

Research Article

Jaago of Punjab: Tradition and Transition

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A B S T R A C T

The paper aims to look at the oral tradition of Jaago of Punjab in its socio-cultural context and how the ceremony coming down since ages, represents the Punjabi communal identity. It is performed by the womenfolk before a wedding takes place. The culture of Punjab is enriched by a number of such traditions and rituals which depict the traditional pattern of life including the changes that have taken place because of constant modernization and urbanization. An attempt is made in this paper to show how the ritual loses its motifs when performed in a different space. The ceremony is still a part of Punjabi Wedding Rituals but has been transformed with the change in time, context and space.

Keywords: Culture, Punjabi, Oral Tradition, Transition, Folklore, Folk Songs, Community, Communal Identity

Culture carries a very important place in the life of human beings. It lies on the performing traditions which have been carried throughout the society since the existence of the world. Punjab, being an agricultural and mostly rural society, relies on its rituals and traditions for its day to day life. The concept of tradition has always implied an idea of change and continuity. The proverb 'the more things change, the more things remain the same' applies equally to both traditions and customs. This paper aims to explore the socio-cultural aspects of the ritual of Jaago and also how it has been transmuted due to various reasons.

Jaago is the cultural celebration of Punjab which is performed by women on the night before the wedding. The term Jaago is a Hindi word which means 'wake up!' Like its connotation, this ritual tends to wake or arouse members of the family where the marriage is taking place. Jaago means staying awake for the love of the relatives. It is performed for the conjugal bliss. The idea is to celebrate through partying and merry making. In Jaago ritual, the family of the groom and the bride stay awake in their respective places. Earlier, it was performed by the relatives

of the bride but now it is performed by those of the grooms as well as a part of the bride's family. Jaago is performed by ladies using a well decorated earthen pot covered with Diyas (lamps) made of Atta (flour). Diyas are placed on top of the pot. This well-illuminated pot is then carried on head by the ladies as they march through the streets.¹

All human movement is expressive of specific meanings.² These movements make performance expressive by unleashing the inner beauties and hidden rhythms of life. The movement of the women during the procession also unleashes their inner beauty. Women also hold decorated sticks in their hands which are banged on the floor to create a rhythmic sound while singing folk songs which are mischievous and targeted at the in-laws or the elderly people of the family. They also bang the chhaj (Winnowing basket) and beat it with sticks to create a musical sound. Things which are used by women during the procession to create different musical sounds have their own significance. In rural Punjab, the winnowing basket is used mainly by the women folk. The task of separating husk from wheat is done by women only because it needs a light hand to

¹Gill, Amarjeet Singh. An Anthropological Study of Marriage Ceremonies and Punjabi Songs. Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Prakashan. 2012. P. 116. Peirce, Alexandra.

²Pierce, Roger. Expressive Movement, Posture, actions in daily life, sports and performing arts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. Pg. 12.

toss the basket. Men are not considered fit for that kind of a job it is considered to be one of the 'side jobs' generally allotted to women. The beating of the winnowing basket with the stick also signifies a resistance in playing the roles assigned to them.

At midnight women march through the streets of the village, in the form of a procession and visit every house of the village and gather more ladies with them. While marching, women sing various *boliyas*.³ Women sing *boliya* and perform the *Giddah*⁴ expressing their happiness. The ambience is rejuvenated by their songs and dance. *Jaago*⁵ is placed on the head of the *parjaai* (brother's wife) of the bride or the groom led by other ladies of the family. The ladies move singing, dancing, frolicking, knocking at the doors and waking people up. They go to every house in the village and get offerings from them. They get grain and oil from the houses and then continue marching ahead.

When asked from some elderly ladies of rural Punjab, many logical and meaningful motives came out for this ritual.⁶ In the earlier times when the means of communication were limited, *Jaago* was used as a way of letting people know about the wedding and to invite them. In the rural setup, the village works as a single unit and thus *Jaago* was a medium to invite everyone to be a part of the wedding which is taking place in the village. Being a folk tradition, it can never be performed without the involvement of people. So, it was a medium to collect people and then celebrate the occasion. The night before wedding, the women of the household would go to every house of the village and invite the people for the wedding. Another reason behind this ritual is the economic aspect related to it. In Punjab, the dowry system was very prevalent. The groom's family and other relatives used to come to the bride's place one day before wedding and stay there till wedding. The bride's family had to arrange for the food and other needs of the groom's family. Also, the father of the bride had to gift money as well as other household items to them. Being a single unit, all the villagers used to help each other financially at the time of a daughter's wedding and *Jaago* used to be a medium of going to houses and getting financial help from themselves. During *Jaago*, people gift oil, sugar, wheat etc. to the family of the bride as a token of love which helps the family financially.

A belief is also associated with this ritual of *Jaago*. It is

said that *Jaago* was conducted to safeguard the bride and groom from evil spirits. It is believed that when the relatives dance and sing loudly holding lamps, the evil spirits are threatened and run away.⁷ The four diya (lamps) on the pot represent the four directions and thus the light of the lamps prevents the oncoming of evil spirits from all the four directions. The pot represents *Kaaya* (physical form) and light signifies *Agni Devta*⁸ which does not let the evil spirits come near the place of the wedding. Also, the light of the lamps absorbs all the darkness as well the evil. It brings positivity as well as good luck to the life of the bride and the groom. In a rural setup, such folk beliefs are of utmost important and are revered as well as followed by every member of the community.

Jaago is socially relevant too. The procession of *Jaago* was a medium to gather people. The bride's as well as the groom's family used to gather at the same place, one day before the wedding. In some cases, the groom and his family used to come from another village, so they were made to stay at the bride's house. It was the time when not only economical, but the social value of the family was also counted as an asset. Therefore, *Jaago* was a medium used by the bride's family to gather more people with them to show the boy's family that they were socially very active. When the procession starts, only the ladies of the family or close relatives perform it but as they go to every house of the village, the ladies of the other houses also join them in. A small procession started by a few women ends up becoming a long march of numerous women collecting wheat, rice and other financial donations offered to them as greetings.

Folk Songs of Jaago

Folk songs are a reflection of human society and culture. Through the folk songs, one can come to know about the rituals, traditions, culture, life style and the interests of a place as they draw a fine picture of a particular culture. There is no religious, social, personal, political, economic aspect which is not shown through these folk songs. Whatever is there in the life of the common people can be heard through these songs.⁹ They help human beings to understand emotions, desires, aspirations and the rituals of other human beings. They are not an impression of a sophisticated mind but reflect the joys, sorrows, problems and worries of the common people. Folksongs are intensely

³A type of Punjabi Folk song.

⁴Folk dance of Punjab performed by women.

⁵The pot is also called *Jaago* which is carried during the ritual.

⁶The source material for the paper has been collected through filed study and interviews conducted by the author in the referred area along with the interviews of women belonging to a few other regions of Punjab.

⁷Gill, Amarjeet Singh. An Anthropological Study of Marriage Ceremonies and Punjabi Songs. Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Prakashan. 2012. P. 117.

⁸God of Fire according to Hindu Mythology.

⁹A. C. Kapur, Folk Songs of Punjab: An Analytical Study (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1985), p. 195, and Chand Joshi, An Insight into Punjabi Folk Songs (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1984), p. 44

human and their chief characteristic function lies in the art of adroitly blending their choice of words with the harmonious tunes in which they are sung. Human sentiments are well-drawn through these songs which come from day-to-day experiences of the local people. Some emotions like happiness, anger, desires become a part of human psyche and are released through the help of folk songs. Folk songs provide a mirror to everyday life and are coming straight from the hearts of the people. These are the free and independent ideas of the people. Folk songs help one to understand emotions, desires, dreams, aspirations, lifestyle, rituals, beliefs and customs of others.

The Jaago ceremony is incomplete without folk songs. Folk songs are the main part of this celebration. Though there are no particular songs for Jaago, but the boliya songs contain social themes and a bit of teasing and mischief. The boliya are aimed at the in-laws or the elderly people of the family. The songs sung during Jaago provide a way out to the frustration of the women folk. In a Punjabi context, a girl's life is full of responsibilities and burdens. Folk songs sung during Jaago provide women folk with a chance to share their emotions and aspirations which otherwise, they cannot. To come out of the intense emotional burden, they take recourse to these songs. That is precisely why most of the *boliya*¹⁰ are women oriented.

Lambra Joru Jaga lai ve...Jaago ai aa

Lambardaar (the head of the village), Wake your wife up... Jaago is here.

This song is sung when the procession starts. This song serves as an invitation to the women of the village to come and join the procession and dance. Women ask men to wake up their wives so that they can join them leaving all their household chores and responsibilities behind.

Gwaandio... jaagde ki sutte

Aap te taaya ji sutte reh gae...sutte reh gae....taayi nu lai gae kutte...

Neighbors... Are you awake or asleat?

The elder uncle kept sleeping while his wife was taken away by dogs.

This is one such example of those mischievous songs which are sung, aimed at teasing others. This song literally means that the taayaji (elder uncle) kept sleeping while his wife was taken away by dogs. This is also a kind of making them aware of the need to be awakened into the dangers of laziness and evil. During Jaago, womenfolk come out of the set rules and regulations and enjoy every bit of it. When any lady does not come out or join them, they shout that

she may have been taken away by dogs while her husband kept sleeping.

Being oral in form, the folk songs, when transmitted from one generation to another, undergo many changes within the given time, context and space.¹¹ The songs change in theme as well as pattern. Jaago songs do not only aim at the rigid rules and regulations but also carry a social message. With the passage of time, the songs also convey a social message. For example, the following song teaches the young men that dowry is of no use.

Je mundeyo tusii viaah je karauna, Daaj dahej da ki laina mundeyo ve...

padi naar umar da gehna mundeyo...

You boys, if you want to get married...dowry is of no use...

Whereas, a literate wife is like a jewel throughout her life.

Being a patriarchal society, girls were not allowed to study after a certain age. For marriage, a girl was evaluated on the basis of dowry given by her father. If the father is not able to give dowry then the girl had to suffer hardships and she was not considered marriage-worthy. The song has a very strong social message for both the young men as well as the fathers of the girls. Through the song, a request is made to the young boys and their families not to demand dowry because even if they get dowry it will not last forever. The fathers of the girls are also requested to educate their daughters so that they can be independent and as invaluable as a 'jewel' throughout their lives.

Jaago in Changing Cultural Context

- Change of Performance Space-Jaago used to be performed in midnight and women of the family used to march through the streets of the village singing and dancing. But, when this Jaago is performed in cities, it carries an altogether different approach. In cities, neighbours cannot tolerate the disturbance caused by this ritual during midnight. So, this ritual is conducted indoors only or at the venue of the function. Also, rather than marching through streets in the midnight, the family members walk in the premises of their house and, that too immediately after dinner and not in the midnight.
- Change in Character-Jaago was carried over head by the sister in law of the bride and the groom. In the Punjabi family, sister-in-law holds a very important place. She is considered the main lady in the household and thus she has her own rights and responsibilities. Also, sister-in-law plays important role in all the marriage ceremonies as she is considered next to the mother

¹⁰The songs have been collected by the author through field work only.

¹¹Clarke Keneethe and Mary Clarke (ed.) Folklore Reader. New York: A.S. Barners and Co. 1965. P. 101.

of the bride. But in the changing scenario the Jaago is carried by all the ladies as well as the young girls of the family.

- Change in Performance Equipment- With modernization, the ritual of Jaago also got modernized. Much of the equipment used commonly in the past has been replaced by a set of new and modern equipment. The pot was made up of mud which was then lighted by the lamps made up of wheat using oil. All these things symbolize the day to day life of the women as these things are an integral part of the daily routine. But now, instead of an earthen pot steel pots are used for the rituals which are already decorated by the electricity bulbs instead of the oil lamps.
- Change in Pattern of Performance- Modification and revivalism has lead to many changes in the ritual. Earlier, women used to perform folk dance and sing various folk songs and thus share their emotions. But now, in urban areas people are forgetting their folk songs and are more prone to the latest music. Nowadays, people call special performers to perform the folk dance as they themselves don't know it. The changes can also be noticed in the way women dress up. Earlier, women used to wear traditional Punjabi dresses and even the hairdo used to be traditional i.e. wearing *Parandi*.¹² But now women wear latest the fashion donning different hairstyles.
- Change in Motifs and Beliefs Jaago symbolizes love and brotherhood among neighbours as it was a way of helping the father of the bride. But in today's fast moving and busy world, relations are losing their value. Because of urbanization, people are also financially fit and thus the bride's family no more needs a ritual like Jaago to generate financial help. Also, Jaago's light was used to get rid of the darkness as there used to be no electricity in the villages. But, in today's urbanized society, lamps are used for decoration purpose only. Jaago was also an occasion for the women folk to step out of their houses and convey their emotions and feelings through songs, because during those days women were not allowed to speak in public. It is only through these marriage ceremonies that the family would imitate or act it out for merry making. Like earlier times, neither people stay awake nor can they wake others up as in the past. In cities like Delhi, people of the family cannot even think of going through the streets in the midnight waking people up. It is only in the village or rural areas that people have love and brotherhood and they gather in happiness as well as sorrow of the other. But in cities when this ceremony is performed, one cannot even think of doing the same as in a village.

Jaago has been handed down orally since ages. Being a reflection of its people and their culture, the ritual Jaago is not rigid and thus adapts itself with the changing times. As every other ritual or ceremony, this ritual also has many meanings and reasons attached to it which are somehow losing their importance because of the fast changing times and situations. Due to urbanization, only a few rural places are left in Punjab now which still celebrate *Jaago* as it was earlier. With technology and latest advances in communication, the customs and rituals have been limited to the mere function of merry making.

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¹²Parandi is a special kind of decorated colourful thread which is braided along with hair.