

Articulating Gendered Voices through Ritual Performance: A Critical Study of an Oral Archive of Awadhi *Sohar***¹Dr. Amit R. Prajapati**

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Article Received: 21/11/2025**Article Accepted:** 22/12/2025**Published Online:** 23/12/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.354**Abstract:**

This research paper examines the role of Awadhi *Sohar* which means a ritual traditional song sung at the time of the birth of a child, especially a son. The Awadhi *Sohar* has generally been found embedded with the gender, the practice of the rituals and the voices of the females very often suppressed. The *Sohar* functions offering a type of collective oral space through which the emotions, social expectations and anxieties of the female voices are articulated when performed specially by women during the time of the birth and fertility. Attempting to set this research paper on *Sohar* within the structural framework of oral traditional ritual performance, it is argued that these *Sohars* / ritual songs operate at the level of such gendered narratives that express true, live, genuine experiences that encode the social roles of women as the reproductive female machines having emotions at their hearts.

To state clearly, the meaning of the *Sohar* is for the celebration of the male birth only, thus converting the discourse into the direction of silencing the female voice, allowing the female to produce the voice for 'him', not for 'her' with a view to being imposed by the dominant cultural social structure. This paper reads Awadhi *Sohar* as an agent of vocal male agency where the performance of rituals turns into the model of gendered, i.e. prejudiced self-expression of the passive traditions. The formula to interpret *Sohar* is relevant when for few moments, females get symbolic deceptive authority to perform as rightly declared by Richard Bauman, "performance puts the act of speaking on display, objectifying it, lifting it to a degree from its contextual surroundings" (Bauman 1977: 11). This study projects to propose Awadhi *Sohar* as a text that discloses the gendered performance negotiated within the oral traditions of North India.

Keywords: *Sohar*, oral, ritual, folk song, patriarchy, gender

Introduction

This research explores the various stigmatized descriptions and superficial relationships among females in the folk songs of Awadhi. Awadhi literature has a great corpus of folk literature; essentially folk songs are the most important aspects of it. Here, the major focus of the research is to see the disparity in the portrayal of women and their gendered role. The demographic representation of females in all the social roles project them as insecure, cunning and weak. The role of gender is extremely emphasized in the songs that are collected by various scholars. Other than gender, the other segment that is criticized or scrutinized with much more rigorous sharp and poignant vantage point is caste-based classification. This particular research will focus much more on the gender description of various classes of women in various social roles. Regardless of what Gender studies have achieved overall in various categories, the way some of the folk songs talk about women in Awadhi, reveals a deeply rooted stern belief of entitling women to only the worst emotions. This kind of representations of women and men are actually very much common in folk songs. As folk songs are deeply rooted in the cultural aspects of society and the language in which they have been composed, the major part of it is how the culture used to portray them in general life.

What is *Sohar*?

India is multilingual, multicultural and multireligious nation. This multiplicity of Indianness makes India different from most of the nations. Differences of languages, religions, customs, rituals, food habits, costumes etc. allow richness to India. One of the examples of such a cultural and linguistic diversity in India is *Sohar*. *Sohar* is one of the types of the folk songs sung during the child birth, especially a son, in North part of India, particularly in the Awadhi region. Nitin Sinha in his article describes, “*Sohar* songs are sung at the birth of a child (usually that of a son) and tend to be gleeful” (Sinha 2018: 217). However, the opinion of a critic Arya Usharbudh differs when she declares, “The *sohars* . . . though expressive of the emotion of the joy at the occasion of the child birth, are more of a thanksgiving to the deities than a mere celebration” (Usharbudh 1968: 13). The *Sohar* is associated to rituals. To Marcus, *Sohars* are, “songs associated with specific rites of passage (*Sohar*, birth songs)” (Marcus 1989: 99). *Sohar*, sung as a part of the oral ritual, articulates not only the emotional but also the social reality of women of the North India. Embedded within the framework of the domestic ceremonial life, *Sohar*, sung collectively by a group of women which includes all—mothers, grandmothers, relatives etc., represents the ritual as well as the cultural necessity of the society. As a practice of the oral archival tradition of Awadhi, *Sohar* stores in itself social norms, rituals, values and memories of the generations of the society, that has somehow escaped the attention of the creative artists in the various literary forms.

Sohar also functions as a type of an oral narrative that provides a platform to the female voices to help them acquire their legitimate position in the society. All the folk songs cannot, can never simply be the decorative pieces to attract the ears of the listeners but they

constitute the meaningful and lucrative discourse of the cultural texts. Alan Dundes maintains that the folklore “provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of values, tensions, and anxieties” (Dundes 1965: 3). The form of the performance of *Sohar* as a sort of a ritualized expression of everyday speech allows women to articulate and express their not only joy but also fatigue and ambivalence within the accepted cultural framework. Thus, it can be said that *Sohar* is not only a celebratory birth song only but also a powerful instrument of relief for the women to live their lives with different experiences within the structure of the patriarchy.

Oral History of Sohar:

The *Sohar* actually belongs to the oral tradition, not a written one. Therefore, it is not easy to write a history of it. *Sohar* exists not in the book of history but in the performances of the events, i.e. oral traditions. *Sohar*, as a type of unwritten literary genre, is not born out of authorship but out of the living oral tradition that gets transmitted across generations through the female voices, their memory and through the performance of the ritual. Ruth Finnegan supports the oral history of *Sohar* stating, “Oral literature is by its nature dependent on a living context, a present situation” (Finnegan 1970: 2). The existence of *Sohar* is found in the performance, memory and repetition during the performance. Lord explains, “The singer of tales is composing in performance” (Lord 1960: 13). Jan Vansina commenting on the role of *Sohar* in the history says, “Oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature, whose preservation depends on the powers of memory and transmission” (Vansina 1985:1). *Sohar* has been created out of the written institution of literacy. *Sohar* for its existence rests on the oral memory, an oral archive of gendered memory. Thus, the existence of *Sohar* survives as a living repertoire, not as a fixed text.

The authority of the *Sohar* is examined out of the popularity of the *Sohar*. This authority comes from the oral authorship of those communal repetitions over many generations. Defining the oral history, Paul Thomson writes, “Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself.” (Thomson 1978: 1). *Sohar* lives in this principle recording emotional history of birth and relationship. The oral tradition of the history of *Sohar* blends the mythic past and the present life as Raja Rao rightly mentions in the ‘Foreword’ of his novel *Kanthapura*, “. . . the past mingles with the present and the gods mingle with the men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright” (Rao 1938: 5). The classical function of *Sohar* is that in it the myth works as a history. Jan Assmann’s views on culture declares that “Cultural memory preserves the past as present” (Assmann 2011: 37). Thus, the travel of *Sohar* from one generation to another turns out to be non-liner. If the *Sohar* is recorded as a history, Ruth Finnegan says, “Once oral literature is written down, it is no longer oral literature in the full sense” (Finnegan 1970: 5). Thus, in order to note, one can say that when the written collection survives *Sohars*, however *Sohars* fail to capture the complete sense of orality. *Sohar* automatically survives due to the need of it being sung at the time of the child birth. Later on, every generation renews it. The success of *Sohar* lies in its record of how people feel, believe and live, not in recording simply what happened.

History records the chronology of events whereas *Sohar* is not chronology but repetitions of significant rituals of the society.

Awadhi *Sohar*: Disguised Concept of Feminism through Oral Tradition:

Normally *Sohar* is categorized as an oral song of folk tradition sung during the time of the child birth. However, the feminist reading of *Sohar* may be attempted as a text embedded with a gender in which the women are found not simply celebrating the child birth but something more. The *Sohars* are the examples, to witness them as, the feminine texts, in which the women articulate their bodily experiences, their reproductive capacity to bear the labour pain, their kinship knowledge and religious authority. The definition of gender given by Joan Wallach Scott which provides theoretical entry point is worth noting here, "Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott 1986: 1067).

The history, written by a male, from the male point of view, can very easily exclude the female form of knowledge. This argument has been raised by many feminist theorists that systematically in an official way, the women have been excluded from the history. Michelle Perrot very interestingly argues how in a very easy way "Women are left out of history not because they had no role, but because their role was not considered worthy of record" (Perrot 2008: 12). The very idea of Perrot is supported by Paul Thompson when he says, "Oral history can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place" (Thompson 1978: 2). Thus, one has to say that *Sohar* also operates at a feminist oral archival level preserving the experiences of women that have been ignored by the patriarchy.

The female body gifted with the blessings of the childbirth is a biological labour woven with a social exploitation. As argued by Silvia Federici, "Women's unpaid labour in the home has been the hidden foundation of capitalist production" (Federici 2004: 15). Many *Sohars* describe the labour pain the woman bears during the pregnancy. While describing the labour pain, the *Sohar* indirectly resists the role designed for the woman by the man in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "Woman is determined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential" (de Beauvoir 1989: 16). Thus, *Sohar* attempts to reclaim the reproductive experience of a woman. The *Sohar* sung for the birth of a son reflects "patriarchal bargains" as termed by Deniz Kandiyoti who further states, "Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal the logic of patriarchal systems" (Kandiyoti 1988: 274).

Sohar successfully tries to transform pain and joy both into a mode of collective female expression. Sherry Ortner says, "Female power does not lie in the absence of hierarchy but in alternative symbolic systems" (Ortner 1974: 73). These rural women can be seen as the producers of the knowledge. When Gayatri Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak?", the context of *Sohar* replies 'yes', the subaltern can always speak, but orally,

collectively and ritually. (Spivak 1988: 66). *Sohar* through its oral form challenges the centrality of history as a text. Thus, *Sohar* becomes a crucial space for women to exhibit their emotions especially.

To remember here Christine Delphy who argues that the oppression of the woman is deeply rooted, not in the ideology but in the materialistic relationship within the members of the single family. To her, the household is a “domestic mode of production”. Here, the man has, in a systematic way, appropriated the unpaid labour of the woman, reshaping patriarchy as an economic system favourable to him. Delphy says, “*women are exploited not because they are workers, but because they are women*” and states further that *the family is not outside the sphere not to exploit (Delphy 1984: 40-100).*

Looking at a woman as a productive force is very common in a male dominating society. The woman should bear a child but the child must be a male. Margaret Atwood describes the agony of her female protagonist whose husband was not interested in her but in a son to be produced by her: “. . . I never identified it as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you're supposed to. It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn't prove it though, he was clever: he kept saying he loved me” (Atwood 1998: 22). The use of a woman as a reproductive force is idealized in the following *Sohar* as to bear a male child is her first and the foremost duty. In order to fulfil the duty, the woman prays to the Goddess Ganga. A woman however hardly prays to God for the birth of a female child:

“At the shore of Ganga a woman is praying,
O Ganga! In one of your waves, I want to drown.
Are you in laws torturing you, is your home faraway?
Or is your husband faraway in foreign land? Why do you want to drown?
Neither my in-laws are torturing me nor is my home faraway
Neither is my husband faraway; I want to die due to my womb.
Go to your home lady, your husband's home,

Nine months from today you will bear a son.
 Eighth month ended in ninth, a boy took birth,
 Come friends sing songs, we will sing *sohar*,
 I will call the *Naun* of the city,
 And I will go and pray on the shore of Ganga.
 I will the *Bajja* of the city,
Bajja will bring colourful clothes, I will pray on Ganga.
 I will call the *Dom* of the city,
Dom will bring musical instruments; I will pray to Ganga
 At the shore of Ganga a woman is praying,
 O Ganga! In one of your waves, I will offer you *piyari*.
 I will offer you *chunri*, I will offer you *piyari*.
 O Rani! You will have seven children all of them will live long"
 (Shukla 2020: 135, my translation)

The above song falls under the category of *Sohar* where the lady is requesting to river that the river should drown her as she is unable to have kids. She requests the river Ganga to allow her get drowned into her water, if She doesn't bless her with a son. The *Sohar* renders very clearly that the woman is never asked about her desire to be really a mother or not. A woman's being pregnant doesn't offer her the joy of motherhood, rather it turns out for her to be a burden of delivering a male child only. By celebrating the birth of a male child, the celebration of the birth of a female child is readily and directly denied.

Awadhi *Sohar* as Discourse of a Female Human's Suppressed Emotions:

Awadhi *Sohar* expresses the variety of human emotions, especially of women, of any type. When the *Sohar*-songs are performed in the courtyard / domestic spaces, they function not as celebratory songs only but also as a type of cultural commentary on a variety of subjects like motherhood, community expectations, births, gender roles etc. Through the oral presentation of the *Sohar*, the narration of the mythical story, human emotions in all forms get realized. Ortner states, "The secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals of human culture" (Ortner 1974: 73).

Motherhood, is something which might be a straining journey with a lot of ups and downs and women should celebrate in the manner they find it best. Irrespective of a woman's desire, the motherhood of a boy is imposed on her. The fact that in most of *Sohar* songs it is noticed that the father of the child is trying to pay neg, however he cannot even show his gratefulness or happiness towards the mother and child. The following *Sohar* presents in detail that the tormenter of the daughter in law is mother-in-law whereas the husband serves as a mere receiver of the actions that are taking place within their relationship. The hurt and punishment transferred to the daughter-in-law is frequented in many of the Awadhi *Sohars*. Shown in a very normal way, the pain of the son-less woman makes the heart of a woman cry:

The temple seems empty without lamp,

the parting in head seems empty without *sindoor*.

In the similar manner the lap of woman

seems empty without a son,

Everything seems empty, empty palace, empty farms,

nothing seems worth without a child,

Everything has been tried out,

all remedies done,

now when the lord will wish a child will play in my lap,

I will give my son to *Bhaarat*; in order to serve,

my son will serve the nation that will make my life worth,

I just have a last wish that my son should love his nation and serve his nation,

I will pray to God.

(Mishra 2016: 38, my translation)

As it is believed that the woman can get happy only when she delivers a child is illusion. Rather here, the woman is constantly reminded of her childlessness. Having delivered a child, the whole life of a woman is spent behind the child. The song shows that the mother will finally get value only if her son goes to the nearby city to earn money. Repeated celebrations of such songs always torture a woman from her within highlighting the social pressure imposed on her. Both the *Sohars* discussed here represent the issue of 'gender' at two levels. One at the level of the mother herself and the other is at the level of the birth of a child whether a male or a female child.

Conclusion:

In the conclusion, it can be argued that these songs like *Sohars* reveal the deep-rooted gender expectations imposed by patriarchy. The demand of giving birth to a male child endangers the very idea and pleasure of the motherhood. The reminders of childlessness through such *Sohars* expose how women's identities are constructed socially as the reproductive capacity rather than individuality. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly noted in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex* 1989: 283). She has emphasized to say that such roles of women are culturally imposed, not naturally. In short, in the words of Delphy, "the family is a central site of women's oppression" (Delphy 1984: 65). To simplify, to bring a woman to suffer is due to her own family, and none else. These *Sohars* as the cultural texts are commentaries of the patriarchal however sadist pleasure. The subjugation and celebration very often co-exist unknowingly within the practice of folk traditions. The discussion made here exemplifies how women have been very conveniently used by men to suit them. The role of the traditional *Sohar* singing has slightly changed turning to be neutral somewhere in some cases. There is no refusal to accept the fact that many people celebrate and sing *Sohar* after the birth of a female child as well but with a little in number.

Notes:

Bajja- a caste of venders who sell clothes

Chunri- a piece of clothing, a long scarf

Dom- a caste of venders who perform on music on special occasions
Naun- a caste of barber also people who groom
Piyari- an auspicious saree given at special occasions
Sindoor- it is a vermillion applied in the parting of the head of a married Hindu woman

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