

Carnavalesque Desire: Gender, Sexuality, and the Limits of Resistance in Women's Ragni Performances

Tanvi Bhati*

Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of women's desire, gendered performance, and the boundaries of cultural resistance within folk traditions through the study of women Ragni singers' performances of Ragni in rural North India. Traditionally, male performers have dominated the Ragni genre in rural north India. However, with the coming of women singers, the performances now highlight themes of women's fantasies and sexual desires. The study uses content analysis to examine both lyrical content and embodied performance practices, such as gestures, dance styles, and performer–audience interactions, in Ragni performances available on YouTube. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with three Ragni singers have been conducted. The results indicate that women's involvement in Ragni performances brings narratives about female sexuality and agency into the public cultural arena. However, these performances may not always constitute sustained defiance of patriarchal expectations. Moreover, women Ragni performers interpret their own performances as professional engagements that are influenced by the expectations of audiences and the demands that they make. Therefore, the women singers and performers deliberately maintain a separation between their on-stage personas, characters they play, and everyday social identities. Thus, even though behaviors that depart from socially prescribed gender roles are temporarily enabled by Ragni performances, but they remain constrained within the performative context. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, this paper argues that Ragni performances by women Ragni singers and performers function as transient locations of symbolic inversion. In the performances, the social norms seem to be suspended. However, they are ultimately reaffirmed rather than being transformed through the process of performance. Thus, the study reinterprets women's Ragni performances

*The author is with the Department of Sociology, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, Haryana. Correspondence details: tanvibhati343@gmail.com