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MISSION NARI SHAKTI, FOLKLORE, AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: LOCATING 'GENDER' IN THE FOLK PROVERBS OF UTTAR PRADESH

Abstract

Mission Nari Shakti (MNS) is the flagship program of the Uttar Pradesh government to promote women safety and women empowerment in the wake of the rising incidents of rapes against females in the state. This scheme tends to promote women's empowerment through dialogue, communication, and awareness generation and hence, is novel in this regard. In this backdrop, this reflexive essay analyses more than 600 folk proverbs from the published sources as well as collected empirically to analyze 'gender' normalizing gender-specific roles for men and women in the selected region. The findings reveal that the folk proverbs related to women are quite discriminatory and derogatory in several regards. This paper argues that the language is the most powerful tool of acculturation and gender identity is established through constant interaction with others in a particular social context. It is found that these proverbs project women as weak, feeble and eulogize their contributions as a home maker to support patriarchy and establish and sustain male hegemony. The paper proposes that it is erroneous to treat proverbs as 'static' and hence instead of external interventions such as approach with MNS, folk proverbs could be used to rewrite gender identities through concerted efforts to promote gender parity and women empowerment in the state.

Keywords: *Folklore, folk proverbs, women empowerment, gender, Uttar Pradesh.*

Background

Mission Nari Shakti (MNS) is a flagship program of Uttar Pradesh (UP) government to protect women and promote women's empowerment in

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the state. This scheme was launched in the wake of rising incidents of rape crimes in the state recently (Bhatia 2021). The objective of this scheme was to promote women safety and intends to reduce crime against women in the state. Beginning with the Sharad Navratri¹¹¹ 2020, the MNS scheme lasted for six months ending with the Chaitra Navaratri¹²¹. The objective of this scheme was to promote women empowerment through dialogue, communication, and awareness generation on issues threatening women safety such as rapes, violence against women, sexual harassment, acid attacks on women, gender discrimination, and so on. To attain its goal of women safety, the government emphasized the inclusion of diverse stakeholders and triangulation of media to promote women's empowerment in the state. To illustrate, the government organized different programs in the Gram Panchayats, Industrial Units, Schools, Durga Puja Pandals, and Ramlilas to eulogize women's contribution to the society through seminars, short films, street plays, safety pledge, women's laws and other inspirational stories. It also focused on integrating medical education, technical education, secondary education, employment exchange, panchayats, etc for awareness generation on women safety and women empowerment (Srikant 2020)¹³¹.

The MNS proved to be the widely acclaimed scheme of the state government and was positively received by the people, bureaucrats, media, and other stakeholders. This scheme is novel in several regards. Women empowerment schemes in the past have basically tried to promote women empowerment through education, economic assistance, or laws, and legislation. To promote women's empowerment, the development practitioners have primarily relied on welfare schemes such as improving enrollment of girls in education, reducing drop-outs, providing them with monetary or cash incentives for employment and so on. Similarly, gender parity has been ensured through gender-centric laws and legislation to prevent gender discrimination in both domestic as well as the public sphere. Hence, MNS proved to be a game-changer in this regard as it focused on promoting women empowerment through discussions, lectures, and talks on the contributions of women in society. The government envisaged that women's empowerment cannot be accomplished without acknowledging their worth and contribution to society. To achieve its overt goal, the MNS scheme focused on advancing the merits of women through popular media such as seminars, street plays, and pledges on women's safety, and so on. Besides, the inclusion of diverse actors reflects the contingency of multiple stakeholders in achieving women empowerment.

'Empowering' women is the most popularly cited outcome of several development interventions including MNS (Parmar n.d.). Hence, before embarking on the merits of this scheme, it is imperative to understand what is women empowerment? Empowerment usually refers to the development approaches where individuals are endowed with increasing capacity for controlling various aspects of their lives and facility for inclusion in community

affairs. Empowerment “enables” the beneficiaries such as the poor, marginal, or vulnerable groups such as elderly, women, or minorities to take initiatives to solve their own problems of poverty, exclusion, and chronic dependency (Narayan 2005). Thus, women empowerment basically implies increasing their self-sufficiency, facilitating decision-making, and engagement in the community. Although there is diversity in the markers of empowerment yet there is no single method for measuring empowerment (Parmar n.d.).

Recently, policymakers and development practitioners have increasingly realized the significance of communication in the process of empowerment. Mustaffa and Asyiek (2015) emphasized that empowerment is closely related to communication as empowerment implies a capacity to be independent, and participation in decision making. Empowerment basically aims to strengthen the marginalized, giving them voices, and facilitating their participation, and hence, participatory communication is a key to empowerment (Chitnis 2005). Communication is a process of creation and transfer of meaningful information between two or more individuals and good communication allows people to gain new knowledge, challenge existing oppressive structures, and gain control over their lives, and overcome oppression (Chitnis 2005). And participatory communication is inclusive in nature and seeks the participation of diverse stakeholders such as the ethnic minorities and marginalized cohort in the dialogue, decision-making, and collective action. Since language is a vehicle for communication, language could be a powerful tool for evaluating the position of gender in any society.

Theoretical framework of the study

Language is more than a combination of words, syntaxes, and grammar for communication and transfer of ideas. Language provides us insights into the culture and gives us insight into the worldview of any community. Bascom (1954) believed that “language is a mirror to culture and incorporates descriptions of the details of ceremonies, institutions, and technology, as well as the expression of beliefs and attitudes” (p. 337). Hence, early anthropologists relied heavily on the usage of local language for ethnographic researches. They emphasized that language helps us understand the insiders’ perspective and helps gain access to the value system of any culture. The language both spoken and written reflects the ideological distinctions, stereotypes, and norms prevalent. In this regard, Sapir and Whorf have rightly emphasized that *‘language is not merely gendered, but is also a site for doing gender’* (cited in Noor (2015)). Thus, sociolinguists, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists aptly summarized language as an archive of social life and its study can contribute to an understanding of the contemporary culture and the past of human society (Noor 2015).

Language is a primary means of enculturation and a child learns about

his/ her culture through social interaction and communication. Right from childhood, an individual discovers, interprets, and imbibes the socio-cultural milieu of his/ her environment through interaction and discourse. Howard (2018) claimed that the process of socialization not only facilitates integration in a group but also helps them in becoming familiar with their community's ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world. Hence, social interaction is very crucial in engraining the concept of self and social roles in an individual (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Through participation in routine interactions with more expert members of the community, novices are socialized through the use of language and socialized to use language (Moore, n.d.). Interestingly, language socialization is a continuous process spanning across the lives of an individual as an individual imbibes different role sets at different stages of the life cycle. Cross-culturally, gender is an acquired trait akin to culture and asexual newborns become conscious of their gender identity through language. Hence, as children acquire the language they simultaneously acquire the social identity and social milieu.

In this backdrop, this reflexive essay intends to examine the construction of gender in the oral expressions of UP and evaluate the significance of these oral expressions in perpetuating gender stereotyping and gender discrimination promoting gender inequity and fostering masculine hegemony.

Folk proverbs as a subset of folklores

Folk may be defined as a system of accumulated knowledge, behavior patterns, and material and non-material products of human activity transmitted from one generation to another (Debbarma and Bharali, 2018). According to the Oxford Dictionary, folklore consists of the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community passed through the generations by word of mouth (Michalopoulos and Xue, 2021). Etymologically the term folklore may be understood as the lore of the folk where folk refers to the local or of common origin while lore is the cultural expressions. Representative of the cultural expressions of the common people, lore are basically verbal and unwritten as traditionally writing was limited to the privileged sections of the society. While the common masses or the rural people transmitted their experiential learning, perspectives, knowledge, and skill training, etc. through word of the mouth which gradually evolved into a folklore. Folklore includes but is not limited to a body of popular myths, narratives, or beliefs relating to a particular place, activities, or groups of people. Folklores basically comprise of the non-written local heritage and consists of the experiential knowledge passed down through generations mainly by telling or transmitted orally or in oral forms. This oral cultural heritage has numerous socio-political implications for the inhabitants of the region and serves as a mechanism for the transmission of the oral learned knowledge from one generation to the others. They form an essential

component of the '*rural cultural scape add*. Being oral in nature, folklores are marked by the absence of authorship and date of origin.

Folklore is an umbrella term and comprises numerous oral genres which include but are not limited to folk songs, folk proverbs, folk riddles, folk tales, folk ballads, folk paintings, and so on. These folk genres occupy a distinct position in the folk conglomeration and may be practiced by different practitioners. These folkloric expressions reflect significant insights about the ideologies, popular perceptions, and beliefs of the people. Folklore is also an essential marker of gender in society. To illustrate, folk songs are mostly associated with women and served as an outlet for their emotional expressions. Initially, folk songs received overt attention in the study of gender dynamics of any society. However, the development of comparative linguistics highlighted the covert role of folk proverbs in the construction of gender identity through communication and discourse. Sadly, folk proverbs are the most unsearched genre in the Indian context warranting future researches.

A proverb is a short but complete statement articulating wisdom or experiential knowledge. Nordquist (2018) defined a proverb as a short, pithy statement representing general truth condensed into a rhyming form. Miguel de Cervantes has aptly summarized it as "a short sentence based on long experience." Proverbs are self-contained or complete sayings as they are semantically complete and meaningful even if we don't know the larger context in which they are used (Noor 2015). The proverbs often have a deeper meaning and hence are layered and usually convey messages subtly. Being part of popular discourse, these folk proverbs serve as a valuable treasure trove and carrier of collective conscience. The proverbs are primarily used to teach, inform, edify, warn, caution, instruct and moralize the listener and to normalize any anomaly in social life (Noor 2015; Yakubu 2020).

Proverbs are viewed as a part of colloquial language, which occurs both in oral and written forms. Oral proverbs are linguistic structures that primarily thrive through oral narratives such as popular discourse, dialogue, and communication. Linguists believe folk proverbs are the simplest representative of folk philosophy or the smallest literary works. The proverbs are not merely a linguistic structure but perform a number of communicative and behavioral functions and play an active social role in the life of both speakers and listeners. Firstly, proverbs are regarded as wisdom texts derived from experiential knowledge and contain wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons, and advice concerning life handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth. Hence, proverbs widely serve to validate a culture which in turn promotes social integration. For example, proverbs are often used as an explanatory device for justifying common rituals, explanations, or institutions. Proverbs are also regarded as pedagogic tools and used as a means for teaching morals and values to the new entrants or children (Noor 2015). Besides, proverbs also serve to maintain social conformity exercising social control to

maintain the status quo. Thus, proverbs helped in regulating and establishing social control through talks and hypotheses of their experiential origin invoked acceptance and submission among the masses. Proverbs were also treated as an archaic dialect useful for the comparative philological study of rural or survivals of the prehistoric past useful for deriving cultures of the ancient past. However, recent developments in paremiology have revealed that these proverbs are not without their share of ambiguities and have also served to promote stereotyping and prejudices among the popular conscience (Noor 2015). These folk proverbs are not only full of sexist connotations and but are also expressions of male chauvinism and masculine hegemony. Comparative study of folk proverbs in other contexts has proved that proverbs as a genre has largely been associated with males and hence, are primarily used as a tool for establishing male hegemony. Women are mostly presented negatively in these folk proverbs and portrayed as objects, not agents (Noor 2015). Hence, this research posits that folk proverbs as wisdom texts are carriers of traditional beliefs, attitudes, and practices and have served to perpetuate and propagate patriarchal hegemony leading to gender discrimination and gender inequity in the given region.

Methodology

Though I was born and brought up in Allahabad town my parents grew up in the Purvanchal region of Uttar Pradesh. My father moved to Allahabad in the early seventies for higher education while my mother accompanied him after their marriage in the eighties. Both my parents possessed a huge reservoir of folktales, folk songs, folk riddles, and folk proverbs, and so on. Hence, folkloric items such as folktales, folksongs, riddles, etc. were and still a part of my life. My parents especially my mother frequently referred to folk proverbs during her conversation to emphasize or express her dissent with us. Although we could not decipher the meanings of these folk proverbs yet I was amused by these proverbs due to their tone or rhyming schemes. We would ask her to explain these phrases and would laugh hysterically over the overtones of these proverbs dismissing them as rural or illiterates' propositions. However, it was only during my training in Anthropology I was drawn to the merits of these folkloric expressions.

As I matured in Anthropology, I gradually realized that these folk proverbs were not just illiterate propositions but occupied a significant position in the spoken language of the people. These proverbs were regarded as pearls of wisdom often used to strengthen the arguments, to express generalizations, influence or manipulate others during conversation, question certain behaviors, satirize, ridicule or ostracize social ills, or poke fun at ridiculous situations during conversations (Mieder 1993). These folk proverbs exercised significant influence in shaping the discourse and hence, occupy a significant position in the verbal or spoken language. However, there are not many published resources

on folk proverbs in the given area except Dwivedi's compilation on Ghagh Bhaddari ki kahavatein (2019). Ghagh and Bhaddari's compilation is the single biggest source of folk proverbs of UP consisting of more than 600 folk proverbs. This book has been used as the main source of published proverbs for this study. A part of the proverbs was also collected through a snowballing approach using a key informant strategy over a period of more than 5 years. Using key informant strategy, additional 150 proverbs were collected through vernacular conversations in natural contexts, volunteer method, and focused interviews.

A geographical overview of the Uttar Pradesh

UP is the fourth largest state of India in terms of area. With roughly 200 million inhabitants, it is the most populous state in India as well as the most populous country subdivision in the world. It was created on 1 April 1937 as the United Province of Agra and Oudh during the British rule and was renamed *Uttar Pradesh* in 1950. UP is segregated into 75 districts with Lucknow as the capital. Lying in northern India, it is bordered by the state of Uttarakhand and Nepal in the north, the state of Bihar to the east, the states of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh to the southeast, the state of Madhya Pradesh to the south, and the states of Rajasthan and Haryana and the national capital of Delhi to the west. The state could be divided into two physiographic regions: the central plains of the Ganga River and its tributaries and the southern uplands. The major rivers are Ganga, Yamuna, Ghaghra, Saryu and so on. Being located in the Gangetic plains, the vast tracts of land are marked by the alluvial deposits making agriculture the primary means of livelihood. Agriculture is the main occupation of 66 percent of the population of the State. The net cultivated area in the state is 164.17 lakh hectares. According to the Census of India, it has a population of about 199,812,341 with a sex ratio of 933. The Hindus are the dominant religious group in the state followed by the Muslims and a minor proportion of Sikhs, Christians, Jains, and Buddhists. Hindi is the official language of the state and the mother tongue of most of the people (Mathur, n.d). Although it has an average literacy rate of 70.69% yet it fares poorly in female literacy with an average literacy rate for females being only 59.30% (Census of India, 2011). The pace of urbanization has been lower in the state. The level of urbanization has also been lower than in most other states.

Fig 1: District wise division of Uttar Pradesh



Source: Google Images

Results and discussion

UP is rich in oral expressions marked by the presence of a plethora of folk genres such as folk songs, folk riddles, folk tales, folk games, and folk proverbs, and so on. Although unable to attain a place in written literature, yet these proverbs occupy a special place in oral discourse. Due to their emphatic nature, these are widely used and play an important role in the everyday life of the local people. They could be found in the mundane conversations at home, bazaars, and *haat*. The folk proverbs touch upon a varied aspect of life and touch upon different domains of lives such as climate, weather, rainfall, cattle, the position of women, gender relations, and so on. These folk proverbs occupy are believed to have an experiential origin and hence are regarded as wisdom texts of the ancestors.

For the purpose of the current study, more than six hundred folk proverbs were analyzed from the previously published collections of folk proverbs of UP as well as collected empirically using snowballing sampling. A

total of 750 proverbs were analyzed for the purpose of this study. The subject of these proverbs ranged from climate, weather, agriculture, gender, and so on. Out of the total, around 100 (less than fifteen percent) proverbs had gendered implications. The proverbs concerning gender consisted of norms, roles, and activities deemed to be suitable for females in the social sphere. Hence, folk proverbs on gender explicitly focus on the status of the women in the household, their duties and responsibilities, norms related to marriage, widowhood, and so on. Most of these proverbs have been designed in a way where they lead to the *othering* of the females, propagating gender discrimination, and reinforce gender stereotypes. Sadly, these proverbs fail to recognize the agency and individuality of the women and present women as objects, not agents.

Table 1: Summary of the folk proverbs from the published as well as unpublished sources

	Collected through published sources	Collected through fieldwork	Total
Folk proverbs	600	150	700
Folk proverbs related to gender, gender relations, and women	89	12	105

The proverbs focused on gender are full of sexist connotations and promote gender stereotyping and objectification of women. For example one of the popular proverb concerning women reads as Ujaro ujaro sab bhalo ujaro bhalo na baal achi kali kamri kali bhali na naar उजरो उजरो सब भलो, उजरो भलो ना बाल अछि काली कामरि, काली भली न नार (*White is good but white hairs are not. Similarly, the black blanket is good but black woman are not*) strengthens discrimination based on skin color. By promoting fair women, it discriminates against dark-skinned color women. The obsession for fair skin is widely prevalent throughout the region as well as the rest of India. The fair girls are widely coveted and get married easily while a dusky or dark-skinned girl is a nightmare for her parents due to difficulty in seeking a prospective groom for her due to her skin color. It is important to note that India as a whole is marked by wheatish skin color not white as expressed in the above proverbs. Hence, this obsession for white females could be an outcome of the colonial imprint.

The critical review of these folk proverbs reveals interesting insights on the construction of gender and gender-based ideologies. These proverbs are based on the theory of human biogrammer and posit that men and women are genetically distinct. The biogrammer is a genetic markup that predisposes men and women to behave in certain ways based on their biological sexes. Tiger and Fox claimed that although men and women possess similar biogrammes yet there are important differences between the two sexes (Haralambos and Mead, 2002). They argued that nature has selectively made men more aggressive and dominant compared to women hence, males are destined for politics and leadership. While women are destined to reproduce

and care for children. This biological proposition of genetic differential among males and females has led to the sexual division of labor in society. Interestingly, these propositions still continue to dominate the construction and treatment of gender cross-culturally.

This biogrammer theory has been used to normalize household chores as a woman's domain. For centuries, the biogrammer proposition has been used to limit woman's contribution to household work and establishing them as a homemaker. The woman's contribution in the household naturally limited their participation in the paid economic activities outside the household which in turn increased their dependency on the males promoting masculine hegemony in the household. Interestingly, the theory of maternal deprivation was added during the nineteenth century to reinforce their homemaker role. The theorem of maternal deprivation still forces the majority of women to voluntarily giving up paid work after the birth of the child increasing the vulnerability and dependency of the women in the household (Hazarika and Das, 2020).

The popular folk proverbs support this biogrammer approach and have promoted sexual division of labor in a household. In household, domestic chores such as doing the dishes, cleaning, and mopping are considered as women's domains while men are expected to participate in paid economic activities outside the household. Traditionally, agriculture is the primary economic activity in the given region. Although women have for long been contributing to agricultural activities yet their contribution is not duly acknowledged and they remain deprived of the monetary benefits of agriculture. Agricultural products or income from the sale of the agricultural products directly accrued to the males in the household limiting women's agency and autonomy in the household. To instill homemaker roles among the woman, the society praised and rewarded the good homemakers and condemning the poor homemakers as is evident in the folk proverb below:

Saanjh se pari rahae jo khaat pari bharehar barah baat ghar angan sab ghin ghin hoye ghagga gahire dehu duboye

सांझ से परि रहै जो खाट, परी भड़ेहर बारह बात घर आंगन सब घिन घिन होय, घग्गा गहिरे देहू डूबोय (The woman who goes to bed early, without cleaning, doing the dishes, whose house is messy should be drowned deep into the waters.

This rhetoric of good homemakers has had a strong impact on the construction of gender and still continues to dominate the gendered ideology. Right from the childhood, the girls are socialized into household chores. There are marked differences in the socialization practices for boys and girls in the household. The daughters are trained into a homemaker while boys are prepared for the outside world. To graduate into homemaker and caregiving roles, young girls are expected to participate in household chores helping their mothers. A

girl child usually contributes towards babysitting for younger siblings, assist in chopping vegetables, kneading dough or fetching water and woods for the household, and so on. This socialization in household chores is believed to increase their value as future brides (Haraldamos and Mead 2002) propagating the norms of a sexual division of labor.

Further analysis reveals that the folk proverbs are replete with sexist connotations and gender stereotypes. Full of discriminatory and derogatory norms towards women, these proverbs have led to the systematic demeaning and devaluation of the women in the community. These proverbs basically project women as less competent, efficient, and capable than males normalizing male hegemony. By supporting male or masculine hegemonies, these folk proverbs have produced unequal gender relations. Most of these folk proverbs portray women in a negative or subordinate position. For example, the proverb *Bagad birane jo rahe mane tiriya sikh tinahi yo hi jayenge pahi bohe eekh* says that the one who lives away from his house to the community, listens to his wife, and sows sugarcane away from his house are prone to suffer. This folk proverb intends to highlight the significance of living in a community but at the same time also demeans the advice of women and ridicules the man who looks forward to counseling from their wives. This proverb in particular has numerous implications. Firstly, these proverbs convey women as less efficient or incapable of decision making hence, their counsel is liable to bring suffering. Secondly, these proverbs also lead to the *othering* of the woman in the household. After marriage, a bride is expected to give her consanguineous kinship ties and treat her husband's family and kin as her own. She is expected to take care of her husband and his family as her own for the maintenance of the goodwill and well-being of her husband's family. Despite her service and obedience to her husband's family, a woman is regarded as an outsider in the family and this 'otherness' influences her integration into her affinal family. She remains an outsider in her family and her wit, decisions, or counsels are always taken with a pinch of salt. Hence, it is advisable that men should not seek counsel from their spouses owing to their low competence as well as a malevolent outlook towards the husband's joint family.

Interestingly, such outlook towards the woman continues to influence their status and position in the household till she graduates into a mother-in-law. All the hard work and the services rendered by the young woman as brides in their affinal family may not be acknowledged unless they themselves become a mother-in-law. Traditionally, the power and authority in the family are vested as per the age-set where the elderly are considered as more worthy and competent in leading the family. In a patriarchal setup family, authority is automatically vested into the hands of the elderly women of the family. It is believed that after years of services and participation in the household, a woman gradually develops skill which facilitates her integration into her affinal family and becomes competent members of the household. Their service in the

household over the years helps them achieve authority to lead the household. This leadership does not translate into economic control of the family but increase in her social status as a senior member in the household and the community. The mothers-in-law are highly regarded and considered as an anchor in the family. Owing to their experiential knowledge, they are responsible for the maintenance of the family including supervision of the member across several generations. Her expertise in domestic chores and experiential wisdom is valued in the social structure and brides are expected to learn intricacies of the management of the household from their mothers-in-law. Hence, mothers-in-law are valued in a household and their supervision is necessary for the graduation of the young daughters-in-law into prospective mothers-in-law. Following proverb is illustrative in this regard: *Bacha bail bahuriya joyee na ghar rahee na kheti hoye*. The proverb says that young ox and young bride are bad for agriculture and household respectively.

Traditionally Indian worldview, husband wives are regarded as two pivots of the household. They are compared to the two wheels of the grinding mill. As in a grinding mill, two wheels must function synchronously for grinding grains; similarly, husband and wife must work in tandem for the upkeep and running of the household affairs. Both men and women have equal liabilities in the management of the household. They are regarded as equal partners in the marital alliance. Sadly, the folk proverbs do not conform to this doctrine and on the contrary have promoted patriarchal hegemony by demeaning women which is evident from the following proverb: *Halkan bant kudari ho gohravain nari bhaiya kahi maange dama ye teeno kaam nikkama*. The proverb says that a person with a loose pickaxe, who refers to his wife with respect and one who is meek in demanding the debt from his borrower is worthless. Such proverbs have served to establish male domination and female subordination in society. Through verbal exchange and transmissions, these proverbs have served to strengthen gender inequality jeopardizing gender parity.

Besides, these proverbs have further idealized submissive behavior for women condemning the individuality and agency among the women. These proverbs dictate acceptable behaviors for the woman condemning the non-conformers. These proverbs eulogize meek and docile women untenable of individual agency and condemn assertive and vocal women. The outspoken woman who is able to articulate their voices are regarded as a threat to male hegemony and hence, are outrightly condemned. A number of proverbs criticize such women subjecting them to public condemnation and social ridicule. For example: *bail chamakana jot mein or chamkili naar ye baeri hai jaan ke laaj rakhein kartaar*. The proverbs say that an ox throwing tantrum in a plough and a smart and assertive wife is bound to bring disgrace to the family. Such proverbs serve to promote masculine hegemony downplaying the individuality and agency among the women. A similar message is conveyed through another proverb which says that a bickering wife and biting horse, and a doctor who

takes a bribe, cunning friend, and a burglar son should be drowned in deep waters (Naari karkasa katha ghor hakim hoike). Yet another proverb echoes an analogous outlook towards the bickering wives. “*Chilanga khatiya batal deh tiriya lapat hatae gahae, vega bigari kae satru milant ghagh kahae ye dukh kae ant*” | The above proverb implies that the person with asymmetrical cot, acidic body, who fights with his brother and with a cunning wife is doomed to suffering and endless pain. Such proverbs have inevitably normalized submissive behavior for the women invoking submission from the women gradually silencing the dissent among the women. The women are expected to remain silent, subservient, and succumb peacefully to the men’s authority and domination. There are innumerable proverbs which project man as the rightful owner of women’s sexuality and justify men’s dominance and control on the female sexuality discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article and warrant additional researches.

Summing up

This reflexive essay is based on the study of more than 600 proverbs from pre-collected sources as well as collected first hand in natural context through fieldwork. The paper tends to examine the construction of gender in the folk proverbs of UP and their significance in shaping the lives of millions of women in the state to gauge the merit of the MNS scheme. The critical review of the folk proverbs reveal that proverbs as a genre are part and parcel of the lives of the people and exercise a significant role in the everyday lives of the people. Being a part of spoken language, these proverbs are widely used to justify, explain, emphasize, or ridicule an action and used for the regulation of public conduct and morality through social sanction. They also invoke and hence act as a social sanction for maintaining the status quo. Most of the folk proverbs use popular imagery, common household artifacts, metaphors, or analogies to prove a point and hence are easy to understand and quick to grasp. Usage of the familiar contexts and reference to mundane items has made them popular among the masses such as the elderly, women, and so on. Due to their relevance and fit to the contemporary contexts, they are regarded as wisdom texts and people often look towards these folk proverbs in a state of dilemma.

The paper argues that folk proverbs not only serve as a didactical tool but also act as a pedagogical tool for the new entrants (Noor 2015; Yakubu 2020). These folk proverbs are very instrumental in the socialization of the boys and girls where they imbibe gender-appropriate roles both consciously and unconsciously through everyday interactions justifying Beauvoir (1949) that one is not born a woman but become one. He has rightly pointed that children are born asexual but they grasp their gender identity through socialization. Being an indispensable part of oral narratives, these folk proverbs are very powerful and instrumental in gender socialization instilling gender

roles among the children.

The critical analysis of these proverbs further reveal that these folk proverbs are sexist in approach and full of gender stereotypes reinforcing Gramscian perspective that the proverbs are the best examples of the hegemony of common sense (cited in Noor 2015). Folk are representative of collective consciousness and mirror masculine hegemony supporting patriarchy. The folk proverbs have also led to the objectification of women through stereotyping. These folk proverbs portray women in a negative light, naturalize woman as a homemaker, and ridicule vocal and assertive woman. It is important to realize that through repetitions and echoes these folk proverbs propagate stereotypes (Aich 2020).

The paper concludes that women empowerment is a distinct goal and can never be accomplished amidst such a negative outlook towards women. Our language directly shapes our motivations, perceptions, and reflections and helps in building the worldview of the entire community. Thus, no wonder millions of investments directed towards women empowerment have failed to achieve gender equity in the state. Widespread gender inequity and gender discrimination are the major impediments to women's empowerment in the state. The government has been investing heavily in the field of education and other incentives for increasing self-sufficiency and agency among women through numerous welfare schemes. Sadly, the welfare approach towards women empowerment has the field to yield desirable outcomes. In this backdrop, the MNS scheme is innovative in this regard as it emphasizes women empowerment through discourse as empowerment basically implies vesting power among the target group and the MNS anchors on discourse as a means for empowerment. The emphasis on discourse as a weapon for empowerment is not new and bounds one to reevaluate the propositions of Michael Foucault on knowledge and power. According to Foucault, discourse refers to a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. It is primarily a way of generating knowledge which in turn structures the social relations and collective outlook towards any issue. Foucault claimed that in the modern era, discourse is a handmaiden of the powerful and the dominant majority used for the subjugation and subordination of the marginalized groups. The dominant groups have been exercising control and authority over the target groups be it women, transgender, or other minorities using the power of social ridicule (Adams 2017). He further emphasized that the knowledge and logic produced by discourse are structurally related to the broader episteme of the historical period in which it arises. Interestingly, these discourses are not neutral and are influenced by the locus of power and often used to legitimize social actions by prescribing a set of rules for different cohorts in the same society. To justify their validity, the powerful claim these rules and categories as *a priori i.e.* originating before the actual discourse. Hence, historicity helps them gain social conformity masking its stereotyping

capacity. Here, it could be rightly concluded that folk proverbs have been used to establish male hegemony downplaying the position of women in the society normalizing homemaker, submissive, meek, and docile role for the women. Sadly, these stereotypes still continue to influence the lives of women as vocal and assertive females are shunned and ridiculed as home breakers.

Although proverbs occupy a significant position in the oral/ spoken language in the state yet there is a dearth of published works on the 'gendered' nature of proverbs. These proverbs occupy a special place in oral literature and are the most widely used of all folklore in day to day affairs of the people. Though their usage is declining among the youth yet the elderly have revived these proverbs through references and recommendations. Being part of spoken language, these proverbs continue to accessorize the conversations hitting the bull eye. Most proverbs are moralistic and didactic in tone and touch upon all aspects of life and activities. Gender relations are among the most significant topics of proverbs, most of which are full of sexist connotations.

To conclude, the proposition proverbs as wisdom texts must be taken with a pinch of salt. As a representative of collective consciousness, these folk proverbs are not objective and unbiased. As an example of common sentiment, they put forward only partial reality i.e. the reality as experienced by the powerful and authority figure. And it is widely known that these powerful and mighty have gradually silenced the dissent through systematic subjugation. In the case of women, it could be aptly argued that these folk proverbs have been used to establish female subordination, and stereotyping to establish male hegemony. Interestingly, proverbs as a 'text' are treated as static but Noor (2015) found that different speakers may use proverbs for different strategic purposes, such as to establish and negotiate ethnic and gendered identities and power which varies on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, and a class of the interlocutors highlighting the variability among the proverbs in performance. Hence, these folk proverbs could be used for reviving the position of women in society and raising awareness on gender discrimination and women empowerment. Folklorists have traditionally glorified these folk proverbs as pearls of wisdom and insights of our ancestors. Their relevance and fit in the contemporary context have rendered them valuable elements of oral expressions. Nonetheless, their contribution to gender stereotyping and discrimination cannot be ignored. Thus, interventions on women empowerment must turn to these folk proverbs as tools for rewriting gender and gender-based ideologies to foster gender parity and promote women empowerment. Women empowerment could not be accomplished in a piecemeal fashion or through external interventions alone. Women empowerment could only be achieved through sustained gender sensitization and removal of discriminatory gender-based norms and practices through discussions and deliberations validating the effectiveness of the MNS in the long run.

Notes

1. Sharad is the Hindi festival of spring falling in the month of October-November.
2. Chaitra is the first month of the Hindi calendar falling in the month of March or April.
3. This article is also the outcome of an invited talk on women empowerment under the MNS scheme organized at the leading university in the state of UP.

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