

**Indian Poetry- 5**  
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**Length: 28:13**

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**"I HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO A SON"**  
**-Anonymous Bhil Mother**



- Dear sweet sparrow, deliver this message for me:
- Tell my father that I have given birth to a son
- Tell me mother that I have given birth to a son
- Ask my father to give me a new sari
- Ask my mother for a multi-coloured blouse
- Tell my brother that I have a son
- Ask him to give me a sari too
- Tell my uncle that I have given birth to a son
- Ask him to bring me a multi-colour blouse



Okay, so this is the other tribal poem titled "I have given birth to a son" and this is an anonymous Bhil mother's words. Let us briefly take a look at this one. "Dear sweet Sparrow (deliver this message for me. Tell ) my father that I have given birth to a son, tell my mother that I have given birth to a son. Ask my father to give me a new saree, ask my mother for a multicoloured blouse. Tell my brother that I have a son; ask him to give me a saree too. Tell my uncle that I have given birth to a son, ask him to bring me a multicolour blouse."

So that's the poem, not very complicated, not full of dense imagery. It is almost in the form of prose. What do you make of this one? Saree, we know what it is, a garment worn by Indian women. So that is the glossary there. And it is translated by Abraham Thuruthumalil, so that is the translator. What are your thoughts on this one?

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## I have given birth to a son



Speculate on the reasons for using a sparrow as a messenger.

What impact does the phrase "Dear sweet sparrow" have on the reader?



Suma, next one, next please. So these are some of the points of entry that I have for you to make sense of this apparently easily comprehensible poem. So the first point of entry is - Speculate on the reasons for using a sparrow as a messenger. Why a sparrow as a messenger? "Dear sweet sparrow, dear sweet sparrow." The adjective sweet is not used anywhere else in the poem. It is not used anywhere else in the poem. Any thoughts on this, anybody?

(Student reply)

Yeah, that is good. Perhaps there is nobody else. Yeah, provide her with what she wants. I like the idea of being "abandoned," quote, unquote. Perhaps, there is no literal abandonment? Perhaps there is a metaphoric sense of being uncared for in the way she should be cared for. So, there is a metaphoric desolation. That is a possible interpretation. She does not say "Dear sweet husband." So the idea of using a creature from the wild to pass on the messages is interesting and needs to be probed; needs to be thought about. Traditionally we use doves to send out messages, and here we have an unconventional bird from the wild to pass on messages, "Dear sweet Sparrow deliver this message for me," and I was reminded of Nagamandala.


Inevitably it comes to mind because Rani, when she is left alone in the house, locked up in the house, she fantasizes about eagles carrying her away from the house of her husband, back to her parents. So the only rescue for Rani are these fantastical creatures. So these creatures therefore,

become a signifier of hope as well as the impossibility of escape. There is a double bind, you are allowed to fantasize about what you really want, but what you really desire is not going to come through.


So what impact does the phrase “Dear sweet sparrow” have on the reader? There are two words that are significant to my reading. One is the sweetness of the sparrow and the compound adjective multicolour, the multicolour blouse, the multicolour saree. So these two words are profound signifiers which encode a lot of significance in terms of domesticity, the feminine identity, her place in society, I think, why I will come back to the question that what multicolour is shortly, but think about the impact of certain words on your mind when you read. Next one, please.

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I have given birth to a son



- Why does she evoke each and every relative?
- Discuss the reasons as to why she is seeking a sari from almost every relatives?



Why does she evoke each and every relative? What is the significance of passing word to everybody? Father, mother, brother, uncle. So think about that and one very quick and easy answer is that we get a picture of a kinship. We are kind of given a glimpse of a community of which she is a part to. So if she has a child, it is important for the entire community to know about it. So that is how families are passed down from generation to generation. So everybody is evoked. Go back to the poem please.

So ‘tell my father, tell my mother, ask my father, ask my brother, tell my brother ask him.’ These syntactic structures are important and interesting. Think about that- the repetitive syntactic

structures with no variations. So that has a certain impact on the reader too, it's more prose as I said then verse, in it is the structural aspect. So, why this choice of repetitive syntactic structures and what kind of impact it has on the reader is a question that you can fruitfully probe.

Discuss the reasons as to why she is seeking a saree from almost every relative, it should be relative. The same demand, the same request. There is no variation on that too. So there is a repetitive syntactic structure as well as a repetitive content. The content is also repeated. I have a son give me a saree, I have a son give me a saree, I have a son give me a saree. So it is a very very, in some sense a kind of a disturbing emotional picture that we get of a woman who has recently given birth. So we need to figure out or attempt to figure out what exactly is disturbing in this particular glimpse of this woman. Can we move to the next one?

Okay, so I will go back to that question of why a saree and a blouse, nothing else. Cultural significance, how, the demand has cultural significance. How? Why not?

Student: It may be one of relatives giving gifts as a tradition.

Professor: Okay, so yes. So he has expanded on it. We have certain traditions where a woman is given saree by very close relatives, just before the ceremony, so it could be part of that culture. It could be part of that culture. But is that...?

Student: It is a kind of wish. In most of her lifetime, what she can aspire for and what she can ask for might be something just like this.


Professor: Yes, very good. Let me just take your point a bit slowly, idea by idea. So firstly, we can kind of assume that it could have cultural significance as Mridula and Sourav pointed out and that it is a ritual that she is given a saree by her close kins, kith and kin. Secondly, I am just using the same words that he has just used. She could be secluded. There is nothing else she can aspire for. There is nothing else she is, she can aspire for. Her life is so limited and confined that she cannot think beyond the simple demands. Perhaps, the simple, basic demands of a saree and the blouse is all that she can think about in terms of a gift from her kith and kin. So we get more details about the life if we probe this further- secluded life, limited aspirations, simple life, perhaps the saree and the blouse in itself is a massive gift for her because she does not have that many.

The multicolour here assumes significance too, the multicolour, perhaps the only colour, the only colour spiritually and symbolically speaking comes through these garments, these outfits. So perhaps, if you go back to the Stench of Kerosene, think about the chores that Guleri is supposed to do on a regular basis. When she gets her annual holiday, they just go to town, getting bangles and multicolour outfits, dyeing the dupatta and wearing them and celebrating the joys of life through the clothes that they put on.


So multicolour suggests joy, celebration perhaps, to someone who leads, who leads a very bare existence and perhaps, quote unquote, “a harsh existence”. We can only reasonably speculate on the quality of life of this mother. And I go back to the word sweet again, “Dear sweet sparrow.” You can go back and think time and again as to why that adjective is used only in conjunction with a sparrow and with nobody else, not even with the newborn. Not even with the newborn. So son, here, is an interesting figure. It is a very interesting figure.

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## I have given birth to a son



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From this poem, can we get any insight into the state of mind of the mother who has given birth to a son?

Okay, can we move on to the next one? So we have talked about this a little bit. So think about the state of mind of the mother who has given birth to a son. What can we assume about her psyche, about her emotional makeup through these demands and sentence structures, again, the repetitive syntactic structures could suggest an illiterate woman, perhaps, who is not able to come up with complex language to communicate the complexity of her life. She can only go this far to express, to capture, to give us a sketch of her life. Further than that, she is not able to express through

language. I am not saying that she is not able to sense the complexity; I am just saying that perhaps she is not able to communicate it. It is a reasonable assumption to make.

No details about the environment, except reference to the sparrow. No details to the nature of her domesticity, no details about the nature of her relationship with the husband who is absent from the poem or the male partner who is absent from the poem. No such picture which will tell us the routine, the day to day experiences of the woman, so only this most important point in her life, the act of giving birth, is captured and communicated. The rest seems to be immaterial here.

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## I have given birth to a son



- What is the tone of the speaker?
- Can you elicit the speaker's attitude towards having a son?
- What effect do the phrases "multi-coloured sari blouse" and "multi-coloured blouse" have on the reader?



The tone of the speaker, can we gather some information about the tone of the speaker? It is matter of fact, in some sense. It is matter of fact, I mean, if you read this poem, if you perform this poem, you can bring in some emotion, which would give a slant to how this message is to be communicated or is communicated. You can read this in various ways, embedding your emotion onto the poem, beaded happily, ecstatically, sadly. You can vary the emotion but from you when you read it what do you feel? What could be the tone? Can you elicit any kind of attitude on the part of the mother towards having a son? What does she feel? How does she feel? Yeah, go on.

Student: I think it's a sense of relief on her part, that it's a son and not a daughter. it is a son, and she thinks that she can bargain with the...

Professor: Yes. Not just bargain, demand.

Student: Yes, demand for these things from the family members.

Professor: Yeah. Yes, absolutely. I do not think the poem in itself could have happened, could have been constructed. It is a good point. It is such an obvious point, for me, it did not strike to touch upon it that if it had been a girl, she cannot make all these demands on the part of her relatives. So there is triumph, there is a triumph, but is there a triumph in the real sense for the mother? There is triumph which makes sense confident enough to make certain demands.

But is that triumph really making the woman happy and fulfilled? We do not know. We do not know. We can just assume. So again we talked about this, the effect of the phrases multicoloured saree and multicoloured blouse on the reader. The colour, the colours associated with all these clothing, in this particular poem, so think about the effect of these.

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## I have given birth to a son



- Can you talk about the absent signifiers, or markers, in this poem?
- What are the regional significations in this poem?
- In other words, can you point to any aspect and argue that it is indicative of this particular community, the Bhils.



Next one. What are the absent signifiers or markers in this poem? We talked about the absences, the absences of the husband, the absence of details about the way of life for this woman, so all these absences, signifiers, markers are important. Can we find out more? If you want to find out more, go read other poems from this tribe, go find out anthropological details, go find out the way of life of these groups in India to this day.

Yeah. What are regional significations in this poem? Can we pick any regional significance? So, we kind of assume that the saree-giving is a kind of a ritual act, we assume that, but is that concrete,

we need to find out. We have to find out by picking up other cultural documents, oral and written to find out more about the way of life of this particular tribe. Or is it just a demand because she does not have any good saree and blouse? So, that has to be ascertained by doing more research into this tribe's way of life. So any other regional significances? Sparrow is a bird which you can find across South India. I do not know about the North, but on a rough surmise, I am just saying it is a common bird, not peculiar to any particular, spot or place in India.

In other words, can you point to any aspect and argue that it is indicative of this particular community, the Bhils? How very unique, how very unique is this set of ideas from a mother to this particular tribe? Can you just tie it to this particular tribe and say, this is unique to this tribe?

Student: I'd like to bring up the idea of talking to nature, or interacting with nature, and the relationship that tribes have with nature, usually.

Professor: So, what Suma is suggesting is that this idea of communicating with elements of nature, creatures from the wild is an attribute of rural communities, tribal communities. Yeah, we can pick out comparable references in the western canon too, if you just give it a go you will find it. But there is a romantic sense associated in such references from the western canon, more optimism and more positivism, positivity associated with such communications. But I do not know how far that is the case with all this particular poem as well, like the emotional makeup might be a little worrying.

Student: There are some ritual songs that are sung for certain occasions, parents also sing certain songs at the time of birth perhaps. Maybe this poem is one such song, these poems or songs are there in many communities.

Professor: So my suggestion is that, since you are suggesting that this kind of poem could be a ritual communication after giving birth, I mean, can you pick one or two tribal songs and bring it to us? We will have a read. Yes. Bengali that is fine. Bangla is fine. Yeah, we can do that. And others too, if you can come across any poem from your regional language, which celebrates the act of giving birth by offering gifts, please bring it. We can have a read of those too.

The next one, please. Okay, we will go back to the earlier one. I will read a couple of poems for you. And then we will go back to the Dilip Chitre.



This is The Door. The title of the poem is The Door, written by Anamika, A-n-a-m-i-k-a. The title of the poem is The Door. “I was a door. I was a door. The harder they beat me, the wider I opened. They walked in and saw a great cosmic whirling. When the grinding stops, the spinning begins. When the spinning stops, the sewing begins, something or other, all day nonstop. And in the end, my broom sweeps it all up, sweeps up the stars in the sky, mountains, trees, stones, all the shards and splinters of creation and collects them in a basket, stores them somewhere deep inside in some corner of the mind.”

I will read this poem again. “I was a door. The harder they beat me the wider I opened. They walked in and saw a great cosmic whirling. When the grinding stops, the spinning begins. When the spinning stops, the sewing begins. Something or other all day nonstop. And then the end my broom sweeps it all up, sweeps up the stars in the sky, mountains, trees, stones, all the shards and splinters of creation and collects them in a basket, stores them somewhere deep inside in some corner of the mind.”

Did you get the content of the poem, did you understand? So it is very poetic, the idea of a woman sweeping up the stars, the mountains, the sky. And everything is broken and she collects it in a basket and stores it in the deepest corners of her mind. So the details are something that we can compare with a lot of the verse that we read for this course.

And Guleri, Rani from Nagamandala and several other women across Indian literature can be seen through this figure here in this poem. So I will ask Suma to pass this poem to the class. I will just read one more. This is Salma Paths P-a-t-h-s. Paths - “Upon the almirah against the room’s walls, between the swirling fan’s blades, a bat clashes, falls, scatters. But birds thousands of miles away, fly across the blue of the sky and the massing of mountains and have never so far lost their way.” Very brief these two stanzas. I will repeat this, Paths by Salma. “Upon the almirah, against the room’s walls, between the swirling fan’s blades, a bat clashes, false scatters. But birds thousands of miles away, fly across the blue of the sky, and the massing of mountains and have never so far lost their way.”

And this is translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom, and the other one, Anamika’s poem is from Hindi. So you can see the word ‘almirah’ indicates that it is a very regional poem. We have

that word in the local language 'almirah', I do not know whether we have it in Telugu and- you have it in Telugu? Kannada too? (Yes). So it is a kind of a southern term, we can reasonably say.

And the idea of the bat caught between the blades, blade of the fan, it is a searing image, it is a painful image in some sense and she compares this bat, about to or caught between the blades, she compares this bat to other birds thousands of miles away, flying freely in the open skies. So you can see the comparison that she is making between the feminine identity in peninsular India perhaps, and with the women who are apparently free, flying about in a symbolic way across the seas, so that comparison is caught, captured beautifully here.

And the idea of bat is repetitive in Salma. Even in the other poem, there is a reference to bats, the comparison between bats and women, hanging upside down. So, think about that. Okay, I will stop here. And then any doubts, questions? The poems that we read can be part of the syllabus for the end semester.