

# Women's Oral Music Traditions in South Asia: A Stage for Voicing Critical Consciousness on Societal Dominant Practices

Dr. Subash Giri

*Department of Music, University of Alberta, Canada*

**ABSTRACT:** Women are active bearers and carriers of South Asian oral music traditions and heritage. Women's musical performances are intrinsic to the social and cultural life of South Asian societies, including festivals, ritual celebrations, life-cycle rites, and agricultural production spaces. Apart from entertainment and the continuation of socio-cultural and religious practices, these performances evoke and communicate deep meaning and messages about various social, cultural, and political issues of South Asian societies such as women's social status, family position, occupational constraints, and day-to-day experiences, as well as marriage, kinship, caste, sexuality, social roles, relationships, identities, and the sociocultural constitution of gender. Based on Paulo Freire's "critical consciousness" theory, existing scholarship on women and music in South Asia, and musical examples drawn from an ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines how these oral music performances have been playing the role of a theatrical space to exhibit critical consciousness on women's various real social issues in South Asian societies and how these music traditions have become a powerful tool to speak against the socially, religiously, culturally, and politically established discriminatory dominant practices.

**Keywords** – Women, Oral music traditions, South Asia, Critical consciousness, Socio-cultural issues

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women are active bearers and carriers of South Asian oral music traditions and heritage. Indispensable to every social and cultural aspect of community life, women's music performance, to a great degree, evokes and conveys multi-layered and multifaceted realities of South Asian societies, including social systems, values, and ideologies [1]. This performing art narrates women's social status, family position, occupational constraints, and day-to-day experiences, as well as marriage, kinship, caste, sexuality, social roles, relationships, and identities. Importantly, this oral performing art acts as a strong force of agency that illuminates the sociocultural constitution of gender and helps us to understand the organization of maleness and femaleness of a particular society in South Asia [2, 3, 4].

This article examines women's oral music traditions—folk and traditional music traditions—practiced in South Asia, including their performance settings and the themes portrayed in those performances. Specifically, this

article posits how these oral music performances have been playing the role of a theatrical space to exhibit critical consciousness on women's various real social issues in South Asian societies. It also argues, evoked largely by the empirical context and circumstantial evidence of the performances, how these music traditions have become a powerful tool to speak against the socially, religiously, culturally, and politically established discriminatory dominant practices. The argument presented in this article is grounded in the ideas drawn from the theory of "critical consciousness" developed by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) [5]; reflections on the South Asian scholarship on gender and women's music traditions; and the analysis of five musical examples collected during my ethnographic fieldwork of the Hindu women's annual *Teej* songfest in the Kathmandu valley—which consists of three ancient cities Kathmandu, Patan (also called Lalitpur), and Bhaktapur—of Nepal in August 2017.

## 2. SCHOLARSHIP IN WOMEN'S ORAL MUSIC TRADITIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

Scholarship in women's music in South Asia is abundantly rich. Anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, social scientists, and historians have performed a plethora of inquiries and have unveiled multitudinous women's music performing traditions and investigated various aspects of it through multi-layered lenses. Anthropologists Gloria Goodwin Raheja [3], Ann Grodzins Gold [3, 6, 7], and Smita Tewari Jassal's [8, 9, 2] ethnographic works make remarkable contributions to the field of study on women's music traditions in South Asia. Their work constitutes the literature on women's traditional and folk songs of North India, specifically various parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, and investigates those oral traditions within a discourse of gender and kinship identities. Other notable scholarships include Anjali Capila's [1] anthropological work on women's folk songs of Garhwal Himalayas, India, which examines the multifaceted images of women reflected in the Garhwali folk songs, and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's [10] ethnographic study investigates women's traditional music genres of the Chhattisgarh region of middle India through the lens of gender. Ethnomusicologists have also equally probed into women's music traditions in North India. For example, Anna Morcom [11] explores the music and dance of hereditary female performers (courtesans) in North India, focusing on their image in the feudal patriarchal society and their exclusion from so-called elite and bourgeois society during the colonial and post-independence period; and Stefan Fiol [12] delineates professional female village performers and female vernacular recording industry artists and unveils the sexual and caste discrimination, exploitation, eroticization, and discrepancies in payment in the Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.

Compared to Indian literature, much fewer research studies can be seen on women's music in other South Asian countries. In the case of Nepal, anthropologists Dorothy C. Holland [13, 14, 15, 16], Debra G. Skinner [13, 14, 15, 16], and Laura M. Ahearn's [17] investigations into women's *Teej* songfest have provided a rich presence in the field of South Asian women's performing arts. Most recently, ethnomusicologist Anna Marie Stirr [18, 19] has taken up the trope of gender while examining women performers' social status and honor in a dialogic, conversational sung poetry genre called *dohori*. However, there is still much work needed to be done to investigate many of the unexplored women's performing arts in Nepal. In relation to other South Asian countries, no rigorous studies have been carried out on women's music traditions yet—at least to my knowledge. A few studies have been conducted out of the realm of music, such as a work from Susan A. Reed [20] on *Kandyan* dance form—derived from a male religious ritual—which investigates how women express themselves in new and empowering ways while retaining the norms of modesty and domesticity in Sri Lanka; Anoli Perera's [21] work examines the issues, anxieties, boundaries, limitations, and interventions that influenced contemporary women artists (beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) in Sri Lanka; and in the case of Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s, Shuchi Kothari [22] discusses how Urdu drama serials played a crucial role in resisting, transgressing, and negotiating women's place as prescribed in an Islamist patriarchal society.

### 3. PERFORMANCE SETTINGS

As Capila [1] writes, “no celebration of the birth of a child, marriage, religious rituals and so on, are conceivable without the singing of songs by women” [p. 53]; women’s performances are intrinsic to the social and cultural life of South Asian societies. Almost no event of community life is complete without women’s performances. Among many of those events, festivals are the chief space for women’s musicking in South Asia. There are several genres performed by women annually during festivals. For example, in many parts of North India, a festival called Holi is celebrated on the full harvest moon in the spring of every year. The festival is known for the burning of the demoness Holika, who attempted to kill the infant Prahlad. People smear colors on each other’s faces and celebrate the festival with joy and camaraderie. Women across North India engage in public performance in this festival [3, 9, 2]. Another genre called *Kesya* is performed in Rajasthan, India by women during specific annual festivals of spring, summer, and rainy seasons—usually the months from March to September [3]. In the same area, virgin girls and married women perform songs in the annual festival of *Gangaur* [6]. In Chhattisgarh of middle India, two genres called *Bhojalī* and *Dālkhāī* are performed by women during the festivals of *Bhojalī* and *Dālkhāī* [10]. In Nepal, Hindu women celebrate a three-day festival called *Teej* around mid-August to mid-September. During this festival, women perform *Teej* songs by gathering in a temple, primarily a Shiva temple, and other public spheres and express their joy through music and dance performances [17, 23, 24, 25].

Life-cycle rituals also contain a large array of women’s oral performing repertoires. Wedding ceremonies are one of the key spaces for women to engage in a public performance. Some songs are performed a few days before the wedding, and some are performed on the day of the wedding. A romantic genre called *Bana* (bridegroom-prince) is performed in the villages of Rajasthan by caste sisters and neighbors of the bride-to-be before the day of the wedding [3]. In rural and urban North India, a sexually oriented genre called *gali* or *gari*—insult or abusive songs targeting the wifetakers—is performed by a group of women [3, 2]. In response to the birth of a son in North India, women gather in a courtyard of the birth house and perform a genre called *byai git* for six consecutive nights. The songs contain texts that depict the celebration of the birth of a son and happiness for the new mother [3].

Another popular setting for women’s music performance is the agricultural production space, where women perform everyday household tasks as well as farming, planting, and harvesting. A genre called *jatsaar* is performed in the Bhojpuri-speaking region in northern India during the daily grinding of grain and spices [8]. An indigenous (*ādivāsī*) dance song genre from Chhattisgarh called *suā nāc* is performed by women in the courtyards of landowners during the harvesting of paddies [10]. In Tamil Nadu, South India, irrigation songs called *etra padalgal* and *temmangu* are performed by women while working in the field and engaged in lifting water. Similarly, another song genre called *nadugai padalgal* is performed during the planting of seeds; *payir kaththal* is performed during the guarding of the crops; *aruvadai padalgal* is performed during the harvesting of the crops; *vallaipattu* is performed during the husking of the paddy and pounding the grain [26]. In Nepal, a genre called *asaare git* is performed by women during rice planting [27].

### 4. THEMES AND MOTIFS

Women’s musical performances in South Asia display a vast array of themes and motifs. These themes in women’s performance are grounded largely in the performance settings discussed in the above section. One of the prime themes portrayed in women’s songs is gender in South Asian society. There is no specific genre that deals with gender, but musical performance in every performance setting—festivals, life cycle rituals, and agricultural activities—encompasses the theme of gender. This explains how significant gender issues are in South Asian societies. I will delve deeper into this in the next section.

Another common theme found in women’s music in South Asia is that of conjugal relationships. This includes issues of hardship, longing, lamentation, nostalgia, and such. For instance, the sadness of a new bride in her

conjugal home is portrayed in the *suā nāc* dance song performed by indigenous women in Chhattisgarh while harvesting the paddy [10]. In a similar manner, in *jatsaar* songs of the Bhojpuri-speaking region of North India, the themes of conjugal hardship, conflict, and compliance with predominant cultural values are narrated [2]. In Kangra, India, women perform a song genre called *pakharu* that depicts the yearning of married women for their segregated husbands who go abroad for work and don't return for years. The songs of this genre also describe the newly marrying bride's longing for her natal home and her mistreatment by in-laws in a conjugal home [28]. Most of the *Teej* songs of Nepal exhibit women's issues occurring in conjugal life [14, 15, 16, 4, 13, 24, 25]. Some songs depict auspiciousness and celebration during a specific rite of passage. For instance, a genre called *byai git* is performed at the birth of a child—particularly a son—in Rajasthan [3]. Some women's songs also portray ecological themes. In Garhwal, India, women's songs reflect on mother nature, seasons, and the environment [1]. Some women's songs contain themes of eroticism, flirtation, enticement, and sexual insult. To name a few, song genres called *Bhojalī* and *Dāikhāī* are performed by unmarried girls in Chhattisgarh during the festivals of *Bhojalī* and *Dāikhāī* which are categorized as vulgar songs [10]. The songs of Holi describe emotions of separation and longing, as well as explicitly erotic and overt sexual encounters, which are publicly characterized as obscene and transgressive in Hindu patriarchal morality [9, 2, 3]. Further, some song genres—like the *Kesya* genre of Rajasthan, India, performed in annual festival settings—abuse husbands with very strong language and praise lovers for their sexual capacities [3].

## 5. A STAGE FOR VOICING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

“Critical consciousness” theory, developed by Latin America’s foremost educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, refers to how oppressed or marginalized people analyze and develop awareness of inequitable social conditions and act for change to address such social inequalities. Freire defines critical consciousness as a representation of “things and facts as they exist empirically, in their casual and circumstantial correlations” [5, p. 39]. Further he states, “[c]ritical consciousness is integrated with reality” [5, p. 39]. According to Freire, when someone understands a “phenomenon or a problem”, they also understand its “casual links” and, more accurately, when they understand the causality, their understanding of reality can be more critical [5, p. 39]. Borrowing Freire’s idea, the critical depiction of the sociocultural reality in women’s music in South Asia is a result of the critical consciousness of women driven by the empirical context and circumstantial evidence occurring and recurring in the South Asian societies.

Many of the rigorous ethnographic studies—of women’s music as well as gender in general—have constantly stated the fact that under the social customs, rituals, norms, and traditions defined by the patriarchal hegemony and patrilineal supremacy, women have been largely victimized, marginalized, and discriminated against [e.g., 4, 3, 29, 2, 22, 30, 7, 24, 25]. The issues of women’s subordination, social inequality, domestic violence, male privilege, conjugal hardship, unequal gender relations, gender hierarchy, government-biased political actions, and economic discrimination against and exploitation and marginalization of women delineated in women’s music are the articulation of women’s awareness. Let’s take an example of the most common and recurring theme of gender found in women’s songs. For this, first, below I present two songs I collected during my fieldwork of the women’s *Teej* songfest in Kathmandu valley on 24 August 2017:



गर्भबाट सुरु हुने महिलामाथि अत्याचार  
छोरा भए जन्म देऊ छोरी भए मार ।  
जहिले पनि भगवान मान्नु पर्ने पतिलाई  
दाइजो थोरै भयो भनी मारे कतिलाई ।

Atrocities against women starts from the womb  
Give birth if you have a son, abort if you have a daughter.  
A husband always has to be treated as a God  
Many women were killed because of dowry.

Example 1. *Teej* song performed at the north side of Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, 24 August 2017.  
(Transcription and translation: Author)



बर्ष दिनको तीजमा आँसु खसे बरर  
घरको दुःख सम्झी ल्याउँदा छाती चरर ।  
दुःखसँग दिन काटछु कैले छैन चैन  
पराई घरमा माया गर्ने कोही भएन ।

Tears fell on the day of *Teej* festival  
Chest cracked when I remembered the sorrow of conjugal home.  
I spend my days with sorrow, but there is no peace  
There was no one to love me in a foreign home

Example 2. *Teej* song performed at Bankali, north side of Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, 24 August 2017.  
(Transcription and translation: Author)

The song in example 1 is composed in a very common *Teej* melody in *Jhyaure Bhaka* (folk melody composed in a 6 beat rhythmic cycle) and *Taal* (rhythm) styles. Its first couplet illuminates the atrocities that begin for women when they are in their mother's womb. It elucidates the discrimination between sons and daughters, where a woman is asked to give birth to her baby if he is a son, but not if she is a daughter. Further, the second couplet points to the issue of *daijo* (dowry) and wives' mistreatment at the hands of their husbands, despite women respecting their husbands like gods. It describes a social issue, where women are killed in a conjugal home because they brought little *daijo* into a marriage. There is a common belief within the Hindu patriarchy that the wife should treat her *pati* (husband) like *parameshwar* (a god), where the 'god' metaphor describes the superiority of the male in a conjugal home. Along with respecting their husbands, women have to ensure they follow gender norms by respecting in-laws, fulfilling household duties, and remaining subordinate [31, 25]. In one study, Lynn Bennett describes that women, specifically young *buharis* (brides), are treated as aliens, dangerous, and low-status people, as well as persecuted by their mothers-in-law [32].

Example 2 of the *Teej* song is composed in *Khyali Bhaka* (folk melody composed in a 4 beat rhythmic cycle) and *Taal* styles. The stanza laments the distress of a daughter-in-law in a conjugal home and her sufferings caused by the *daijo*. The first two couplets express the melancholy of a woman at a *Teej* festival who does not get love in a stranger's home (her conjugal home) despite her hard work. The third couplet elucidates an incident of a conjugal family mistreating their daughter-in-law by not providing treatment while she is sick, and even beating

her because they did not receive the desired *daijo* in the marriage. Within the historically-dominant high-caste gender norms and ideologies, women’s position remains in the domestic realm and in seclusion in South Asia [33]. In fact, the gender discrimination begins from birth—rooted deeply in societal custom and culture. One stark example is a celebration of six consecutive nights with singing at the birth of a son in North India. To the contrary, when a daughter is born, the courtyards are dark and silent at night because of the common belief that the birth of a daughter brings sorrow to a house [3]. This discrimination continues throughout women’s lives. Women’s status in Nepalese society is impacted by both the largely-popular dowry culture and laws surrounding patrilineal land-ownership. Women’s position in the in-laws’ house largely depends on the dowry received by the bride-takers. In one gender-based violence study conducted in 2005 (in eight districts among the seventy-five total in Nepal), 13.2 percent of the 587 women respondents reported domestic violence because they brought in less dowry during and after marriage [34, p. 217]. In other instances—such as property share, land ownership, and rights to confer citizenship to their children—women are significantly deprived [35]. A report by the 2011 National Population and Housing Census in Nepal revealed that women have only 19.71 percent of ownership of fixed assets (land or house or both) [36]. Many other studies have highlighted the prevailing patriarchal hegemony and supremacy in Nepalese societies [31, 37, 38].

Another imperative issue critically reflected in women’s songs is a dowry or gift giving tradition, which is one of the essential elements of the marriage system in South Asia. The following women’s song, which I collected at Gaushala, on the south-west side of Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, during my fieldwork, illustrates the dowry trope:



बिहे गर्दा सकिने भो घर खेत घडेरी  
समाजको कस्तो यो रीति बरी लै ?  
सुनको सिक्की, सुनको औंठी, माग्छन् मोटर साइकल  
बुहारीभन्दा सम्पत्ति प्यारो बरी लै ।

One loses house, land, and farm while marrying a daughter  
What kind of social custom is this?  
Conjugal family asks for gold chains, gold rings, and motorcycles  
Property is dearer than daughter-in-law.

Example 3. *Teej* song performed at Gaushala, south-west side of Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, 24 August 2017. (Transcription and translation: Author)

The composition of the song is in *Jhyaure Bhaka* and *Taal* styles, similar to example 1. The first and third lines of the verse describe the context of a marriage in Nepalese society, where bride-givers often have to go through an enormous loan, risking house, land, and farm when they marry off their daughters. The bride-takers ask for gold chains, gold rings, and motorcycles in a *daijo*, and the bride-givers have to fulfil their demands. The second and fourth lines question such a custom and a society—a society that encourages *daijo* and views *daijo* as dearer and more precious than daughters-in-law.

Marriage plays a critical role in women’s lives in South Asia. The complex set of ritual actions involved in a marriage transforms women’s lives by altering their social identity, kinship, relationships, and roles. Although much has changed in recent decades for marriage traditions, arranged marriages are still largely practiced in

South Asia. While observing the marriage and gift giving system in North India, Raheja [3] states, “[p]reparations for this gift begin long before the search for a groom is even thought of, as mothers begin to purchase cloth that will be given in their daughter’s dowry, as girls begin to sew quilts and items of clothing they will take with them to their conjugal village, and as fathers begin to amass the cash and jewelry that must accompany the bride when she is given in *Kanya dan*” [pp. 79-80]. A gift giving or dowry culture is an integral part of this marriage system, where a bride’s parents perform the ritual *kanya dan* (gift of virgin) of a daughter along with lavish gifts (substantial amounts of jewelry, cloth, brass cooking vessels, cash, and other such items) to the groom and his family. The dowry tradition plays an important role in women’s status in their conjugal home, since their in-laws treat them according to the quantity and quality of dowry they bring to their conjugal home. This gift-giving is not limited to the event of the marriage itself, but can continue for many years thereafter. Women have to face criticism and abuse if the dowry is judged inferior [3].

Women’s music traditions not only elucidate their awareness through the performances—they also reflect their critical consciousness in the form of protest, dissent, and resistance. Here, I present stanzas of two songs that I recorded in Patan and Bhaktapur during the women’s singing:



उठौं अब नारी जति सबै बन्धन तोडेर  
 अन्धविश्वास कुसंस्कार सब छोडेर ।  
 सबै मिली हटाऊँ दाइजो दिने चलन  
 समाजको कुरीतिलाई पर्छ फालन ।

Let's get up all women now by breaking all the bonds  
 Leaving all superstitions.  
 Let's get rid of the custom of giving dowry  
 The wicked practice of the society has to be discarded.

Example 4. *Teej* song performed at Krishna *Mandir*, Patan (city of Kathmandu valley), 24 August 2017. (Transcription and translation: Author)





छोरो भए अंश मैले पाउँथे  
छोरीलाई पराई घर दिन्छन बरी लै ।  
छोरा र छोरीमा नगरीँ भेदभाव  
छोरीलाई 'नि अंश दिनु पर्छ बरी लै ।

If I were a son, I would get a share of Father's property  
They send their daughter to a stranger's house.  
Let's not discriminate between sons and daughters  
The daughter should be given a share of a property.

Example 5: *Teej* song performed at Durbar Square, Bhaktapur (city of Kathmandu valley), 24 August 2017.  
(Transcription and translation: Author)

The stanza of example 4 encourages the breaking of the dominant norms of society that are intended to suppress women and standing together against the superstitions practiced in society. Further, it suggests uniting everyone and abolishing the wicked practice of *daijo* from society. In example 5, the stanza points to the discrimination in passing ancestral property to sons. The first couplet describes how daughters are deprived from receiving *Ansha* (ancestral property) and are sent to a stranger's home after marriage. The second couplet asks that the injustice stops, and demands daughters have property rights equal to sons. In many other parts across South Asia, women's songs share a similar motif. For example, in the folk songs of Tamil Nadu, women criticize the dowry system that is set by patriarchal values which is primarily centred on gaining control over the bride's natal property. In the case of property rights, a women's mourning genre called *Oppari* in Tamil Nadu displays women in their widowhood after the death of their husband lamenting and criticizing being deprived of their husband's property by in-laws [39]. Women equally make powerful critical commentary via songs on the cheating and unfair treatment they face from their overseers during agricultural labor. For instance, lower caste marginalized women in Tamil Nadu, South India, perform a genre called *vallai pattu* while husking paddies and pounding grain and complain and criticize the ill treatment they receive from the overseer, who pays the women far less wage than what they work for [39]. In the case of Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s, performing arts played a crucial role to resist, transgress, and negotiate women's place as prescribed in an Islamist patriarchal society [22].

## 6. CONCLUSION

Modernity, urbanization, education, political change, technology, mass media, economic independency, and many other factors have brought about a massive change in South Asia. In recent decades, the societal viewpoint has also shifted significantly with regard to women's role and position in the sociocultural and sociopolitical milieu. Today, there are multiple means and mediums available for women to express their concerns or voice their issues. Before these series of changes in South Asian societies, women's oral music traditions had long been serving as a stage to overtly articulate, report, and voice women's concerns and issues. Undoubtedly, this performing art is still an effective medium to express critical consciousness towards societal discriminatory practices. Unlike male repertoires, women's music traditions are not periodically renewed through regular performances and practices, despite women being active bearers and carriers of these traditions in South Asia. However, these annual and occasional performances have been helping to renew and build resilience and articulating an awareness of societal discriminatory practices.

The songs of women in South Asia are not merely a part of entertainment or the continuity of festivals, ritual celebrations, and life-cycle rites. In fact, to a great extent, they evoke and communicate deep meaning and messages about various social, cultural, and political issues of South Asian societies that are biased against women. When women perform, the entire community watches, listens, and perceives as an audience. Women make the public arena a stage where they present real social issues and coherently articulate their critical



consciousness in an artform. From this standpoint, women's oral music traditions can be viewed as platforms for voicing their concerns loudly, strongly, and critically. While performing these music traditions, women not only prove the social and cultural issues related to them but also counter the prevailing gender norms and ideologies. Through songs, women become outspoken, authoritative, and coherent to express their concerns and issues. These songs challenge the code of modesty and gender specific social roles defined by the patriarchal ideology. Women overtly express their consciousness and critical commentary on issues vis-à-vis gender informed discrimination, marginalization, oppression, suppression, subordination, and domestic violence, as well as several social and political degradations.

This article discussed women's oral music traditions and a critical reflection on women's viewpoints based on Paulo Freire's "critical consciousness" theory, existing scholarship on women and music in South Asia, and musical examples drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork. The efficacy of these music traditions and the gauge of the change they impact in these societal dominant practices of South Asia can be another separate research inquiry; however, the oral music traditions explicitly and powerfully present the critical consciousness of women in South Asia.

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**INFO**

**Corresponding Author: [Dr. Subash Giri](#), Department of Music, University of Alberta, Canada.**

**How to cite this article: [Dr. Subash Giri](#), Women's Oral Music Traditions in South Asia: A Stage for Voicing Critical Consciousness on Societal Dominant Practices, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2023; 5(6): 129-139.**