
UNIT 4 FOLK FORMS AS PROTEST

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand the relation between folk forms of expression and protest;
- distinguish between open and covert forms of protest;
- identify various kinds of protest against power and authority (social, political, religious etc.); and
- recognize the subversive potential of folk forms whether they are live performances, literature or oral traditions.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "We may discover in these folk-rhymes many a trace of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain...coming down the ages. Entwined in their broken rhymes one may still trace many a tale of hurt and suffering." ('Gramya Sahitya' 1898, Translation, Khsitish Roy). One could add to this the element of protest. Folklore records the real life of the common people with uncomfortable fidelity which also reflects their protest against authority or existing social structures sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Folk performance including music, dance, religious and non-religious pageantry, puppetry etc. has been used by folk artists to voice their protest against existing power structures.

Folk forms are characterized by simplicity and spontaneity which are their hall mark. These forms arise from, and are part of, the lived life of the performers. Naturally, these also register their simple and spontaneous feelings, including

those of protest. Folk forms are the artistic expression of the people. They are produced by and cater to people sharing a sense of belonging with the same community. Sharing the same or similar identity and sharing grievances against some authority or power creates participative forms of expression.

Folklore is not a fossilized thing of a hoary past. Its evolution is a continuous process and therefore can become a vehicle of people's aspirations, anxieties, joys and sorrows arising out of their lived experience. It is because of this that folk forms are capable of lending themselves as vehicles of protest from time to time. As eminent folklorist, Sankar Sengupta observes in his book, *Folklore and Folklife in India*, "... sometimes in hardships and struggle also some forms of beautiful and everlasting art emanate."

4.2 PROTEST

Protest, broadly speaking can be of two kinds, open and covert. Open protest can take the form of clearly or openly voiced dissent or gestures of protest. Covert protest can exist in various hues. Lamentation, subversive laughter and ridicule can be some expressions of covert protest. Folk forms spring from the heart of the folk or common people and reach out to the folk. They are alive and sensitive to the feelings and emotions of the folk. Being an ongoing process which records the narratives of an individual engaging with the social space available to him or entire communities seeking to assert and identify themselves, the folk form has great elasticity. Folk forms go on acquiring new strands of thoughts, ideas and issues which sometimes may burst into gestures of protest. Protest can be understood as both the desire to question the authority of social, religious and political structures and the expression of this desire whether spontaneously or through organized display such as protest marches etc. Let us see how Folk forms can voice or constitute protest.

There are instances of registering an open protest. If we look into the social content of the folksongs it becomes apparent. Hemango Biswas writes, "A purely academic and conservative approach to folksongs often overlooks and even ignores one of its most human aspects-the 'protest songs', which express in varied forms the struggle of our oppressed people through the ages against an unjust social order".

4.3 FOLK FORMS AS PROTEST IN HISTORY

4.3.1 Folk Ballads and Folk Songs

Folk ballads on heroes of particular regions and communities bestow a mythical status on folk-heroes who overthrew powerful rulers, both Indian overlords and colonial masters and their representatives. These ballads valorize protest and defiance as can be seen in the ballad 'Resma'. This is about Chauharmal, a Dushad hero born at Anjani near Mocama (Patna), who, with the help of goddess Durga, defeated Ajabi Singh, a notorious landlord. Chauharmal is worshipped by the Dushads and an annual fair is held near his wrestling ground. 'Lorikayana' celebrates an Ahir hero Lorik who killed an evil king Malaygeet. These folk forms are instances of rich communicative ways within a community.

Folk ballads have been greatly effective for articulating as well as spreading protest at various junctures of history. For instance, Kabig?n in Bengal was used

effectively to stir popular protest against the British colonial oppression in Bengal. Mukundadas, an eminent singer costumed as a traditional folksinger or *C?ran*, swept the countryside with his patriotic songs sung in the *Kabig?n* style. This style was replete with the simple language-idioms and melodies of folksong. The effectiveness of his protest can be guessed by the very fact that the British had to stop his performance, arrest him, and throw him into prison.

Similar use was made of popular ballad or ballad-like forms in various parts of the country during the colonial era. Mention may be made of *Laavani* in Maharashtra, *Alha* in Uttar Pradesh, *Gee-gee* in Karnataka, or *Villupaattu* in Tamil Nadu. *J?tr?*, a traditional folk form, had been widely used during the period of nascent nationalism to spread the ideas of patriotism and the injustice of foreign rule. The renowned author Raja Rao shows in his novel *Kanthapura* how popular performances like *Hari-katha* were used by young patriots in the remote far-flung countryside to spread the message of Gandhi and the freedom struggle.

History and folklore are bound to impact on one another. Much folk art, literature and song arose from real historical events. The many peasant rebellions during the early phase of British rule in India provided such impetus. The British during the early period of their inroad in India faced stiff resistance from the tribal people who positively gruded encroachment on their basic rights. Tribal communities and ethnic people who had no experience of being 'ruled' by any authority beyond their own head/chief and had held rent-free land for generations in exchange of service to the landlord, were suddenly forced to pay revenues. Taking cover of British patronage the zamindars also sneaked in for their cut. The ensuing protests and challenges by these desperate people were ruthlessly crushed both by colonial masters and their representatives. The folklore of these regions retains the memory of these unrecorded tragedies. The Chuar revolt (in North-West region of Bengal) of 1799, the peasants' insurrection in the North Bengal districts in 1783, the sannyasi *Bidroha* in *Birbhum* and *Bishnupur* in the wake of the famine of 1769-70, the *Hos'* (of *Singbhum*) long resistance to the British from 1820-27, the combined rebellion of the *Hos* and the *Mundas* (*Chhotonagpur*) in 1829-32, and again in 1857, the *Khasi* rebellion (in *Sylhet*) in 1783, 1829, and 1860, the *Santhal* uprising (in Bengal and Bihar) in the 1850s, the *Bhil* revolt (in *Khandesh*, West India) from 1819-1831, the uprising of the *Poligars* in various areas along the eastern coast of South India, etc have gone down in folk memory in the form of tales, songs and verses.

The year 1832 marked the first instance of *Dhangar Kol* uprising (*Sonepur*) and before long they were joined by *Larka Kols* of *Singbhum*. The *Ho*, *Munda* and *Oraon* of *Choto Nagpur* rebelled against the British. In 1895 the *Mundas* were in revolt, led by *Birsa Munda*. *Birsa* invoked the memories of 1832 and the solidarity of the tribal people during that uprising. "The valleys of *Icha Hurang*, *Lango Lor*, *Domba Ghat* and the upland of *Jikilata* in popular imagination had once resounded with the triumphs (though illusory) of the powerful combination of the *Mundas* and *Laraka Hos* against the British Raj as commemorated with pride in *Munda* folk songs." (*Guha*, *Elementary Aspexcts of Peasant Insurgency*, 176). These *Munda* songs were sung at the meetings of *Birsa* and his followers, during 1898-99, in order to stir up the spirit of revolt on the eve of the insurrection. A *Munda* meeting, held in March 1898 on *Simbua Hill* sang about the *Kol* revolt of 1832,

- "O where are they fighting, shouldering weapons like the small ant?
- O where are they shooting arrows, carrying their weapons like the big ant?
- O they fight at Bundu
- O they shoot arrows at Tamar (in Guha 176).

You can find ballads on real folk heroes and real events like Veer Kunwar Singh (Bihar) who lived during the 1857 uprising and Birsa Oraon (Chhotanagpur) during Munda uprising. Ballads on Gandhiji's Non-cooperation movement are an example closer in history to our times.

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be around thirty words each.

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

1) What do you understand by the term 'Protest'?

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2) Can you name some tribal uprisings against the British rule?

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4.3.2 Revolts, insurrections and folk forms

The many isolated local insurrections and revolts by oppressed peasants throughout the country during the earlier phase of the British rule. These were not sufficiently explored or recognized by mainstream historians for a long time as they remained recorded in a gamut of folktales, songs and verses. Many of these may have also become untraceable as these were oral art and not recorded through any technological or other means.

The Santhal Revolt of 1855-56-originating in the Santhal Parganas of Bihar spread over the Santhal areas of Bihar and Bengal. Around 30,000 Santhals stood up against the British led by the brave young men Sidhu and Kanu. They had no weapon but bows and arrows and a strong resentment against the ruler. This resentment spread through songs such as the one translated below by Hemango Biswas,

"Sido, why are you bathed in blood?

Kanu, why do you cry hul, hul?

For our people we have bathed in blood,

For the trader thieves

Have robbed us of our land"

The memorable Santhal uprising in 1855 against the 'dikkus' (landlords, money-lenders and their British accomplices) has been recorded in a number of ballads. These ballads evoke admiration, awe and sympathy for the rebels. Here are the opening lines from a long ballad cited by P.C.Roychowdhury:

'Korley paramarsha mane harsa muluk marbar tare

Ingrej mariey amra rajys liba kere' (Roychowdhury, 104)

[They decided with great zeal to snatch the land from the British]

The following lines of the long ballad seem to reflect a keen triumphant mood during the onward march of the santhals to Kumrabad.

'Ghar bari kuri kuri bhangley dalan kotha

Kumrabader loguloke korley kumrokota.' (Roychowdhury, 106)

[They brought down all the houses and mansions to dust/ they chopped the residents of Kumrabad like kumro (yellow gourd)].

The Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 saw the participation of more than six million peasants. This even attracted the sympathy of the elite Indians who had been indifferent to earlier such revolts. Dinabandhu Mitra's play Nildarpan is an example of the way such revolts entered popular expression. Among the folksongs arising out of this revolt a most famous one is:

"The blue monkey has wrecked Bengal,

Our golden land-

Harish dies before his time

And Long is thrown into prison

What will the poor peasant do now! (Translation, Rama Kundu)

All over India similar songs can be found in different languages, retaining a very real history of desperate protest and defiance in their lines.

One can also cite the immensely popular folksong that spread like wildfire through Bengal following the hanging of Khudiram Bose, the teenage martyr who joined the terrorist movement and hurled a bomb with the intention of killing a British bureaucrat. We do not know who composed the song, but it was picked up by the masses,

"Ma, allow me to go for once, I shall come back!

O ma, I'll put my head into the noose all a-smile

While the world will look on,

On Saturday at ten the court cannot contain the crowds any more

The judge orders hanging for Khudiram.

You still have twelve millions of sons and daughters, ma

To tend; let me be hanged!

I shall be born again in a mud hut

If you fail to recognize me then,

Just look for the sign of the noose round my neck...(translation, Rama Kundu)

Sisir K.Das described the 1857 revolt, also referred to as the 'first war of Independence' as a "silent moment". This is due to the little record it has left behind in contemporary written literature. Excluding the poets Iswar Gupta (Bengal) and Narmad (Gujarat), mainstream literature remained nearly mum during and in the immediate aftermath of 1857 in contrast to folklore. There was an immediate and powerful outpouring of folk response in various forms of folk art. Even the puppeteers presented the events through their puppet shows in order to stir pity, awe and resentment amidst the folk.

The heroic feats of Rani Laxmibai became the favourite subject of popular folksingers: (see P.C.Joshi, 'Songs of Mutiny'). Mahasweta Devi, in her book Jhansir Rani cites a song which indicates the degree of inspiration the Rani instilled among her followers:

"One day we all will have to die

Then let that day be today

For our Rani we shall give up this life.

I will fight the Feringhee with this sword in my hand

The world will never forget me."(Translation, Rama Kundu)

There was a burst of ballads and songs about the queen of Jhansi, which reflects popular hatred against British torture and admiration for the queen as can be seen in the following song,

"Fell the trees,

The queen of Jhansi ordered,

So that the Feringis

Cannot hang our soldiers,

So that the cowardly British

May not shout,

Hang them on the tree.

Fell the trees, so that

They may not get any shade

To rest in the hot sun." (Translation, Hemango Biswas)

Another hero who was valorized in the folksong was Kunwar Singh, a leader of 75 years. Age or physical debility did not make him weak of purpose. The songs specially highlight his age in order to foreground his exceptional commitment. Kunwar Singh appears in these songs as an old man of 80, whose head wriggles as he walks, whose hair is white like a crane and who has lost all his teeth. However, "such a man set out for the war in the dark night". Children are still lulled to sleep with the song about Kunwar,

"O my child, our grandpa that day
had picked up the sword..."

A Gond prayer during the rebellion of 1857 invokes the popular spirit thus,

"Shut the mouth of the slanderers and
Eat up the backbiters, trample down the sinners,
You, 'satrusamharika'

Kill the British, exterminate them, Matchundee.

Let not the enemy escape, not the wives and children

Of such oh! Samgharika

Show favour to Shanker; support your slaves;

Listen to the cry of religion.

'Mathalka' eat up the unclean,

make no delay,

now devour them,

and that quickly,

Ghor-Mathalka.

(From P.C.Joshi(ed.), *Rebellion 1857: A Symposium* (1986: 158); cited in *The Penguin 1857 Reader*. (ed.) Pramod K.Nayar. Penguin Books India, 2007; p. 314-15)

In the folk poems of the 'Karan' poets of Rajasthan the kings of Rajasthan, all of whom had supported the British except the king of Bund, were called 'gadar'. Sankardan Samaur(1824-78) had even called upon the people to rebel against the kings. The Karan poet Suryamal of Bundi composed satirical verses:

Oh ye Thakurs, don't allow people to call you Singhas (lions)

Now that you've surrendered to foreigners

The name suits only those whose paws can kill elephants, and not the weak.

The great harvest of folk literature, scroll, music, and rural 'tamashas' preserved the glory and the martyrdom, the thrill and the tragedy of 1857. It was only in later years that these slowly percolated into mainstream and thereby inspired subsequent freedom struggle. So these are valuable documents of our anti-imperialist struggle and national heritage.

At the initial stage of the rebellion the elation among the common folk can be guessed from such excited songs as follows:

"Oh, all come and see

In the market of Meerut

How they give a good thrashing to the captured Feringhee

How they give a good thrashing to white men!" (P.C.Joshi)

In a sombre mood, the sad songs on the fall of Lucknow such as "bullets are flying in Alambagh", or "the canon roars in Machhibagan", or "thick arrows have darkened the sky", or "soldiers are beating their own forehead", or "queens are lamenting inside the palace" suggest an atmosphere of gloom and confusion.

Many tragedies were registered in folksongs and tales and thus remained alive in folk memory. Maniram Dewan of Assam, who was hanged in 1858, for his involvement in the 'mutiny' was thus commemorated in the mournful elegiac folk ballad:

"Secretly did they arrest you, O Maniram,
Secretly did they take you
Holroyd Sahib on the Tokolai bank
Had you secretly hanged." (Hemango Biswas)

A malita in Assam is about Maniram Dewan who had , around 1857, tried to organize a revolt but was eventually captured and executed by the British in 1858 following a mock trial. The 'malita' registers the sorrow of the people at the tragedy:

*'Desh patiboloi olali Maniram
Yatarai marile hanchi;
Lagar Samaniyai ?atru ??lile
Loli Jorjatat phanchi'*

(Das, 129)

'Maniram you had set out to build the country
However somebody sneezed at your departure,
All the followers and friends you had betrayed you
You were hung at Jorhat.'

Thus, folklore contains valuable micro-narratives of history under the garb of their simple melodies, verses, tunes and tales. Today we know some six thousand Indians were hanged during the three months in the immediate aftermath of the mutiny.

4.3.3 Folk cults, bhakti and protest

Like the political establishment, religious establishment too caused resentment and led to unique forms of protest. The B?ul songs prevalent among the outcast and poor communities present a remarkable defiance of the Hindu and Muslim religious establishments. Their emphasis on 'manush' or the individual is itself a protest against the authority and teaching of the mainstream religious establishment. The songs that go in the name of Lalan Sain or Madan Seikh amply bear out the message of protest.

He who knows the real tattva of man
Does not need any scripture
He has no fear of gods or demons, made of earth or wood
Who knows man (Translation, Rama Kundu)

When asked by everybody about his caste, Lalan would ask with simple innocence: 'what caste does look like? I do not know.' Lalan sings:

'The real Mecca is the human body.

Why do you tire yourself out, running abroad?'(Translation, Hemnago Biswas)

A popular song in the name of Madan Shek:

"Your path is blocked with
Temples and mosques,
When your call comes, my mentor,
I cannot move on -
The Gurus and Mursheds
Stand in my way.
The 'Puran', the 'Koran' and the counting of beads,
How tormenting are they
Madan wails in disgust."

(Hemango Biswas)

Sanat Kumar Bose writes about the B?ul: "He ... defies all the accepted forms of rituals prescribed and rigorously defended by the Hindu priests". The outcaste status of the B?ul who has to necessarily hold himself aloof from the mainstream society and religion/s, is however an assertion of his unique space and worldview.

The powerful Bhakti movement which is believed to have gained strength from the Eighth Century onwards in various parts of India is perceived as a form of social protest against the class and caste divisionism of orthodox religion. Though imbued with various strands of mysticism, the raising of the individual being or devotee or seeker above social and religious structures had recognisable consequences on the self-perception of entire communities. Indeed Bhakti movements created communities of devotees who within their fold could be equals and 'casteless' being united in the same mystico-religious experience while belonging to particular social castes or communities in other social contexts. Early Bhakti movements of south India such as Saivism and SriVaishnavism and later Movements originating in the Deccan like the Dattatreya cult and Vithoba cult to name a few have grappled and tried to resolve problematic issues of social inequality and the pre-eminence of the individual mystic.

Sometimes a shrine can command the central position in a community's life. In such case the shrine itself can evolve into a bastion of struggle for the community.

Saurabh Dube writes, "Recent studies of low-caste movements have focused on religion as a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order, the articulation of these initiatives was linked to popular tradition and popular culture."

The evolution of the Satnampanth cult and the Satnamis in Chhattishgarh can be cited as example. Satnampanth was an expression of the protest of the Chamar community of the locality. An 'untouchable' caste, the Chamars protested against their marginalization from the rural society. The Satnami mythic narratives relate the origin of this cult with the emergence of their preceptor, Guru Ghasidas. Being chosen and initiated by 'Satnampur', Ghasidas began to heal people from snake-bite, disease, blindness, other ailments and even death. Mystics and preceptors are often believed to be gifted with healing powers.

The Satnampanth rejected caste division within the community. They questioned the caste system but at the same time upheld the practices of purity and pollution which were flaunted by the upper caste as mark of their superiority. By rejecting meat, alcohol, narcotics, even certain vegetables and pulses, etc., they seemed to appropriate the symbols of the higher caste. This appropriation was itself an act of defiance. Eventually they also took the janeu or sacred thread, tilak, and choti, all symbols of high castes, thus challenging the prerogative of the caste order.

At the same time Satnampanth also introduced other practices which indicated protest. Satnampanth rejected temples and abolished the worship of village gods and goddesses for its followers. According to the myth "Satnampurush had asked Ghasidas to chase out the gods and goddesses from their houses" (Dube 144). They tried to get over the machinations of the caste society by throwing its gods and goddesses away. They also replaced the 'priest' by a nominated representative called 'bhandari'. There was no caste distinction within the faith. This actually meant a rejection of the social hierarchy of the caste society. A human mortal and that too from a 'low' caste, Guru Ghasidas was made to take the place of religious leader and was invested with the authority of the upper caste guru. A very daring act indeed! This invited the ire of the upper caste Hindus. The fact that they could launch this protest, however briefly, was because of their unity and the tight bond of mutual support among the community. By its very nature Satnampanth involved a 'confrontational enterprise' (Dube 147).

The Satnamis not only took on the caste society but later, during the leadership of Ghasidas's son Balakdas sought to take on the colonial power or the 'angrej raja'. As the story runs, when five Satnamis were unlawfully arrested and penalized by the sarkar, certain miraculous events proved their essential purity. The chakki or grinding stone in which they were to grind an impossible amount of grains broke down, forcing the government to accept their janeu, tilak and choti. As Dube writes, "the questioning of the exercise of colonial law combined with the truth, legitimacy and power of Satnam reveals the glimmer of a version of an alternative legality".

Two self-styled religious sects set up among local tribals in Mymensingh and Faridpur (now Bangladesh) in the early 19th century, Pagal Panthi and Ferazis respectively, professed the ideals of equality among all men. The Pagal Panthis rebelled against the British and the local zamindars supported by the British in 1825 and 1833. Another sect, the Ferazis, claiming that land was God's gift and none had the right to impose tax or rent on land, launched a peasant's movement in 1838-47 against extortion by zamindars and the British indigo planters.

Check your progress 2

Note: 1) Your answers should be about thirty words each.

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

3) What revolts and insurrections have been discussed above?

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4) What do you know of the Satnampanth?

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4.4 WOMEN'S PROTEST AGAINST PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

The marriage rituals in Murshidabad among the women of the Muslim community included a form called 'kap'. Kap or 'Alkap', a form of burlesque performed in accompaniment to verse or music, was in vogue among the folk. It is played by women making fun of the male society and institutions. Some women dress up as men with beards made of jute. Wearing shirt-trousers or dhoti-lungis and painting their faces, some carry spades and cane baskets on their shoulders. By means of dance, song and mimicry they make fun of the quarrels among men and the dispensing of rural justice by men among other male-oriented activities. The note of female assertion in 'Kap' can be fascinating. For example, on the occasion of some minor problems threatening the marriage feast in a village, the local women rise and squash it with the defiant dance and song of 'Kap',

Remake jhamake lacbo re mashale

Mashal jalyie de

Shasur bhasur mani ne mashale

Mashal jalyie de(Sarkar 134).

[Oh, light and hold up the flaming torches/We shall dance with flair and gusto/
Oh, we don't care about the strictures of father-in-law, or elder brother-in-law
...]

It is interesting to see how women, in spite of the cramping patriarchal stranglehold, carve out their space by means of these oblique devices of protest.

Dinesh Ch. Sen collected popular ballad-like songs called Maymansingh Geetika through years of hard work in the fringe areas of East Bengal, now Bangladesh. We hear a bold, direct indictment of the male in many of these songs. For example, Mahua, a beautiful girl who had been kidnapped and brought up by the vedia, a migrant community, expresses her apprehension when courted by a genteel youth thus, "Tomra purush bang-er jat/laihya laifya jao re nagar(3)/ Ar parer maiya dekhle pare hat baraiya dao..."(You men, you are the race of frog, you go a-skipping from one relation to another; and if you chance to spot a stranger's daughter at once you bend forward to grab the poor thing!)

Women would sometimes use a festive occasion for the mockery of male authority often represented by the bridegroom or the priest. 'Joranam' or 'khicagit' were extempore songs sung by women on the occasion of marriage. In these songs the bridegroom is called 'Japra' (wild shack of hair), 'luvia'(glutton), etc. The priest too is targeted as can be seen in the following verses,

*'Bidhi pade bapudeye maje maje ere
Gharat ache khaloipeti taloi mane pade' (Das 105)*

Mr. Priest cites some mantras, leaves out some;
Remembers the potbellied woman at home'
Or

*'Puja karon buli raikaha bamune
madhuparkakano khale' (Das 105)*

'Just see, the gluttonous priest,
under the pretence of worshipping pours the bowl of honey down his gullet!'

Women folk poets or 'Kavials' often lament the bleak lot of the women toiling
unrewarded on farms and in households. An obscure woman 'kavial' (folk poet)
sings thus,

*'Pushye rtu nitya nutan
maiyar rtu nai sangsare
Khoda ei dunya jabe kon dine'*

(Deb 87)

[For the men life brings such variety with every reason!

For women it is but one monotonous endless droll.

O God, will this system ever change!]

It is interesting to note the concluding prayer to 'Basundhara brata' or ritual fast
which is held by women to ensure rain. Women holding a dripping water bowl
above the Banyan, Pakud and Tulsi trees, sing the song of the brata. The ritual is
concluded with the prayer:

*'Basundhara devi mago tomay kori namaskar;
ei prthibite janmo jeno ar na hoi amar.' (Deb)*

[I pray to you O goddess Basundhara, that I may not be born again on this earth]

Though at the heart of all bratas (customs of fasting and worship observed by
women) there is a longing for the love of the husband, his well-being and the
good health of the family, traces of a deep desolation and despondency underlie
the women's ritual songs.

4.5 FESTIVALS AND FOLK EXPRESSIONS OF PROTEST

Some popular religious festivals among rural folk have also become platforms
to give vent to protest against social injustice though in an indirect way. Gambhira,
Chou, Jhumur, Haichao, Bihu are some of the examples.

Gambhira has been in practice in Malda for nearly two centuries. It is part of a
religious festival in which the artists tell the tales of their woes, hardships and
sufferings to Lord Shiva and seek redress from the Lord. This is a kind of covert
protest. The Gambhira songs sung in Malda through the month of Chaitra ad-
dress some of the very real problems of rural life, though putting the blame on
Siva and accusing none but Siva for every hazard. The rural poet sings,

"Catch hold of him, don't let him go
Carry him along
The old fellow has given much pain
When paddy is sown, he gives no water
He jokes with us every time."(Roy)

Tea garden labourers in Assam have evolved their own lore over time lamenting their lowly status and distance from home. The adkati or cunning recruiting person is ironically called 'Shyam' (possibly to rhyme with Assam too). 'Shyam' is a name that is traditionally supposed to denote the eternal lover. Hemango Biswas cites a popular Jhumur song sung by the tea garden labourers in Assam,

"How cruel are you, O Shyam,
You have cheated me into Assam.
The Sardar demands work,
The Babu says, drive them along,
The Sahib threatens, I'll take off your skins
I didn't want to come
It was you who cheated me into Assam
How cruel you are, O Shyam."

Prafulla Goswami cites an Assamese Bihu song which is a direct mockery of the British planter,

"The Sahibs come and open the gardens
on their heads are pan-shaped topees,
they make Mems of coolie girls
with cigars on their lips."

In North Bengal there was a custom among the Rajbangshi community of worshipping three deities together, Gorakhshanath, Sona Roy and Rupa Roy. The songs sung by the team of Gorakhshanath's worshippers are called 'Haichao'. A 'haichao' such as cited would contain a mocking reference to the British traders.

*"Kora bale kurire bhai ebar baro ban
Uncha kari bando dhipi kaladhapa dhan
Kaladhapa dhanre mor tulsu sari sari
Tahar niche darbar kare Gaurmon chaudhuri..."*

(In view of the threat of a heavy flood they had made a very high barn to store their dear harvest; then the white trader came to usurp the barn.)

Baramashya songs, as a rule, underscored the poverty and misery of the folk, thereby incorporating an implicit protest against the system. If the form was the frame, protest contributed the flesh to it. Here is a song from Sylhet (now Bangladesh):

In the month of asharh, it rains the whole day,
Brings tears for the poor mother,
There is no food, not a piece of cloth to wear,
What can I send to my daughter's house?

But my daughter's mother-in-law will not understand
And my daughter will be tortured.

[Translation, Soumen Sen]

Though Murshidi songs are ostensibly about Dehatattva, the religious message of Murshidi song is sometimes expressed in terms of social-economic reality and the unfairness that is embedded in the system. Thus the dimension of protest has been apparent quite often. For example,

I paid all my rents and taxes
Yet my land is put on auction,
Whom shall I complain to?
My landlord remains far off... (Translation, Rama Kundu)

These songs have double meanings. The situation of the devotee vis-à-vis his distant God is described in terms of the unjust suffering of the tenant of an absentee landlord. Similarly, the 'rent collector' in the following song can be death, as well as the very alive grim emissary of the real absentee landlord.

My Guru... I am head and ears in debt.
I don't know how to pay off the Zaminder's rent,
I am in constant worry,
When the rent collector comes
With the ejection notice in hand.

(Hemango Biswas)

It is not difficult to read the voice of unconcealed resentment and protest against social inequalities and injustice in many a Murshidi song of Bengal. One such song says,

'My Murshid, some live in palaces,
but I have a broken hut,
the hut can somehow resist a gale,
But it can't withstand the storm

'My Murshid, some people are well-dressed,
but I have a loin cloth,
even if it covers a part of the body
it doesn't cover my shame. (Hemango Biswas)

Check your progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be around thirty words each.

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.

5) What is the 'Kap' ritual discussed above?

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6) What popular festivals have been discussed in the above section?

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4.6 FOLKTALES OF LOVERS AS PROTEST

The lovers, heroes and heroines in Punjabi folklore possess extraordinary beauty but come from poor walks of life. The potter's daughter Sohni, the washerwoman Sassi, the shepherds Ajimbeg and Ranjha are examples. Puran and Rasalu, the two popular prince heroes gave up their throne and embraced the life of a destitute. Another unique aspect of Punjabi folklore is the celebration of individual freedom. The lovers represent the assertion of the individual whenever there has been a clash between the individual and the family and/or community.

Birha and Dehotattva songs emphasize the young lover's protest against social taboos and censors. For instance, a Bihu song says,

'God created the earth first
And then created life,
If this God could fall in love
Why should we not?' (Translation Hemango Biswas)

Love songs also imply protest against the insensitive system of marriage which proves particularly painful for the young bride, uprooted from her paternal family forced to labour amidst hostile in-laws. They particularly create a space for romantic passion and desire, usually not present within formalized relations of households which deny individual space.

4.7 OUTLAWS AND NOTIONS OF PROTEST

Some individuals may be regarded as criminals by all sections of society. However, there are instances when people are considered criminals by the law keepers, the state and the administration might be heroes and champions in the perception of the poor or the marginalized. David Arnold describes this as 'ambivalence'. Some acts can be perceived by the state as not only criminal but a threat or challenge as well. On the other hand "for the subalterns, even a purely selfish theft or assault can, in the right situation of tension and underlying hostility to oppressors, assume the character of a gesture of defiance or revenge." (Arnold 125). This means that in certain contexts even criminal acts carried out for selfish motives by some might assume a heroic character in the eyes of oppressed communities. This can happen when there are shared grievances against a community or a ruling class. In such situations crime itself can to be seen by the underprivileged or deprived masses as an expression of protest.

The peasant's own perception of 'violence' can be the reverse of that held by his enemies and the establishment. The establishment perceives all violation of law or defiance of the law as 'crime'. On the other hand in special situation the rebellious peasant can perceive them as gestures of social protest and therefore valorize them as honourable and just acts of protest. This we have seen in the Robin Hood ballads of pre-industrial England which used to enjoy great popularity among the poor villagers of England.

The tales about Banjara Singh a bandit who operated around Chambal, correspond to the exploits of Robin Hood. These popular local tales about Banjara Singh ring with reverence for a man who was supposed to have been merciless to the rich and benevolent to the poor. Sympathy and admiration for the outlaw resound in these tales.

Goreya Baba, a folk hero belonging to the Dushads, one of the backward castes of Bihar, was originally a robber leader. He came from Delhi along with his gang and eventually was deified. "He was the Robin Hood of Bihar" (Roychowdhury 41). Later he became a "popular godling" with the Dushads. Goreya had many encounters with the police and landed gentry. Finally he was killed near Sherpur (district Patna). A shrine was built there, and a mound of earth came to represent Goreya. Gradually Goreya worship spread through Bihar.

P.C. Roychowdhury cites the popular story of Jaydeb Dube, alias 'Bhoy-Haran' (dispeller of fear) of Monghyr (Bihar). Dube, a fortune teller, had made a humble cottage, but the Raja or local ruler wanted it. In disgust Dube pushed a knife into his own body and sprinkled fire on the palace which instantly caught fire and got scorched. Dube, now turned a demon, pursues the king from hill to hill and finally kills him on the top of Tinpahar (Santhal Parganas). Eventually all the Rajas of the Khheturia clan died at the hands of Dube's ghost. The demon Jaydev or Bhoi-haran commands great reverence in the area, and is next in status only to the deity of Baidyanath of Deoghar (Santhal Parganas).

Sanat Kumar Mitra cites a Bhadu folk song:

'It is now difficult to identify Bhadrajan
Bhadrajan are cheats and swindlers.
Deceiving people with sweet words
They commit burglary even in daytime...
None can protest out of fear...'

[Translation, Sen]

There are many traditions of popular performances by low castes or communities which have an outcaste status. Shang pantomimes, usually held by low people in Cities and towns, combined dance, song, mimicry, and could be outrageous satire against the high-ups. Bireswar Bandyopadhyay collected some of these Shang verses:

'We, the scavengers, live in the city,
Babus enjoy life at our cost
Hi, gentoos! Attend
The marriage-feast of the scavenger's daughter
We invite you cordially.'

[Translation, Sen]

Some very common proverbs carry a barely concealed core of protest and satirical comment. Here are a few examples;

- i) "Bahge Chunle atharo gha, Rajay chunle bish"
[The tiger's touch leaves one with eighteen injuries, while the king's attention inflicts twenty.]
- ii) "Rajar salao prajar thakur"
[Even the brother-in-law of a king is a deity to the poor subject]
- iii) "Laathi jar, mati tar"
[One who has got the arm power also gets the wealth]
- iv) "Keu more bil chenche keu khay koi"
[While the lot of some people is to spend his life catching fish, the lot of some other people is to eat that catch]

Check your progress 4

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be around thirty words each.
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of this Unit.
7) Can you name some outlaws who have become popular folk heroes?

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4.8 LET US SUM UP

Folklore can be the repository of countless micro-narratives of history. By the term micro-narratives those individual or domestic or personal narratives both of individuals and communities are implied. These narratives are a commentary and at times source of official history. Folk forms are not a fossilized thing but part of a constant ongoing living process. They are a source of delight and sustain joy in a life of hard work and deprivation. At the same time folk forms have been a device for the people to negotiate with untold sufferings and hurts. Folk forms may be individual but always stress upon the collective experience of the immediate audience or the community they address. Even when an individual author is there, he represents the voice of the folk. Thus a song becomes a group song though originated by an individual. Sankar Sengupta writes, "...if a boatman, or a peasant or a labourer creates new ballads or songs about his comrade who is killed on the river drive or by an accident or by a person with vested interests or even by the police and he models his song on other lament songs of folk people who intends it to be sung by his fellow comrades would surely come to the group of folksongs even in spite of its origin from an individual. Thus protest songs and ballads are important... Song is considered... a weapon, a brick bat"(1975:126).

In this Unit we have had a small glimpse of the ways in which folklore has been the expression of people through history. Folklore also records and retains the memories of popular uprisings and revolts thus becoming a source of history. Alan Dundes, the renowned folklorist argued, "The important question is not what is folklore, nor where does folklore originate, nor how it is transmitted. The important question is what does folklore do for the folk". By understanding the power of folk forms of art and expression to voice dissent or protest and subvert existing social equations we can begin to comprehend the role folklore has played and continues to play in our lives.

4.9 ACTIVITY

Try to recollect any tales of folk heroes or uprisings you may have heard about from older family members, neighbours or others. Write down these tales and collect different versions of these if possible. Try to collect some pictures or visual material in connection with what you have read above and maintain a visual reference book for yourself.

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5.1 GLOSSARY

Insurrection	:	a rebellion or resistance to established authority.
Anti-imperialist struggle	:	a struggle on the part of subject people against their imperial/ colonial masters.
Establishment	:	existing power structures in a society.
Perceptor	:	a philosophical leader or seer.
Outlaw	:	a fugitive or person who has been declared illegal.
Pantomime	:	a theatrical performance with facial expressions and gestures.

5.2 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) Protest can be understood as the desire to question the authority of social, religious and political structures by individuals or larger groups of people. The expression of this desire either spontaneously or through organized display is part of protest.
- 2) The Chuar revolt of 1799 in north west Bengal, the peasant's insurrection of north Bengal in 1783, the Sannyasi Bidroha during the Birbhun famine of 1769-70, the rebellion of the Hos and Munda tribes of Chhotanagpur in 1829, 1832 and 1857, the Khasi rebellion of Sylhet in 1783, 1829 and 1860 and the Santhal uprising of Bengal and Bihar in the 1850's are some of the tribal uprisings against the British that have been discussed.
- 3) The revolts and insurrections talked about are the Santhal uprising of 1855-56 under the leadership of two Santhal warriors Sidu and Kanu, the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 and the 1857 revolt, also called the first war of Independence. Popular reactions of the masses to the hangings of martyrs Khudiram Bose and Maniram Dewan have also been discussed.
- 4) The Satnampanth evolved under the preceptor Guru Ghasidas. This cult evolved within an untouchable community. Guru Ghasidas is believed to have been chosen by the 'Satnampur' to propagate casteless devotion and heal people with his powers. The Satnamis rejected caste divisions within the community but upheld practices of purity and pollution. They appropriated the symbols of higher castes by wearing sacred thread, tilak, choti etc.

- 5) Kap is a sort of marriage ritual performed by the women of the muslim community of Murshidabad. Women dressing up as men make fun of various activities and social roles performed by men, using witty verses and music etc.
- 6) The popular religious festivals that carry strands of protest are Gambhira of Malda, Jhumur of the tea garden labourers and Bihu of Assam and the Haichao of the Rajbangshi community of north Bengal.
- 7) Banjara Singh of Chambal and Goreya Baba, a Dushad hero of Bihar were two Robin Hood like figures whose raids upon the rich and kindness to the poor peasantry became the stuff of folklore. Jayadeb Dube a fortune teller turned demon is another outlaw character about whom many tales are prevalent.