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Chapter Five

Language, Abuse and Ribald Bharani Songs

Performance studies ascribes an agency to words; it proposes that speech is akin to actions. Speech utterances are seen as kinds of certain performances; they ‘do’ certain things and can supplement the fervor of the major action. *Theripattu* literally translated as ‘ribald songs’ filled with innuendos and explicit sexual references act as a catalyst to the *thullal* of oracles in Bharani. There is a vivid and detailed description of the body and sexuality of the Goddess in *theripattu* and the reason behind such a tradition is still contestable. From appeasing the fury of the Goddess and calming her down to arousing her sexuality, these songs abet in effectuating a cathartic effect in the performers channeling out their concealed furies, anger, anxieties and frustrations. The sexuality of the Goddess is ostensibly celebrated and the devotees believe this praxis to be cherished by their Goddess. Here, ‘abuse’ is categorically transformed into an oblation without which they believe the Goddess would not be assuaged. Another view sees it as a commemoration of the event by which Buddhists were expelled from Kodungallur by subaltern groups singing lewd songs. It is a fact that Bharani songs confront the strong threat of censorship in the face of upper class morality and are thereby struggling to preserve its authenticity. These songs are chiefly oral in tradition and are fast-losing their original flavor. Besides, changes in the socio-economic realms have been reflected in the Bharani songs, thus proving its social congruity apart from its religious design.

Profanity is socially offensive language, also called curse words, cuss words, swear words, crude language, coarse language, oaths, blasphemy, vulgarity, lewd

language, or expletives. Kalpatta Narayanan notes in an article “*Chekuthante Vakkanu Theri*” (Expletive is a Devil’s Word) published in *Mathrubhumi Weekly Magazine*:

If there is a day exclusively for speaking expletives, it will be the day when the man sleeps most peacefully. That sleep will be under the contentious feeling of having spoken in the most powerful language, of having used the most potential tool, of having driven the point; of having utilized the unlimited freedom (Can the rest be called freedom?). Those who speak expletives derive the same pleasure as a mob moving forward breaking barricades. There is an ecstasy of breaking the limits in voicing lewdity. It has the addiction of a festival in which everything is permissible. (my trans.; 54)

Thus, this ‘verbal abuse’ cannot be tagged as a meaningless activity involving substandard language and non-literariness and precisely has a definite role in shaping human behavior and cognition. Society, everywhere, has a tradition of demonizing certain value systems and valorizing others. In contrast to the established and accepted human language, abuse uses an offbeat syntagmatic structure, and the performative impulse of abuse is positively higher. It can serve heterogeneous purposes and reflect sundry human emotions. Accordingly, a study of cursing or abuse with its neuro-psychological dimensions can be significant which is attempted in the ensuing section.

Neuro-Psychological-Social Aspect of Cursing

In the most fundamental level, cursing is understood as the use of language to wish harm on or blame someone/something. But the term cursing also envelopes its variants as swearing, obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, name-calling, insulting, verbal

aggression, taboo speech, ethnic-racial slurs, vulgarity, slang, and scatology (T. Jay 10). Swearing draws upon such powerful and incongruous resonators as religion, sex, madness, excretion, and nationality, encompassing an extraordinary variety of attitudes including the violent, the amusing, the shocking, the absurd, the casual and the impossible (Hughes xv). Undoubtedly, language and culture reciprocate each other and linguistics is an advanced academic discipline having longstanding purport as it is unequivocally trussed with human evolution and growth. Nevertheless, like sexuality, the study of cursing or abuse has been considered as a social taboo and hence has been literally distanced from the sanctified spaces of knowledge. However, by trying to analyze language minus curse words, we are in actuality ripping off the emotional and destructive aspects of speech.

To fill this lacuna, a new theory called the NPS (Neuro-Psycho-Social) Theory of language has been devised by Timothy Jay, who has extensively worked on cursing behavior that incorporates both the normal and unique properties of curse words dissolving the sacred-secular binary. Jay through her studies traces the answer to the perennial question ‘Why do we curse?’ She finds that humans swear for different purposes: neurological, psychological, and sociocultural. At a neurological level, cursing may be viewed as an automatic process, relying on the right hemisphere and subcortical areas. An example of automatic cursing is cursing in response to surprise or frustration. Alternatively, propositional cursing is not reflexive; it is creative and strategic. Propositional cursing is joke-telling and sexual talk (246). Thus, cursing serves a more visceral than a cerebral purpose, catering to the emotional needs of human beings at large.

Paul Broca, a late 19th century French physician, through his studies on brain damage, revealed that humans create language using the left cerebral hemisphere of the brain which is now known as 'Broca's area.' Aphasia (the inability to make fluent sentences) is a condition that damages the Broca's area. Jay proposes that Broca ignored the fact that these patients retained the ability to swear and express emotions even when they lost the ability to use fluent speech. The NPS Theory, predominantly, is meant to explain why people curse and why they choose the words they do. This theory is notable for its protean adaptability, decentralized structure, and the primacy it accords to the personal experience. We all curse, some use moderate words that are not repulsive to others and the mode and tonality of such words will be higher than on normal occasions. Formal swearing is a ritual of social compliance and obligation whereas informal swearing constitutes a transgression of social codes ranging from the merely impolite to the criminal (Hughes xv). Thus, the range and degree of cursing vary from person to person, nations, gender, race, class, genealogy, age, etc. Although swearing might seem frivolous, it teaches us a lot about how our brains, our minds, and even our societies work (Byrne 6). Seemingly, cursing is a necessity for human beings to let out their intense feelings.

In the NPS, two interlocking neural systems are important: (a) the cerebral cortex, which governs speech comprehension and production, and (b) the subcortical systems (limbic system, basal ganglia, and amygdala), which regulate emotional reactions such as approach-avoidance responses. These two brain systems play a central role in regulating a speaker's verbal expressions. Cursing may take the form of an automatic reflex (outside of awareness and difficult to control) or a more complex, strategic, controlled response

(consciously monitored) (T. Jay 20). Thus, cursing can be both deliberate and accidental. Further, an individual's knowledge and his language depend on one's subjective personal experience, psychological dispositions, and religious idiosyncrasies and on the culture in which one is brought up. As such, a person's style of cursing will be the product of both shared and intimate experiences.

Interestingly, it has been observed that we speak expletives using the part in the brain that controls human organs and not with the part that controls language. Emotional expressions draw words from a cursing lexicon, or cursing module, in the cortex. Curse words are embedded in the semantic neural network that develops and expands with experience (T. Jay 22). For the NPS Theory, cursing is never chaotic, meaningless, or random behavior — cursing is seen as purposeful and rule-governed. The goal of the NPS Theory is to generate likelihood 'rules' that underlie concepts of appropriateness, offensiveness, and humor. According to NPS theory, cursing may accompany any emotional state, though anger is mostly the primary dominant emotion. Additionally, it has several communicative functions. It is interesting to note that children acquire curse words as soon as they speak but they suppress it due to fear of punishment. This is an activity that "persists throughout life into old age" (T. Jay 25). Steven Pinker observes that words' denotations are concentrated in the neocortex, especially in the left hemisphere, whereas their connotations are stored in the neocortex and the limbic system, especially in the right hemisphere (*Language* 18). Also, in cursing, gender, identity, and power relations are tacitly embedded. When we hear a person cursing, we hear emotionality, hostility, aggression, anxiety, and religiosity. We hear a speaker's personality through his/her style of cursing (Pinker, *Language* 107). Simultaneously it

can be a source of humor and a means of sexual harassment, abuse, and criminal behavior. Also, just as slang within a particular community serves to produce a feeling of bonding and solidarity within its members, curse words also bond social groups.

Arguably, use of abusive language is an effective means of anger and stress management. Connie Eble noted how slang changes over time. Many negative and derogatory terms in the general informal vocabulary of English originated as blunt and coarse references to sexual acts, body parts, and bodily functions. With increased use in a variety of contexts, such terms lose their shock effect, sometimes even becoming euphemistic (58). If slang terms lose their taboo-ness, new terms must be invented to break the taboos again. Over the centuries the two spheres of the unsayable— the religious and the sexual/excremental, the Holy and the Shit, have given rise to all the other “four-letter words” with which we swear. A history of swearing is a history of their interaction and interplay (Mohr 3). Jay amassed the examples of curse words uttered in statements and noted the frequencies of different uses of each word. One set of words appeared to be used primarily connotatively: *asshole*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *bullshit*, *cocksucker*, *cunt*, *dick*, *douchebag*, *fuck*, *hell*, *motherfucker*, *pig*, *pussy*, and *shit*. This means that *asshole* and *bastard* are generally used to refer to a thoughtless male, not a body part and an illegitimate child, respectively. Some words were used primarily denotatively, not connotatively: *balls*, *blow job*, *cock*, *dyke*, *honkey*, and *tits*. Another group of words was used both connotatively and denotatively: *blows*, *crap*, and *piss* (140). Thus, curse words are packed with gradations of meaning used both denotatively and connotatively, changing contours as per the context. Jay observes that curse words have a long history of use as figurative speech in song lyrics (137). In abuse, words are strong and pungent as in

poetry. In ribald songs, we discern creativity and imagination, metaphor and metonymy, rhythm, and rhyme. Here we get to see that celebrated ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions’ categorically placing it as an offshoot of poetry.

It is interesting to note that most abusive language from any language of the world derives its most powerful tools from sexuality. Since the 1960s, many progressive thinkers have felt that sex is a source of mutual pleasure and should be cleansed of stigma and shame. Prudery about sexual language could only be a superstition, an anachronism, perhaps a product of spite, as in H. L. Mencken’s definition of puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy” (Pinker, *Stuff* 300). Society, everywhere, is afraid of sexuality; it is believed to be something hideous that must be done in secrecy and privacy. “Society creates and maintains the secrecy of sex. Eroticism is present only in humans” (my trans.; Narayanan 56). Sex has high stakes, including exploitation, disease, illegitimacy, incest, jealousy, spousal abuse, cuckoldry, desertion, feuding, child abuse, and rape. These hazards have been around for a long time and have left their mark on our customs and our emotions. To talk about sexual acts and sexual organs is unacceptable behavior. “A male-female difference in tolerance for sexual language calls to mind the stereotype of a Victorian woman who when heard a coarse remark would raise her wrist to her forehead and swoon onto the fainting couch” (Pinker, *Stuff* 301). Discerningly, sexual speech is taboo because sexuality is deemed to be taboo and if in society, sex is an accepted way of behaving, sexually connotative words may lose its inherent taboo-ness.

Taking this idea further, when did humans felt shame and the need to cover their bodies? The answer is not known. In the Bible, it is associated with the first sin by Adam

and Eve. Shame was, thus the effect of their sin. “Attire, beauty, manners, and culture might have arrived as a package” (my trans.; Narayanan 56). But humans always tend to say the unsayable and do the undoable. In doing so, they enjoy pleasure; the pleasure of being free; free from all bonds and chains. Thus, ‘abuse’ offers compensation for the loss of freedom, and it is in reality, a replacement for action.

Steven Pinker assumes that taboo language “enters into a startling array of human concerns, from capital crimes in the Bible to the future of electronic media” (*Stuff* 304). Furthermore, language is subject to strict bowdlerizing by the imperious institutions within a society that conclusively decides what is appropriate and what is not. They may be educational institutions, religious establishments, government, law, family, or business groups, etc. Pinker wonders, “But why would a democracy sanction the use of government force to deter the uttering of words for two activities—sex and excretion—that harm no one and are inescapable parts of the human condition?” (*Stuff* 304). Censorship is a contesting topic that is precisely connected to human being’s freedom of speech. History shows that societies tend to cycle through liberal and then conservative periods of speech censorship. In cartoons and comics, we often see these abusive words indicated by symbols for words termed ‘grawlfixes’ in the lexicon of cartoonist Mort Walker. Also, in music and film, expletive is often conveyed by a beep sound. In this regard, Jay asserts that though innumerable studies have been conducted to study the effect of pornography on viewers, they have contributed very little information about the detrimental effect of offensive speech on listeners. The recording industry and film industry are constantly called upon to censor music lyrics, computer and video games, rock video content, and motion picture speech without any supporting social science data

indicating a need for speech restrictions (250). In this regard, Pinker posits that to the “guardians of decency,” profanity is self-evidently corrupting, especially to the young. But he does not comprehend “how the mere hearing of a word could corrupt one’s morals” (*Stuff* 304). Agamben suggests that *sacrare* (“to consecrate”) indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, to profane meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men (23). The passage from the sacred to profane can be affected through ‘play,’ “it frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it” (25). He identifies profanation as a ‘political operation’ that deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized (26). Evidently, no scientific algorithms have been devised so far to count the gradations of taboo-ness of a word and it is generally those in power who define taboo words and takes necessary actions to restrict its use through policing and retribution.

Also, Ludwig Wittgenstein concludes that language is human’s boundary. In speech acts, we do not violate these boundaries, but we safeguard these boundaries, he argues. But profanity violates all impositions and the restrictions the society has created over years. Abuse at times can be very harmful phenomena as well as it belongs to ‘hate speech’ that can hurt more than the physical pain and may end up in serious fights including murder. The primary aim of abuse is sacrilege. We, humans, are bound by the walls created by the mores of society. Some are happy whereas others are unhappy with this position, he maintains (54). Restrictions only result in intensifying the effect of abuse, in a conventional family circle, it is strictly impermissible. In such a scenario the advent of an abusive word can shatter many habitual value systems. Similarly, the person to which it is directed is another key factor. Power relations create variations in the

connotations of abuse. When called at men exercising power, lewdity becomes punishable. On a higher plane, if it is directed at religion or god, then it is blasphemy. Narayanan presumes that when spoken between people of equal rank/status, it is just “abuse for abuse’s sake” (my trans.; 55). Hughes hypothesizes that swearing is governed by ‘sacral’ notions of word magic; its relative power to change the world. The ‘high’ varieties of swearing often violate the taboo of invoking the name of the deity, while the ‘low’ are often violations of sexual taboos, especially those concerning copulation and incest. “This dualistic juxtaposition of the binary opposites of the sacred and the profane, the high and the low symbolically represents the angelic and the diabolical potentialities of man” (Hughes xvi). Thus, context is a defining element in the use of expletives relying on which the words relatively lose or attain the disruptive effect.

Cursing needs not always rely on morphological words but can be communicated using gestures as well. Since verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are deemed to be accepted forms of language, Jay feels that curse too must be qualified as language. The single-word nature and the gesture-like quality of cursing are not sufficient to deny its language status. What makes curse words unique is their “deep emotional intensification.” Researchers have always been keen to exclude emotion, probably because language is easier to deal without emotion. The problem with cursing lies not in the phenomenon itself but scholars’ limited definition of “language” (T. Jay 254). Thus, the key to the ensuing problem is a lenient widening of the ambit of the definition of language and ascribing due place to this inexorable aspect of human behavior. Words are not permanent unless they serve a continuing purpose. What is unnecessary in language becomes obsolete. Then curse words, if it were not a necessary phenomenon would have

become obsolete in time. But, as we perceive, they have only grown both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Also, Steven Pinker considers language as nothing but an ‘instinct.’ A child picks up language without any formal teaching. Basic, elementary language is imbibed by the child through interaction with his natural surroundings as “people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs” (*Language* 18). A child is not exposed to abusive language and mostly it is only after physical maturity that one gets a complete implication of the abusive words they have heard or spoken. Usually, until a child attains a certain age it does not recognize the distinction between a taboo word and an accepted word. Language acquisition is certainly social conditioning. When an individual receives punishment for using certain words, they become aware of its unacceptability, but they do not erase it out of memory totally. It will be suspended there, within the deeper layers of consciousness, always tantalizing the memory and whelming to jump out.

Furthermore, Judith Butler in her book *Excitable Speech* presumes that when we say we are injured by language, we are ascribing an “agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory.” Butler ponders how this mechanism works if we were not ‘linguistic beings.’ She states that our vulnerability to language is a “consequence of our being constituted within its terms.” If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power (*Excitable* 1). Elaborating this notion, she argues that to be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. Not all name-calling is injurious. One is

not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, “one is also paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. In using an injurious speech against someone, a ‘force’ works upon that person being interpellated” (2). It can affect in creating an emotional experience of changed identity. Thus, for instance, when being called son of a bitch, a very popular and offensive abuse in the English language, the hearer goes through the trauma of having such an appended yet bogus identity. He naturally feels disgraced and mortified. Racist remarks also come under this category as it can hurt one’s feeling intensively. In calling names related to one’s caste/race, people often get offended whereas one should not be. This happens when that race/caste is ‘low’ in society and only such words are seen as derogatory. The language that is dignified or lofty contains a ‘negative reference’ to the ‘common,’ ‘every day,’ ‘crude,’ ‘coarse,’ ‘vulgar,’ ‘uncouth’ language (Bourdieu 60). He hypothesizes that the factors constituting ‘habitus’ are “transmitted without passing through language and consciousness, but through suggestions inscribed in the most apparently insignificant aspects of the things, situations and practices of everyday life” (51). The concept of ‘everyday violence,’ a term coined by Nancy Sheper-Hughes (1992) shows that certain hierarchies and inequalities are maintained less by physical force than by everyday practices of symbolic domination. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as a “form of violence that functions through the “purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition...” (2). Symbolic violence is actuated through certain processes as misrecognition where power relations are rendered “legitimate in the eyes of

the beholder,” condescension by which the dominant proposes a “purely symbolic denegation of distance,” and consent or complicity where the effects of the power are “inscribed in the bodies of the dominated” making them sensitive to public manifestations. Through misrecognition, the practices that can be potentially violent or complicated attain wide social acceptance through practices and discourses. Regarding condescension Bourdieu assumes that those who subvert objective hierarchies are those who are confident of their position in these hierarchies and possess the legitimate competence and the necessary symbolic capital (21). Žižek identifies symbolic violence as “embodied in language and its forms,” it sustains relations of social domination (1). In language, instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate, to exchange words, and such an exchange, even when it is aggressive, presupposes a minimum recognition of the other party (Žižek 50). Invisibility constitutes an effective tool of silent domination and silencing the dominated. Silence is not overcome by simply allowing the subaltern to speak, but a systemic and structural change is needed to enable them agency (Bhabra and Shilliam 67). Through such ‘subordination’ processes certain groups of the society, usually subaltern, are made a means of abuse. Thus, lower caste groups, women, transgenders, etc. supplement its popular vocabulary.

Interestingly, as in poetry, abuse is almost always lost in translation. Abuse is not necessarily hate speech. The one who speaks hate speech is imagined to wield sovereign power, to do what he or she says when it is said. Taboo speech is part of a larger phenomenon known as word magic. Through incantations, spells, prayers, and curses people try to affect the world through words, and taboos and euphemisms are ways that people try not to affect it (Pinker, *Language* 16). Taking into account the mythological

phenomenon of cursing in the Indian context, those who have the power to curse are gods, saints, or virtuous men/women. They attain this power from years of penance or through a life never deviating from the path of *dharma*. Kannaki cursed the Pandya Kingdom and the whole town was put to fire. She gained this power from being a steadfast, virtuous *pativrata* (“a wife loyal to her husband in Indian tradition”). Commencing from potent sources, even the mighty gods cannot escape from the repercussions of a curse. Indian mythology abounds in tales involving curse, and in most narratives, this phenomenon alone becomes the decisive factor. In cursing, seemingly, humans have copied the actions of his gods. Though humans do not possess the power to execute the words of curse into action, psychologically they experience an alleviation and respite after cursing. They have done their part and whether it would be fruitful is another matter. Cursing in its most literal sense invokes a deity to make something bad happen to someone. But the bloggers who give advice about “how to stop cursing in front of your children” are not explaining “how to stop calling the wrath of God down on your neighbors while your kids watch” (Mohr 10). And Keralites widely believe in the potency of words to cause harm upon others. They term this phenomenon *praaku* or *praavuka* that means cursing. It is believed that heartfelt cursing, if it is bona fide, even by humans can affect others. Greeks too catered to this aspect of cursing and believed that if at some point or other somebody cursed the ancestor of a family line, thereafter a moral taint lay upon his descendants (Fox 464).

Butler uses ‘citation’ in a specifically Derridean sense to describe the ways in which ontological norms are deployed in the discourse, sometimes forcibly and sometimes not. Linguistic survival implies that a certain kind of surviving takes place in

language. Thus, they transcend the limits imposed by time. “Language has often been called a weapon, and people should be mindful about where to aim it and when to fire” (Pinker, *Stuff* 310). To claim that language injures or rather to mention that ‘words wound’ is to combine linguistic and physical vocabularies. The use of a term such as ‘wound’ suggests that language can act in ways that parallel the infliction of physical pain and injury (6). Narayanan asserts that “Expletive is the medium of indecency, of making indecent, and of being indecent. In speaking them, you feel the same blood rush as slapping someone” (my trans.; 55). The same notion is emphasized when Charles R. Lawrence refers to racist speech as a verbal assault underscoring that the effect of racial invective as “like receiving a slap in the face. The injury is instantaneous” (qtd. in Matsuda 68). Also, Timothy Jay hilariously remarks, “After all, one might view cursing as an indication of evolutionary progress, saying words to people has replaced hitting them over the head” (255). Human kind is a diversified race and as long as there are differences between people, they are bound to create tension and hate resulting in hateful racist or ethnic slurs. But, on a more positive note, as long as the human need for bonding and sexuality is alive, abuse becomes a means of bringing people together. Basically, humans are animals with language, and they ought to express their animal desires through speech.

Butler argues that “If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence” (*Excitable* 6). Thus, language can be both life-giving and life-taking. Violence can destroy language and language too can create as well as subdue violence. For Elaine Scarry, the body is not only anterior to language, but she argues persuasively that the body’s pain is inexpressible in language, that pain shatters language, and that language

can counter pain even as it cannot capture it. She shows that the morally imperative endeavor to represent the body in pain is confounded (but not rendered impossible) by the unrepresentability of the pain that it seeks to represent (Butler, *Excitable* 5). Thus, one of the effects of torture is to efface its own witness as the victim loses the ability to document the torture that has occurred, they in a sense become paralyzed. We can also see language assisting violence, as in the case of interrogation. This urges Butler to raise the following question: If certain kinds of violence disable language, how do we account for the specific kind of injury that language itself performs? As a possible answer, Butler quotes Toni Morrison's reference to 'the violence of representation' that posits "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence" (*Excitable* 6). Hence, language is thought of "mostly as agency-an act with consequences." "We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but the language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both 'what' we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences" (Butler, *Excitable* 8). Thus, in effect, language is simultaneously the act and the effect.

Butler refers to MacKinnon's argument that "Pornography is a kind of hate speech and that the arguments in favor of restricting hate speech ought to be based on the argument in favor of restricting pornography." He has based his argument on the conception that "the visual image in pornography operates as an imperative and that this imperative has the power to realize that which it dictates" (qtd. in Butler, *Excitable* 65). Additionally, Butler in *Excitable Speech* puts forward the notion that "censorship produces speech." She argues that censorship usually appears to follow the utterance of

offensive speech (128). After certain speech forms have become offensive, some sort of regulatory agency comes forward to regulate it and make it 'appropriate.' Butler herself validates that this is a confusing statement that reverses the usual conventions.

Censorship is a productive form of power: it is not merely privative, but formative as well. Butler argues that all speech is in some sense beyond the speaker's control and hence 'excitable' (*Excitable* 15). If the law produces hate speech to legislate it, it also produces a culpable speaking subject in order to prosecute him or her. Thus, censorship, in effect seems to fuel the very fires it seeks to extinguish.

Steven Pinker notes:

More than any other form of language, it recruits our expressive faculties to the fullest...It engages the full expanse of the brain: left and right, high and low, ancient and modern. Shakespeare, no stranger to earthy imprecations himself, had Caliban speak for the entire human race when he said, "You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse. (*Stuff* 16)

Apparently, the curse is an additional creative faculty that language has gifted humans with and the shared apprehension towards abuse is fear; the fear that it might disrupt the veneer of civilization that is thought to guard several fragile human borne notions of sacrality and profanity. But however hard we try to suppress this aspect, the curse is an impulse or instinct just as language is, and will continue to amuse, abuse, or shock us. The following section of this chapter attempts a rigorous and exhaustive analysis of Kodungallur Bharani songs ill-famed for its nefariousness.

An In-depth Analysis of Bharani Songs



Fig. 5. 1. Jayan, Nimisha K. Oracles from Vallachira singing Bharani songs in temple portico on the day of *Kozhikkallu Moodal*. 22 Mar. 2017. *Private collection*.

Ribald songs or lewd songs or bawdy songs can be traced from all corners of the world, it is undoubtedly an essential feature of folklife, “obscenity remains a legal as well as a literary and social variable” (Cray xviii). This phenomenon has a profound history, emphatically related to human psychology and cognizance yet they are mostly ignored by the mainstream academia for being substandard and shoddy. These songs are an indication of a time when humans lived in a less monopolized society when instincts governed human nature than cultural norms. Unfortunately, much harm has been done to this tradition through the attempts of expurgation and relative sanitization making it fit into the moral schemata. The practical impossibility of preserving them due to the protest from guardians of public morality, self-appointed or legally comprised, has resulted in the waning of this fecund aspect of human nature. Eroticism once celebrated has been suppressed and pushed to the margins. However, vulgarity is a slippery concept as the

parameters of defining its certainty is abstruse. Words gain and lose colorings subjective to the vicissitudes in the mores of the society; a word once acceptable may become unacceptable.

The book *Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs* (1969) and its second edition that appeared in 1999 by Ed Cray has been a revolutionary step in this field collecting and documenting two hundred prevailing oral bawdy songs in America. In the book, he relates an interesting incident that throws light on the struggles and difficulties one faces in this endeavor. The great folklorist Vance Randolph from 1919 to 1954 gathered folk songs of a folk group called Ozarks, but owing to the censorship issues, he reluctantly had to publish an expurgated version of these songs excluding about 207 unprintable songs (Cray xv). Whether such a collection of ribald songs exists in India is suspicious, however, the scholars who have probed on the Kodungallur Bharani Festival though acknowledging the presence of obscenity in the songs have not attempted to file it. Probably, in a journal article “Sanitising the Profane” that appeared in 2013 authored by Shweta Radhakrishnan, an effort to analyze the songs is attempted for the first time including an appendix of translation of a few lines.

The conspicuous Kodungallur Bharani songs are sung in connection to the Bharani festival and are primarily oral. It is predominantly the presence of Bharani songs that makes the fest objectionable to certain groups of society. What we get in the name of *bharanipattukal* in printed form is a refined/sanitized version of these songs. These lines cannot enter into the accepted recorded versions or printed formats; censorship being one reason. And, not all Bharani songs are lewd. Some devotees do not sing *theripattu* and they sing *devistotras* instead which is not similar to the Sanskrit *stotras*. The language,

they use in these songs has a rugged charm, is in folkstyle, and full of slang. Interestingly, *theripattu* is set in the poetic meter *manjari vritham* (Adarsh 176). A comparative analysis of Bharani songs to the popular Sanskrit *slokas* describing the Goddess throws light on its essential nature. For example, the Sanskrit *slokas* describe Goddess in *Lalita Sahasranama* as “*Kameswara prema rathna mani prathi panasthani*” (“She who gave her breasts which are like the / Pot made of precious stones and has obtained the affection of the God of Love”), “*Nabhyala vala Romali latha phala kucha dwayi*” (“She who has two breasts that are like fruits borne / On the creeper of tiny hairs raising from her belly”), “*Kamesha gnatha sowbhagya mardworu dwayanvitha*” (“She who has pretty and tender thighs known / Only to her consort, the God of Love”), “*Ramana lampata*” (“She who is interested in making love to her lord”), etc. (Radhakrishnan 224). Further, in the Bharani songs, the Goddess is described as wearing “a crown of gold, in a hair bedecked with flowers,” “a face red as lotus,” “lips as red as a plum,” “having beautiful teeth,” “sparkling gold pots like beautiful breasts,” “body hair with a bluish tint / legs and perfect middle part.” Apparently, the similarity in explicit body detailing is impossible to not notice, but the aura of Sanskrit language protects them from harsh criticism and contempt.

Adarsh feels that in the twentieth century, the divide between different castes and sects in relation to the temple became more evident. During this time, the debates about the ‘vulgar’ nature of Bharani songs also began. It was as a continuation of these, cock sacrifice was banned and Bharani songs were limited to the temple premise (9).

Mithavadi-Book of 1916 contains a column that features a notice by SNDP (*Sree*

Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam), an organization of the Ezhava community in Kerala against Bharani in its thirteenth yearly committee. It is stated that:

The *poorapattu* sung during Cherthala Pooram and Kodungallur Bharani is against the community's increasing moral uprightness and any religious notions and it is intolerable and satanic to any human with dignity; hence it must be requested to Thiruvithamcore and Cochin governments to actively take action against stopping them completely; also this committee has decided to initiate the respective Ezhava Samajam members and chiefs to take necessary actions to separate Ezhavas from taking part in such shameful rituals. (my trans.; Adarsh 287)

This passage acknowledges the dissent faced by Bharani pilgrims even from the lower caste groups revealing the fact that the trajectory of this festival has not been an easy one. Bharani songs vary with places, as the singers incorporate sectarian contours into the songs they sing. The scheme of the songs gives room for greater flexibility and is updated from time-to-time. Cray notes that this is a universal nature of folk and there is no single 'correct' version of a song or a story. "Many folk songs are sung with stanzas interposed, transposed, dropped, or borrowed from entirely different songs because the singer felt like it at the moment" (xxiv). He also adds that "ribald songs do change over time, but at a rate much slower than do non-bawdy songs" (xvii). Ribald songs have a configuration that evokes laughter and shock and in most cases, their order and continuity are preserved by later generations.

Contemporary matters get reflected in these songs and they also serve as a means for expressing revolt and antipathy of the devotees toward the established systems. Shweta Radhakrishnan notes that *bharanipattu* has “long outlived its utility” (220). It has developed into a powerful socio-political tool capable of subverting the existing systems and hierarchies. Sweta identifies a sort of ‘self-censorship’ in the songs due to the intrusion of technology to the arena of Bharani, as the performers knew that their performances have a wide reach. But, this self-censorship is not so widely seen in today’s Bharani. We see the devotees freely indulging in the singing of ribald songs even in the presence of women and children in their groups (see fig. 5. 1). We often come across female oracles singing ribald songs without hesitation of any kind. They are at home with these songs as for them, singing is a ritual offering; it is certainly not something to be ashamed of.

In the article, “The Ribald Rites” that appeared in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (1991), Venu Menon notes:

In recent years, an *ashram* near Trichur around 10 kilometers from Kodungallur, has become the nerve-center of a concerted campaign to stop Therippattu, a practice integral to the Kodungallur Temple ethos. Swami Bhoomananda Teertha and his band of faithful of the Hind Navotthana Pratishthan have held road marches and public meetings to focus attention on their mission of refining temple practices which are retrograde or which violate the laws of the land. (32)

Reasonably, this passage notes the efforts undertaken by Savarna groups to stop Bharani songs in the year of 1991. Though the attempts of Swami created havoc, it had not been

successful in the occlusion of Bharani songs. After this day, several episodes of this incident were judiciously added to the Bharani songs, thereby making use of the very same means to oppose their oppressors.

Another question to ponder is: Whom these songs are sung for? Some believed that they sing it for Bhadrakali; to calm her down, returning from the battle with Darika. Arousing her sexuality was a means to propitiate her and most devotees cater to this popular belief. Some devotees sing their songs as a dedication to the Goddess herself, as they believe her to be a virgin and these songs act as a compensation for her longing for physical intimacy. Some believe that these songs were sung for Nalachan—a friend of Kannaki and Kovalan. When he revealed his desire for her, she asked him to come to Kodungallur. Later, at Kodungallur, Nalachan was turned into a stone. To keep her word, she calls upon her devotees to satisfy his desire by singing ribald songs. This version underlines V. G Nair's claims that these songs are sung to defile the image of Kannaki, the Jain goddess. Another group believed that these songs were sung for the retinue of ghosts of Bhadrakali. Clearly, these myths are as varied as the people participating in it.

As a matter of fact, Bharani songs are so infused into the cultural imagination of the populace that the name Kodungallur has become synonymous with *theripattu*. In popular art, as films, we perceive this tendency of stereotyping which underlines this popular sentiment. For instance, in the Malayalam movie *Chocolate* (2007), when the character played by Prithviraj Sukumaran telephones the heroine and abuses her by calling her names, to his surprise, she retorts with unexpected hurling of expletives that are unforeseen and unexpected from a refined and educated woman of her stature. This shock probes him to ask his friend if by any chance she hails from Kodungallur. Also, in

the Mammooty starrer movie *The Great Father* (2017), when a journalist inquires a policeman about the character of their chief police inspector, played by Arya, he replies, “*Vaa kondu Kodungallur, kai kondu Kannur*” (“Kodungallur by mouth and Kannur by hand”). It implies that the chief, is aggressive and licentious in speech, and in action, he is violent and haughty. Regrettably, this view in and out prejudiced hesitates to appreciate the comprehensive spirit of Bharani. Firstly, Bharani involves a whole network of rituals and performances, and songs are essentially one of the many facets of the festival. Thus, equating Bharani to Bharani songs is not doing justice to this labyrinthine religious system. Secondly, though songs are lascivious in many aspects, they cannot be extraneously tagged as infantile debauchery. It is indeed an austere occasion for the participants, assiduously clouded in a ritual clime. The very fact that singing of songs as a matter of course commences and stops at a fixed time adverts to this fact. Also, most steadfast devotees do not sing these songs out of the ritual context of Bharani. They perceive it as a consecration to the Goddess, which is kept as sacred as any other spiritual offering.

Observing the gender variations within the practice of speaking expletives, in Kerala, abuse generally exists in the realm of the male world and within these boundaries, it is acceptable to an extent. But formal spaces do not encourage the use of such words and are shunned as bad manners. However informal occasions give room for a libertine usage of language rather than the restricted vocabulary. A person has multiple personalities within one’s self that they consciously contain and project according to contexts. Seemingly, abuse belongs to the subconscious realm of the human mind. It is natural and direct in contrast to the formal language that is artificial and ornamental.

Culture tames the human mind and brain and manufactures normal civilized beings. But apparently, the inner consciousness of humans is at a perpetual tension with these restrictions. In stark contrast to the normalized beings, the subaltern existence is more or less free and lackadaisical. They do not pay heed to the intellectual demands of the society as such and the prevalence of abuse in everyday language is not seen as a crime as in elitist groups. Hence, when they offer something to the Goddess in the form of songs they speak in their tongues without any liquidation. In the initial contact, it may appear as outrageous and irrational to our sensibilities. After the first shock, we wake up to the ring of sincerity in their primitive thoughts, earnestness in their earthiness, the tinge of pain and anger in their smiling lips and beauty in their imagination.

In Bharani songs, innumerable songs are *devistuthis* glorifying Goddess as the Kannaki- Kovalan story, the story of the Darikavadham, story of Nanu Nair, and debate between Urakathamma (Goddess of Urakam Bhagavathi temple, Thrissur) and mother goddess of Kodungallur. Some other songs are based on topics as the story of Shakuntala, Usha-Aniruddha story, story of Mandodari and Ravana, etc. After *Kozhikkallu Moodal*, a group from Vallachira region of Thrissur, sing songs in the northern portico of the temple. Adarsh C. notes that there is a debate between the Goddess of Urakam temple and the Goddess of Kodungallur in the first song sung by this group. In it, the Goddess of Kodungallur is described as the daughter of the Goddess of Urakam, the father being Lord Siva. But these songs are generally not popular among the public, Bharani songs are almost often understood as synonymous with *theripattu*. Devotees use the term *pachapattu* to denote *theripattu*. They sing, “You want *pacha* songs...? / I can give you Ramayana songs as well.” By *pacha* they mean rawness, explicitness, and lack of

ornamentation, etc. Adarsh C. views that among the traditional singing groups the songs are not considered vulgar (164). Ed Cray posits that the folk songs with obscenity have survived compared to the ordinary folk songs. “Reason for this staying power is easily found: bawdy songs are funny. They have an elemental appeal; they entertain.” He adds that entertainment can be the only function of these songs as “titillation is incompatible with humor: the person doubled over in belly-aching laughter is not one capable of copulation” (xviii). Bharani songs are unapologetically licentious. Sexuality, in all its manifestations, forms the main theme of these songs. Evidently, the singers purposely choose mythological stories that allow for free and extended use of lewdity. For example; stories narrating the birth of mythical characters as Vavar, Vedavyasan, etc. Apart from this, there is another category of Bharani songs that do not follow a storyline. They are loose, flexible, can be varied according to the contexts. They generally use archaic Malayalam as medium, at times English words also crop up in these songs. In analyzing the songs, slang words most often used are *kunna*, *kanthu*, *pooru*, *pannu*, *oompi*, *mairu*, *pari*, *thayoli*, *ooki* etc. all of which are explicitly related to sexual organs and sexual activity. These are slang words, not accepted vocabularies in Malayalam language. The literal translation of *pooru* is ‘cunt’; *panni*, *ooki*, or *oompi* meaning ‘to have sex’ can be said to have similar connotations of the word ‘fuck.’ Literally, *kunna* means penis and *kanthu* is clitoris but translatable as ‘cock/dick’ and ‘clit’ respectively. A quick view of the popular Bharani song depicting the birth of Vavar can provide the reader with an insight into the narrative structure and developmental pattern of Bharani songs based on stories in general. It starts with an invocation to Goddess Saraswati in the tradition of epic poetry. The singer pleads her to “Shed your shyness and reside in my tongue.” But unlike

the familiar poetry, he salutes the “clit who is the mighty lion” residing in the temple and “Lord Ganapati’s cock and Goddess Saraswati’s cunt.” This shocking initial salutation to the deity of the temple provides a taste of the ensuing episodes. He then asks forgiveness to the scholars for the mistakes he might commit in the rendition followed by reminiscing the teacher who taught him the song. The song is interactive and he asks, “Friends, do you know who Vavar is?” Vavar is then described as the son of Lord Siva. When Siva took the *avatar* of Yaksha to kill Tripurar, the heroine of the story; Pathumma was born in Mecca Madeena into a middle class Muslim family. Meanwhile, Siva went to Mecca for hunting “with an erect dick.” He was enchanted by the beauty of Pathumma and he took the form of a tree to seduce her, “The dick as big as an elephant trunk / Took the form of small twigs.” When the tree flowered, it attracted people from everywhere and Pathu too went to get some flowers. Pathu ascended the tree, “the small twig touched the clit” and Pathu became aroused. Then Lord Siva took his own form. This is followed by a drawn-out description of the penis of Siva: His dick was “as big as an elephant trunk,” “as fritters stringed on a stick,” “like a butterfly perching in the headless coconut tree / struck by lightning in the month of *Idava*” and consequently Pathu “wavered in the tip of his dick as a large areca palm tree in wind.” Ed Cray notes that bawdy songs are emphatically heterosexual. Their viewpoint is masculine, even when sung by women. “Sexual intercourse, often in heroic bouts; penises of equally heroic proportion; cunts worthy of such cocks; seduction of the innocent but agreeable maiden-this is the stuff of bawdry” (xxviii). Then, the sexual union between them is explicitly described as “When the dick penetrated the slit, three-fourth / Her slit flowered as a fishing net” and “After the fuck, when the slit is full / The cream overflowed into the earth.” And thus Vavar

took birth. The story ends with a bio of the singer and prayer to the Goddess. Thus, the songs are profusely peppered with slang words denoting sexual organs and sexual activity. Understandably, large sexual organs including long penis and enormous vagina are frequent motifs of ribald songs in general and Bharani songs in particular. And, assuredly, the story of Vavar is a convoluted one, having no mythical background and also unheard in the popular version of Lord Ayyappa-Vavar story.

Translating ribald songs is an arduous task as while transferring the connotative values of lyrics into another language, its original flavors are mostly lost in the process. In this regard, Kalpatta Narayanan notes, just think of the original form of the line that can be translated as “to have sex with Kodungallur amma, a flagstaff like a penis is needed” (my trans.; 57). A sexual act in most explicit or rather perverted manner informs these songs and the rhythm and feet of the songs are mostly the same. Its tonality is not similar to other popular folk songs of Kerala as *Koythupattu*, *Naadanpattu*, *Vallapattu*, etc. No strict rhyme scheme is followed. Notably, they even do not hesitate to ‘abuse’ the Goddess in extreme metaphors. They sing, “Mother goddess is a sheer bitch / She shows her slit to all.” Even addressing her as a mother, they perpetually shower invectives on her and it is these kinds of ‘abuses’ that the ordinary devotees find obnoxious. Another such line runs: “Mother goddess of Kodungallur is not so innocent / She secretly fucked Lord of Guruvayur.” In the contemporary spiritual atmos of India, mere contemplation of the sexuality of divinities is considered a sin. Sexuality and spirituality are understood as two distinct paths, potentially detrimental to each other and hence always kept apart. On these grounds, Bharani performers take the liberty to ‘abuse’ the Goddess in the most unimaginable language.

Homosexuality, child abuse, sexual perversions, illicit relations, inter-caste sexual relationships, and any relationship banned or shunned by the cultured society are celebrated in these songs. Thus, the idea is to celebrate whatever society prohibits and says no to, at least through language. Undoubtedly, it is their way of expressing the deep-rooted resistance and anger. Cray asserts that the prevailing public opinion that somehow “bawdy songs are not appropriate for polite society, permits the bawdy songster to thumb his nose at the convention even as he relieves his own fears and guilt with laughter.” He finds that according to Freud and his followers, the function of bawdy lore is to permit people to air or momentarily relieve their fears of matters that are ordinarily taboo in polite society” (xxv). Thus, their function is more or less a “humorous assault on fear” (xxvi). This aspect in no way implies that they live a lecherous life of loose moral standards. Living in society, they too are prone to its strict moral policing tools. In addition to this, they carry the dragging weight of their lineage simply because they are born to the lower caste groups created by the society out of irrational and partial indexes. We have to oversee these songs in its inception stage in the Kerala history, a period of considerable oppression, untouchability, and indignation. But today odds have changed and we live in a secular environment promised by the Indian constitution. But unfortunately, the germs of the caste system have not died out completely; they are still potent, lurking beneath every practice of the society.

The songs continue to be sung as a way of carrying forward the age-old tradition. The devotees believe that their Goddess is pleased to hear these songs. In another instance they sing, “Oh, mothers and sisters, don’t be angry / This is not arrogance, but Bharani festival” signaling their helplessness and obligation. Even criticism of Bharani

songs is evident in some versions of the song; “Thus, to sing ribald songs here / Many louts are here” and “Hearing the ribald songs, women folk chuckled / And they clapped hands in rhythm” pointing to its entertainment value and acceptance among the audience. We can perceive their fondness to their Goddess who for them is no less than their mother. They sing, “What shall I offer as a gift to you who has / Nurtured me with your breast milk?” And their grueling poverty is echoed when they sing, “How am I to offer this (rice) / Mixed with stones, charcoal, and fiber?” Somewhere else, we notice apparent anger against the authority. These lines, “Oh, policemen, sons of bitches / Are you guarding slits?” show their bitterness at police, who in the past, acting as per the vested interests of upper classes unleashed terror upon the pilgrims and stopped them from singing songs. To provoke those groups they sing, “This year no ribald song must be sung / A telegram came from Goddess’s slit” and “They brought a ladder with thousand sticks / And pushed into Goddess’ cunt” indicating the mistreatment that devotees suffered at the hands of authorities which they believed was an act against the Goddess herself. Possibly, they sing this not out of irreverence to the Goddess, but as a slap on the face of moral policing of the upper class authorities.

In most songs, some usages proclaim women’s strength and power. In the song about the Goddess of Kodungallur, it is stated that she is assertive and not like ordinary women. In the song of Shakuntala, we can see Shakuntala demanding the country (Adarsh 166). But this is not always the case, in the typical raw songs women are objectified and we see a reflection of a male chauvinistic society that loudly asserts no matter how educated a woman is, at the end of the day what she needs is a man’s care and protection. Interestingly, even International names and topics find a place in Bharani

songs. For example, a line runs, “That *pooru*, this *pooru*, Tripooru, Melpooru / Singaporean *pooru*, Chinese *pooru*.” Here, relying on the word pun, the meaning of *pooru* being vagina, they imply that all women are the same, be it that of here or elsewhere. Further, they sing, “If the right of the land is with police / The right of the house is with dick.” In a more flagrant version they sing, “If the right of the bus is with conductor / The right of the cunt is with cock” and “When the dick is full, isn’t she a sinner / Who doesn’t let to fuck?” Ed Cray asserts “...bawdy songs reflect strong masculine viewpoint. They can be said to be reinforcing the male view of the women’s sexual role...” (xxv). Following this course, most Bharani songs glamorize misogyny, representing women as masochist demure sex objects. Another line runs, “Seeing a cunt, he is a hero / But after he cums, he is timid” and “Why boy, you sit silent? / Stoop and lick my ass.” Thus, Bharani songs seem to celebrate toxic masculinity proclaiming male ideals of virility and power synchronously projecting a warped idea of female sexuality. Every aspect of sexuality finds a space in these songs, including sodomy and homosexuality.

In yet another instance, they sing, “She showed off her lemon sized tits / And deposited four thousand rupees in the bank” and “There are women in Kodungallur who let to fuck / For a coconut half.” We see two facets of prostitution in these lines, of poverty and exorbitance. Interestingly, Cray observes that rape rarely figures in bawdy song. “Seemingly, the social-and sexual stigma attached to that act makes such a subject, by its very nature, beyond the bounds of true masculinity. The rapist uses force; the hero of bawdry uses wit... He may be a scoundrel as the rapist but by guile or sexual attractiveness, by deceit or straightforward seduction, he achieves his heterosexual ends”

(xxviii). For instance, in the song of birth of Vedavyasa, Kali retorts to the lecherous advance of saint Paraswara, “Oh, will saints behave so to young? / Will they show erect cocks?” He indignantly replies, “Hey, you have to learn by fucking oldmen / You idiot virgin cunt.”

Also, these songs touch upon highly sensitive topics so much so that sung outside this ritual space, these songs can disrupt the secular framework creating much chaos and disharmony between different religious groups. They chant, “Upon opening the slit of Christian girl / It seemed like a cut Christmas cake.” Also, there is evident anger against the upper caste sects. In the earlier episodes of Kerala history, even gazing an upper caste woman was prohibited and reprimandable. In those times they sang, “What’s inside the slit of a Brahmin woman? / It stinks like a rotten rat” and “Once a Nair went to fuck / A dog and Nair together fucked.” Thus, their imagination and ingenuity know no bounds. There is also a discussion of contemporary politics within these songs from time to time. As a possible reaction to the oppressive period of emergency of 1975 in India, declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, they sang, “Indira Gandhi who ruled India, did not have a penis to fuck... / So, she borrowed Reagen’s dick.” This can be seen as an obnoxious attack charging Prime Minister of an illicit affair with the then American President Reagen. However, as is the case with abuse, the literal meaning of the words are not to be valued to comprehend the issue at stake, these lines rather hint at the various political alliances that were made by Indira Gandhi during those times toning down her anti-American stance and the dark despotic period of emergency under her rule. The songs are similar to a curse word or calling names in which the intensity of the emotions matter more. Further, they did not hesitate to sing against even the royal power. “Though

the King of Kochi is child / He is smart enough to fuck madams.” These lines allude to the amicable relationship of royal families with the foreign invaders that only helped to push layman into deprivation and insecurity. Ed Cray documents a popular bawdy song *The Sea Crab*, 300 years old, sung in Elizabethan times. A line from this song runs as follows; “The old wife got up for to take a long shit / The god damned old sea crab grabbed her by the slit.” Now, considering a couplet from Bharani song, “In the eight-inch cunt of Brahmin lady of Palakkad / A leech slid,” an unmistakable analogy is noticeable in them, accentuating universal human nature.

Ostensibly, these songs are exaggerated as a cartoon picture. Just as a cartoon strip by magnifying a certain aspect throws light on the ugly side of reality, these songs mock at the vulgarity of human existence and its moral hypocrisies. *Theri* denotes words that have been thrown out of language. They have no place in the accepted structure of language. *Therichavan* or *therichaval* is used to denote people who do not fit into the normal societal norms (Adarsh 161). Narayanan assumes that the term *theri* might have originated from the prankish (“*thericha*”) boy, who is running after spitting dirt (“*theripichu kondodunna*”) over the white dress or someone fallen (“*thericha*”) from the basic manners. (Fallen woman and fallen seeds (“*thericha pennum thericha vithum*”) are probing me to consider them) (my trans.; 54). M. N Vijayan writes that our perception has become upside down and twisted viewing the “description of battles and murders as great, and the description of the birth of humans as obscene. That is why, we rever the battle descriptions of Ezhuthachan, and deem the songs celebrating human’s origin, celebrating fecundity as obscene songs” (my trans.; 162). Thus, inverting the accepted convention, *theri* can probably be hailed as the ‘normal’ vocabulary of humans and it is

the refined language that humans speak that become 'abnormal.' Hence, it can be assumed that whenever humans transgress into their normal self, *theri* comes into use.

Notably, abuse was an inherent part of ancient comic cults and later of carnivals. "Coupled with the cults which were serious in tone and organization were other, comic cults which laughed and scoffed at the deity ('ritual laughter'); coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones; coupled with heroes were their parodies and doublets" (Bakhtin 7). Also, obscenity has been recognized as one of the defining hallmarks of Greek Old Comedy. The Greeks referred to it as *aischrologia*, 'shameful speech,' considered as a marked language, transgressive in everyday speech but sanctioned within the generic and performative parameters of Athenian dramatic festivals. Henderson in *The Maculate Muse* comments on the obscenity of old Greek Comedy:

The cults, do seem, however, to have contributed to the growth of obscenity as a standard and accepted element in the comic performance: the use of obscene language to expose individuals and thus to make them comic was a standard feature of the cults...It was not merely the uttering of obscene language which appealed to the comic poets; it was the use of obscenity as a means of abuse, criticism, and degradation which attracted them and challenged their ingenuity. (Rosen 21)

In addition, ribald songs have been an indispensable part of ancient fertility cults. Chelnatt Achuthamenon notes about a Siva temple in Mudukkathurai, in Thalakkattu, near Mysore practicing an unusual custom; women coming from faraway places leave their blouses in one part of the temple, any man picking up a blouse can have sex with the

owner of that blouse. Also, similar practices can be traced to some other temples as well. He also claims that such songs are sung in Kottiyur Siva temple. In Sankaranayanar Kovil in Tirunelveli, devotees ‘abuse’ their goddess. In the Gangamma Jatara Festival of Tirupati as well such ‘abuse’ is performed. Ravindran records that in a tribal group named Muriyagond in Orissa, men and women after consuming alcohol dance intoxicated and fornicate (Adarsh 162). Further, Keralavarma feels that ribald songs are sung in Cherthala Pooram in Alappuzha district of Kerala as well. In Java, during the times when rice grains bloomed, people went to the fields and copulated (Adarsh 163). In the earlier, agrarian mode of living fertility rites were ceremoniously performed to increase the produce and harvest. The sexual union between a man and a woman was believed to help increase the fecundity of the earth. In many places, harvest festivals are marked by sex rites. The Bihu festival celebrated in Assam is a “period of considerable license.” Naga tribes of Manipur, a month after paddy is sown and again before the first fruits are reaped, organize a tug of war between men against women and girls, a period of relative license. The Bhuiyas of Orissa celebrates a three-day festival called Magh Porai, in which there are considerable promiscuity and intoxication, “all respect for blood relations are set at naught, and even sisters and brothers make indecent jokes regarding each other.” The Hos of Chotanagpur celebrate a feast in January, it is believed that during this period men and women are “overcharged with vicious propensities” and to give vent to these passions “servants forget their duty to their masters, children their reverence for parents, men their respect for women, and women all notions of modesty, delicacy, and gentleness.” Further, the Punjabs of Jeypore celebrate a month-long festival for a month, by “both sexes mixing promiscuously and taking partners” as per choice. The Kotas of

the Nilgiri hills and the tribes of Khondistan have a similar festival of “continuous licentiousness.” Bhattacharya views that the “association of sexual union with agriculture was universal.” By imitating the act of human procreation the primitive people tried to increase the generative powers of nature...” (35). Such rites abound in the Greek harvest festivals of Thesmophoria; tribes of Central America, Peru, backward inhabitants of Chili, New Mexico, Nikaragua, and other Latin American countries, Java and New Guinea to ensure the fruitfulness of the earth (Bhattacharya 36).

Thus, the singing of ribald songs is a universal phenomenon that can be traced in several cultures around the world. Victor Turner makes a detailed study of the singing of Rabelaisian songs during the Wubwang’u ritual in Ndembu. This is a curative ritual and while the participants collect medicines accompanied by dance, and sprinkle those medicines on the patient, they sing songs that emphasize sexual conflict and praise sexual union. They are believed to strengthen the patient both ‘sexually and bodily.’ Before the ribald songs, they chant a special formula, *kaikaya wo, kakwawuweleli* (“here another thing is done”) that legitimize the singing which is otherwise considered inappropriate. Turner in *The Ritual Process* states, “Wubwang’u is an occasion of licensed disrespect and prescribed immodesty” (80). Sexual promiscuity is not displayed but is expressed through words and gestures. These songs are in serial order. First, each sex belittles the opposite sex’s sexual organs and prowess and extols their own. They sing, “Today look at a wet vulva / Mother of penis! Mother of penis! // That will give you much pleasure....” The women jeeringly assert to their husbands that they have secret lovers to which husbands retort that all they get from women are venereal diseases. “A large vulva, a small penis / Look, a vulva as on a lion’s brow, // I will rub your penis / Mother, O

mother!” Later, both groups sing songs in praising the pleasures of intercourse. “Your swollen scrotum stimulates the vulva indeed / A strong vulva and a strong penis, // How it tickles like grass! Copulation is like sweet honey” (Turner 80). The whole atmosphere is “buoyant and aggressively jovial” (Turner 78). These songs fall into the category of “prescribed obscenity” that society allows for by withdrawing from its normal prohibition during periods of crisis. These songs bear an unmistakable similarity in meaning to the ribald songs in Bharani that underlines the fundamental human psyche.

Arguably, a similar vein runs in the Holi festival celebrated in Northern India. Holi involves disruption and inversion of the conventional social order, as well as a celebration of symbols of sexual fecundity (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 127). It is celebrated in honor of the Goddess Vasanti and is an occasion on which “the most licentious debauchery and disorder reign throughout every class of society. It is the regular Saturnalia of India. Persons of greatest responsibility, without regard to rank or age, are not ashamed to take part in the orgies which mark the season of the year” (Rousselet qtd. in Bhattacharya 35). Holi was originally celebrated by the Sudras, disrupting the normal social order by dousing people, especially upper class people, with colored powder or water. Women who are normally docile get a chance to get into the fun of dousing men or beating them with sticks. It is said that during Holi “the bully is bullied and the high are brought low.” Lewd songs, the consumption of *bhang*, a milk-yogurt drink laced with hashish are common features. “Holi is a threat not only to one’s clothes but also to quotidian morals since Holi madness has been known to inspire sexual licentiousness and promiscuity” (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 128). Again, Sammakka Saralamma Jatara, a four-day festival celebrated once in every two years at Medaram

village, Telangana is a subaltern festival commemorating the event of Koya tribes' revolt against the Kakatiya rulers denying to pay tax during draught. The matriarch of the tribe Sammakka was defeated in the battle and the myth is that Sammakka cursed Kakatiya rulers. Sammakka and Saramma, her daughter wielded swords much before the celebrated Queen of Kakatiya, Rudramma, and in their, memory *Jatara* is celebrated. In the 'liberating anonymity' of the fest, men cross-dress and transgenders and women equally participate in consuming beer and liquor, singing, and dancing with loose hair. Also, as hinted earlier, the Gangamma Jatara celebrated in Tirupati also includes a series of performances by lower caste males in female guises. It is performed as a reminder of the goddess's victory over Palegadu and for seven days men of specific castes of Tirupati perform *veshams* each of which is stylized to depict their castes and occupational groups. Flueckiger notes about Gangamma Jatara:

On the first two days, young children (mostly boys), dressed as *bandas*)...with the penalcode number 786 painted on their bare chests, beat the large bare feet of the goddess with neem branches while singing sexually explicit and/or "abusive" songs (*butulu*)... in the framework of the jatara aesthetics of excess, the songs help to create the excess (desire) of the goddess and at the same time fulfill it.

(45)

In this ritual, criminal behavior and sexual excess, two traits considered detrimental to the welfare of society is amply celebrated. Peter Manuel finds that among North India's regional music scenes 'spicy' songs portraying the traditional flirtation between the young wife and her husband's younger brother are quite popular. Bhojpuri vernacular music also consists of similar spicy ribald songs. The Braj region to the southeast of

Delhi enjoys special renown in India as the legendary home of the God Krishna, in his pastoral amorous persona. It is famous for songs called *rasiya*, distinguished by “playfully erotic lyrics, abounding in euphemisms and double-entendres.” In these songs, there is an ambiguous conflation of the dramatis personae of the archetypal lovers, Krishna and Radha, with the stock devar-bhābhi/jījā-sāli personages of North Indian secular ribald songs (Manuel 110). Another set of ribald songs of Braj is *languriya* songs, though associated with the worship of Kaila Devi profusely use ribald innuendos.

Moreover, abuse is a ubiquitous phenomenon that often is taken for granted. We can sense the presence of abuse, explicit and inexplicit in mass media discourse. Humor with sexual overtones is profusely used in popular culture. Certainly, cinema is a medium that reflects everyday reality but is subjected to severe censorship making it conform to norms of decency. When other kinds of songs are not learned by the younger generation, “two types of folk songs are stubborn exceptions to this general rule: children’s rhymes and bawdy songs.” Gershon Legman writes that the form of humorous folktale falls largely into two classes: those with sexual themes involving castration or pseudo castration, and the scatological. The sexual joke dealing with castration reassures the listener with laughter; the scatological joke’s function is to shock. Castration can be in the form of contracting venereal diseases or homosexuality-which is “a psychoanalytic form of castration” (Cray xxviii). But ‘cultured’ society does not either relish the joke or stand the shock, and has its own tools of containing this nature. For instance, in 2018, Punjab police under their Cultural Affairs Minister Navjot Singh Sidhu decided to set up a ‘Punjab Culture Commission’ to eliminate “vulgarity in lyrics by working zealously

towards its complete eradication.” The commission is expected to take stringent actions against singers or artists ‘polluting’ the cultural scene of the state.

In a motion moved in the British court against idolatry in India in 1830, asking for the eradication of opprobrious behavior from Hindu temples, Mr. John Poynder, the pleader cites British historian Mill’s words that Hindu religion encourages the “loosest morality” and “depravity of manners,” and is a “religion which subjects to the eyes of its votaries the grossest images of sensual pleasure.” The worship of the “Yoni, and the Lingam, cannot be regarded as favorable to chastity” (Higgins 89). Poynder charges the Hindu moral text *Hitopadesha* to be essentially amoral, which an English scholar cannot translate but a “Hindoo lady, from grosser habits, might hear them without a blush” (Higgins 89). Poynder also cites Mr. Ward’s findings that proclaim Hindu religious practice to be dismally gross and obscene. He is appalled at the innumerable lingam placed in Hindu temples and the “daily worship of this scandalous image” among Hindu women. Ward chronicles the Durga festival in Calcutta in the year of 1806, “Four sets of singers were present, who entertained their guests with filthy songs, and danced in indecent attitudes before the goddess.” He was so appalled at the sight that he writes these people were “perpetrating a crime of high treason against the God of Heaven.” He continues that “at the end of the ceremonies the parties cook and eat the flesh of the sacrifice, drink the spirits offered to the goddess, and then in a state of intoxication the men and women dance together, and commit the greatest indecencies.” Further, Ward testimonies to have seen young men standing naked in front of idols, and young men dressed as women performing indecent dancing with men (Higgins 91). Ward further alludes to the female worship practiced in Hindu temples. After the worship of the

presiding deity, “the female who sits naked” before the idol is worshipped. He accuses this ritual to be corrupting the priests, “his passions are inflamed and his mind polluted.” He also asserts that “it is not devotion that leads the Hindoo to the temple, but a licentious appetite.” Ward also charges Hindu women to be infidel to the core (Higgins 92). Apparently, such forms of worship are not generally seen in the present religious atmosphere of India. Female worship, Durga festival, and Holi is still prevalent in the country but have become refined and cleansed; from these notes, we can understand that this has been largely due to the blight of the British concept of virtue and morality. Thus, the moral code of India has undergone a radical shift under the British puritanical rule. We cannot but laugh at the British historians’ infantile reactions to the *linga* and *yoni* worship and naked statues in the Hindu temples. In a sweeping generalization, they charge everything connected to Hinduism, including their epics, gods, priests, and devotees immoral. This intolerance to label everything ‘other’ as vulgar and ‘refining’ them is a typical colonial syndrome. And the present-day attempts to contain the surviving rituals and practices can only be seen as an extension of this colonial hangover.

We cannot fix Bharani songs in time as they are always evolving. We get a hint of their periods of its conception from fixing the topics mentioned in it. Also, there is no proper order or pattern to these songs. They can be sung in any combination, by mixing lines of different songs. This aspect gives room for so much novelty and freshness. Another feature of the song is that they are spontaneous reactions. They are sung in response to whatever the performers see in front of them while moving around. Thus, they ‘abuse’ the auto-rickshaw drivers, bus drivers, vendors, and the like when they chance upon them. Songs also change according to places and singers. Each group

incorporates their family history and lineage into the songs. Within Kodungallur, Bharani produced a male-dominated space. Women belonging to Kodungallur did not participate in the festival in the past, even as spectators. This is mainly because of the presence of ribald songs. Such an environment is not deemed to be suitable for women to be present.

C. Achuta Menon notes that Bharani pilgrims believe that if they do not sing these vulgar songs throughout their journey, the offerings will not yield the desired effect (16). This offbeat belief remains unaltered even today. With the popularization of virtual platforms, people are finding it easy to voice their contempt and protest against Bharani. Most people consider Bharani as an onslaught against Indian culture and heritage. But, rare enough, there can be heard voices that question the role of society in defining culture, vulgarity, and propriety. This eagerness to view anything comprehensively gets reflected in the present-day Bharani as well. While in the past it was considered improper for a 'cultured' woman to participate in the fest, now women belonging to Kodungallur along with their families take part in the fest as spectators. Thus, the taboo is broken and this is certainly a welcome change.

Adarsh argues that we see certain life elements that are simultaneously seen as sacrilege and a celebration. Sexuality is one such thing. Similarly, menstruation is seen at once as a lifetime achievement and pollution. Maybe this is due to the irony arising out of the merging of two different cultures (my trans.; 164). Subaltern goddess is a goddess with 'tits,' slit' and 'cunt.' Humans imagine their god in relatable images, mostly in anthropomorphic form and we do not know exactly when the tradition of using clothes for divine beings began. The sculptures of Ajanta and Ellora point to the celebrated sexuality of ancient humans. With the advent of pseudo-moralism, human beings came to

a consciousness that the body needs to be covered and the first step taken might have been to drape the gods. In their prayer to the Goddess they sing, "...I bow before you to relieve my sins // May the desire to fuck be always alive / Grant me *moksha* upon death." Intelligibly, these rustic folk have simple demands from their Goddess, and the very fact that they who ask her to purge them of their sins, in the next line asks for a fecund sexual life points to their idea of sexuality that is divorced from the notion of sin. To them, sexuality is simply one of the basic needs of life. Further, Bharani occurs in a thick framework of devotion. The life of each Bharani devotee is onerous; he stands firm devoting everything in their Goddess's hands, equally accepting the happiness and pain that Devi gives them in return. Their steadfast *Bhakti* is their lifeblood; there is no adultery in it. They who sing the *pacha* ("raw") songs are raw human beings. As in any other walk of human life, exploitations and shams might have crept into Bharani as well, but the dominant sentiment remains unaltered, namely hardcore *bhakti*. The attitude of the upper castes and authorities are reflected in the following lines by Venu Menon in his article, "Everyone agrees that the practice of singing scurrilous songs must stop. The general observation is that it has been on the wane over the years. State and temple authorities prefer to let the convention die a natural death" (32). In Bharani, the process of 'subordination' is inverted, the men and women of the upper castes become the popular idiom, and even those in power are not spared; more than the sexual renderings, it is this subversion that increases the shock value of Bharani songs. Those who advocate the need for banning this festival, on the ground of disturbing morality must sit back and ponder over the truth of morality. If humans had been a refined and superior race, child abuse, rape, murder, and war would not have occurred in this society. Vulgarities is

everywhere in human existence and is subjective; each period had its own versions of vulgarity. J. Devika, in an interview voices that the Indian tradition of wearing *sindhooram* (“crimson powder on forehead”) by married women, is essentially vulgar to the core and characteristic of “Indo-Gangetic barbarism” as this tradition symbolizes penetration and legitimate sex. Such vulgarities abound in every tradition, but since they are devised by the dominant groups, they are transmitted across generations. We see an anthropomorphized goddess in Bharani; she is a mortal woman having feelings of lust, love, motherly affection, anger, revenge, and pain. A community that views the female body as essentially vulgar and generates its values only in relation to male needs and desires may not be able to apprehend or appreciate the deeper levels of meaning embedded in this festival. The narrow mindedness that does not accept or tolerate anything deviant from normal or traditional values is the major impediment. To conclude this chapter, it is the inequalities, injustices, and violence prevalent within a society that must be considered obscene and vulgar and not sexuality or bodily activities. And if by Bharani, somebody’s moral values are in danger, then they must realize that those values are only skin deep.