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ECHOES OF THE DIVINE: CULTURAL MEMORY AND MYTH IN MAGAHI FOLK SONGS

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1.INTRODUCTION

Magahi folk songs are more than inherited melodies—they are living vessels of memory, belief, and cultural symbolism. Rooted in the Magadh region of Bihar, especially in places like Patna and Gaya, and spreading into parts of Jharkhand, these songs are deeply intertwined with daily life. Sung during farming, weddings, or rituals, they merge the sacred with the everyday and preserve traditions through oral performance.

These songs are not simply regional art. They function as oral texts transmitting moral values, religious beliefs, and cultural identity. The recurring appearance of mythic figures like *Dharti Mai* or motifs like *Sita's exile* reflect a worldview that sees the divine in everyday human experience.

Folk songs sung during marriage or sowing seasons are imbued with myth. For instance, when women sing lines such as "Dharti Maiya sun le pukar," they invoke the earth as a goddess—a blend of reverence and practicality. Similarly, references to Sita's departure in *Gauna* songs turn individual experiences into collective memory, connecting each woman's life with divine stories.

These songs are also sites of resilience. Many contain subtle critiques of patriarchy or hardship, using metaphor to veil their social commentary. In this way, Magahi folk songs reflect not only cultural preservation but also cultural resistance, especially from the voices of women.

In conclusion, Magahi folk songs serve as living archives. They document regional belief systems, encode ethical norms, and celebrate the divine in the ordinary. As oral traditions face modern erasure, studying and preserving them becomes essential—not just for academic interest but for cultural continuity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Oral Traditions as Cultural Memory

A.K. Ramanujan, a seminal figure in Indian folklore studies, emphasized the richness of India's oral traditions. In his work *Folktales from India*, he curated a diverse collection of tales, highlighting how these narratives serve as vessels of cultural memory and societal values. Ramanujan argued that such folktales are not mere stories but are instrumental in understanding the complexities of Indian civilization.

Komal Kothari, a distinguished folklorist and ethnomusicologist, dedicated his life to documenting the folk traditions of Rajasthan. He co-founded the Rupayan Sansthan, an institute aimed at preserving the oral traditions of the region. Kothari's extensive work underscored the significance of oral narratives in understanding the socio-cultural fabric of communities.

2.2. Magahi Folk Songs: An Underexplored Domain

Magahi folk songs, mostly sung in Bihar and parts of Jharkhand, are powerful carriers of cultural stories, yet they've received little attention in academic circles. These songs touch on a wide range of themes—devotion, resistance, fertility, and even divine intervention—offering a deep, vibrant look into the lives and beliefs of the communities that sing them. A study titled *Coordination of Folk Principles at the Core of Magahi Folk Songs* delves into how these songs reflect the collective consciousness and suppressed desires of the community, often manifesting in dreams or omens.

Another research, *Magahi Folk Songs: Kaleidoscope of Life*, emphasizes the role of these songs in various life events, such as marriages and festivals, highlighting their integral place in the socio-cultural practices of the Magahi-speaking people.

2.3. The Role of Myth in Folk Narratives

Mythological elements are deeply embedded in Magahi folk songs. These songs often reference local deities and legends, serving as a medium to transmit religious beliefs and moral values. The intertwining of myth and daily life in these songs offers insights into the community's worldview and their relationship with the divine.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Songs as Carriers of Myth and Memory

Magahi folk songs serve as oral archives where myths are neither fixed nor distant but are actively reshaped through performance. One recurring theme is the **divine feminine**, often represented by deities like **Dharti Mai (Mother Earth)** or **Gauri Ma**, who symbolize fertility, protection, and endurance. In agricultural

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songs, the land is personified, and offerings are made through song as a means of sustaining harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. The act of singing itself is an invocation, a prayer embedded in rhythm.

In one such song, a woman preparing for sowing season sings:

"Dharti Maiya sun le pukar,
beej chhita ke maange ashirwad."
(*Mother Earth, hear my call,*
I sow the seeds and seek your blessings.)

Here, Dharti Mai is not just a metaphor—she is a living goddess, showing the syncretic fusion of **myth and everyday action**. Such songs keep indigenous belief systems alive, even in the absence of written scripture.

3.2. Role of Ritual and Oral Transmission

Folk songs are deeply ritualistic. During **marriage ceremonies**, songs are sung to invoke divine blessings while simultaneously retelling mythological events. For example, in **"Gauna"** songs (sung during the ritual where the bride departs for her husband's house), references to **Sita's exile** or **Radha's longing** evoke mythological analogies that elevate the bride's emotional experience to the level of sacred suffering.

Another commonly sung verse:

"Jaise Sita chali banwaas,
tahi re bidai mein roya sab paas."
(*Like Sita went into exile,*
everyone wept at her farewell.)

This verse draws a poignant parallel between personal emotion and epic narrative, reinforcing the cultural perception of womanhood as sacrificial and divine.

3.3. Songs as Sites of Resistance and Resilience

Beyond devotion, some folk songs also encode subtle forms of **resistance and resilience**. In songs sung by working-class women, veiled critiques of patriarchy or economic hardship appear in metaphorical language. Myths are sometimes reimagined to center female strength or critique unjust systems, reflecting how oral culture offers both **continuity and critique**.

In a harvest song, the singer might mock a lazy husband or corrupt zamindar, contrasting them with the divine order that rewards hard work and moral conduct. The **mythical and the real** thus blend to offer both **aspiration and social commentary**.

4. CONCLUSION

Magahi folk songs are more than expressions of regional art; they are **repositories of myth, memory, and meaning**. Rooted in agrarian life and domestic rituals, these songs capture the **cultural consciousness** of communities whose histories often remain unwritten. Through their recurring motifs of gods, goddesses, moral dilemmas, and seasonal rhythms, the songs encode complex worldviews in deceptively simple lyrics.

This study has shown how mythological references in Magahi folk songs are not static echoes of ancient texts but **living stories**, reimagined and retold by common people. Whether invoking Sita's pain at separation or seeking the blessings of Dharti Mai, these songs reflect a **syncretic blend of belief and lived reality**. They elevate ordinary life to the realm of the divine and, in doing so, become a form of cultural resistance and resilience—particularly for women, who are often the primary carriers of these oral traditions.

As modernization, migration, and digital homogenization threaten the survival of these oral traditions, it becomes vital to document, study, and celebrate them. Magahi folk songs serve as **cultural artefacts**, offering insight into how myths continue to shape identities, relationships, and values. They are not just songs of the past; they are voices of the present, still echoing with wisdom, memory, and quiet strength.

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