

‘Feminine’ in Subaltern: *Maliniyas* of Salhesh Gatha

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Folk narratives carry as well as create memory. An important component of this memory are the tales of heroes and their heroics. Stories of heroic deeds of humans contain self-conscious aspirations of insipid listeners. The past in the story becomes a prelude to the present with words and lives flowing into each other. There are several folk heroes belonging to Dalit and backward classes, whose tales of bravery are etched in the memory of subalterns in feudal Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Every hero has a definite caste location: tales of *Salhesh* and *Reshma-Chubarmal* are popular among *Dusadhs*; *Dina-Bhadri* and *Murkatwa* amongst *musabars*; *Alha-Udal* and *Lorikayan* amongst *Yadavs*. All these stories have an extraordinary hero who resists feudal oppression and emerges victorious. Hero, during narration, metamorphoses into ‘god’- worshiped for mystical powers to rescue followers/devotees from unwarranted situations in life. As Badrinarayan notes these “stories reflect aspirations, dreams, ambitions and identities of groups and communities.”¹ They evolve into narratives that amplify subaltern voices and turn into tools for fostering social cohesion and cultural preservation.

The subaltern culture in Bihar cannot be comprehended in isolation from its politics. Bihar has been a hot-bed of subaltern politics of all shades. In the second half of the 19th century mobilisations around caste identity had begun with the formation of caste associations. By 1930s under the aegis of Kisan Sabha and Triveni Sangh, Bihar witnessed an organised movement of the backward caste sharecroppers on their economic as well as social concerns. Post-independence Bihar witnessed movements of radical peasantry organised under the Communist leadership which crystallised into a vibrant movement which came to be known as the naxalite movement which once again raised issues of economic and social exploitation. The movement for social justice under the leadership of Lohia saw emergence of leaders like Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan who changed the narrative of Bihar’s politics and that of the nation. The subaltern culture in Bihar hence must be imbricated in the trajectory of this politics.

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1. Badri Narayan, Documenting Dissent, (Shimla: IAS, 2001), 5.

This paper narrows its lens on one such folk narrative emerging in oral tradition of Mithilanchal, the story of Raja Salhesh, a *dusadb* hero. The *veergathas* emerging out of ‘*narsbanshi* tradition of Indian *Akhyam*’ usually have a ‘masculine logic and aesthetic sense’²; female characters are incidental and in supportive roles. This paper is particularly interested in the heroines of Salhesh’s *gatha*- the *malins* or *malinyas* (in corrupted colloquial form).

Ethel Johnston Phelps while digging out “spirited, courageous heroines” of folktales from “seventeen different ethnic cultures” notes that “traditional fairy/folk tales are heavily weighted with heroes, heroines we encounter are far from heroic...beauty is the only reason for being in the tale. They conform ...to the sentimental ideal of women in the nineteenth century. They are good, obedient, meek, submissive, and naturally inferior to the heroes. ...In most cases they are docile or helpless when confronted with a dangerous situation.”³*Malinyas* of Salhesh Gatha are different- Salhesh’s tale of chivalry is incomplete without them. *Malinyas* appear as Salhesh’s ‘heroines’ and ‘heroines’- in their own right- inverting the gender roles of traditional folk.

Since narratives are never etched in stone, are invariably ‘retold’ in congruence with social realities of the times. The characterisation of *Malinyas* in textual rendition of Salhesh’s story, also reflect the changing notions of feminine and femininity of the subaltern overtime. The paper considers three textual narratives of *Salhesh Gatha- Salhesh Geet* as recorded in GA Grierson’s *Maithil Chrestomathy and Bihar Peasant Life*, in 1892; Mani Padma’s novel *Raja Salhesh*, 1973 and Dr Mahendra Ram and Phulo Paswan’s transcription of *Salhesh Lokgatha* published in 2007.

These three texts mark critical junctures in the history of the region in relation to the nation and its political vibrations. The first narrative, as collected by GA Grierson, a British officer keen on understanding Bihari language and its dialects is imbricated in administrative orientalism. The second text, a novel by leading Maithili novelist, Braj Bhushan Verma ‘Manipadma’ is located at the crossroads of *maithil* sub-nationalism and the churning for social justice in Bihar. The third narrative under consideration *Salhesh Lokgatha* - a compiled transliteration of oral performative narrative- by *Mahendra* Ram and Phulo Paswan. This text, published in an era of campaign for civilizational resurgence by decolonizing the cultural heritage of *Bharat* with *Dalit* icons being appropriated by Hindutva. These three texts

2.Narayan, Documenting Dissent, 42.

3.Ethel Johnston Phelps, *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales From Around the World*, (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winstein, 1981), 1-2.

are distinct in form and separated temporally yet they appear ‘as instruments...products and...modes of social action.’⁴ The paper attempts to analyse these disparate texts as reflective of the transformations in female agency and sexuality in cultural discourse centred around Dalits. The questions of representation of the ‘other’- the ‘colonial lens’, ‘caste-glance’ as well as the ‘male-gaze’ are important intersectional pivots of analysis.

The paper is divided into four substantive parts- first section is a brief introduction to Raja Salhesh and *malins* as they are currently found in *Mithilanchal*. This section attempts to lay out the theoretical framework including grappling with questions of folk, femineity, conversion of oral narratives into literary texts. Next three sections correspond to the three texts under consideration locating them in their socio-political contexts and pointing to the meanings of feminine apparent thereby.

Section I- Salhesh and malinyas:

Raja Salhesh is an icon of the subaltern *maithil* cultural sphere, with innumerable *naach* performances, radio drama, *madhubani* paintings and literature centred around him. Salhesh’s historical existence is unquestioned though his time-period is debated. The period in which Salhesh lived differs in each account, ranging from the 5th to 15th century AD, though without much material evidence.⁵ A *dusadh* hero, revered as a fearless king of mountains; has attained the status of a ‘*manukh devta*’ or human god bearing mystical prowess. Shrines for Rajaji or baba- as he is popularly known in this region- called *Gabhars* or Salhesh *sthans* are found on the outskirts of villages. These shrines usually have a clay figurine of Salhesh mounted on a one-tusked elephant, Bhauranand ridden by Mangala or Karikand the *mabaout*. Motiram and Babua Budheswar -Salhesh’s warrior brothers- flank him on two sides on horses. *Malins*, Kusuma and Dauna, given their indispensability, accompany Salhesh atop elephants in some statues, and on foot in others. Depending on the grandeur of the shrine there are statues of other characters from the ‘gatha’. There are some Salhesh shrines with terracotta figures but the general organisation of the shrine mirrors the description above. *Gabhars* are usually found under a *pipal* tree or there is a *pipal* tree in the vicinity adding to the sacredness of the shrine as well as its frightening aspects. Salhesh as a symbol of Dalit resistance must be feared by the oppressors. Daily worship is not an essential requirement in *gabbars*; devotees usually make votive offerings. There is an annual *mela* or fair organised during *satauni*

4. W. F. Hanks, "Text and Textuality", Annual Review of Anthropology, Volume 18 (1989): 95–127.

5. Rampratap Neeraj, Etihaskipurush: Raja Salhesh, in PK Maun and Ram Pratap Neeraj (ed.), Raja Salhesh, (Muzzaffarpur: Namita Prakashan, 2002), 41-51.

which is open to all castes. In the month of *saawan* every year, on designated days, a special collective worship by Dusadhs called Salhesh Bhao or Bahariya Priya is organised at all *gabbars*. A prominent mela in this region, held in March-April or *Chait* month of Hindu calendar is *Rajaji ki phulwari* organised in Nepal. These melas serve as instances of *yaadgari* or remembrance of a hero and his feats.⁶ The ever-increasing footfall in these melas bears testimony to the popularity of Salhesh as a deity.

Bhagat- a person who is believed to be specially chosen by Salhesh conducts prayers or *gohari*. The process of acquiring this privileged status is mystical. It is believed that Salhesh appears in the dreams of the person with instructions for becoming *bhagat* hence he possesses supernatural powers. Badrinarayan provides a detailed description of the bhagat, his appearance, conduct/performance etc. during *gohari*. The *Bhagat* is adorned with red, yellow *orbul* and *kaner* flowers, *ghungroos* are tied to his waist and he has a long *sindoor* mark on his forehead. He dances when possessed by Salhesh.⁷ The figure of *bhagat* through whom Salhesh resolves or is believed to be resolving everyday problems appears 'feminine' in his demeanour. There are a few female Bhagats.

Salhesh's human identity with a clear caste location amongst *Dusadhs*- a Dalit group in a largely Brahmanical Mithila makes his imagery subversive. While Salhesh occupies the centre-stage, *malins* are equally indispensable in the scheme of subversion. Their persona and performances successfully invert the norms and hierarchies of *Brahminical* Mithila. Jaykant Mishra one of the pioneers of academic research on Salhesh points "without *dauna malin* Salhesh appears as an impotent hero".⁸ The relationship between Salhesh and *malins*, the way it transforms through years, as reflected in the textual narratives under analysis raises questions of caste-gender intersectionality and its location within the larger socio-political context.

Meanings of femininity, sexuality, gender asymmetry are all imbricated in the socio-economic structures of society. Kamala Visweswaran views gender as "an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power".⁹ Ortner and Whitehead similarly argue that the "natural features of gender... furnish only a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop to the cultural organisation of gender and sexuality... (these are) symbols invested with meaning by the society in question."¹⁰ Uma Chakravarty points to the

6. This section is based on essays in Maun, PK and Ram Pratap Neeraj (ed.) (2002), Raja Salhesh.

7. Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, (Delhi: Sage, 2009), 158-74.

8. J. Mishra, *Folk Literature of Mithila* as quoted in PK Maun, Raja Salhesh, 13.

9. K. Visweswaran, 'Histories of Feminist Ethnography', in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), p. 616.

10. Sherry B Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (ed.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

interconnections between caste and gender hierarchy as organising principles of the Brahmanical social order. The essential nature of women is identified with their sexuality and they are seen as lascivious and evil with a need for control. The Rigvedic stratification of women between those of conquering and subjugated people with different roles and places in society paved the way for categorisation of women- the *pativrata* observing stringent sexual codes against *dasis*, demoniac women and *apsaras*. Social control over upper-caste women's sexuality was needed to maintain both patrilineal as well as caste purity while *dasis* or enslaved women's labour and sexuality were to be used ...under the overall control of the conquering clans".¹¹ Hence, femininity and sexuality acquired varied meanings for the elite and subaltern "sexuality (getting) intrinsically linked to caste."¹²

Three texts of *Salhesh Gatha* under the scanner raise several important questions of sexuality and agency as refracted through the caste lens. Salhesh, the dependant hero in Grierson's compilation becomes a demigod- with *malins* as mere consorts- in Manipadma's novel. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of the texts and their textuality.

Section 2: Grierson and Salhesh Geet.

The first known written text of *Salhesh Gatha* is found in GA Grierson's 'An Introduction to the Maithili language of North Bihar containing Grammar, Chrestomathy and Vocabulary,' published in 1881 by the Asiatic Society. Grierson opines that '*Maithili* is a language'... not an 'uncouth dialect, of untaught villagers'....a country with its own traditions, its own poets and its own pride in everything belonging to itself'. He was hopeful that his book would 'help officials brought into everyday contact with this country, supersede 'contemptuous ignorance of the *gaomari* ...by desire to learn a language...which cannot fail to be useful to them.' While Grierson recognises Maithili as a language or *boli* he qualifies it by pointing to lack of 'much literary work'.¹³ Subsequently reference to Salhesh is found in Grierson's 'Bihar Peasant Life' published in 1885. Grierson describes Salhesh as a 'great hero and first watchman' in section 1456 on village deities listed in Chapter XIV dealing with miscellaneous superstitions.¹⁴ This text once again was designed to help colonial administrators 'learn a language they were ignorant of' and aimed to provide them with a 'general idea

11. Uma Chakravarty, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State', EPW, Vol 8: 14, (1993): 579-585.

12. Sharmila Rege, 'A Dalit feminist Standpoint', Seminar 471, (November 1998): 47-52.

13. GA Grierson, An Introduction to the Maithili Language of North Bihar containing a Grammar, Chrestomathy and Vocabulary- Part I, Extra number to Journal Asiatic Society of Bengal, (Calcutta.: JN Banerjee and Son, 1880),

14. GA Grierson, Bihar Peasant Life: Being Discursive Catalogue, 2nd edition, (Patna: Government Printing, Bihar and Orissa, 1926), 409.

pronunciation'.¹⁵ Grierson's compilations particularly the chrestomathy 'contain(ing) nearly all the *Maithili* literature' he had been 'able to collect' erupted out of his orientalist love for popular life and lore as well as practical administrative necessities of making the language comprehensible.¹⁶

Grierson's biographers call him '*le rat dans le fromage*' when it comes to 'studying the dialects and literature of rustic India.' Grierson had developed a keen interest in languages under the influence of Prof. Robert Atkinson at Trinity College, Dublin, earning University prizes for both Sanskrit and Urdu. On his appointment to Bengal Presidency in 1874, he naturally carried his interest ashore. He became a member of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1879 and subsequently served as its secretary from 1893-96. The orientalist administrative logic saw Grierson collecting, compiling manuals, treatises as 'original studies of the speech area'. Grierson the 'field linguist and lover of folk literature' with deep interest in 'language and story as actualities and not merely structures'¹⁷, nevertheless needs to be situated in the larger socio-political structure of Bihar in the late 19th century. Particularly so, because Raja Salhesh, is unequivocally identified as a *dusadh*, a much-stigmatized lower caste group.

In the decades of Grierson's postings in Bihar districts there was an apparent churning centred around caste and its consciousness. Caste based revenue liability; implementation of Criminal Tribes Act, 1876; census and the politics of representation all gave a fillip to movement amongst several caste groups to be counted as Brahmins or Kshatriyas. Bhumihars claimed status of brahmins, kayasthas contested their location amongst *shudras*, *ahirs* and *dusadhs* 'imagined' their *kshatriya* origin. Some groups even filed petitions in British courts going to the highest court of appeal, the Privy council. Court cases arose on the issue of caste-based land revenue and *abwabs*. Settlement records of districts attest to this practice, which was duly recorded even in Francis Buchanan's journals maintained during district surveys undertaken from 1809-13. WW Hunter, while providing a Statistical Account of Bihar, once again makes a note of caste-based land revenue and other tributes extracted by upper caste zamindars. Caste 'imaginings', contestations in courts co-incided with what popularly came to be called *janeu* movement. *Aryasamajis* organised public sacred thread (*janeu*) ceremonies or *yagyopit sanskar* which became a symbol of caste assertion. Swami Dayanand Saraswati presided over the first *janeu* ceremony of a *kayastha* Babu Madholal in 1879.

15. Grierson, Bihar Peasant Life, 2.

16. Grierson, Maithil Chrestomathy,

17. F W Thomas and R L Turner, Proceedings of the British Academy, p. 283-306.

There were violent backlashes on a few occasions like at Hathitola, in 1899.¹⁸ *Dusadhs* were first amongst Dalits in Bihar to organise a movement around their caste identity. Their quest for recognition as kshatriyas led to imagination and production of tales of kshatriya origin, which were intern-alised and popularised. Caste organisations became an important tool in the process-*Dusadh Vanshiya kshatriya Mahasabha* established in 1891 being a pioneer. *Mahasabha's* annual congresses were attended by approximately two to three thousand *dusadhs*. These congregations passed resolutions against dowry, polygamy, alcoholism, and other ills afflicting the community. These meetings also stressed upon getting their brethren to quit crime and improving the educational status of the community.¹⁹ Grierson's project of making *Maithili* comprehensible to the British officials could not have been untouched by these socio-political churnings.

Salbesh Geet that appears in Grierson's Chrestomathy is the first known printed version and will be taken as "most popular throughout the district amongst low caste people" as claimed by him. The text is claimed as an accurate transliteration of the popular narrative 'printed word for word as taken down from the mouth of a dom.'²⁰ This stress on accuracy appears like a pre-emption of sorts to 'accusations' made by subaltern historians several decades later, that 'speech of humble folk is not normally recorded for posterity'.²¹ Badrinarayan makes a note of other versions popular amongst *dusadhs* and *Magahi* speaking people.²² These versions undocumented in textual form could represent the ongoing caste locational contests or mere malleability of folklore.

Grierson by way of familiarising his readers with *Salhesh* calls him "the first chaukidar ...much worshipped by *Dusadhs*, a caste whose profession is to steal and to act as chaukidars, preferably the former."²³ In Grierson's description of *dusadhs* preferring to steal one sees a stereotypical essentialization. These stereotypes assumed sinister form with the extension of the Criminal Tribes Act to Bengal in 1876. The Criminal Tribes Act which argued for congenital criminality or crime as 'real hereditary calling' of certain communities had become a part of colonial mind and lexicon since the *anti-thuggee* campaign of early 19th Century. *Dusadhs*, the ordinary

18. Prasann Kumar Chowdhary and Srikant, Bihar mein samajik parivartan ke kuch aayam, (Delhi: Vaani Prakashan, 2001), 60-83.

19. Ibid.

20. Grierson, Maithil Chrestomathy, 3

21. Shahid Amin, Event, Metaphor and Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 1.

22. Narayan, Documenting Dissent, 46-47.

23. Grierson, Maithil Chrestomathy, 3.

labouring classes in Bihar, found in the lower rungs of caste structure were designated as a criminal caste.

This paper with its focus on the *malins* of Salhesh *gatha* seeks to decode the prevalent gender norms amongst the subalterns. The essential storyline has Salhesh - the *chowkidar*, *kusuma anddauna malins* appearing as hero and heroines. *Chuharmal*- the thief had heard of *Salhesh's* prowess and wanted to challenge him by stealing on his beat. He steals the Queen's necklace and her golden bed. The story develops with Salhesh getting arrested and *malins* efforts to rescue

him from his bond. It ends with a battle between Salhesh and *Chuharmal*; queen's necklace and golden bed being retrieved; Raja rewarding Salhesh and *malin* and Salhesh living in Raja's *phulmari* happily ever after.²⁴

Grierson's Salhesh *geet* or song of Salhesh begins with *Dauna malin* praying and pining for Salhesh.

*For him I kept my bosom covered with my body cloth.
For such a spouse I built a bridal chamber of fresh bamboo.
I have made and adorned a scarlet bed.*

There are several folk songs suggesting the impending sexual encounter. Interestingly most of them are sung by women in their own spaces away from male listeners. Even these songs are usually not sung in the first person, instead other characters talk about the girl's mother or friends, planning for consummation of marriage. *Dauna malin* with her 'declarations' of building a bridal chamber, scarlet bed and pining for Salhesh displays a sexual agency. She is a rebel, transgressing all boundaries when she leaves her house in anger, packing all her jewels in search of Salhesh. She does not ask her father to look for a groom to marry. However, there are slippages in her autonomy and agency when she cannot imagine a life without a spouse. It is not just love for this one man but a sense of being incomplete-

*My face is very lovely, but the parting is without a grain of vermilion. Without a spouse
how can I pass my days. I will seek my husband*

On seeing her hysterical state *Champa*, a friend suggests:

*Let us five friends go to the banks of Kamala, where thy spouse Salhesh will come
We will tempt him and take him by magic and marry him to thee*

Malin and her friends seem to be adept at casting spells. *Malin* in traditional folk literature/ oral tradition is a generic term used for sorceress

24. This section has excerpts from Salhesh Geet as it appears in Grierson's Maithil Chrestom-athy.

besides denoting the caste location of flower girls. Mithila, a seat of Vedic Hinduism, has also been a land of tantric traditions. It has a long history of migratory connections with Kamarupa the land of black-magic, witchcraft, and occult practices. At Kamarupa-Kamakhya temple there is worship of yoni or the female genital, personifying female desire. Mayong-the land of desire and Morang, *malins* natal home are connected etymologically and otherwise. Hence, *malins* hoping to entice and capture Salhes is a familiar imagery in the folk traditions of the subaltern. Women from 'respectable' sans upper caste families would not express desire or think of exercising agency and breaking norms.

On hearing their prayers

Seats of fifty-six crore of Indra gods shook and they went to the kachabri in which Salhesh was sitting and told him the entire story.

Salhesh plays pricey and thinks it is inappropriate to go running after *malins* himself. Instead sends his parrot to fetch a *beduli* as a token of love. Jhimma, the parrot gets Dauna's *beduli* to *kachabri*. Salhes sees it and imagines Dauna's beauty. Jhimma is sent back immediately with *beduli* and a message of Salhes' arrival. The *beduli* episode is taken straight out of popular epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat where all hints of love are veiled in sanitised symbols. The insertion of this episode in the narrative is a testimony to the fact that subalterns emulate and subvert the culture of upper caste elites in the same breath.

In *malins* imagination and first-time listeners/reader's mind Salhes presides over the *kachabri*. It is only when the story progresses, it becomes clear that Salhes is only a *chowkidar*, a minion in King's court. This sequence of events happening in *malin's* imagination where Salhesh is sitting in his *kachabri* and fifty-six crore gods go up to him pleading, on behalf of her is a flight of fantasy every subaltern woman or a poor disempowered woman will have about her lover/ spouse. Most mill workers or rickshaw pullers have their partners imagining them as kings. The same goes for men who always imagine their spouses as queens. This fantastical leap is a comforting inversion of reality possible in lores and ballads.

At dawn, Salhesh reaches *malins* garden riding a horse. He has travelled a long distance through the night. There is a masculine imagery of a knight on a horse who has come to meet his lover. In folk songs, very often one finds references to a traveller mounted on a horse who tries to woo the girl. In most cases these girls, transgressing societal gender boundaries end up being deceived. These tales are like warnings for young girls exercising

agency in loving and living lives. Dauna malin of Salhesh *geet* however, is no ordinary naive girl.

In the garden she plucked flowers and tied a necklace for Salhesh.

At that moment there is a disruption and the story moves to Pakaria, where Salhesh is a *chowkidar*. A thief called Chuharmal from a 'strange country' called Mokama. Chuharmal was no ordinary thief, he wanted to steal on Salhes' beat as a challenge. On roaming the streets of Pakaria, he identifies King Bhim Sain's palace as the only place worthy of his feat.

Chuharmal dug a tunnel into the palace which got him into Queen Hansavati's chamber. The Queen was sleeping on a golden bed. He cut her necklace, lifted her up and put her on King Bhimsen's (empty) bed. He carries the golden bed upon his head and walks 4 kos in the mine, crossed river Ganga, walked through Magadha, and reached Mokama. The Queen keeps sleeping through all this.

Salkhi, the palace maid wakes up at dawn, cleans the courtyard and *verandah*. In her mind, she is critical of the Queen's indolence.

How can a woman stay so long in bed when her husband is not with her.

For Salkhi the servant girl seeing the Queen and her luxuries while she must slave it out every day brings out inequality in its crudest form. She is jealous of the queen and her resistance to this inequality can take no other form, but this scathing disapproval expressed only in her mind.

When the Queen realises there had been a theft in her room she begins to weep and writes a letter to King Bhim Sain. Queen Hansavati's character resembles the heroines of medieval ballads who are docile and helpless when faced with untoward happenings. Queen Hansavati nevertheless is quick to exercise her authority against the underclass-watchman Salhes-by complaining to her husband, the King. This characterisation of gender relations mirrors the sociological realities of the landed elite.

King promptly fixes the liability on the *chowkidar* and orders his arrest. To add to the drama and Salhesh's glory there is an entire sequence of King's *banuadhis* or arresting peons hanging their heads in shame as they could not find 'a trace of Salhes' until they are given a clue by an old woman traveller.

He was drinking spirits at the still of a spirit-seller and rolling ganja in his hands and had besmeared his body with damp earth. He had a dark blue turban on his head and a brown stick.

This description of Salhes is a complete contrast with all that was said about him in the narrative hitherto. The exalted imagery created seems to give way to a more real, human form. Salhesh, the *chowkidar* appears as any other subaltern man. He is arrested and produced before the King in *kachhari*, where he stands with clasped hands and prays to the King.

*From birth, I had been thy slave never been branded by a flower,
today what has happened that I am bound in chains*

King orders: *Arrest the thief with his booty and then thou wilt be released.*

Salhes says: *Bring paper and I will write a bond for the value of the stolen property and through all my future lives will I pay it off. I cannot find the thief and his booty.*

Salhesh is tortured on King's orders and belief that 'a *dusadh by caste will never confess*' otherwise. helpless Salhesh starts to cry and prays to goddess Asavari.

Go tell my wife, the faithful dauna with whom I had eloped where she is sleeping in the bed in the garden, tell her to come to kachabri to see me.

The *kachabri* where Salhes is detained is very different from *kachabri* of *malins* imagination. In her fantasy, *kachabari* is Salhesh's court from where he reigns. The *kachabri* where she has been asked to come, is Salhesh's prison. He has been imprisoned for no fault of his. It is his location in the power structure that has him branded and chained. Dauna *malin* on getting to know of Salhesh's situation takes on the matter in her own hands and tries to solve the problem.

She resorts to her occult practices and finds the whereabouts of the unknown thief.

On getting the sign she readies herself for the *kachabari*. She walks into the *kachabari* not as a damsel in distress, but with the intention of charming her way to the King and his courtiers. She is willing to use her sexuality to get her husband released. Dauna exercises her sexual agency even if under duress, she owns her sexuality and uses it wherever required

She adorned herself in all 16 braces and made a magic flower basket. She plucked fresh cloves and cardamoms, and entered kachabari with clasped hands. She said humbly to King Bhim Sain, very tender is my lord Salhesh, I will bring the thief and his booty from wherever he may be.

While Salhes was willing to write away his future lives, as he '...cannot find the thief and his booty.' Dauna is confident about her mission of finding

the thief. The lecherous King, charmed by Dauna's beauty, asks her to write a bond to the effect that, if she does not produce the thief and the booty within a week's time she would marry him.

Each party ratified the bond, then up rose Malin, and unloosed her lord's bonds with her own hands.

Salhes, unaware of the events, enquires how she got him freed to which she replied- *I gave my chastity in bond*. It is Dauna who tells him about Chuharmal the thief and his whereabouts. Salhes after Chuharmal's assault on his beat appears as a broken man whereas Dauna displays immense self-confidence and independent spirit. She taunts Salhes to act like a man and arrest the thief to lift his spirits.

However, Dauna already has an artifice planned as she knows Chuharmal cannot be caught by ordinary means. She instructs Salhes to dress up like a *nat* and herself takes on a *natin*'s disguise. While *malin* is the initiator of events, it does not count for much as river Ganga hears of Salhesh's advent with Dauna no more than his accomplice.

When Ganga refuses to let them cross it on boats, Dauna takes off her necklace and crosses the river on it. *Nat* and *natin* eventually reach Mokama and pitch their tents. While Salhesh rested himself, *Malin/Natin* put a bundle of beads on her head to sell. She goes around the streets and identifies Chuharmal's house. He was sleeping the 'sleep of 7 sleepers within his seven houses'. *Malin* stood at the door and by her magic woke him.

Natin once again has no qualms in offering sexual favours to retrieve the stolen necklace. She directly tells Chuharmal that she dreamt of a necklace in his house and if he were to gift it to her, she would fulfil all his heart's desire. Enchanted by her beauty, he falls in her trap and brings the necklace. She asks Chuharmal-

Come to my tent and upon my golden bed of thine, I will fulfil thy heart's desire.

In the meantime, Salhes had prepared his forces for a battle. His brother Motiram, nephew Karikand had arrived with seven hundred small tusked male elephants and surrounded the tent. Chuharmal, an accomplished warrior, slashed all seven hundred elephants. For three days and nights the battle went on. Chuharmal could be bound only by deceit once again orchestrated by the sorceresses *malin*. The thief is produced before King Bhim Sain who rewards Salhes. Salhesh and Dauna *malin* guarded Kings *phulwari* or garden for the rest of their life.

This text when read as reflecting social codes returns Dauna *malin*

as a woman who acts as necessitated by the plot. She exercises agency, which includes casting spells, manipulating powerful men, exchanging sexual favours all on her own terms. While the text is titled *Salhesh Geet*, it comes across as a *gatha* of the *malin*. It is a sociologically established fact that subaltern women of the low castes exercised significant autonomy which was determined by necessities of life and living. Sanskritization including status markers like 'seclusion and circumscription' overturned the existing hierarchies²⁵ and notions of sexuality. Dauna the lower caste heroine comes across as that autonomous woman unbridled by the vagaries of Brahmanical Hinduism and its prerequisite of a chaste 'wife' as a respectable woman.

The following section analyses a novel written in a turbulent decade in post-colonial India where regional identities were being shaped on streets and libraries. Salhesh and *malins* once again appear as pivotal characters in the project of forging solidarities.

Section 3: Manipadma Raja Salhesh

In 1973, Brajbhushan Verma 'Manipadma' published a novel titled 'Raja Salhes' from Maithili Prakashan, Calcutta. In the *samarpan* or dedication page 'Manipadma' dedicates the novel to *mamaithili* and quotes the famous shloka found in some editions of Valmiki Ramayan "जननीजन्मभूमिश्चस्वर्गदपिगरीयसी" which places mother and motherland above heaven. Manipadma's novel must be contextualised in the post-independence Maithili movement. This sub-national movement, centred around a language driven identity within the 'porous linguistic and cultural boundaries of the 'Hindi heartland' presents one story of how 'traditional communities in India encounter modernity'.²⁶ A novel on Raja Salhesh-a lower caste *dusadh* hero of Mithila written by a leading luminary of the literary political movement for recognition of *maithili* is a pointer to socio-political processes underway.

The *maithili* movement essentially was a political struggle, waged to emerge from the 'condemnation' of maithili as a '*gawaru, janana bhasha*' to being recognised as an independent language with a glorious history distinct from Hindi. The quest simultaneously was for fomenting 'a modern linguistic community' ...through internal 'negotiations with different castes, regions and varieties of maithili speakers....'²⁷

25. Gerald D Beremann, (1993). 'Sanskritisation as Female Oppression', in Miller, Barbara D (ed) Sex and Gender Hierarchies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 366.

26. Mithilesh Kr Jha, Language Politics and Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement, (New Delhi: OUP, 2018) 2.

27. Ibid, 211.

The hierarchies of *maithil* society are well documented, the *panjibadh* system stands out as a unique system of gradation even within Brahmins as a caste group.²⁸ These hierarchies and the dominance of Brahmins and Kayasthas in the socio-cultural life of Mithila and organisations formed for the cause of maithili proved to be a major impediment in the growth of the movement. Organisation like Maithil Mahasabha had membership restricted to Brahmins and Kayasthas. Paul Brass has identified the failure of the maithili movement in the ‘ineffectiveness of the elite maithil castes in ‘transmitting their sense of regional identity to the mass of maithili speaking people;’ the sharp cultural gap between elite castes and rest of the masses.’²⁹ There was a realisation that the movement could succeed only if it broadened its base.

Calcutta provided the ideal setting for this broadening exercise. The language- ‘maithili became the only basis for social interaction’, in a distant urban setting, where observances of caste and class divisions were somewhat relaxed. Vidyapati Parv, Janaki Mahotsav and many other cultural gatherings brought *maithili* speakers across hierarchical social divisions ‘together’. There were attempts to forge a unity for collective action. Magazines played a major role in expressing the agenda of social reforms and express(ing) that Maithili was not the language of Maithil Brahmins alone but of all the ‘inhabitants of Mithila—Shakaldwipi, Bhumihar, Rajput, Vaishya, Shudra, Muslims, Christians, Bengali, Marwari, and even Englishmen.’³⁰

Brajbhushan Verma ‘Manipadma’ was at the forefront of this socio-cultural-literary-political movement. When Laxman Jha presented the cause of Maithili before Pandit Nehru in the Calcutta session of All India Writers Association ‘Manipadma’ and Harimohan Jha the famous Khattar Kaka were in attendance. ‘Manipadma’ was one of the founding members of Akhil Bhartiya Mithila Sangh, 1957 and Mithila Sanskritik Parishad (MSP), 1959- MSP formed exclusively for social, cultural, and literary developments.

Dr Jagannath Mishra, the Chief Minister of Bihar from Mithila region was an important pillar of the *maithil* identity movement. His support for this sub-regional identity could be interpreted both as a genuine emotion and as a strategic tool to strengthen and solidify his own political base. The political assertion of backward classes in post-emergency Bihar was a force to reckon with. The challenge posed by the rise of leaders like Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar and Ramvilas Paswan from outside the Congress fold could be dealt with, only by wooing the Dalit-backward sections and their cultural

28. Hetukar Jha, 'Understanding Caste through its sources of Identity: An account of Shotriyas of Mithila', Sociological Bulletin, Volume 23, Issue 1. (1974): 93-98.

29. Paul R Brass, Language Religion and Politics in North India, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 114-115.

30. Jha, Language Politics, 116.

symbols. Jagannath Mishra presided over the establishment of Salhesh section in Vidyapati Bhawan. Novels, plays, radio dramas were produced centred on Salhesh as a protagonist. Brajbhushan Verma 'Manipadma' became the modern day 'bard'.

Manipadma through his novels and other literary works was already working towards forging the sub-regional/national identity of Mithila and Maithili speaking populace. Religion and religiosity were an important fulcrum around which this identity was to be woven but the quest was also to draw the most marginalised within Hinduism and *maithil* society, the Dalits into the larger politics of a unified Mithila and a homogenous *maithil* identity. Manipadma's novels provide an interface for both these impulses. On the one hand his novels sought to 'establish a harmonious confluence amongst Saiva, Shakta, and Buddhist philosophies'³¹, given the centrality of Mithila for all these philosophical traditions. On the other his subaltern protagonists like Salhesh, Lorik, Dulara Dayal drew on the rich cultural heritage of the lower classes. Udit Narayan Jha, President Maithili Prakashan Samiti in his prologue to the novel Raja Salhesh commends Manipadma for his relentless efforts towards making lost stories of heroes of Mithila accessible through his writings. Interestingly, Salhesh's story has been routinely performed by *naach* parties but clearly literati do not consider these traditions as legitimate repositories of memories. The cheap, *solkan* entertainment could not be included in Mithila culture.

Manipadma's novels remarkably have female protagonists and strong women characters. *Ardhbnarishwar*, talks of the existence of masculine and feminine in every human body; *Lavabari Kushhari* brings out Sita's strength; *Ananga Kusuma* once again has a strong female protagonist. Indragovind Jha in the introduction to the novel Raja Salhesh notes that at the centre of Manipadma's literary creations is the ideal man and woman. The ideal man is '*param-purushartha, lok seva parayan, nirabankar and kartavyanishtha*' whereas the ideal woman is '*satatsadbika, Lok Sevika, Prerna murti, garimamayi*'.³²

Malins in Manipadma's novel are summarily different from *malin* in Grierson's *Salhesh Geet* (discussed in the previous section). There is an attempt to deny their location within the lower caste. In the introduction itself, the author points out, *malins* in the *gatha* are not from the *Mali* caste rather it indicates their attainment of *tripur-malini* stage in *Yog sadhana*. Kusuma *malin* is an acclaimed yogini, instrumentalist, dancer, singer, *Chikaskia* (doctor), *rasayan*

31 Sachidanand Jha, 'Nationalist with A novel Idea', Daily Pioneer, Nov. 2, 2018.

32. Manipadma, Raja Salhesh, Eitihashik Upanyas, (Calcutta: Maithili Prakashan Samiti, 1973).

vidh (chemist) and *Chitrakleba* (artist). The sorceress, an enchantress using her sexuality as a currency in adverse situations, metamorphoses into a 'respectable' princess. *Malin* in the novel has a sanitised asexual representation. Manipadma follows the lineage of those social reformers in colonial India who "attempted to improve the popular cultural practices of the lower castes, especially as far as those related to women, ostensibly to uplift and cleanse them of perceived evils and lax moral standards."³³

Characterisation of malins in the novel revolves around the 'ideal woman', aiding and assisting her man/hero. Kusuma is shown worshipping a massive *shivlinga* mounted on a huge lotus in Himalayas. Salhesh on the other hand is in *dhyan mudra*. This scene is a recreation of Shiva-Parvati encounter in Shiva Puran. Manipadma in the introduction clarifies that his narrative does not have any traces of upper-caste *acharan* however, draws heavily on Brahmanical texts and it gets reflected in the story and its progression.

This fictionalised account which claims to be a historical novel portrays Salhesh as divine-keeping intact the mythical glorification of celibate men of great powers. There is a concerted attempt to weed out any references to the real-in language, meanings, metaphors. When Salhesh sees *malin* sisters he is mesmerized by their beauty. However, his admiration gets expressed in the words of an 'ideal' yogi when he says- "you aren't women, you are *vidya* (knowledge), you are inspiration and *aalok* (light)."³⁴ Aranya, another female character in the novel, is transformed into a human from demoness on being overpowered/meeting Salhesh's nephew Karikanha. There are several pages devoted to her description whereby she is presented as a naked *pishachini* with long open hair drinking blood surrounded by wild animals. She marries Karikanha and gets tamed. As a marriage rite the bride must kill a bull in one go. Aranya manages the task effortlessly, given her powers and to ever-yone's surprise. Aranya's effortless killing of a bull, being surrounded by wild animals, her physical descriptions are all meant to evoke a 'masculinity' which is rarely a feature of upper-caste, docile women of Mithila. She is clearly the wild 'other' who needs taming to become social. Descriptions of *malin* Kusuma and Dauna's feminine beauty and skills along with Aranya's 'ugliness' and masculinity remind one of the debates around representations of black women in white literature. Patricia Collins points out that that dominant racial standards of femininity often lead to women from other racial backgrounds being perceived as either more feminine or more

33. Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2001), 29.

34. Raja Salhesh, 25

masculine in comparison.”³⁵ In this case race can easily be replaced by caste.

The theft by Chuharmal in Raja Bhimsen’s palace gets replaced by Chinese invasion of the motherland. The context of the war with the Chinese aggressor once again has *malins* at the centre. Suyong, the Chinese

Emperor, is enchanted by the beauty of *malins* he wants to have them and Salhesh fights to protect their dignity and the integrity of his motherland. He declares that his entire being is dedicated to the protection of his motherland. This motherland is Bharatavarsha and *Mithila Pradesh*. *Malins* face an army of one lakh soldiers, they reach the fort and rescue Salhesh and Jaivardhan. Chuharmal who was aiding the Chinese Emperor is also brought to justice and Salhesh’s fame spreads far and wide.

The novel clearly has its own narrative drawing on various sources and prejudices while *malins* show heroics yet their frame of existence changes drastically. All characters including Salhesh and *malins* confirm, to the Brahmanical ideal typology which in turn served the identity construction project. Salhesh and *malins* removed from their original, ‘dirty’, lascivious locale of Dalit/backward cultural performances and exalted into the high literary cultural world set the stage for their appropriation by the Hindutva bandwagon.

Section 4: Salhesh Lokgatha: Mahendra Ram and Phulo Paswan.

Badri Narayan has made a note of the ‘fascinating’ cultural project of Hindu nationalism aimed at appropriation of “the past and identity of Dalits as a Hindu past and identity by recreating the (caste) memory ...through their myths, heroes and histories.”³⁶ Narayan says that the process of Brahmanisation of Salhesh- a dusadh folk hero- over a long time period serves as a “readymade cultural material” for Hindutva forces to appropriate him and the community that identifies with him.³⁷ A book titled ‘Salhesh Lokgatha’ edited by Mahendra Paswan and Phulo Ram, published by Sahitya Akademi in 2007 could be read as a book furthering this project. Editors of Salhesh Lokgatha place their text as pivotal to the political project of bringing Dalits and backwards into the national mainstream. Interestingly the editors themselves are very aware and proud of their caste location.

They claim to be preserving the ‘gatha’ or lore in its original form by writing it down. They acknowledge that the gatha has lost its importance

35. Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2001), 29.

36. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 9

37. Ibid.162

as an entertainment form, given the availability of multiple options in this age of technology, and changing tastes. Nevertheless, for them it is significant as a tale of the marginalised - the '*antim aadm*' or 'last man' hence the need for its preservation.

Editors contextualise Salhesh as God of the 'working people', hence his 'gahbar' or 'sthan' shows signs of poverty- it's usually made of hay and clay with terracotta figurines. They describe the *gohari* or worship where *bhaageet* is sung instead of a recital of Sanskrit mantras. Nonetheless, Salhesh is portrayed as a *shivbhakta* whose *rajkiya dhwaja* or political flag is imagined as bearing the mark of a trident or *trishul*. Shiva, is the only god in Hindu pantheon who is seen as a god of '*shudra*' or dalit origin given his 'wayward' existence. He is a *shmasanvasi* or resides in a crematorium and is surrounded by those outside the respectable social order- *ganas*, *pichabes*, serpents etc. The subaltern devotees were allowed in local mahadeva yatras; however, entry into jyotirlinga shrines was prohibited until the 20th century. This ambivalence makes the relationship between shiva and the subalterns 'tendentious'.³⁸

Paswan and Ram see this narrative as opposite of the high cultured compositions of Vedic tradition- the "*shisht-o-parinishthit ved-paripati ki rachna*". Yet incidents and their surrounding metaphors heavily draw upon Hindu mythology in their textual recording. Salhesh's birth story in this text bears a clear imprint of mythical stories of apsaras luring rishis into conjugal unions resulting in birth of glorious kings and virtuous maidens. There is an unmistakable reference to the Vishwamitra-Maneka encounter and the birth of Shakuntala besides several such stories of lure. Mayavati, Salhesh's mother in this narrative is an apsara who breaks rishi Vakmuni's twelve yearlong meditation or '*tapasya*.' Angry sage curses the apsara, who pleads forgiveness, and as a redemption of her sins, '*Satbrata*' Salhesh appears out of Kamala and apsara Mayavati becomes Rani Mandodri. Such stories of divine 'unnatural' birth is meant to glorify the hero and legitimize his powers. Salhesh's birth story appearing in this form clearly has a purpose of pulling him out of his biological existence and ordaining him with supernatural worship worthy powers.

He has been called *satbrata*, one who has vowed to tell the truth, once again the effort is to place him on a higher pedestal because of his virtuousness. The virtues as defined within the moral compass of a Brahmanical society. However, Salhesh's birth narration also has a reference to Kabir Saheb's appearance as a child at Lahartara lake. These two

38. YS Alone, 'Shiva: Not a God of subaltern communities', Outlook, October 28, 2022.

simultaneous references one drawn out of Brahminical mythology and the other from the corpus of dalit cultural movement is a testimony to Badri Narayan's argument that 'saffronising dalit memories is a complex process of seeking acceptance as well as dissenting and negation'.³⁹ This complexity for him is particularly 'compellingly visible in the oral forms' of dalit cultural life. Salhesh *lokgatha* in its textual rendition is a prototype of this process.

The Brahmanisation of Salhesh, the dusadh hero, is a result of a 'long (ongoing) process of socio-political transformation of Mithila society. The role of Manipadma in this socio-cultural process has been discussed in the previous section. Tarakant Jha, a leader of Janasangh and BJP was a benefactor of this saffron appropriation by participating in Salhesh *pujas* and *melas*. Salhesh of Grierson's 'salhesh geet' rolling ganja and wrestling in mud acquires a towering, God-like personality possessing supernatural powers. Mithila's pride had to be created and reinterpreted warding-off all his dalit slippages and ills.

If Salhesh becomes a god-like king, his queen could be no ordinary mortal. The *lokgatha* text introduces the Brahminical dichotomy between the pious wedded wife, Rani Samarvati, and the lustful other women, bearing evil designs, *maliniyas*. The sorceresses rescuing Salhesh turn into his lustful oppressors. Their black magic turns Salhesh into a parrot, a leech at will. A battle ensues between the pious wife turned into *dokhar* or eagle and evil *maliniyas* as cranes. The queen loses this battle but borrows her husband for a night to save her father's honour. The virtuous 'man', runs away from his home, masquerades as a brahmin in order to escape the evil plans of *malins*. Sati Samarvati is portrayed as a devoted wife, fulfilling her familial duties of getting Salhesh's brothers and nephews married one by one. Rani Samarvati, Salhesh's sister Banaspati, *malins* are all surrounded by *sevikas* and *dasis* or maids. These references clearly are a pointer to their exalted status whether imagined as a metaphorical resistance to the actual living realities of the Dalits and backwards or as a project of reimagined past.

Malins here, unlike in Manipadma's novel, show greater agency when they become 'other' women. In their attempts to capture Salhesh, one sees their agency in fighting for their love. Banaspati's character is shown to have fallen in love with Raja of Satkholia in Triveni mela. These female characters, unlike Sati Samarvati, do not wait to get married off by their fathers. However, it is Samarvati, the pious wedded wife who is placed on a pedestal. This oral composition which gets transformed with every performance reflects the societal values of the present. The impact of Sanskritization on gender roles

39.Narayan, FascinatingHindutva, 158

and women's status is distinctly discernible.

Conclusion

Salbesh Gatha analysed as a prototype of subaltern culture in Mithila with focus on *malins* brings out several interesting trajectories of folk. This *gatha* as reproduced at different junctures of history *becomes* a living testament of contemporary social realities. A social commentary which trespasses the boundaries of innocent pure entertainment. The paper attempted to “place the text(s) more firmly amidst material and social practices instead of ... purely literary tradition.” The weaving together of historical and mythical references nevertheless takes the tale far away from lived realities of the marginalized sections where it originated. The construction of homogenous identity whether sub-regional or national required a recension of patriarchal codes. The text and its characters acquired new meanings and roles in tune with larger political needs and demands made on the community. The *malinyas* of *Salbesh gatha*, their transformation from feisty,

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