

**Rupali Sehgal**

## **CULTURE AND FOOD SYMBOLISM IN FOLKSONGS OF PUNJAB**

### ***Abstract***

*The article examines the expression of socio-cultural realities of life for people in Punjab through the singing of folk songs in general and the symbolism of food epitomized by them in particular. It demonstrates how, especially the women, use references to food items in folksongs for not just entertainment purposes but to express her emotions and resist the dominant social structures. Through a focus on food, cooking, and associated activities in folksongs of Punjab, the approach taken in this article enables us to examine and record the social world of women and certain forms of everydayness in the lives of people of Punjab - of which food is an important component. Drawing on food symbols contained in the song texts of Punjabi folk culture, this work explores how the life experiences of people in Punjab (especially women) and their culture finds representation. The study attempts to demonstrate how food and folk songs are situated at the intersection of gender and expressive culture of Punjab.*

**Keywords:** Food, Cultural Symbolism, Folksongs, Punjab, Gender

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Food has been an important component in the folk literature of Punjab. A whole range of work that has embodied food, consciously or unconsciously, in different genres of folk literature in Punjab speaks much of society, culture, and philosophy of life in general. I will share two Punjabi stories here. A very famous short story by S.S Wanjara Bedi, ‘*Sundd te Haldi*’ (literal meaning ‘dried ginger powder and turmeric’) is a narrative on how negative emotions like jealousy, pride, and conceit depreciates the value of humans. The writer, quite discreetly, employs cultural symbolism and use food as symbols to convey a message that is culturally defined. The story through the usage of symbols of spices and also basic humours/tendencies of spices (like the hotness of ginger powder and antiseptic properties of turmeric) illustrates the general social impression and repercussions of exercising certain virtues and vices. Likewise, ‘*Khatti Lassi Peen Wale*’ (literal, the ones who drink sour *lassi*) by Ram Saroop

**RUPALI SEHGAL**, Ph.D. Scholar, Centre for Media Studies, JNU - New Delhi, E-mail: [segalrupali@gmail.com](mailto:segalrupali@gmail.com)

Ankhi eulogizes the power of hard work and honesty. The two brothers and their families worked tirelessly and believed in high morals, such as integrity and humility. They had a simple and modest living, which was also evident in their daily intake of food. The story concludes at the moment when the brothers are shown absolutely fearless and courageous while they openly challenge the trespassers. Representation of food items like 'sour *lassi*' and 'roasted grains' characterize goodness of simple living marked by noble qualities like simplicity, honesty, morality, and purity of intentions in this story. The narrative intends to express and symbolize that despite their modest diet, the brothers were strong, brave, and worthy of high principles. The stories are just two examples of popular representation of food and its symbolism in the folk culture of Punjab, which also happens to mediate different cultural shades of Punjabi society.

### **Folksongs and Anthropological Relevance**

Regarding the significance of folksongs, it has already been underpinned by a distinct position that folk music is a manifestation of social life and people's experiences (Damodaran 2017: 21). Folksongs are also important social texts, revealed by a historical and anthropological investigation that the analysis of folksongs simultaneously engages with the social processes that generates and create changes in musical practices. For instance, a lot of dance steps performed in folk dances of Punjab like *Bhangra* and *Jhummar* are improvisations from agricultural activities like cultivation and harvesting of crops. In this context, it has also been argued that communication through the folk media like folk songs, folk theatre, folk dance, etc. enables better transmission of messages as the sender as well as the receiver is rooted in the same culture and share a common pool of knowledge (Prasad 2013). Folk media is supposed to carry cultural messages whose source is the stock of knowledge that is shared by the people in their everyday practices. Therefore, while analyzing the form and content of folksongs, one may notice that the musical and sociological aspects are inseparable.

The significance of folksongs and folk music is conspicuous on occasions like weddings, childbirth, festivals and even everyday practices of people where humming and tapping on the tunes of folk songs has become almost indispensable. There are distinct folksongs that are associated with cultivation and harvesting of crops and a different set of folk songs for festivals such as *Lohri*, *Basant Panchami* and *Teej* and other songs for weddings. These songs are/were the prominent tools of communication revealed in varieties of daily social activities such as work and play.

Folksongs and folk music are often referred to have originated in indigenous agrarian, forest, mountain or desert dwellings or other communities is practised in groups. The term folksongs generally connote the spontaneous expression of the musical feeling of people or melodies sung by peasant class in any society (Raglan 1947: 254). They are understood and valued by the

group and are maintained by the group which gives them their approval. As argued previously the singing of folk songs, in practice, is often coterminous with ritual or other activities that are non-musical such as farming and cooking. These activities mark the everydayness and regular existence of communities. Folksongs are thus, necessary components for those occasions that denote or celebrate functions and activities in regular life. They are generally practised in groups rather through solo virtuosity that allows for a great deal of elaboration or improvisation. There is less distinction between the performers and audience, to the “extent that the actual performance can have a great deal of calls and response type structures or a grammar which requires repetition of the lead parts in a collective voice, indicating extensive participation by a large number of people of the community” (Damodaran 2017: 22). For these reasons, it is often argued that folk music and folk songs are regarded as close to spontaneous expression as possible.

The importance of the study of folk songs lies in the fact that these are important ethno poetic devices to record the subjective experiences of people and women in particular. Folk songs are an important part of people’s expressive culture, and sometimes it is only through oral lyrics that they express their personal and intimate feelings albeit indirectly. In this context, Mei-ling Chien (2015) cites Abu-Lughod who argues that the singing of songs sometimes gives a platform to people to express emotions that otherwise violate the moral code. They are able to express “sentiments that they themselves denied in their ordinary language interactions in less intimate social situations” (Ibid: 40). Sentiments of nostalgia, betrayal, loss, and fear are expressed through metaphorical language often using symbols such as that of food and nature. In the following sections, we will discuss instances where the emblematic usage of food in folksongs of Punjab is done to save oneself from social condemnation while making ‘inexpressible messages expressible’ on some occasions.

Further, analysis of folk songs that embody symbols of food also tells us about the social, cultural, historical and material importance of food in the culture of Punjab and by that premise ‘what’ and ‘how’ does it help to mediate social realities of people. Therefore this work focuses partly on women’s subjective experiences and secondly on mediated aspects of Punjabi culture in order to obtain a sense of the ways in which, the people of Punjab have understood the world around them at particular times. It is in this sense, that this study is an important anthropological examination of Punjabi society.

### **Nature of Punjabi Folksongs**

Punjabi folksongs widely categorized as *sithniya*, *tappe*, *suhaag*, *bolliyan*, *mahiya*, *jindua* and *ghoriya* are a part of the rich oral tradition of Punjab. *Bollie* or *Tappa* is the most ancient form of folk songs of Punjab, which originated in the eastern regions of Punjab. *Bollie* is characterized by its brief and pithy utterance. The literal meaning of *Bollie* is to lash out sarcastically.

*Tappa* is a dance form that involves jumping and frolicking. Now, the *Bollie* may not be exactly in a dance tune, but there is a lilt to its utterance that provokes, or even invites, a caper. *Ghoriyan* and *Suhaag* are sung on the occasion of a wedding. The songs on the groom's side are called *Ghoriyan* (literally meaning 'mares') and those on the bride's are called *Suhaag* (meaning crimson). These folksongs have traditionally existed as part of the oral culture in Punjab. The recent explosion of media technologies like audio cassettes, DVDs, television, mobile phones, the internet, etc. in rural and urban India is gradually changing how oral folk music is being performed, produced, distributed and shared. The advent of new media has an evident impact upon the social environment of Punjab where folk songs were primarily performed and listened to in live settings. However, the focus of this study is not about changes that the advent of new media has introduced in the oral cultures of Punjab but exclusively on the usage of symbols of food and possible meanings that it can render in the folksongs of Punjab.

Folksongs of Punjab are part of a genre of folk arts that are marked by impassioned music and emotional stirrings (Narula 2001). Prima facie Punjabi folk songs are "characterized by the balance of syllables and placement of stress and caesura. Internal rhymes and alliterations add to the music of words. But of far more value in them are immediacy and spontaneity of utterance, which, at times may verge upon flippancy" (Ibid: 203). The emotional vigor and suggestive quality of these songs are not lost even though they are in the form of octosyllabic couplets, or single-line sharp quips, the characteristic that gives it the appellation of *Bollie*. Punjabi folk songs can better be seen as spontaneous emotional responses to a situation, a mood, or an event or occurrence. "It is the forthright and effortless utterance of what can be called raw emotion" (Ibid). What gives Punjabi folk songs an instant appeal and essential intensity is their racy and foxtrot rhythm.

On reading between the lines, one may realize that these songs are mainly addressed by women who have used food to express their 'raw' emotions and sentiments. There is a plaintive yearning for a husband's love and father's home which is never to be seen again after her marriage. These songs and food symbols embedded in them express a celebration of familial relationships, such as between mother and daughter, father and son, such as between mother and daughter, father and son, husband and wife, or filial bonds or relationship between lovers, and jealousy generated by other women or men. It also speaks of various social situations like marriage, childbirth, social relationships, and also changes in seasons and activities associated with different times of the year. All of these point towards the political economy and socio-cultural intricacies of Punjabi culture. The paper wants to draw attention towards the mediation of cultural tropes and some of the material or physical aspects of the rich diversity of the life of people of Punjab as it finds expression in these folk songs. For example, words vouched with symbols of food like *bajra* (pearl millet) or *gheo* (clarified butter) acquire the power to convey much more than

their literal meaning in Punjabi culture. They speak of food as a complex cultural product, an indicator of political economy and broader social systems in Punjab. It tells us about people's relationship with food and how it is determined by history, class, caste, gender, kinship and ethnicity.

Most of the *bolliyan* or *tappe* (couplets) that are sung while dancing *Gidha* (traditional dance of Punjab mainly performed by women) captures "simple agrarian activities like milking cows, cooking mustard greens, doing needlework, fanning in the summer, buying glass bangles, churning milk in the morning, carrying water in earthenware pitchers steadily balanced on the head, helping with ploughing and harvesting" (Claus, Diamond & Mills 2003: 551). Folksongs afford women a means of self-expression through singing and dancing. These songs open the way to articulate her oppression, hopes, and dreams. The individual anguish is rendered a collective idiom. Women sing freely and vent their frustration which has been racked up with in-laws. Anguish over the patriarchal structure of Punjabi society combined with the rigidity of the joint family system is clearly reflected in these songs.

An important issue that needs to be flagged here is that folksongs form a part of the traditional oral culture of Punjab. The need to conserve it in print marks supremacy of literacy over orality. The emergence of technology that establishes eminence of printed text over the oral culture reveals notable details about structures of power that are responsible for institutionalizing typography as an inevitable medium. For instance, the way literacy and rationality are sometimes used interchangeably (McLuhan 1964) and when power and status are ascribed to forms of typography, it is very different from kinds of perception and organization of existence based on orality. Print and written words remain influential because it is believed to have homogenized human population. Therefore the message or effect or scale of change that technology of print has introduced into human affairs is that it has created uniformity and continuity as 'rational' concepts (Ibid: 15).

### **Food as Cultural Symbols in Folksongs of Punjab**

Despite the recognition of the social importance of folk songs and the knowledge that social structures and developments are reflected in varied ways in structures as well as the content of folksongs, it has not been given its fair hearing in the social sciences. If there has been a little systematic investigation of the relationship of music to culture or society as a whole, even less effort has been expended on a systematic investigation of the interrelations between folk music and dietary culture, or more specifically, folksongs and food. This section will illustrate how the nature of folksongs contribute to understanding the process of social, cultural and political processes of mediation through the metaphors, symbols, language, etc., related to food. For example, Ghuman (1986: 30) cites:

Swings are hung high  
 My sisters in law are crooked  
 My brothers in law are blind in their one eye  
 They have to visit the market  
 And eat coconut and dates  
 Coconut and dates turned sweet  
 When I saw the sweet face of my brother  
*Aal beeba aal, you complete my thaal* (round platter)

The song as such, perhaps, may read inconsequential. But the last three verses if separated and followed by that chorus are more pointed. The symbols of food in verses not only reflect but also mediate to add a certain value to the special status that brothers enjoy in the lives of women. She concludes by saying that her brother completes her food plate (*thaal*). A *thaal* (or *thaali*) holds a special significance in Indian tradition. It is made up of a selection of different dishes which offer distinctive flavors. Each dish complements other food items present in the platter and therefore completes the purpose of others. The woman draws an analogy from her *thaal* whose flavors, she says were incomplete without the sweetness of her brother. In many songs such as these, the sweetness is regularly associated with male members in the family who are dear to women. The importance of her father, husband, nephew and especially brother is often expressed through the usage of food symbols which are sweet in nature. Take another two songs (Ibid: 49),

All the sugar in the market was used up  
 When my brothers came over  
 Sacks of sugar would be brought in  
 When the nephew of my mother in law came

The focus here is on the social importance of ‘sweetness’ as a taste and food items such as sugar, honey, dates, and sweetmeats which abet a taste for sweetness. Sidney Mintz (2013) quotes Claude Levi – Strauss who in his book “From Honey to Ashes” writes of the sweet honey to have a magical potential to burn the eater with the fire of love (Ibid: 95). The point here is to look at food in its message bearing, symbolic form and its representation in folksongs which mediate to add a certain value to a social phenomenon. Mintz has argued that food substances such as sugar are merely raw materials, until “systems of symbolic extrusion and transformation can operate upon them” (Ibid: 102). Timeless representations of meaning associated with food items like that of sugar in Punjabi society is not simply about sugar as a foodstuff but “attitudes” and “protocols” that are bound to certain usages and have to do with more

than food (Barthes 2013: 23). Barthes points out that in American society the usage of sweet beverages like Coca-Cola means more than to consume sugar. Through sugar, it also means to experience the periods of rest and leisure in a specific fashion. He further gives an example of wine drinking for the French for whom wine is an almost indispensable part of meals. He says,

“Sugar or wine, these two superabundant substances are also institutions. And these institutions necessarily imply a set of images, dreams, tastes, choices, and values” (Ibid: 23)

The folk songs of Punjab likewise reiterate certain food items like sugar, *gheo* (clarified butter) and *makki* (maize) which have certain social implications – few rooted in political economy, which further help to mediate cultural practices.

The importance of the study of food symbolism in folk songs of Punjab also has a relationship to the social environment for women. Cooking and associated activities are central to women’s lives in Punjab, and therefore, forms of food are integral components in the social world of women. This is also reflected in Punjabi folk literature where women’s position and status are often described through the line of work she is expected to perform, i.e., household errands. She is commissioned with all sorts of homemaking tasks from cooking and cleaning to feeding the cattle. Therefore while expressing sentiments like love and pain, the points of reference and analogies are commonly drawn from her everyday activities. Since most of the folk songs are sung by women, they have a clear reference to food, cooking, and kitchen related activities – something that is an essential part of their social world. For instance, Gulati (2004: 19) explains that sacrificial love for children and want for simple living is expressed this way,

a quarter whole wheat flour is enough  
a bread each for two of us  
and *parantha* for our little one ...

The song narrates communication between husband and wife on basic wants of food, cloth, and shelter. Their want for frugal living is intertwined with emotions of love and care for the family. The couple alleges that a *roti* (flatbread) will suffice for their daily nutrition, but their kid will be fed *parantha*. The two pieces of bread have a symbolic difference in Punjabi culture; while the *roti* can be without any oil or butter, the *parantha* is always prepared with *desi ghee* (or any other oil). *Desi Ghee* has a symbolic dominance over other food products for it is valued as a sign of love and respect if fed to others. In another song, (Ibid: 26) the woman uses metaphorical ingredients from her kitchen and tries to appease her husband who is upset. She says,

My younger sister in law nibbles at coriander

and elder sister in law nibbles at cumin,

who else but I will mollify the annoyed brother of my sister in law (her husband)

These songs, at times, may read laughable and illogical but we must take cognizance of the fact that these folksongs are manifestations of the description of pure/raw emotions than any sort of engagement with the philosophical inquest. Secondly, translation too partly casts off the true essence of songs. But we will notice that each song is heavily impregnated with cultural signifiers drawn from objects the women in these songs are usually surrounded by – the kitchen and food. Reference to food items like spices and dairy products may or may not always have any concrete semiological significance, but their frequent citation to its flavor and substance may indicate the importance of the formulation of people's *social world* through food. One folk song says (Ibid: 37),

Two stars twinkle in the sky; they twinkle one at a time.

Post me a letter my love; a letter which is sweet and spicy

The folk song is sung in admiration of her lover who is far away. She tells him to send her money and a *saari* (a garment draped by women) apart from love letters which are sweet, crisp and spicy in nature. Reference to categories that pertain to tastes of the palate such as sweetness and crispness defines a coherent set of traits and habits associated with food. These categories which Barthes termed as “spirit” of food are useful units for defining a general system of tastes and habits that exist among people (Barthes 2013). Therefore connotations attached to the letters of a lover on being sweet, crisp and spicy evoke a “spirit” of food that triggers romantic sentiments between the couple. Sweet and spicy letters comprise a complex but homogeneous signifying unit which can designate anything related to romance, flirtation, love, and passion. A very famous *suhaag* sung at the time of the bride's departure in Punjabi weddings is ‘*Hariye Ni Ras Bhariye*’ which compares the beauty and fecundity of bride with the tallness of date trees and her demeanor with sweet and juicy date fruits (Noor 2008: 15). The emotion goes beyond the purely physical nature of the fruit as sweetness and juiciness designate anything that is delightful. Similarly, “My stock of salt, you will transmute to sugar crystals” allegorize saltiness of man with sweetness of his female lover (Madpuri 2014: 75, song no. 477). The pleasant company of ‘sugary’ beloved can convert tough and ‘salty’ moments of a man to delightful experiences. All the units associated with food such as flavor or substances are commonly cited in folksongs as an expression of sentimentality. Letters from the lover designate anything that is pleasurable, a mix of both sweet and spicy. The qualities of the bride and lover are compared to the soothing character of sweet foods like dates and sugar. One of the aspects that are well illustrated in these folksongs is that food and its signifying units are thus important components in the lives of the



people of Punjab. Also, the questions of the innate nature of food items and their physical properties, taste and symbolic significance of food, masculine and feminine connotations attached to food all are examples of issues that lie behind the cultural conceptualization of food in the social world of agents in folksongs.

Further, the complexity of the issue of representation lies in fact, as also argued by Bourdieu (1985), that the categories of perception (as indicated in folksongs) are also, in one way, the product of internalization and incorporation of the objective structures of the social space that defines the social role of women. Consequently, these structures incline agents (women in this case) to accept the social world as it is, without challenging it in the slightest possible ways. This leads agents to accept their social position and sense of one's place in society on the face value. The distances are thus marked, kept, respected and expected as part of the explicit consensus of the whole group, commonly termed as *common sense*. The singing of folk songs by women not just represents their social world but by this, they also reinstate structures of symbolic violence involving them that take place in practice and exist below the level of explicit representation and verbal expression. This is to say that, folk songs have played a role in representing as well as mediating and pronouncing the continuation of a social practice that forms an essential part of women's lives in Punjab. Take this folk song, as cited by Mahinder Singh Randhawa (1991: 49), for instance, "Do not sow seeds of *Bajra* (pearl millet) and *Jowar* (sorghum). *Bajra* generates heat in the body, and *Jowar* triggers indigestion. Birds will nip all the *Bajra* seeds and *Jowar* will be eaten up by locusts. Do not strike me with the stick and do not hurl blasphemous comments on my mother. The stroke of stick hurts my shoulder and slandering pinches my heart. Oh mother in law, do not abuse my father. My eyes are red and moist." The cruel mother-in-law replies, "Get valuables and servants from your home. I will henceforth not slur on your father." She retorts, "Give valuables and bundle of slaves to your own daughters. My parents are unfortunate and poor."

The song celebrates natural properties of crops like *Bajra* and *Jowar*, and through their representation, also suggests the inner conflict between mother in law and daughter in law. Drawing probable analogy from the innate nature of crops the anguished daughter in law describes her difficult living at in-laws. Besides, the symbols of food also imply an agrarian set up where the plot of the song is placed. The song represents an abusive relationship that a woman has with her in-laws on not being able to get sufficient dowry and slaves. It describes the helpless condition that women like her are forced into if their financial backing is not strong. The popular representation of the folksong depicts not only the pity state of affairs but also confirms the coercive social structure that pushes the continuation of the dowry system and other atrocities on women.

Simply put, popular representation of the deplorable plight of women in folksongs qualifies for undisputed acceptance of the social world of women which further legitimizes the structure responsible for consolidating the same. And the food is an important ingredient through which symbolic struggles for the power to produce and impose the 'legitimate world view' of women (an offshoot of dominant patriarchy) is exercised. The study and analysis of food, in this sense, are important too.

We already discussed how the content of these folk songs reflect an act of conserving the categories through which the social world of women is perceived. Now we'll look at a few examples to analyze how women exercise symbolic power on themselves through the practice of singing songs. To be able to derive pleasure from the act of chanting 'unscrupulous content' of folksongs the women actually reiterate their social position that they are entitled to cater. So, the work of producing and imposing meaning to their social world is done through all forms of "benediction or malediction, eulogy, praise, congratulations, compliments, or insults, reproaches, criticisms, accusations, slanders, etc." (Bourdieu, 1985: 729) in folksongs. SukhdevMadpuri (2003: 63) cites,

A little less wheat flour was added to clarified butter (*gheo*)

Mother in law, please do not abuse me on this

Nobody will come to my rescue.

Do not cry, my sweet mother

The agony of giving birth to daughters is immense.

Her subjugation here results from the worldview exercised under the aegis of dominant patriarchy. A folksong called '*Ambarsar Diya Warian*' (Gulati 2004: 22) is popularly sung by women at weddings and singing ceremonies, also known as sangeet in Punjab. *Warian* is sun-dried fritters made from lentil and spices paste. Apart from *warian*, the song cites other comestibles like *Papad* (thin crispy crackers), *Cholle* (chickpeas) and *Luchiya* (fried puffed bread) that the city of Amritsar (*Ambarsar*) is famous for. The song vividly describes the maltreatment that she is subjected to by her husband. In the closing stanza, she says, "I will not eat *luchiya* from Amritsar. You lash me with your shoe which I will not endure. We fight and pull each other's hair. You can either hold me back or tell me to leave the house. No one else but only I could have continued with you. No one else but only I could have suffered hardships with you." The song is sung in a playful spirit often characterized by the natural lament that women express on being married to an unloving husband. The content of the song emanates from the symbolic strength that men enjoy in Indian society. The fact that women are singing and dancing on their dismal state illustrates how patriarchy makes it possible to impose a dominant world view in an almost, irrefutable manner. They enjoy a symbolic struggle over

the production of common sense, an accepted notion in the songs that wife-beating is normal. Take another folksong (Ibid: 79) addressed to husband, “Why are you annoyed, my lord? Why do you not eat your food? From where should I get milk, cream and sweets for you? I have cooked mustard greens for you. A meal of corn flat breads, *lassi* and mustard greens is what poor people like us only have the means for. Only if you break the bread can I eat as without seeing you partake I will die. Have mercy and forgive me. My tears have drained me. Why do you not eat your food?” The verses arise from a power relation that exists between her social position and that of her husband. His god-like status accepted in a patriarchal society like Punjab further reinforces the imposition of ‘legitimate vision of the social world’- also inscribed in the minds of women. Internalization of the structures that guide agents to accept gender and class differentiation help ensure the permanence of power relations. The woman also contends that people from their class cannot afford pricey food items like milk, cream, and sweetmeats. The song thus confirms to their internalization of social structures that also mark the distinction between various class groups.

The references are implicit and tacit, often confirming the sense of the position occupied by women in social space. All this points to how the concept of power is also present in people’s minds in the form of categories of perception of power relations. In the struggle to impose the legitimate view of the social world, Bourdieu (1985) argues that agents yield a power proportionate to their symbolic capital, i.e., to the recognition that they receive from a group. However, one cannot rule out the fact that despite confirming their social roles by performing on folksongs these women also seeks pleasure from the same structure. It is from this medium that she criticizes the coercive social structure and therefore draws pleasure out of it. Dance and singsong unleash her resentment and dissatisfaction with life. In response to the above-mentioned argument that describes how the concept of power is overlaid in the construction of content of folksongs this viewpoint objects to the idea that agents (women) are passive dupes. This argument emphasizes experience or feelings of listener and singer. Scholars like Janice Radway and IenAng concerned with audience research have flagged off some interesting points. Radway (1984) studied the nuances of meanings the ‘Smithton women’ ascribed to their romance reading. Rosalind Gill writes about her:

“She found that far from being unintelligent dopes the women were sophisticated readers of romance, able to make subtle differentiations within the genre and to pick up on small nuances and cues from the cover pictures and blurbs in order to determine whether books would meet their particular tastes and need” (Gill 2007: 19).

Radway further argues that an element of wish fulfilment, a sort of escaping into the life of an idealized character is also ascribed to the pleasures of reading romantic fiction. Pleasure in vicariously experiencing what is depicted

as an ideal love accounts for the successful circulation of romantic novels among Radway's subjects.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, analyses romance reading for women primarily as therapeutic in nature. She argues that it is precisely a release of tension – a temporary, literal escape from the demands of the social role of a housewife or mother that makes romance reading a particularly pleasurable activity for female readers. Besides, tension is vented out “by a symbolic gratification of the psychological need for nurturance and care that the romance genre offers these women – needs that, given their entrapment in the arrangements of ‘patriarchal marriage,’ cannot be satisfied in ‘real life’” (Ang 1996: 98).

Emphasising that sometimes the medium than content which can be a pleasurable entity, Ian Ang (1985) suggests an example of characteristics of television viewing generally associated with entertainment and leisure activity which also offers the promise of pleasure. She writes about socio-cultural contexts and a network of other conditions of consumption which gave rise to the popularity of pleasure from watching an American soap opera Dallas. She argues that ‘watching T.V’ is generally not considered as an irksome duty. A large group of people set to ‘watch television’ for relaxation and leisure, may not particularly be interested in the content or qualities of a T.V programme but what is televised at the prime time that eventually gets popular. Raymond Williams (1974) also points to the nature of ‘watching television’ rather than have watched ‘the news’ or ‘a play’ or ‘the football on television.’ He says that television viewing has almost become an extension of our daily life and routine activity. This is so because television has got into everyone's reach and “it is the most obvious and easy to realize forms of leisure activity” (Ang 1985: 23). Likewise, the women who make melody over the social realities of her life and swing, spin and twist on its tunes may not necessarily be interested in the meaning-making process or subject matter of the songs but the act of dancing and singing on the songs itself. The act itself helps her get rid of feelings of depression and raise her spirits. The ‘characteristics of the medium’ of songs offer her an escapade and a brief departure from her mundane domestic life. In the same way, as Radway (1984) has pointed out in her study of romantic fictional novels that romance reading actually proved ‘therapeutic’ to women, it can be suggested that nature of Punjabi folk songs is a blend of acceptance as well as mock on harsh realities of life.

### **Emotional Responses and Socio-Cultural Realities**

This section discusses food as a cultural signifier or language to communicate the socio-cultural intricacies of Punjab and the way in which construction of various cultural meanings have been practised. The idea is to understand the manner in which people have collectively constructed a conscious way of conceiving reality from a definite cultural point of view

especially through the medium of food and folk songs. Secondly, how food symbolisms play a powerful medium to express feelings and marginalization of women is also elaborated.

Before the analysis part, I will briefly discuss the theoretical background of semiotics which has guided my interpretation. To start with, the study of connotation or second level signification is an important approach to understand the symbols of food. As mentioned previously, food products such as *desi gheo* (clarified butter), milk, *gudd* (jaggery), *shakkar* (powdered jaggery), *saag* (mustard greens), *kheer* (rice pudding), *makhan* (unsalted butter) and various grains have immense symbolic importance which is rooted in the culture of Punjab. The signifiers of food thus convey a lot of cultural messages to its people who share a common lifeworld. Barthes' analysis of French popular culture is the most important study of second-order signification which argues that connotative readings of signs are interpreted by audiences who possess the appropriate cultural codes. Therefore a signifier such as *gheo-shakkar* will make sense only within a particular cultural or subcultural setting which is fed to please a dear one. If we do not understand the motive of the signifier, we would frequently be baffled by the symbolic relevance or metaphorical purpose of many food symbols used in folk songs. Therefore it is important to recognize a context or framework of these codes in which meanings are rearranged and presented before us through media platforms such as folk songs. How and what are some connotative meanings of food items used to signify and mediate a social prevalence, change, desires and emotions are discussed in broad categories below:

**a. Patriarchy and Subjugation of Women**

The society of Punjab is largely patriarchal and patrilineal in form. The social implications of patriarchy are well documented in folksongs and highlighted through symbols of food. For instance, there are songs that unabashedly speak for preference for a male child and praise/longing for brothers.

When my brother steps on bitter neem  
 It starts bearing crystals of sugar (Maadpuri 2003: 26)  
 I apply layers of jaggery sugar  
 onto the *rotis* of my brother (Ibid: 27)  
 My brother is tall...pair of brothers  
 It is separate from the previous couplet.  
 My brother is tall, like sugarcane on top  
 My sister in law is slim and agile like a fish ....

I prepared *roti* and *torri* (ridge gourd) for my elder brother

God has blessed me indeed with a pair of brothers (Randhawa 1991: 348)

When a son is born sweet food items like jaggery, *patashe* (a sugar candy) and *ladoos* are distributed in the village. Even so when he is a grown up, and his marriage is arranged the sisters are much exhilarated. An expression of happiness is expressed through sweet food products and sweetmeats. In this context, Leela Dube (1997) cites an example of a young woman in her book 'Women and Kinship' who was taught to refuse sweets by her grandmother. She would say, "You are a girl; you should learn to eat less and to swallow suffering" (Ibid: 137). From dairy products to meat, a number of examples are cited by scholars to show how pricey food items have traditionally been denied to women. Patterns of food consumption are also talked about in the academic circle to highlight how women are entitled to eat the leftovers or eat in the last. Male relations like brothers are particularly pampered by sisters. She finds solace and security in life under the patronage of her male relatives. After her marriage, she calls upon her brother to visit her and share her grief. Another folk song to validate the point,

My charming brother, your sister has roasted grains for you

Come, eat them and enjoy life

My charming brother, there's a glass full of milk for you

Come and drink it, your sister is very angry (Noor 2008: 131)

In this song, the sister sends summon to her brother through food items such as roasted grains, gourd, and milk. She is saddened by her life and feels distressed after marriage. She is disheartened and longs to share grief with her brother who stays very far.

While discussing the relevance of food symbols in folk songs, it has often been observed that the power and status of male figures especially that of brother and husband is mediated through pricey and sweet food items like *gheo – shakkar* and milk. Sweetness has a cultural ability to add a certain value to the social positioning of men which women are almost barred from. This folk song (Ibid: 175) is apt here,

*Kulfi* (ice cream) peddler rang the bell, come alone if you want to eat *kulfi*  
*Kulfi* peddler has come, and he is calling me.

When I was about to taste it, my elder brother in law came over...

While I was holding the stick of *kulfi*, my mother in law scorned at me

When I was about to taste it my younger brother in law also came over

And said that I should have mercy on them and not eat *kulfi*.

The taste of sweetness has connotative meanings in Punjabi society all related to pleasure, happiness, celebration, and indulgence. Women, as also evident through these folk songs, are/ were traditionally not permitted to delve into anything that is pleasurable – a privilege reserved exclusively for men. She, therefore, longs to have tasted pricey food items like dry fruits, milk, clarified butter, sweets, and butter. In this folk song (Randhawa 1991: 326), for example

Mother, please cook '*chulai da saag*' (amaranth leaves) for me  
 the ones which are thinner than betel leaves  
 Mother, please add a dollop of butter on it  
 If you would not, then I may get displeased

The girl asks her mother to prepare a dish for her made from amaranth leaves. She also expresses her desire to have added a dollop of butter on her vegetable. Knowing that it was uncommon for girls to have rich food tasted she meanwhile gives an implicit threat to her mother who she fears may not yield to her desire.

Further, since patrilocality is the rule, marriage has meant a shift in place for women of Punjab. In consequence, territorial dislocation, at times over a considerable distance, has been integral to the life of women. Her socialization and acceptance as reflected in the folk songs confirm the abiding patriarchal social structure.

Fields of wheat and chickpeas have eventually been matured  
 Fatherland will someday be left behind  
 Mother, do not speak severe words to us  
 As we will not come back  
 My fatherland, we will visit sometime (Noor 2008: 17)

The song mediates the form of patrilocality through the symbols of wheat and chickpeas. The woman draws an analogy from the ripened harvest. The song says that just like the season to harvest matured crops, the daughters will also be wed far away.

The economic dependence of women on her male relations is much explicit. She is disassociated from her paternal property and shown to ask for favors in the form of gifts either from husband or brother. She expects presents like jewelry, clothes and pricey food items. Take this couplet for instance,

My brother has plenty of lands  
 but his sister was sent away with an empty portmanteau (Ghuman 1986: 41)

The woman when visits her paternal house after marriage expects some gifts from brother and sister in law. In this couplet, in particular, she complains that despite her brother's family being quite well off, known from the fact that they have lands at their disposal, they have unfortunately sent her back empty-handed. The ownership of land is symbolic of richness usually associated with the status of brothers in the Punjabi society.

Lastly, the folk songs and symbols of food used in the composition of these songs mediate to shed some light on the economic structure of Punjabi society. The mediation tells us about the primary role of women which is to cook and manage household chores. One of the songs says it all,

Boys play the game of *gilli danda*

Girls sing songs

Men are into merchandising

And the women take care of domestic (Ibid: 31)

A lot of folk songs use motifs and symbols of food to represent as well as mediate social conditions for women. In one of the folksongs, she pleads not to be beaten on forgetting to add salt in the meal.

I forgot to add salt in the *khichdi*

Don't beat me up; I forgot to add salt

If you hit me with a tablespoon, I will quiver like a fish

I forgot to add salt

If you hit me with shoes, I will leave our son behind

I forgot to add salt (Gulati 2004: 20)

Here, media representation of men and women, the social roles ascribed can be seen as a product of male and female identities tenuously constituted in time – identities instituted through a “stylized repetition of acts ... a mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1988). Butler argues that gender identity is largely a performative accomplishment which comes into being through social sanction and taboo. What we see as a stereotypical way of presenting gender in folksongs and through food can be seen as part of what Sartre would perhaps have called a “style of being” or Foucault, “stylistics of existence” (Ibid: 521). A living style of gender is cultivated in history which conditions and limits the possibilities so much so that Beauvoir (1974) would argue that the body is a historical idea rather than a natural species. Why men are not represented to take care of household or cook for a family in the folksongs is the performance of their gender with clearly punitive consequences. If we are to believe that gendering of the body is the resulting series of social



acts which are “renewed, revised and consolidated through time” (Ibid) and that personal is political because “it includes the wider political and social structures,” (Ibid) can we argue that media representation of gender-specific social roles is the part as well as result of the historical construction of gender? Going by vehement arguments of Judith Butler can we argue that sedimented expectations from a gender have produced a set of corporeal representations in folksongs, like women being objectified as a server and men beating their wives which in their reified form have started appearing as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes? Is it not the result as well as reinforcing factor to the on-going historical sedimentation of sexuality? Is the representation a reflection of already existing directives that dictate the gendering of the body?

**b. Family and Kinship Ties**

The folk songs also mediate to add value to the nuances of family and kinship structure in Punjab. The folksongs, mostly speak of family relations and express prevalent fissures and warmth in certain relations. Since most of the songs are from the perspective of women, they define the relevance of family as it exists for them.

The women find consolation in the auspices of her blood relatives especially men. Hence, a lot of folksongs eulogize their presence in women’s lives. She defines their association to be as sweet and fresh like that of a lemon plant which is sowed in her veranda. She says,

Lemon plant of my house, your shade is sweet and soothing  
 A set of two bangles tinkle  
 Onto my grandson’s wrist  
 And he plays with bow and arrow (Gulati 2004: 96)

The verses are repeated for other male relations like son and nephew. In another version of the same song, she imagines her son, grandson or nephew to be dressed like a prince. She imagines him clothed in silk clothes and wearing velvety footwears on the day of his marriage. She also describes her blood relations to be as comforting as the dense shade of mango trees are. The company of her mother, sister, paternal aunt, and sister in law is described to be as soothing and pleasant as the canopy of mango trees.

Her in-laws on the other hand are described as callous and loathsome. She condemns her affine relatives in folksongs and uses the symbols of food to express her extreme dislike for them.

A muskmelon was cut into twelve slices  
 One slice for the one who is close to my heart

My mother in law who is less a mother to me

Call me names

My sister in law who is less a sister to me

Call me names (Madpuri 2003: 73)

Leaving her husband who is closest to her heart she criticises everyone in her in-laws who call her names. She doesn't want to keep the share from melon for her in-laws. The sweet fruit in the folksong mediates to let the audience know that apart from her husband the woman has a strenuous relationship with affine relatives.

In regard to other male relations in her in-laws, the women feel closest to her younger brother in law (who is also like a kid to her). Of all her affinal relations she is shown to have spoken pleasant words only for her younger brother in law. Again drawing an analogy from the food, Ghuman (1986: 47) cites,

The younger brother in law is like a mustard plant

Which I will implant in my verandah

One may not offer lassi to elder brother in law

The younger one may have a whole glass of milk

She has a special animosity towards the elder brother in law and his wife but expresses her fondness for the younger brother in law who is innocent and always stand by her side. In one of the songs, the younger brother in law gets bitter gourd which creates ruckus at home. Her husband's sister conspires to drive the woman out of the house, but the timely intervention of younger brother in law comes to her rescue. The song (Madpuri 2003: 77) says,

My younger brother in law brought bitter gourds

I cooked them with *desi gheo*

And served them to all

The sister in law was served little less

She complained to my father in law

The father in law complained to mother in law

Mother in law complained to elder brother in law

The elder brother in law complained to his brother

My husband pulled me out of the house

The younger brother in law then came to rescue

Relationship with the younger brother in law is usually shown to be cordial except in a few instances where the woman also finds his eyes unchaste.

Mother, I had just cooked yellow *dal*

A guest came over

Daughter, you had just cooked yellow *dal*

Your younger brother in law came over

Mother, do not send me away with brother in law, his eyes are lecherous

When I walk with brother in law, he tries to push me behind a tent

But I refuse

When my village came, my fool husband was feeding the cattle

“Singha, were you down with a fever or were you bitten by a snake

Why sent brother in law to escort me?”

“Neither had I fever nor was I bitten by a snake

My sweet younger brother went to bring his sister in law” (Noor 2008: 176)

The song mediates the nuances of male relations in the life of women. Except for her husband and blood relations she is skeptical of confiding in any other relation. The folksongs, therefore, shed some light on the family and kinship structure especially from the eyes of women. She even does not trust her father in law who isn't concerned about her well - being.

In the crack of the dawn, I had one raw radish

My father in law comes and asks, ‘why daughter in law is lying down?’

Call the doctor or call a wise man but save the daughter in law

If the expense is one or two lakhs, I will instead wed my son (Ibid: 135)

The father in law in this folk song is shown to be an utterly mean man who says that he would instead wed his son to someone else rather bearing expense on the treatment of his current daughter in law. The song concludes when her husband comes forward and saves her life not minding the expense. She is all in praise of her husband whom she loves and holds the utmost trust in. In other songs and elsewhere, the physical appearance of the husband is glorified by using metaphors of food.

Butter and vermilion is the skin of my beloved husband

My father in law is one evil

He tells me to call him '*pitaji*,' but I'm unwilling  
 Instead, I'm only able to utter words like 'old man' for him  
 Yay! The skin of my beloved husband.

My mother in law is one evil  
 She tells me to call her '*Mataji*,' but I'm unwilling  
 Instead, I'm only able to utter words like 'old hag' for her  
 My sister in law is one evil

She tells me to call her '*behenji*,' but I'm unwilling  
 Instead, I'm only able to utter words like 'young lady' for her  
 Butter and vermilion is the skin of my beloved husband (Ibid: 139)

She sings the praises of her husband and criticizes her controlling in-laws. By glorifying her love relationship with him she even extols his physical appearance. She compares the fair and rosy complexion of a husband with butter and vermilion. Butter as a food product has a special status in the lives of people in Punjab. Anyone who is close and dear to the heart is allegorically invoked as '*mere makhana*' (my butter) or '*mere makhana de pedeya*' (my glob of butter). The comestible mediates to assign attributes associated with butter onto the close relationship. Connotative meanings assigned with butter vary from sacredness and pleasantness to richness of milk, the primary ingredient in butter.

Although most of the folk songs sing unfathomable praise for a husband, he is also despised on certain occasions. A husband is called sinful if he is habituated to alcohol, drugs such as opium and non-vegetarian food. Consumption of meat such as chicken and mutton is considered immoral especially in connection with alcoholism and gambling. In general, there is notably a lesser reference to meat as food in the folk songs of Punjab. Wherever there is one, it is in connection with unrighteous living and vices. Take this song (Madpuri 2003: 96) for instance,

Tell your son, mother in law  
 To not visit the harem every day  
 Glasses full of the liquor does he gulp down  
 And sniff opium openly  
 He is habituated to the meat  
 He does not value one's homemade jaggery powder  
 Rather eats jaggery obtained by stealth

Lastly, she bears a bitter grudge against her mother in law for whom she doesn't even hesitate to use defamatory language. The sharpness of her tongue is expressed this way,

I wish your buffaloes die, mother in law

You served my brother dry jaggery sugar

My sweet brother, eat parched *rotis* as for now

On being separated, I will pour *gheo* onto your jaggery sugar (Ghuman 1986: 50)

She has an abusive relationship especially with her mother in law who hurts her severely by calling names to her parents. She torments her with household work and dominates the young bride. The social standing of the mother in law allows her to dictate her relationship with daughter in law. The latter on the other hand feels oppressed and mistreated. In one of the famous folksongs called '*Nashe Diye Band Bottle*,' the daughter in law complains that her mother in law beats her up and break her bones with a rod when she refuses to grind grains in the manual grinder (*chakki*). The daughter in law then curses her in-laws to be drowned in a nearby river or be stung by a poisonous snake. Take another instance,

When my mother in law cooks *dal*

She pours it in a box till full and gives away to everyone

When my mother in law cooks *kheer*

She hides it below her cot

She nibbles at it while coming in and going out

The bad one is a loudmouth

People, I say, mothers in law are real evils

They twist knives into one's heart (Madpuri 2007: 64)

Lastly, the mother in law is also represented to condemn parents of her son in law or daughter in law. The relationship between two families is bounded by formal customs and traditions. In many cases, the gratification of such customs is regarded as difficult and oppressive. For instance, the custom of dowry and giving of gifts at the time of marriage is considered burdensome by the parents of the bride. Likewise, in one of the songs, there is a harsh criticism of custom of giving away *kacchi pinni* (rice based sweet prepared in round shape) by the in-laws of a bride to all her relatives and village people. Apart from this sweet, the bride is/was gifted clothes and gold jewelry. The custom is an economic burden to the family of the groom against the background of which this song is composed. The sweet, '*kacchi pinni*' mediates to add economic

value to custom as one of the main ingredients to the dish was rice – once one of the most expensive cereal grain to be cultivated in Punjab in the absence of modern irrigation systems.

To be able to prepare the sweet and keep up with the custom the woman complains that she had to sell off her gold jewel and silk clothes. Kulwant Singh Aulakh (2003: 62) cites,

Chand, father of my daughter in law when came over

I fetched sugar from the market.

*Kacchi Pinni* ruined us

I had to sell off the ornament of my head and jewel of my ears

**c. Expression of Sentiments**

Emotions associated with love, separation, beauty, longing, and wait are expressed in folksongs often through symbols of food. Food plays an important role while mediating inner conflicts among women as it is mostly through food items that she expresses her sentiments.

The *tandoor* is lit

With my bones as charcoal

And I'm cooking food of love on top of it (Madpuri 2007: 83)

I finished cooking the pumpkin curry

But you did not return from your parade (Randhawa 1991: 56)

The songs express wait for her husband or lover who hasn't returned yet. Using metaphors of food and cooking associated activities, she expresses her lament in love. The songs bear an expression of separation in love. They are eagerly waiting for their lover or husband to return. In the first song, her whole body is being consumed in the fire of love. In the second one, she completes cooking vegetable for her husband, but he hasn't returned from his military service.

Further, relations that are dear and close to one's heart are compared with the mustard plant. Mustard has a special significance in the culture of Punjab as it was/is widely grown in almost every field. Despite an abundant and common vegetable, it is quite cherished just like corn. Its vital place is spelled out through sentiments associated with closed ones.

My lover is the mustard plant

That I sow in my veranda (Ibid: 39)

Also, an aesthetic emotion such as beauty is expressed using motifs from mustard, flax or fruits such as melon like “your fair cheeks resemble melon” or

Why did you not come when

The color of my skin was alike a mustard flower (Ibid: 53)

In some songs, features of caste and class are especially visible through the prism of food. Chewing of foods such as betel leaves has connotations with royalty and high class. The woman in the song below demands her consort to fetch her betel box in the night. She further says that she is only good with makeup and ornamentation but also habituated. She is also habituated to eat sweets, another signifier of affluence.

Bring betel nut box in the night

The beloved daughter does not know anything

But white teeth and don red lipstick

Her mansion and below is the confectionery

Her routine is to eat sweetmeats

Her mansion and below is the cloth shop

Her routine is to wear good cloth

Her mansion and beneath sits jeweler

Her routine is to wear a necklace (Gulati 2004: 27)

In the song below (Ibid: 87), the symbolization of pearl millet mediates complexities in the love affair of two people who come from different castes. The girl is assigned to clean the harvest of pearl millet. The plot is set against the backdrop of the Ravi river where the couple flirts and reveals their emotions for each other. The song says,

Who will clean the tiny and thick kernel of pearl millet for me?

I will clean the tiny and thick kernel of pearl millet for you

Let's go by the riverside of *Ravi* my love

Help me raise a clay pot – but do not touch me

While he helped me with the pot, he also held me by my wrist

Leave my wrist, love; I tell you that my caste is low

I will not leave the wrist as your beautiful face has captivated me

When the boy catches hold of her while helping lift clay pots, the girl immediately reminds him of her caste which might create problems in their amorous association.

We observed how the mediation of social realities and cultural tropes has been done through the prism of food connotations that speak beyond the surface level. Stuart Hall calls the connotative levels of signifiers as the fragments of ideology - the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. The fact that we ascribe certain codes/ meanings while negotiating with pricey food products like *gheo shakkar*, *makhan*, wheat, milk, *kulfi*, etc. is largely the question of 'structures of discourses in dominance' (Hall, 1980: 56) which conceal the power of dominant ideology. This leads us to discuss an important phenomenon of 'cultural hegemony' which is also visible in Punjabi folk songs. Analysis of the media's ideological role comes out of a long tradition in Marxian scholarship. Going by the Marxian materialist theory of ideology (Marx and Engels 2010) can we argue that ideas and conceptions over the representation of gender in a certain way (women cooking and being rebuked for not carrying out domestic chores) come from its social existence and the gendered division of labor? That is to argue if ideas are not free floating but are the product of the social conditions of the ruling which produce them, can we argue that ideas for subjugated representation of women are the result of patriarchy or probably her position as the non-owner of the property? It implies that if women are always shown in submissive roles and men as saviors it qualifies for a Marxian model of economic determinism. At the heart of it is the desire to understand the working of unchallengeable dominant ideology permeated through folksongs as media – something which Antonio Gramsci called 'Hegemony' whereby domination, injustice, and antagonism come to perceive as normal. The question concerns us why it is that the women as a 'class category' acquiesce in a system that is discriminatory and patriarchal in nature. Gramsci introduced the notion of 'hegemony' or 'ideological hegemony' which is not based upon physical force or coercion by the ruling class but subtle, pervasive forms of ideological control and manipulation known as 'consented coercion.' We are discussing this because media (folksongs in this case) being an integral part of civil society is an effective tool to hegemonize a thought process or an ideology. Louis Althusser (1971) argued that the site for struggle is just not the industrial field but ideological arena as well. Therefore he states that media much like religion, education, family, legal courts, the political arena, trade union, culture and communication are important components of Ideological State Apparatus. As the ruling tries to popularize their own culture, philosophy, morality, etc. through mediums like advertisements, news, literature or cinema the prevailing consciousness is internalized by the masses to the extent that it becomes a part of their common sense. For Gramsci, common sense is at the core of the ideology making process which aims to become a 'part of us.' It is when the ruling class worldview becomes the total worldview that is imposed and accepted as a cultural norm that it subsequently justifies the economic, political and social status quo as natural, inevitable and beneficial to all. Gramsci's idea of 'hegemony' construction has provided us with a powerful tool to analyze representations



of gender in the folk songs of Punjab. We can understand a trend or a pattern of gender representation in folksongs by analyzing the hegemonic layers of meaning construction. The ideologies that media representation engenders subsequently hegemonize people's consciousness so much so that it becomes unchallengeable after substantial time.

### Conclusion

The cultural baggage associated with the 'consumption pattern' of food reveals much about the ideas, values, assumptions, practices, and institutions of the social groups. Representation of 'foodways' on gender lines in folksongs of Punjab has probably borne its genesis in the available notions of food. The patriarchal set up in many South Asian countries has historically imposed atrocities on women who would not be allowed to eat pricey food items such as dry fruits, milk, and *ghee*. Men consider prized food items their prerogative whereas women and girls learn to refuse these foods, to offer their share to guests, and to save the best portions for their brothers, husbands, and sons (Dube 1997). All of this is expressed by women in folksongs.

Further, the men even had the privilege of various sources of entertainment and leisure such as outdoor games but women on being confined to the four walls of the house could only express through indirect means such as the singing of folk songs. While doing various domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, stitching, embroidering or spinning threads on a *charkha* (spinning wheel), the women would sit together in groups and sing in chorus. Through the medium of singing, they would vent out their psychological tensions, grievances, and resentment with life. By dancing and clapping on these songs they would probably laugh off the inevitable. Despite their deplorable plight and alleged resentment with life the women had no courage to break free the coercive social structure but overlook its wrongs. In Durkheimian language the social exists out there; it is complex, intimidating and an embedded construct that affects cultural norms generating attitudes and actions from individuals.

The role of folksongs as media is to serve the purpose of what Aristotle would call 'catharses' – a social outlet that allows the release of negative emotions. By acting as catharsis, the folksongs mediate to give new meaning to their social realities. Folksongs provide them with a platform for social sharing – a way to combat negative emotions through which they can vent, understand, bond and gain social support from their group. Singing and dancing on folksongs act as a cathartic release of emotions – a sort of 'blowing off steam' which helps to restore the emotional balance among women. Besides, the symbols of food present in folksongs further assist the process of cathartic release as these form integral components in the lives of women. Food, cooking and associated activities are the large segments in the construction of women's social world. She, therefore, draws analogies and metaphors from her own

world while expressing a sentiment. Food also assists in navigating some emotions, desires, pleasure, and fantasies of women. For instance, we saw how an expression of longing for sweets or *makhan* (butter) has mediated to gratify some desires and pleasures among women. As another instance might be cited, a meager mention of meat does not merely make us aware of the prevalence of vegetarianism in those days in Punjab but also mediates to construct meanings associated with certain social evils like alcoholism and domestic violence. Comparison of girls with the wheat harvest does not merely tell us that Punjabi society is agrarian but mediates to mark a certain meaning in the life of women who are to be wed off. This leads us to ask some pertinent questions regarding the relevance of folksongs and food symbols in the lives of the people of Punjab. Folksongs are an important part of women's expressive culture. What outdoor physical activities are for men, folk songs as vital tools to express and derive leisure are for the women. Singing and dancing on folksongs help women to negotiate with the social - an act that permits cathartic release and proves therapeutic and symbols of food for the gratification of desires and pleasures of different kinds. Even though her primary role is to cook and feed, denial of certain foods to her is survived through 'virtual' palatal pleasures obtained through imaginative thinking in folksongs. Food is a source of pleasure as well as a medium of expression.

### *Notes*

1. All the folksongs cited in the paper have been translated to English from Punjabi language by the author.
2. I would like to draw a sketch of instances which have made my data conditioned while assaying into the realm of the complex field of folklore. The partition of India left a deep impression upon Punjabi folklore and literature was no less deeply perforated by the on-going political turmoil of that time. Punjabi folklore from undivided Punjab is hence not incorporated in this study. Therefore the enlisted categories and also the interpretations are only suggestive and not exhaustive. Folksongs have been shortlisted by glancing through their titles if they bore any association with food or food-related activity. Next, the study employs textual analysis to understand the meaning making processes related to the food practices, taste and the cultural sensibilities of people of Punjab.
3. I am grateful to the staff of Bhai Gurdas Library of Guru Nanak Dev University situated in Amritsar, A.C Joshi Library of Panjab University, Chandigarh and Bhai Kahn Singh Library of Punjabi University, Patiala who helped me access the literature.

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