

Dissent and Consent in *Sitthanis*: The Public Sphere in Folkloric Tradition of the Punjab

Rajnish Dhawan and Sumera Saleem

Abstract

This essay explores how *Sitthani*, a Punjabi folk tradition, serves to form dissent on the idea of consent in relation to the imagining of the private and the public spheres. In cultures around the world, marriage, a public performance of a private affair is accompanied by performance rituals that include singing and dancing. In the context of Punjab, these performance rituals include singing of a variety of songs that are sung during different stages of the ceremony. The songs for different ceremonies are composed in a metre and vocabulary that is specific to a particular ceremony. For instance, the vocabulary and metre used in a *Ghori* is different from those used in a *Suhaag*, the former being a song composed for the groom elevating him temporarily to the status of a prince and the latter a song for the bride wishing for her glorious future as a married woman. *Sitthani*, however, deals with nothing that is moral or acceptable in the normal social fabric. This form employs a vocabulary that involves everything that is immoral, vulgar, and taboo in society. It involves blatant shaming of the opposite party (the bride's or the groom's) using lewd and explicit language and talks about situations and affairs that are rarely expressed even in a private sphere. Yet, *Sitthanis* is a performance that takes place in the public sphere during a marriage ceremony. Located within the cultural traditions of the Punjab, the public sphere acts as a site of mediation between an active audience and their bearing on a dialogic relation with the performance of folkloric practices. To explore this dimension of dialogue and the way it extends itself as a mode of resistance oriented through folkloric songs, this essay focuses on the way *Sitthanis* help in understanding the concept of consent in relation to the idea of public sphere. For their being a poetic form of cultural expression, the one associated with the idea of public sphere, *Sitthanis* give us an insight into the ways through which they underscore sociocultural conditions, which serve in sustaining such folkloric traditions.

Keywords: Folk Tradition, Punjab, *Sitthanis*, Oral Culture and Tradition.

This essay keeps in view the cultural influence of collective ways of being and the notion of public sphere invested with performative expression in the Punjab on the production of consent of the women on the occasion of marriage. The debate focused in this essay relates to how folkloric tradition of *Sitthanis* alludes to dissent as a performative act that not just negotiates with the ideological notion of the way the notion of consent is assumed but also reorients women's agency, mediated through their voicing the self in the public sphere. The articulation of resistance contributes to reclaiming the agentive potential of voicing what can be called as an act of speaking against the social inequities, existing in the patriarchal societies. The agentive potential of voice values the listening sense and sonic sensibility, two major concepts which provide a theoretical prism through which the folkloric tradition of the Punjab are analysed. Most specifically, the concept of agency this essay draws on is not coalesced with passivity, silence and docility as the registers of subjectivity of the Punjab women.

Through the performance of *Sitthanis*, the Punjabi women, we argue, attempt to sustain voice as a way of being for the agentive potentiality this folkloric practice is characterized by. To this end, sonic relation is built on such collective practices by which Punjabi women reclaim not just their visibility in public sphere through voice and its mediation with listeners but also the emancipatory potential, the one which does not pit dissent against the patriarchal dominance as a reaction radicalism but rather as a culturally specific modality of being in the world.

Engaged dynamically with the notions of caste, class, community and the folkloric traditions which point towards the ideological as well as social stratification, the very mechanism of ritualistic aspect of *Sitthanis* operates as a creative base which reproduces the position of women for their being involved in musicking¹, listening, speaking and creating resistance. Therefore, anger cannot just be seen as a reactive outburst under the rubric of affect. Directly connected to our moral sensibility and consent oriented by social and cultural traditions, emotions bear a relative yet entangled connection to affect, resistance and social hierarchies of power.

Drawing on the performative aspect of Punjabi folkloric tradition, this essay addresses the neglected dimension of cultural resistance with reference to *Sitthanis* which simultaneously engage with alternative conversation on gender, social status, caste and configure public sphere registered through the collective practice of dissent and sonic agency. Most importantly, the cultural practice of

Sitthanis is largely premised on the notion of anger that accounts for scathing criticism on the groom and his kin. We attempt to understand the genealogical aspect of folkloric rituals that reorient the sense of the gendered identity and psycho-social conditions that are arrayed around the performance of *Sitthanis*.

Informed by resistance that challenged the normative discourse of socially acceptable expression through the celebratory mode of cultural songs, *Sitthanis* contribute to reinscribe the way in which Punjabi women regulate their autonomy in the public sphere. Punjabi culture is historically marked by popular cultural practices which add to the performative aspect of doing self, the act that involves a dynamic interplay of reconfiguring the collective ways of being, conceptualized both in dichotomous relations as well as the subversive ways of acting out the idea of self. Grounded in performative character, the idea of doing self through *Sitthanis*, recalibrates the notion of autonomy in relation to the position of Punjabi women and the affirmation of their agency through the musical acts in the public sphere.

In order to see how *Sitthani* engenders a discourse of identity through the critique on social inequities and built through an attentive engagement among the live audience, it is important to understand the general notion of public and private sphere in the rural Punjab. The typical upper-caste middle-class house is distinctly divided into male and female quarters. The main entrance to the house is also the entrance to the *baithak* or the drawing room, where the male members of the family entertain the male guests. The male guests do not go beyond the *baithak*. The rear door of the *baithak* opens into a courtyard² that is a sort of a buffer zone between the *baithak* and female quarters or the bedrooms of the house. This courtyard is the place for the kids to play and the women to do their chores. So, beyond the *baithak* the rest of the house is under the female domain and men usually cross the threshold of the *baithak* at night when they are to retire to the bedroom. Similarly, the women rarely cross the threshold of the *baithak*, when men folk are sitting there. When the food is to be served to the guests, the women would bring the food to the threshold of the *baithak* and the men will take it from them and serve it to the guests. Thus, the public and private spheres in the house are distinctly divided and the courtyard serves the purpose of the buffer or a no man's land. Outside the house, the public sphere in the village is again distinctly divided between men and women quarters. The men would gather at the Sath, the village square, where they would discuss politics, sports, village affairs and women. The women would find such a space

at the *bhatthi* where they would go to get popcorn or get the tandoori rotis made. For women, this evening ritual would become a female sath; where marriages were fixed, gossip was indulged in and subjects that were considered taboo were discussed. These conversations at the *bhatthi* feature prominently in the various folk performances, especially the ones associated with the marriage ceremony.

All aspects of a Punjabi marriage have performative aspects associated with it and each of these aspects has songs that have a specific metre and specific vocabulary. For instance, the vocabulary used in the *Suhag* focuses on blessing the girl for a happy married life. *Suhag* also directs the father to find a suitable match for his daughter, a match who doesn't live too far from the girl's house. The girl in question, who out of modesty cannot talk to her father directly about her hopes and aspirations regarding her would-be groom, asks the winds, the birds and the sunlight, etc. to convey her feelings to her father as well as other male members of her family so that they find her prince charming for her.

Ghorian are sung to put the groom on a high pedestal. The groom might be a pauper but for the duration of his marriage ceremonies, he is nothing short of a prince. The vocabulary of *ghorian* focuses on things like finding a mare of the superior breed for the 'Banna' to ride, adorning him with choicest of jewels and getting the best clothes stitched for him. Not only the groom, but the whole of his family is compared to a royal family, a cut above the ordinary. *Birha* is a form that talks about the realities of life once the festivities are over. The persona in the *Birha* songs is almost always the woman and the songs present the predicament of a woman who has been dissociated from her parents' house, and is facing situations like neglect from her husband, who is having multiple affairs, the complete incompatibility between the woman and her husband, or the mistreatment that she receives from her in laws because her father was not able to give respectable dowry. *Birha* songs also project problems like the debt that keeps on piling every year, poverty, about the husband who has gone abroad in search of greener pastures leaving his family behind to miss him and wait for him.

In contrast to these forms, *Sitthani* is totally different from all these. *Sitthani* does not celebrate the occasion, nor does it offer valuable advice to the newlyweds for their lives. Rather it conveys an image of the groom as stingy, mean, shirker, liar, cunning, cheater, shameless, spineless, immature, childlike, illiterate, crazy and henpecked and the list goes on. It does not simply target the groom, rather

in the realm of *Sithhani*, everybody from the other party be it a man or a woman, encompasses all the possible vices that you can think of and even those which you dare not think of. Etymologically, the plural “*Sithniais* derived from the word “Sith” that denotes “scathing criticism and vulgar abuse” (Bazmi 117). *Sitthani* is a verbal repertoire, generally used in the form of verse and more specifically, it is aimed at making fun of the groom, his family and relatives, and “parodying the kin of the family with which marriage had been fixed” (Malhotra, 198).

The very practice *Sitthanis* accepted as a celebratory tradition necessitates an understanding about how this practice achieved its recognition as a collective/shared expression, attributed through anger to resistance against social inequities. Anger challenges the culture of silence which is often misunderstood as consent. Therefore, discontent expressed in a backstage region turns its effect into public emotion. More widely, the urge to express in cultural practice is often taken for granted under the dominantly prevalent assumption of emotion disassociated from rationality, intended action ultimately from resistance, which is synonymous with cognitive behaviour response. This essay brings to focus emotion as a strategic way of registering resistance to the existing social inequities and addresses the ignored notion about the genealogy of the performance of such a folkloric practice through identifying the possible source of anger by which *Sitthanis* are characterized by.

But the most significant aspect of this performance is the *Baraat*³, or the groom’s procession from his house/village to the bride’s house. But it is not a gentle, humble procession, rather it is a vain, loud, proud proclamation of the groom and his family’s superiority over that of the bride’s. With the brass band going on full blast, the groom on a horseback, carrying a sword and delirious *baraatis* dancing to the brash tunes, a *baraat* is an elaborate procession.

In the Indian epics there are many references to a tradition known as *Swayamvara*, which in essence means that the girl will herself (*swayam*) pick up her life partner (*vara*). The King would organize *swayamvara* for his daughter inviting suitable princes from various kingdoms and the daughter would then pick up the one she fancies he most. But in most of these cases, the girl was usually abducted by a powerful prince before she had made her choice (and sometimes even after she had openly declared her intentions). Examples include, Bhishma abducting Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his step brother Vichitravirya, Duryodhana abducting Bhanumati, Krishna abducting Rukmini, Arjuna abducting

Subhadra, Abhimanyu abducting Vatsala. The woman, although symbolically put at the position of power, in reality does not have any power at all in this arrangement. Even in the situations where she is not abducted, the father holds a bride-competition and the winner takes the bride as his prize. Throughout this ceremony, she is a silent, mute, passive spectator waiting anxiously and having no outlet to let her real feelings know. If the person she hates wins the competition, she is doomed to be his bride. This is a stage, where regardless of her class, caste, status or education, she would want to hurl choicest of swear words at her groom and his family. Arguably, *Sitthani* has its origins in the verbal representation of the emotion of hatred towards the other party because the other party is not the one that she wanted it to be. The notion of woman as a prize, and woman as war-booty continued throughout medieval and in the modern-day scenario too, we haven't moved too far away from this. For instance, one *Sitthani* reads:

Our girl is a thread of golden lace
While the boy looks like a lowcaste
The couple stands unmatched
people, stripped of dignity. (Rana 343)

The sentiments expressed in this *Sitthani* touch on the rationalization of anger over the incompatible match. Fitting in the frame of *Sitthanis* the idea of the gendered self serves as the strategy to explore how various orientations of self-such as 'chumaar', 'kumiaar' and 'kaala' connect to the hierarchy of power and caste in the Punjab. Here, the caste contrasted with beauty problematizes the fixed comparison between the low and the high, the black and the beautiful and thus signifies racial hierarchies. The refrains: "The couple stands unmatched" and "O people stripped of dignity!" highlight glaring inequalities which expose social inequities through the contrasting relation between the black and the beautiful (343).

O groom, what is name of your father?
And what be your caste?
He doesn't know who his father is
And belongs to sister-sellers' caste. (344)

The agentive character of identity that they build through the performative acts of *Sitthanis* does not necessarily come from speaking against the established pattern of speech but rather from "changing existing narratives or "writing back"

to scripted cultural stories—that can suggest “a strategy for gaining agency” as Anshu Malhotra quotes Smith and Watson (13). Engaged with the contestation between shame and respect, this *Sitthani* implies the social context of casteist identity, marginalized by the moral consideration about the distinction between the dignified and the disgraced. Though *Sitthanis* tend to pass on a sense of moral hurt by means of humour. The way they critically respond to the discriminatory viewpoints, linked with caste and gender add to its enabling, an awareness of speaking out through creative resources against social inequities.

In the formation and practicing of *Sitthanis*, people who participate are not just the performers, but also the audience. Interestingly, the way Punjabi women “manipulate various cultural resources at their disposal to their benefit” in the reorientation of self, enhances the role of public sphere in the “culture [...] undoubtedly overdetermined by the patriarchal society women lived in” (Malhotra 176). Such context draws on the atmosphere where the performers of *Sitthanis* express their views on social positions of gender and use expression, usually unrefined one, in a manner that defies the very order of ethical discourse that aligns with the value system of the patriarchal society of the Punjab.

In Punjab, where arranged marriage is still a norm, and those who defy this norm, often do so at great risk, the woman and her emotions are hardly a point for discussion when the marriage contract between two families is being finalized. The focus is entirely upon the outward semblance of happiness, good clothes to wear, good food to eat, economically secure life and a few children; what else does she need to be happy? The advent of *Sitthani* is probably this outpouring of the anger and frustration at being denied the right to express herself.

Your mother has two lovers O groom
One acrobat and the other minstrel
O wait she has a third one too
Who is the village shopkeeper
You know the one who has his shop
Right outside the village. (345)

Understanding the performative character of *Sitthanis* requires a focus on the immediacy with which a creative poetic response of the speaker, who extends anger, mockery and caricaturist view of the family and the friends of the groom, contributes to forming a direct engagement with the listeners. But in following

Sitthani, the woman is not subtle in her expression, she is direct, vulgar and abusive. All the parameters of social norms are challenged in a *Sitthani*. Everything that is taboo in the society is openly sung, and attributed to the groom and his family.

Tell me truly mister, I am asking you a question
 They say your mom's a slut, is that true?
 She comes from a family of beggars
 And she pimps her own daughters, is that true?
 Tell me truly mister, I am asking you a question. (346)

Since an overwhelming majority of marriages in Punjab are arranged marriages, the importance of a matchmaker in this system cannot be undermined. And since the matchmaker is the first person to initiate the marriage, he is also a target of many *Sitthanis*.

You match maker, you are such a liar
 I will call the village panchayat
 And I will shave your head in
 Front of the whole village-you scum.

Why don't you fix a match with the sweepers
 Your mother was having a lot of fun in their quarters
 The slut was trying to impress the sweepers
 By trying to converse with them in English. (346)

The use of indecent language in *Sitthanis* tends to form a robust critique on the moralizing view of identity forming thereby a strategy of resisting not just the social discipline with which language is controlled but also religious morality through which the good/bad dichotomy is ethically oriented. The performative function of *Sitthanis* derives from the attempt to say what usually remains on the border of the unsayable. This *Sitthani* activates a direct mediation with the notion of shame, acknowledging the fault lines of ethical discourse through which the use of language is regulated. Indecent expression lined with a harsh critique on the ideological notion of superior status. The following *Sitthani* is typical in its depiction of contempt with which it dismisses the ideal of cultivated use of language. Bound up with a performative function, *Sitthani* acts as a radical yet

culturally acceptable form of dissent against the institutional control on Punjabi language.

All day I waited for you O brother-in-law
And you came back at night
Where did you sell your sisters,
O you son of a pimp of a mother?
And how much money did you get for them? (347)

Sitthanis contain unsubtle expression which unsettles the regulatory force of normative ethical speech usually formed in line with the social discourse of the Punjab. Defiance of disciplinary potential of ethics involved with the use of Punjabi language is what registers the impact of *Sitthanis* as a social critique, the one that emerges from an explicit rejection of normative ethical discourse. To this end, the practice of *Sitthanis* focuses more on disrupting the way language serves to legitimize the discourse of the ethical and the unethical under the dominant ideology of power rather than on creating ill-feelings among the individuals present on the occasion of marriage. They undertake the mode of criticism that does not draw on the ideal mode of socially acceptable expression.

Through their association with debasement and crass sentiment, *Sitthanis* challenge institutional control on the way an ethically oriented subjectivity is formed and offer a stringent critique of moralizing yet ideological discourse of respectability. It is through the performance of *Sitthanis*, the Punjabi women call into question the ideal of civility and with reference to the uncivilized accounts for the reconsideration of reductive binaries of good/evil, superior/inferior.

Look at the groom's father,
He's obese like a buffalo
His underwear is in tatters
I would strike his behind with a stick
He's a shameless fellow
His wife eloped with the minstrel
But he doesn't care. (347)

The issue of woman's elopement features repeatedly in the *Sitthanis*. Every woman in the groom's family is projected as a slut who will not think twice before inviting anyone to her bed or even going to the extent of eloping with someone. Interestingly though, the man or men with whom the groom's mother

or sister has relations always belongs to a caste that is lower than her in the caste hierarchy. But in the whole process of developing these illicit relations, it's the woman who has complete agency and the man is always passive. So it's never that the minstrel, bard or barber took the initiative to sleep with the groom's mother. It's the woman who invites him to her bed without any sense of shame, guilt or conscience.

O groom your mother first slept with the bard
 Everyone in the village laughed at her
 Then she slept with the barber
 And she was the talk of the town
 And then she invited the shoemaker to her bed
 Does she ever think twice before doing all this?

Your mom first slept with the naee
 Then she slept with the priest
 Then she married your papa
 The first son is from the naee
 The second is from the priest
 But she tells your papa they are all his
 Your papa went to court
 The court have the first one to the naee
 The second one to the priest
 And the rest they said to your papa
 You keep the leftovers

You are enjoying the feast at your in laws'
 And your mom has eloped with the village fool
 If you want to look for her
 Go to the station, not in the house. (347)

While in the case of *Birha* and *Suhag*, the woman expresses her feelings in a subtle, poetic and romantic way, in the *Sitthanis* she shouts from the rooftop affirming her agency and caring little about the social norms and conventions. The use of vituperative language in *Sitthanis* also calls into question the accepted

ways by which a line is drawn between the respectable and the ideal behaviour and unideal one. *Sitthani* is hurled like a swear word. Punjabi swear words like all swear words around the world, deal with female gender where she is passive. *Sitthani* respects that equation.

This essay undergirds the possible reasons behind the genealogy as well as the historical continuity of the folkloric practice of *Sitthanis*. This study talks about the public sphere as a site which generates public venues with everyday interactions, circling around culture, gender and growing from the dialogic understanding built through music, poetry and listening sense. The sense of social morality challenged through the use of creative expression seems to derive from the pent-up emotions of anger. The directness with which the speaker mocks all the relatives of the groom is characterized by the agency of Punjabi women, who explicitly dismiss the notion about the purity of race, caste and identity. Fitting *Sitthanis* in performative mode serves to amplify voice as the registering of resistance, aligned with an immediate audience and their affective response. Deriving the sense of identity through the act of accounting for the peripheral positions of Punjabi women not just underscores the relational aspect of identity formation but also critiques the socially oriented conception of what is considered as a consent and performative mode of resistance accepted as a cultural tradition.

Notes

1. Musicking emphasizes the processual, active, performing aspect of music that engages with experiences of an individual as social actions. See Judith Becker, *Music, Emotion and Trancing* (USA: Indiana Press, 2004).
2. Importance of courtyard: It is that buffer zone where the women of the bride's family see the male members (sometimes females as well) for the first time. *Sitthani* is also given during a buffer zone when the marriage party has arrived but the marriage is yet to be solemnized and the girl is still the property of the parents. But soon she will be taken away by the invaders and this is the time to fight it out.
3. Baraat and the notion of invasion/abduction. Example: Bhishma, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika
4. Duryodhana, Bhanumati

5. Krishna, Rukmini
6. Arjuna, Subhadra
7. Abhimanyu, Vatsala

Almost always the abductor succeeds in getting the woman. However, the modern concept of Baraat is nowhere found in the epics. But if we look at the procession of a baraat it seems to be the continuation of a violent tradition of acquiring the woman by force. The groom comes on a horse, he is carrying a sword, he also has a second. The Band Baja seems to proclaim the absolute victory of the grooms' family over the bride's family. The family members of the bride stand welcome them with gifts. Every aspect of the marriage ceremony so far seems to be a one-sided battle where the groom is nothing less than a victorious invader who is now going to claim his prize and nothing can stop him from doing this. But this is not *swayamvara*.

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