



Khona: Indigenous Knowledge and Its Significance to the Society

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Abstract

The maxims of Khona, or Khonar Bachan, also known as sayings of Khona, are not only popular in West Bengal and Bangladesh but also in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. Aside from literary values, bachans have always played an important role in the lives of rural farmers. Though little research has been done on the importance of Khonar bachan and its significance in society, the contribution towards society is undeniable. This paper intends to show the indigenous knowledge of a medieval-period Hindu woman and its contribution to society. The research is based on secondary data analysis. This paper uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines literature, folklore, and social science.

Keywords: Folk Literature, folklore, Indigenous Knowledge, Gender, Khona

Introduction

The Hindu tradition in West Bengal has always been popularised at the village and street level. There is evidence of folk narratives and rustic versions of the Puranic and courtly literature from the medieval period (1500-1800) to the origins of Bengali literature in the 10th century. Traditionally, the stories, poems, and recitations, which embodied Hindu Bengal folk themes, were carried to the villages by meandering poets.

There is a widespread belief in rural Bengal about lizards. If a lizard calls out three times in a row while someone is talking, everyone assumes that the statement is true and correct. When there is no clear knowledge about a subject, someone makes an approximate guess and says something, and at such a moment, when a lizard calls out, people assume that the idea is correct. How does a lizard know the truth or falsehood of an event or information? And why do humans consider the call of a lizard to be the criterion of truth or correctness? To find out the reason for this, the folk history of a woman named Khona will come to mind. It is said that Khona was a learned woman. Many rhymes and sayings are popular in the mouths of people in villages. Her deep knowledge of agriculture, food, and weather is seen in those sayings. She had practical advice on all matters, such as when it would be best to do a certain



task, in which month it would be best to sow the seeds of a certain crop, and in which situation there would be a storm, hurricane, flood, and many more.

Ancient India's educational system was distinct in its objectives and character. Education in the past was a key component of improving living conditions and raising people's quality of life. It was often held that gaining knowledge and skills enabled people to accomplish their goals and deal with life's challenges. Not only philosophical subjects were taught, but general subjects like literature (religious and secular), arts, and sciences were also taught. Before the year 200 B.C., women were considered to be fully qualified to study the Vedic literature and make the sacrifices. During the Vedic era, they would become well-versed in Vedic literature and even write poetry, some of which were honoured by being included in the sacred canon. Khona, an Indian poet, philosopher, and renowned astrologer, is regarded in literature as a lady of the medieval period who wrote the well-known proverbs still widely used in Bangladeshi rural communities. Her life span is estimated to have been between 400 and 1200 AD.

To some, Khona's story is dismally inauthentic, making most folklore and her speeches an assortment of adages compiled over many years whose authorship is debatable (Chakravarty). The pursuit of education illuminated pathways to prosperity, allowing people to unlock their potential and cultivate a flourishing existence. During ancient times, education was considered an important factor that would substantially contribute to sustaining one's living conditions in a better manner. The participants, in general, thought that education would make it possible for people to accomplish the preferred goal for living an enhanced life. The completion of education has enabled women to lead lives that are worthy of respect and dignity. Women who are respected for their intelligence and expertise receive admiration from other members of society. However, because Khona's life and her statements have a sense of mystery and exoticism about them, scholars do not take her seriously.

Research Methodology

This study emphasises on the synthesis of symbolic languages, found in Khona's collected maxims. My study focuses on the influence of the practice of indigenous materials on social and cultural aspects. Mainly, secondary data have been used for this study. Various journals, articles and web resources are the sources from where data and related information have been



procured.

History of Khona

According to Purabi Basu, Khona's life is the subject of five legends. Her life is said to have taken place between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Despite variations in time and precise location, the legends tell the same stories, all three of the principal actors in Khona's life is the subject of five legends, Khona, Khona's spouse Mihir, and her spouse's father (father-in-law) Boroha (Varaha), who doesn't acknowledge her popularity among the commoners. According to folklore, Boroha Mihira (Varaha Mihira) was a well-known mathematician and astrologer who lived in Ujjain during the latter years of the Gupta era. King Vikram Aditya's royal court included Boroha as a crucial member. A son with an unlucky lifeline was born to the wife of a well-known astrologer. His father, the well-known Boroha, was amazed by the young boy's horoscope when he drew it. The unfortunate boy was expected to pass away within the year. Boroha devised a scheme to avert the fateful prophecy, which compelled him to leave his sole kid aboard a ship and allow it to sink in the river. Later, the infant was taken to Sinhala, which is now Sri Lanka, and reared by the country's monarch. He then married the king's daughter (Khona) after growing up in the Sinhalese royal court. In order to reunite with Boroha, they later journeyed back to Ujjain together. Khona severely damaged her father-in-law's ego when she defeated him in an argument at Vikram Aditya's royal court one day. This is when Varaha gave his son the command to slash his wife's tongue, which he did, and Khona died from her wounds as a result of the ordeal.

According to literature, Khona was a woman of the past who wrote the well-known proverbs that are still widely used in Bangladeshi rural communities. She is thought to have been an ancient Indian poet, philosopher, and fabled astrologer. Her life span is estimated to have been between 400 and 1200 AD. Even if it is a folklore that includes millions of unresolved details, archaeology has been considered (Nuri, 151-155). Ironically, there are authentic Khona-Mihir ruins (mounds) 40 km northeast of Kolkata in a location called Deulia, close to Berachampa, Barasat. According to archaeologists, the particular location dates to as early as the third century B.C., between the Mauryan and Gupta dynasties (Nuri, 151-155).

While nothing is confirmed, Khona's character speaks of her promising skill in subjects like astronomy and mathematics. It has been found from various sources that she was trained in mathematics and literature, which made her interest in astronomy grow. Stories highlight her



wealthy childhood as the daughter of King Sinhal, now named Sri Lanka. While some stories portray Khona as the quick-witted daughter of sinhal, other stories depict Khona as the daughter of a famous mathematician, Bhaskaracharya II named Lilavati (Khona). Stories say that Bhasakara saw her daughter's remarkable intelligence and was mesmerised by her inherent gift, that he named his seminal works after his little daughter Lilavati. Bhaskara was so fond of her daughter that it compelled her to see her daughter's horoscope and was shocked to find that she would not end up in a happy marriage. He forbade Khona from getting married but could not change Khona's course of life. Though Bhaskara forbade her marriage, Lilavati did end up marrying Mihir. Not much is known beyond this story in literature or in history.

There is still profound confusion about whether Khona is a mystical character or not. Due to her opposition to the governing Hindu elite, Khona, an intelligent Hindu woman, was not recorded in history. She chose to follow the hedonist Charvaka, an atheist, instead of the Brahmins. It's possible that Khona never existed. The Khona myth was probably spread to lend legitimacy to the rural society's accumulated knowledge, which learnt from her experiences and transmitted it through her probables from one generation to the next. Apart from her writing, the only evidence that can be found in Khona's life is a village in the town of Berachampa in the state of West Bengal, also popularly known as 'Khona-Mihirer dhipi, whose relics have been excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India (Nuri, 151-155).

According to history, Khona was a woman whose teachings left a lasting impression on people's thoughts during the Middle Ages. "Khonar Bachan" or "Khona's Parables" covered a wide range of topics, including astronomy, life, livelihood, agriculture, philosophy, and more. The sayings of Khona, which have been passed down generationally, have helped the region's rural farmers practice locally traditional agriculture. Not much is known about Khona's parables, as well as her history.



খনার বচন

- দাতার নারকেল বখিলের বাঁশ।
কমে না কড়ু বাড়ে বারো মাস।।
- খনায় ডাকিয়া বলে। চিটা দিলে নারিকে
গাছ হয় তাজা মোটা। তাড়াতাড়ি ধরে।

হাঁচি বিষয়ক খনার বচন :

শয়নে ভোজনে উপবেশনে বা দাে
বিবাহ বিবাদে আর বস্ত্র পরিধানে
এই সপ্তকর্মে হাঁচি অতি শুশোভন
অন্য কর্মে শুভ নাহি হয় কদাচন
বৃদ্ধ বা শিশুর অথবা কফের যে হাঁ
যত্নপূর্বক যে-বা হাঁচে, কদাচ না বা
গোধনের হাঁচি হয় নিধন কারণ
জ্যোতিষ বচনে বলে অবশ্য মরণ

টিকটিকির শব্দ

দিকের নির্ণয় করি বুঝহ সুবুদ্ধি
উর্ধ্বভাগ হলে ধন লাভ কার্য-সিদ্ধি
পূর্বদিকে অগ্নিকোণে হইলে সদা ৩
দক্ষিণেতে অগ্নিভয় জানিবে নিশ্চয়
নৈঋতে কলহ বৃদ্ধি। পশ্চিমেতে ৩
বায়ুকোণে নববস্ত্র আর জয়লাভ
উত্তরে টিকটিকি হাঁচি স্থীলাভ কার

Figure 1: Bookcover of Khona's Bachan

Figure 2: Printed image of Khona's Bachan

Maxims of Khona and its significance

While researching, I discovered that Khona's sayings are founded on a shared understanding of the natural world, the climate, and human culture. Floods, epidemics, rainfall, droughts, ploughing, selling, buying cows and buffalo, how to spot nice cows and buffalo, growing different crops including rice, healthy growth of crops, construction of village buildings, and cultivation of sericulture are some of the typical topics covered in Khona's sayings.

“Dokhin duari ghorer raja,

Pub duari tahar proja,

Poschim duari mukhe chai

Uttor duari khajna nai”

(Transcribed in English)

This maxim summarises the orientation system. Khona was well-versed with the scientific portrayal of rooms. According to her south-facing rooms are best, while east-facing rooms will be comfortable; on the other hand, rooms facing towards the north are worse during winter, and west-facing rooms are worse due to overheating. Khona's Bachans are meticulous and scientific, where she portrays herself to be an exponential thinker and scholar. In one of her Bachans she says:

“Jodi sagar teere gutikapat

Shey botshor fosholer jaani kushalbaat

Shoshyopurno boshundora nahiko shonshoi

Khonar bachan kobhu mithya nahi hoye”

(Transcribed in English)

Khona's depictions were meticulous as well as immaculately correct. Here she says that if there are plenty of silkworms near the sea, then it is a sign of a good harvest. It shall be the year for farmers, as a good harvest will bring profit at home. These prophecies do not only make her audience follow her but also believe in her. Her Bachans like:

“Hath bishek kori phank

Aam kanthal pute rakh

Ghono ghono shoba na

Phol tate hobe na.”

(Transcribed in English)

Here again, Khona says to the farmers that trees should be planted 20 feet apart from one another. This will help the plants to grow healthy and give them more space to grow bushy. Khona here focuses mainly on mango trees and jackfruit trees. She illustrates more complicated instructions like:

“Thor tirishey



Phule bishey

Ghoramukho tero jeno

Bujhe shujhe kato dhan”

(Transcribed in English)

Here, Khona clarifies the most suitable time to harvest the crop. According to her, 30 days after the paddy plant blooms, after the first shower in 20 days and lastly after the topmost leaves bend in 13 days, it is the right time to harvest the crop. These depictions fall within the religious and educational parameters that displaced and made social revolt, especially when the depictions were coming from a woman.

Maxims of Khona, also known as Khonar Bachan, are still used as a guide by rural people even today. She is believed to live in a period when farming was the primary employment of the populace, her claims mostly pertain to agricultural methods. Her claims were not, however, restricted to the direct farming methods. She made many claims that served as remarks about a general approach to better life. Khona's verses are only known orally and are composed of rhymes and poetry in Bengali and local languages. Khona had excellent communication skills. She was well aware of how to communicate the essential messages to the populace effectively. She was well-versed in the language that the rural people would comprehend, and more significantly, she listened to their problems with a lot of attention and tried to remember them as well. As a result, she chose to spread the lessons through rhymes rather than the more traditional method of prosaic talk. In another instance, the relationship between women and nature/the natural cycle is evident, but Khona's wisdom came from an analytical study of climate patterns using astronomical and mathematical perspectives rather than just from an essentialised female intuitive knowledge of the natural world. According to Bandyopadhyay et al., Khona's verses were straightforward to comprehend among common people with the most basic guidelines for traditional agriculture in most of the eastern Indian subcontinent. Village farmers continue to use some of Khona's maxims in their contemporary farming methods. The time of sowing, harvesting, seasonal adaptation, and other important aspects of crop management are primarily highlighted in Khona's lyrics. She also mentions celestial influences on agriculture in a few of her verses. Her claims, which are still relevant in the modern era, were entirely founded on her observations of nature and daily life. Among



folk scientists, Khona is arguably the only one whose theories about nature and life have gained widespread acceptance. She made her own presence very strong through her own communication skill. She was among the firsts as science communicators and also a successful one. Her texts resemble the 13th-century composed Mangalkavyas in Bengal. Mangalkavyas are compositions written in vertical style in uncomplicated metric composition. It showcases the everyday dialogues focusing on the lower-class world with a detailed depiction of their style of economy. Just like the Mangalkavyas Khona's Bachans also had the narrative of the peasant world and their problems that they faced in their mundane life. This writings may not have huge impact on the upper economic section, but it did have an impact on the peasant class, thus making it a very impressive work with great literary significance on social as well as cultural history.

Conclusion

As we go through different sources, we find that the struggle of Khona in her life was very imminent and evident. Especially folklores testify to her life's contradictions and struggle to build up a stage and put up her voice for the public of all sections and strata. During the time of Khona, it was not very common for females to have education or to be trained in science, and it was even more uncommon to practice it professionally along with male contenders who were her own family. During the pre-modern period, there is hardly any information on educated women's role and their contribution to society (Chatterjee 2001). According to folklore, Khona's life has an abrupt end due to the insecurities of Khona's family especially Varaha who started questioning Khona's position as compared to him. Some of Khona's Bachans made Varaha question about his professional competency, which rebuked against her father-in-law and collided with his professional space between Khona and Varaha.

According to Ratnabali Chatterjee, Gargi and Maitreyee were the two most well-known women who were also remembered as mystic characters, just like Khona. Today we remember the names of Gargi, Maitreyee, and Lilavati (Khona) as symbols of ancient Indian culture who were treated as on par with men. This proves that integrity along with authority and power are not to be established as the typical men's notions go. Khona generated her own power and recognition through the acceptance among the masses. She was silenced to cut down her Bachans but instead it immortalised her and made her leadership exist even today, so many years even after her demise.



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