avarohi me sur Ma Ni tumhe tyag, D G samvadi vadi te kahe Bhupali raga," highlighting the essence of Raga Bhupali.

It is important to understand how each note and swara's treatment in context of Raga Bhupali contributes to overall character and formation of raga. The detailed description of each notes is given below:

S (Sa) - It is a fundamental note for Raga Bhupali.

R (Re) - This note is not significantly stressed upon as it can change the Raga completely.

G (Ga) - It is the most important note, the keynote and Vadi swara of Raga Bhupali. It's highlighted and repeated often throughout the composition. S R G, P D S R G, G R G, D, G, this tonal structure showcases the importance of G in composition. G is believed to have a spiritual effect in mantra as well according to some pandits practicing rituals in Hindusim.

P (Pa) - It's very important note in the composition and is primarily used as Nyas (rest) Swar. It's frequent repetition stabilizes the melodious tone.

D (Dha) - It is the Samvadi Swar. It serves as Second most important swar in Raga Bhupali. There is no pause on this note as it may change the framework of Raga.

Just as Alaps are used in Indian classical music as Introduction of Raga and setting the tonal foundation for the raga, Sakhis are used in Bhajans for introduction and set the tone for spirituality and devotion. After setting the tone, singers can eventually start singing the bhajan. Raga Bhupali whenever used in composition evokes a sense of separation, detachment and deep devotion. It's further characterized by serene, peaceful, and calming qualities. Its simplicity along with the majestic and soulful depth makes it an ideal raga for the Bhajan (devotional songs) and Kirtans (chanting). It's popular among the musicians due to its meditative nature. The absence of swaras like Ma and Ni in Raga Bhupali aids in maintaining the serene quality of the Raga. The minimalism and simplicity of this raga create a tranquil effect on the listener's mind. In Indian classical

tradition of music, (M) and (N) have specific emotional effect and connection. Use of M is associated with creating a sense of tension, and urgency, yearning, longing. Use of (N) is associated with excitement, dynamism and energy, joy and playfulness, celebration and attachment.

However, it is observed that in recent versions artists are using M and N in the composition of Ganga sati's bhajans. In further study the analysis of those compositions can be considered for research by a researcher.

Analysis of Ganga Sati's Bhajan

Ganga Sati's Bhajans have profound suggestiveness. It conveys spiritual and mystical ideas with the help of literary devices. Ganga Sati's Bhajans have a symbolic depth. The moral and philosophical guidelines are provided to the listeners and devotees through her Bhajans. It facilitates to grasp the in depth understanding of the metaphysical and complex ideas of Dhvani by being sung repeatedly on daily basis. Given below is the analysis and interpretation of one of the bhajans by Ganga Sati out of 52 bhajans.

“વીજળી ને ચમકારે મોતીડાં પરોવો રે પાનબાઈ નહીંતર અચાનક અંધારા થાશે જી

જોત રે જોતા માં દિવસો વહી જશે પાનબાઈ એકવીશ હજાર છસો ને કાળ ખાશે-વીજળીને.” (Brahmvedantji 84)”

Ganga Sati uses the metaphor of threading the pearls in the momentarily flash of lightening warning that sudden darkness will soon prevail. According to her, in a blink of eye, time will consume 21,600 breaths. This is the reference to how fleeting the nature of life is.

The threading of the pearls symbolizes the unity with the Ultimate Divine. Moreover, the light of the bolt is a reference for the uncertainty and temporariness of life. Here, the darkness is metaphorically used to determine the death that will eventually come to all. The time is personified here further when it is said that time will eat/consume 21,600 breaths.

The suggestive meaning implies the fleeting nature of life and the inescapable, inevitable nature of death. The primary purpose of human life is unity with the Supreme Being. Human life is quite similar to that of the flash of lightning. The breath of human life once taken can't be revived or renewed. Hence, every breath of human life shall be devoted to attaining unity with the Supreme Being. Scholars of Ganga Sati's Bhajans suggested that her Bhajans go beyond the spheres of language, transcend materialistic boundaries and offer a profound mystical experience that can only be obtained through spiritual practices. The emphasis is put on breathing exercises and meditation to attain spiritual purity. The devotees chant Aum while inhaling and while exhaling they chant Soham. This chanting practice purifies the soul and prepares it for the union with God.

This couplet highlights the transient nature of human existence and urges devotees to recognize their ultimate goal to live righteously, remain pure, and seek unity with the divine while time permits. The poet uses the vivid imagery of personified time which will eat away 21,600 breaths in a blink of an eye. It alerts the devotee to seize the moment, live in the present and make the most of the time that has been given to them before it runs out.

“જાણ્યા રે જેવી આ તો અજાણ્યા છે રે વસ્તુ પાનબાઈ અધૂરિયા નેનો કેવાય જી ગુપત રસ નો આ ખેલ છે અટપટો, આંટી મેલો તો સમજાય જી.વીજળી ને ચમકારે.” (Brahmvedantji 84)

The poet here suggests that spiritual truth is always like a mystery that is worthy to be known. But this spiritual truth shall not be conveyed to the people who are spiritually incomplete. જાણ્યા રે જેવી આ તો અજાણ્યા this specific lines adds the effect of the word play and uses the rhythm of alliteration. Due to that it has the quality of memorization. ગુપત રસ નો આ ખેલ છે અટપટો, this line adds on to the metaphorical value of how the spiritual salvation is something which can not be attained by everyone as it is complex in nature and an intricate game. The word “અધૂરિયા” holds significant weight in the verse. Contextually, it refers to those individuals who have not yet transcended their mundane flaws people who are spiritually immature or incomplete. આંટી represents the complexity and entanglements of everyday life. Ganga Sati suggests that it is only through detachment that one can see the reality of supreme being. An individual must be free from the temptations of life. Then and only one can go on the mystic journey of salvation. Ganga Sati uses the word *Nirmal* for a stage of human mind that can be attained when an individual is free from all the negative traits like greed, ego, pride, and fear. This state can be obtained through the medium of meditation. Only then a soul can merge with the divine.

“મન રે મૂકીને તમે આવો રે મેદાનમાં પાનબાઈ જાણી લીયો જીવ કેરી જાત જી સજાતિ - વિજાતિ ની જુગતિ બતાવું ને, બીબે પાડી દઉં બીજી ભાત જી.વીજળી ને ચમકારે” (Brahmvedantji 84)

The poet urges the listener to have an open mind and heart which would be completely free from the pride and ego. A free mind is capable to understand the essence of life in true sense. Ganga Sati says that the relationship between the humans and of humans with divine will be explained through her. She puts emphasis on the need for individual identity as well as collective human existence. The alliteration used in the line, મન રે મૂકીને તમે આવો રે મેદાનમાં and જાણી લીયો જીવ કેરી જાત જી સજાતિ contributes to the musical quality and enhances the memorization effect. સજાતિ - વિજાતિ carries deep significance in the sense that it makes the people understand the connection between humans and moral duties with one another. The poet emphasizes the importance of understanding these two layers of relationships—our earthly obligations to each other and our higher duty to merge with the divine. Here mold is metaphorically used for body which is just made up of clay in a structured way.

“પિંડ રે બ્રમ્હાંસ થી પર છે ગુરુ પાનબાઈ, તેનો રે દેખાડું તમને દેશ જી ગંગા રે સતી એમ બોલિયાં રે સંતો, ત્યાં નહિ માયાનો જરીયે વેશ જી વીજળી ને ચમકારે.....” (Brahmvedantji 84)

Here Ganga Sati puts emphasis on the fact that true essence of guru transcends the physical body and elements of the cosmos. This implies that guru exist in a realm that is not influenced by mundane imperfections or worldly distractions. પિંડ રે બ્રમ્હાંસ થી પર છે ગુરુ પાનબાઈ has alliteration and repetition of the sound. Here the implied meaning is that one shall try to free himself from worldly temptation.

Through these poetic devices, Ganga Sati effectively alerts her listeners to the spiritual purpose of life. The warning and moral tone embedded in the poem creates an atmosphere of urgency and importance, compelling the audience to reflect on their own spiritual journeys. The combination of repetition and vivid imagery ensures that the message is not only memorable but also impactful. Both Arthdhwani (implied meaning) and Shabdhwani (sound resonance) are skillfully woven into the fabric of the poem, leading to the fulfilment of the poet's intentions. The use of these devices encourages listeners to engage actively with the content, prompting them to prioritize their spiritual growth and awareness in the face of life's distractions.

Conclusion

Ganga Sati, the Brahmavadini of Gujarat gave immortal jewels of literary, aesthetic and moral significance to Gujarat in the form of her devotional songs. They have been transmitted to the present generation through different forms of orality. The artistic worth is achieved in terms of musical composition and the use of literary devices to hint at the suggestive meaning. The use of Raga Bhupali contributed significantly to make the songs popular and effective with its devotional, serious and meditative nature. Long-lasting impact on the minds of people is observed due to the use of raga Bhupali in the musical composition. Using the simple raga for the transmission of complex and mystic concepts is one of the remarkable merits of the composition. The compositions serve as guidelines or text for the future generation of music composer to compose their songs with the harmonious balancing of the content and raga to make them immortal. From a literary perspective, the bhajans are full of suggestive meaning. The suggestiveness is conveyed through various poetic devices leading to the fulfilment of the poet's objective. The present study analyzed one of the poems as a sample. For further research, other poems can be considered using various other literary theories. The present study has offered one of the interpretations. Further, layers of meaning can be explored by further research. For such poets who have transmitted the rich heritage of art and literature should be translated into English and other language.

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