



Khas Women's Harvest Folk Songs: Identity and Labour in Sikkim

Dr Bilambita Banisudha¹, Subham Peter Gazmer², Kritika Sharma³

¹Principle Investigator, Associate Professor, Sikkim University

^{2,3}Research Associate

ABSTRACT: This study presents a lyric-centred analysis of two Nepali harvest folk songs performed by women of the Khas community in Sikkim. Employing Functional Theory within a qualitative ethnographic framework, the research examines how formal elements—including imagery, metaphor, symbolism, repetition, and proverbial language—generate cultural meaning. Through close readings of Bhara bisā bhareyā and Mathi hai bata, the analysis demonstrates that these women's songs articulate experiences of agrarian labour, social hierarchy, marginalisation, and the profound connections between humans and nature in Sikkim. These songs function as oral literary texts that encode gendered labour, ancestral continuity, and moral reflection, thereby transforming routine farming into expressive cultural narratives. By integrating ethnographic context with formal literary analysis, the study foregrounds Khas women's voices as active interpreters and creators of social and ecological realities. It addresses a gap in Himalayan folk song scholarship by providing a lyric-focused analysis of women's agrarian songs from Sikkim. Ultimately, these songs are positioned as vital cultural artefacts that preserve collective memory, identity, and community values.

Corresponding Author:

Dr Bilambita Banisudha

Published Online:

February 26, 2026

License:

This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

KEYWORDS:

Sikkim, Nepali folk songs, Khas women, harvest songs, oral literature, agrarian labour, Functional Theory, Himalayan culture

Cite the Article: Banisudha, B., Gazmer, S.P., Sharma, K. (2026) Khas Women's Harvest Folk Songs: Identity and Labour in Sikkim. *International Journal of Human Research and Social Science Studies*, 3(2), 138-151. <https://doi.org/10.55677/ijhrsss/04-2026-Vol03I02>

INTRODUCTION

Folk songs convey cultural identity and serve as repositories of collective memory, moral instruction, and social history. In Sikkim, singing extends beyond entertainment, functioning as a means to document lived experience, preserve ancestral knowledge, negotiate social relationships, and foster communal bonds. For women engaged in agrarian labour, folk songs act as expressive and testimonial forms, reflecting the emotional, social, and material realities of rural life. Within the Khas community, women's folk songs occupy a central role in social and ritual contexts, performed during agricultural work, community gatherings, and domestic activities. These songs encapsulate interconnected themes of labour, kinship, and landscape. The two songs analysed - bhara bisā bhareyā and Mathi hai bata exemplify this cultural function. Orally transmitted across generations, they employ poetic texture and symbolic imagery to address endurance, exclusion, belonging, and moral reflection. Women's agency is evident not only in performance but also in the creation of imagery and metaphor, with each rendition reflecting adaptation and invention. Singers situate their voices within tradition and circumstance, transforming poetic devices into expressions of identity and critique. Bhara bisā bhareyā depicts the porter's social marginalisation and negotiation of village hierarchy, while Mathi hai bata connects agricultural labour to emotional longing, using cultivation as a metaphor for persistence and hope. These songs provide a gendered ethnography of rural Himalayan life, with Khas women interpreting their world through song. Building on the work of Eugenio (1996) and Bronson (1969), who highlight the cultural and literary significance of folk songs, this study applies formal literary analysis to these texts. It investigates how poetic devices, structure, and emotion link artistic expression with lived experience. This integrated approach, combining textual analysis and ethnographic context, reveals the songs as cultural texts and demonstrates how Khas women enact identity, memory, and resilience through song.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Folk songs are oral literature through which communities articulate collective memory, social values, and lived experience. Unlike written forms, they are fluid, permitting variation, adaptation, and reinterpretation across the generations (Way, 2022; Fagan, 1992). Lars has long recognised folk songs as cultural texts rather than simple entertainment, emphasising their role in encoding social structures, moral economies, and historical consciousness (Bronson, 1969; Dundes, 1965). In agrarian societies, folk songs often serve as narrative responses to labour, environmental dependence, and communal life, embedding everyday work within symbolic and poetic frameworks. In the Himalayan region, folk songs form a central medium through which rural communities negotiate identity, memory, and relationships with land and nature. Ethnomusicological studies show that Himalayan folk traditions are closely connected to ecological conditions, subsistence practices, and seasonal cycles (Bista, 1991; Nettl, 2005). Among Nepali-speaking communities across Nepal and Sikkim, oral song traditions accompany agricultural labour, ritual events, and domestic activities, serving both utilitarian and expressive purposes (Campbell, 1998; Fisher, 2010). These songs commonly employ repetition, simple melodic structures, and figurative language, making them suitable for collective performance while also conveying cultural knowledge. Scholars of oral tradition argue that folk songs should be examined as structured verbal art forms rather than as unrefined or spontaneous expressions (Foley, 1995; Vansina, 1985). Oral literature relies heavily on patterned language, symbolism, proverbs, and parallelism, which preserve and reactivate meaning during performance. Finnegan (1992) emphasises that oral poetic forms encode cultural values through formulaic expressions and figurative language that are intelligible within specific communities. From this perspective, folk song lyrics function as culturally situated texts whose meanings emerge through performance, context, and shared symbolic systems. Within South Asian and Nepali contexts, several studies have examined folk songs as reflections of agrarian life and social organisation. Campbell (2011) demonstrates how women's agricultural songs in rural Nepal synchronise labour while strengthening interpersonal bonds and moral expectations. March (2002) highlights how women's songs serve as spaces for emotional expression and social commentary, particularly in patriarchal village settings where women's voices are otherwise constrained. These studies establish that women's folk songs are not passive reflections of tradition but active sites of meaning-making that negotiate gender roles, labour relations, and social orders. Despite this growing body of scholarship, research on Nepali folk songs has often prioritised musical form, performance context, or ethnographic description over close textual analysis of lyrics. Many studies document genres, instruments, and festivals but offer limited engagement with the internal literary structure of songs—such as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and repetition—as systems that generate meaning (Sharma, 2006; Subba, 2008). Consequently, the interpretive potential of folk song lyrics as oral literature remains underdeveloped, notably in the context of Himalayan women's songs. Gender-focused scholarship emphasises women as the primary carriers of oral traditions, especially within agrarian societies. Women's songs frequently articulate experiences of labour, endurance, marginalisation, and emotional negotiation that remain underrepresented in formal historical stories (Bicknell, 2007; Campbell, 2011). In Himalayan contexts, women's agricultural songs accompany physically demanding tasks such as transplanting rice, weeding, and harvesting, transforming labour into collective, rhythmic, and symbolic activity. These songs often encode moral values related to patience, humility, kinship, and reciprocity, linking individual effort with joint survival. The Khas (Nepali-speaking Indo-Aryan) community of Sikkim occupies a significant position within this cultural environment. While anthropological and sociological studies have examined Khas identity, migration, and social organisation (Subba, 2008; Sharma, 2024), their folk song traditions—particularly women's harvest songs—remain comparatively under-researched. The existing literature tends to mention Khas songs incidentally within wider surveys of Sikkimese culture, without a sustained analytical focus on their lyrical content or cultural function. As a result, the voices of Khas women as creators and transmitters of agrarian oral literature are often marginalised in academic discussion. Ethnomusicology and performance studies provide useful frameworks for understanding folk songs as situated practices rather than static texts. Schechner (2003) and Moran (2017) emphasise that performance is a mode of meaning production in which sound, body, space, and audience interaction mutually shape interpretation. Within agrarian contexts, performance is inseparable from labour, environment, and social relations. Folk songs performed during fieldwork are embedded within rhythms of movement, cooperation, and endurance, transforming work into a culturally meaningful act. However, while performance studies illuminate context and embodiment, they often stop short of detailed lyric analysis. Literary criticism and oral literature theory offer complementary tools for filling this gap. Formalist and New Critical approaches argue that meaning emerges through the functional integration of a text's internal elements, including diction, imagery, symbolism, and structure (Brooks, 1947; Bressler, 1999). Applied to folk songs, this perspective enables scholars to examine how poetic devices operate collectively to express cultural themes. Dundes (1965) and Finnegan (1992) further argue that folklore texts employ culturally specific symbolism and proverbial language that require close reading within their social context. Recent interdisciplinary studies increasingly advocate combining ethnographic insight with textual analysis to interpret folk songs as both cultural practices and literary forms (Constancia, 2023; Fagsao, 2019). These studies show that close reading of folk song lyrics can reveal embedded philosophies, moral economies, and social critiques that may not be explicitly articulated in everyday discourse. However, such approaches remain limited in studies of the Himalayan and Sikkimese contexts, specifically about women's agrarian songs. Overall, existing scholarship establishes the importance of folk songs as carriers of cultural memory, gendered experience, and social values, yet discloses a significant gap in focused, lyric-centred analysis of Khas women's harvest songs in Sikkim. Most studies either emphasise ethnographic description

without textual depth or analyse folk lyrics without sufficient cultural grounding. This study addresses that gap by treating Khas women's harvest folk songs as oral literature and cultural texts, integrating ethnographic context with formal literary analysis to examine how figurative language, symbolism, repetition, and structure collectively articulate labour, identity, marginality, and belonging in rural Himalayan life.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has established the cultural, performative, and social significance of folk songs in Himalayan and Nepali-speaking communities, a considerable gap remains in systematic, lyric-centred analysis of women's agrarian folk songs from Sikkim, particularly among the Khas community. Much of the available literature prioritises ethnographic documentation, musical structure, or performance context, offering limited engagement with folk song lyrics as oral literary texts with internal poetic systems. Studies that do address women's songs often emphasise labour synchronisation, emotional expression, or gendered experience without sustained examination of how meaning is generated through figurative language, symbolism, repetition, and structural patterning within the lyrics themselves. Furthermore, research on Sikkimese folk traditions often subsumes Khas women's harvest songs under broader territorial surveys, thereby marginalising their presence in scholarly discussions. Consequently, the interpretive potential of these songs as culturally embedded literary expressions of labour, identity, and social negotiation is still underexplored. This gap accentuates the need for an integrated analytical approach which combines ethnographic context with formal literary analysis to illuminate how Khas women's harvest folk songs function as oral literature within the socio-cultural setting of rural Sikkim.

Conceptual Framework: Functional Theory

This study is guided by Functional Theory as a literary-analytical lens for examining song lyrics. In literary criticism, Functional Theory emphasises that the elements of a text—such as diction, imagery, symbolism, repetition, rhythm, and structure—do not operate independently of one another. Rather, each feature performs a function within the whole text, adding to the development of meaning and producing what is often described as organic unity (Brooks, 1947; Tyson, 2015). This approach corresponds with formalist and close-reading traditions in literary studies, which argue that interpretation should examine how textual devices work together to shape themes and cultural meanings (Bressler, 1999; Tyson, 2015). From this perspective, folk song lyrics are not simply collections of decorative poetic techniques; rather, their stylistic and structural features are meaningful because they function collectively to communicate community experiences, values, and worldviews. Functional Theory in this study draws on the wider tradition of formalist and New Critical approaches, which prioritise the internal relationship between form and meaning in literary texts. The concept of “organic unity” emphasises that meaning emerges from the interdependence of parts within the text's overall structure (Brooks, 1947). Similarly, literary-critical frameworks emphasise that devices such as symbolism, imagery, and repetition reinforce thematic coherence plus deepen interpretive understanding (Bressler, 1999; Tyson, 2015). The study connects Functional Theory to the interpretation of oral literature by recognising that folk song language is culturally coded and relies heavily on symbolic expression, traditional wisdom forms (proverbs), and repetition—features that contribute to both stylistic effect and social meaning (Dundes, 1965; Finnegan, 1992). The study considers how figurative language—metaphor, imagery, symbolism, personification, and proverbs—functions collectively rather than separately. Each device is interpreted as part of an integrated meaning system that reinforces cultural themes and affective expression (Tyson, 2015). The analysis shows how the structure of folk songs—especially repetition, parallelism, and metrical patterns—supports the development of themes such as labour endurance, social hierarchy, identity, and belonging. Thus, meaning is understood to emerge from the unity of structural form and thematic content (Brooks, 1947; Bressler, 1999). Because folk songs are oral literature, their language carries community-based symbolism. Functional Theory helps explain how culturally loaded words, proverbs, and symbolic references function to reflect social realities such as marginality, gender roles, ancestral memory, and human–nature relationships (Finnegan, 1992; Dundes, 1965)

Research Questions

1. How do Khas women's folk songs from Sikkim lend themselves to systematic and thematic analysis within ethnographic frameworks?
2. What formal features—including figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and structural repetition—shape these songs' meaning?
3. How do these stylistic devices translate everyday agrarian experiences into poetic and social commentary?
4. What do these songs reveal about gender, social hierarchy, and human-nature relationships in rural Himalayan contexts?

This research seeks to foreground the voices of Khas women within broader discussions of tradition. By integrating literary analysis with ethnographic insight, the study positions these songs as intellectual and emotional texts that articulate how rural women in Sikkim understand their labour, relationships, and sense of place through lyrical expression.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach within an ethnographic framework, organised into three primary stages: immersion in the field context, collection and documentation of lyrics, and analytic coding and interpretation. Fieldwork involved participant observation and interviews within the Khas community, providing direct insight into song performance and social function (Ortiz & Beach, 2013; Wolf, 2012). Folk songs were documented through audio recordings and meticulous transcription, with careful attention to preserving cultural nuance. Analytic coding combined close reading of lyrics with thematic and formal analysis. Throughout this process, Functional Theory served as the guiding analytical perspective, emphasising that features such as metaphor, imagery, symbolism, repetition, and proverbial language function interdependently to create unity and meaning. By integrating these steps, the study treats Khas women's folk songs as oral literature—cultural texts that reflect lived experiences, social structures, and human–nature relationships.

Data Gathering Techniques

Data were collected through a combination of field-based ethnographic methods and textual documentation, making sure that both cultural context and literary structure were captured. The researcher conducted ethnographic observations in Patuk, East Sikkim, to understand the contexts in which Khas harvest folk songs are performed, their social functions, and the roles of singers and community participation. Field notes were maintained to document observations on performance settings, audience responses, and the cultural meanings attached to the songs.

Interviews

To enhance cultural interpretation, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with elders of the Khas community. The interviewees were Thala Maya Regmee, age 63, from Patuk Chade in East Sikkim, and Dilmaya Dhakal, age 64, from Khamdong, interviewed on 02/09/2025. These participants generously shared a variety of traditional songs. The interviews explored the origins of songs, meanings of metaphors and symbols, social contexts, and changes in practice over time.

Documentation of Lyrics

The lyrics were collected through audio/video recordings of performances and written transcriptions from singers and elders. Songs collected through oral performance were transcribed carefully. Where necessary, translations were made into English while retaining cultural nuance and original meaning.

Sampling and Selection Criteria

This study uses purposive sampling to select folk songs that are culturally significant and thematically relevant to the Khas community. Purposive sampling is appropriate within qualitative ethnographic research because the aim is not statistical generalisation, but rather the identification of information-rich cultural texts that best illuminate socio-cultural realities such as labour, identity, marginalisation, hierarchy, and belonging. During fieldwork, a total of 12 harvest folk songs were collected through oral performances, interviews, and community-based documentation. From this broader corpus, two folk songs were selected as case studies for intensive analysis. This selection follows the logic of qualitative case study research, which prioritises interpretive depth, contextual richness, and cultural meaning-making over numerical representation. The two selected songs are not presented as statistically representative of the entire folk tradition; instead, they serve as culturally central and analytically dense examples through which broader community experiences plus collective meanings can be explored. The decision to focus on two songs supports the study's emphasis on micro-level textual interpretation, permitting detailed close reading and systematic analysis of figurative language, symbolism, repetition, organisational patterns, and thematic coherence. At the same time, the ethnographic relevance of these songs is established by their frequent performance, widespread recall among elders, and close association with everyday agricultural labour and rural life, making them highly suitable for functional and thematic interpretation. To strengthen the credibility of the selection, the study also employed triangulation by cross-verifying the cultural meaning and meanings of the selected songs across multiple sources of evidence, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with elders, and audio/video documentation of oral performances. This process guaranteed that the songs chosen for analysis were not selected arbitrarily but were validated as culturally significant texts within community memory and practice.

The selected songs were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Songs are closely associated with harvest labour and everyday rural livelihood practices.
- Songs containing rich figurative language, including metaphors, imagery, symbolism, personification, and proverbs
- Songs reflecting social realities such as hierarchy, endurance, marginality, ancestral memory, and belonging
- Songs expressing human–nature relationships, land symbolism, and environmental meaning
- Songs that remain actively remembered and repeatedly performed, indicating cultural endurance and shared community significance

Data Analysis Methods

The analysis follows a qualitative interpretive approach and is carried out in three interconnected stages:

Close Reading

Close reading is the primary method of textual analysis. Each lyric was examined line by line to identify meaning through language forms, word choice, and cultural references; internal connections between form and theme; and evidence-based interpretation (Tyson, 2015). Close reading included etymological attention to culturally significant words and compound meanings within the lyrics (Kusch, 2016).

Thematic Analysis

The study uses thematic analysis to detect recurring patterns of meaning across the songs. To make the analytical process more transparent, each theme is illustrated with a brief lyric excerpt. For example, social exclusion and marginality are highlighted by the recurring phrase “Hudainā ... ko bās” (There is no shelter for ...), which personifies place as refusing the porter entry. The theme of labour and everyday life is illustrated by the line “ropár la béw chara” (planting seeds every season), which marks the cyclical nature of agricultural work. Familial hierarchy and social roles are evident in references such as “Baba ko bew chan jél” (Father's seeds remain enclosed), which links authority and inheritance. Membership and identity surface in lines like “deu na mā deu na chautārni āmai” (Grant me a place to rest, platform mother), expressing a plea for inclusion. Ancestral legacy emerges through “Baba ko sáro” (Father’s stored abundance), while human–land relationship and nature symbolism are encapsulated in imagery of terraced and variable weather throughout “Mathi hai bata.” These themes were coded and interpreted using the analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Formal Element Analysis

A systematic analysis of technical and poetic features was conducted to examine how folk songs create meaning through artistic coherence. The study analysed figurative language, imagery, perceptual language, symbolism and symbolic patterns, proverbs and traditional wisdom expressions, structural repetition and parallelism, linguistic parallelism and rhetorical devices (Bressler, 1999; Tyson, 2015). The study consists of these parts, using Functional Theory to show how each formal device functions within a unified system rather than as an isolated technique.

Analytical Procedure

The overall analytical procedure was conducted in the following steps:

1. Collection of folk songs through fieldwork and documentation
2. Transcription and translation of lyrics
3. Close reading of each lyric to identify key cultural expressions and figurative patterns
4. Coding of themes and symbolic patterns throughout songs
5. Formal element analysis to identify poetic structures and rhetorical devices
6. Interpretation using Functional Theory to establish unity between form, meaning, and cultural context
7. Final synthesis of findings by connecting themes with the socio-cultural realities of the community

Ethical Issues

Ethical aspects of obtaining participants' consent while observing cultural norms and intellectual property, acknowledging contributors and tradition bearers, and making sure that documentation does not misrepresent community narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Song 1 - Mathi hai bata

Thematic Overview and Cultural Context

The song “Mathi hai bata” is sung by women, presenting an intimate relationship between the self and the agrarian environment. It reimagines cultivation methods as analogies for struggles, hopes, ancestral bonds, and inevitable limitations. Set within a distinctly Himalayan region of hills, terraced fields, and pastoral scenes, the song places women’s voices at the centre of the agrarian experience. Through their lyrical narration of farming labour, women articulate how rural communities understand themselves as intimately interlaced with land, weather, ancestral memory, and unpredictable fate. Thematically, the song explores the interweaving of human and natural rhythms through women’s agricultural labour, the inheritance of paternal and ancestral wisdom, and the precarity of rural existence, determined by fortune and faith. More profoundly, it elevates women’s agricultural work to a sacred act, an offering that binds the present generation to both ancestral past and imagined future, embodying perseverance, humility, and acceptance of forces beyond human control.

Formal Elements Analysis**Imagery**

Mathi hai bata employs richly detailed agricultural imagery to stimulate multiple senses, creating a visceral experience of farming labour:

Image	Sensory Modality	Cultural Significance
Mathi hai bata	Visual, kinesthetic	Topography defining Himalayan farming
Háli ra bausa ukalo laga	Visual, kinesthetic	Describes physical exertion and difficulty
Hatái ko marmai la	Tactile, kinesthetic	Describes manual labour intensity
Dhánai ma ropnu	Visual, tactile,	Describes central agricultural activity
Bádhou hai bhákari	Visual, kinesthetic	Symbolises prosperity and abundance

This image fulfils multiple functions. First, it grounds the song in the specific material reality of Himalayan rice agriculture, establishing it as rooted in precise geographical and economic practices as opposed to abstract idealisation. Second, the sensory richness of emotional involvement—readers experience the strain of uphill labour, the repetitive motion of planting, and the satisfaction of full granaries. Third, imagery establishes agricultural work as dignified, even noble, despite its hardship. The song refuses to present farming as mere drudgery; instead, it portrays agrarian labour as a meaningful, purposeful activity.

Metaphor

Central to Mathi hai bata is the extended metaphor in which agricultural labour represents broader life processes. Planting represents beginning, effort, and hope. Growth in fields represents maturation and accumulation. Harvest represents fruition, completion, and potential joy. Fallow fields represent periods of rest or deprivation. This metaphorical framework uncovers how rural communities conceptualise existence through agrarian cycles.

Agricultural Action	Metaphorical Meaning	Life Dimension
Ropár la béw chara	Beginning of effort; placing hope in future	Life's aspirations and investments
Háli ra bausa	Tools of labour: ancestral technology	Inheritance of working knowledge
Hatái ko marmai la	Direct Bodily Engagement	Physical sacrifice and commitment
Bádhou hai bhákari	Abundance and security	Achievement and prosperity
Deyená karmai la	Cosmic limitation on human effort	Acceptance of circumstances beyond control

The metaphorical structure reveals a philosophical outlook characteristic of rural Nepali worldviews: life calls for continuous carrying of ancestral dimensions, involves both human agency and cosmic forces, and cannot be wholly controlled despite diligent labour. The song rejects simplistic accounts that equate effort with success; instead, it acknowledges that even sincere labour remains subject to fate, weather, and forces beyond human control.

Personification

The song personifies natural forces and agricultural processes as active participants in human affairs. Rain, sun, soil, and growing plants are portrayed not as passive elements but as agents with their own wills and capacities. “dhánai ma ropnu gyan chupu chupu” Planting in silence, life hides/trembles. Personifies both the rice and the life-force animating the crops. The crops are depicted as living beings whose fates remain uncertain and somewhat hidden. The phrase “gyan chupu chupu” suggests that life itself is in crops. This personification conveys several meanings simultaneously: crops possess a life force that requires respect and control over outcomes, yet this remains limited despite human effort.

Symbolism: Ancestral Connection Through Farming

The phrase “baba ko bew chan jél” (Father's seeds remain in enclosed employ) uses symbolism to convey the idea of ancestral inheritance. Seeds carry paternal legacy—both literally and metaphorically. The notion of seeds being "enclosed" suggests potentiality awaiting release, ancestral knowledge awaiting activation and transmission through the current generation's labour.

Similarly, “Baba ko sáro” Father's stored abundance symbolises not only physical grain storage but also accumulated ancestral prosperity and security that the current generation inherits and must maintain. Farming becomes a means of maintaining this ancestral legacy—success in farming honours paternal inheritance and paves the way for prosperity for the next generation.

Symbol	Ancestral Dimension	Generational Meaning
Baba ko bew	Paternal knowledge and technique	The current generation's responsibility to plant and activate
Baba ko sáro	Ancestral prosperity and security	The current generation's duty to preserve and enhance
Háli	Inherited tools and technology	Continuity across generations
Kheta	Ancestral landholding	Inherited resource requiring stewardship

Proverb and Traditional Wisdom:

The phrase “deyená karmai la” Fate did not give functions as a proverb conveying traditional wisdom about limitations on human agency. This phrase acknowledges that despite sincere effort, positive outcomes remain uncertain. The proverb expresses acceptance of cosmic forces, karma, fate, and divine will that operate beyond human control. This proverb counters potential interpretations that farm failure represents personal deficiency or ethical failing. Instead, it situates agricultural outcomes within a wider philosophical framework, recognising forces surpassing individual agency. The proverb encodes cultural values of humility, acceptance of circumstances, and philosophical equanimity in the presence of loss or disappointment.

Structural Parallelism and Repetition

The song employs parallel structures throughout multiple stanzas, creating rhythmic and semantic unity: “ropár la béw chara ” repeats the action of planting, establishing an ongoing agricultural cycle. Each season brings renewed effort, renewed hope, renewed engagement with the same basic processes. This parallelism conveys both the monotony and the meditative quality of agricultural labour. Through repetition, everyday farm work becomes a ritualistic, sacred activity. The parallel structure assists oral transmission—listeners readily internalise repeated patterns, enabling communal performance and intergenerational transmission of song and the knowledge it encodes.

Environmental and Cultural Grounding

Mathi hai bata demonstrates sophisticated environmental sensibility, grounding its account and metaphors in a specific Himalayan ecological context:

- Topographical specificity: References to hills “Mathi”, slopes, and upland farming establish Himalayan geography as essential context
- Agricultural specificity: Focus on rice cultivation, “dhanai”, illustrates a major Himalayan agricultural product
- Seasonal cycles: Implicit references to planting and harvest seasons root song in annual agricultural rhythms
- Weather dependency: Recognition that outcomes depend on rainfall and sun suggests a sophisticated understanding of agrarian vulnerability to climatic forces

This environmental grounding prevents the song from becoming an abstract philosophical meditation; instead, it is anchored in the material reality of Himalayan farming, speaking specifically to communities whose survival depends on successful rice cultivation in mountainous terrain.

Synthesis

The formal elements in “Mathi hai bata ” jointly establish thematic coherence around labour, ancestral legacy, human-nature interdependence, and the acceptance of limitation. Rich imagery immerses listeners in an agricultural experience. Extended metaphors reveal how the concept of farming structurally shapes the comprehension of life itself. Personification portrays nature as an active agent deserving respect. Symbolism connects farming to ancestral inheritance and generational responsibility. Proverbs encode traditional wisdom concerning acceptance and humility. Structural parallelism facilitates oral transmission while conveying the cyclical, meditative quality of agricultural labour.

These formal elements do not function independently; rather, they reinforce and amplify one another. The organic unity of formal features with thematic issues demonstrates the song's artistic achievement and its capacity to transmit cultural values, philosophical orientations, and practical wisdom down generations.

Song 2: Bhara bisā bhareyā

Thematic Overview

The women’s song Bhara bisā bhareyā offers a moving account of a porter’s search for acceptance and rest within a village's common areas. Sung from a female perspective, it captures both sympathy and distance. Women giving voice to a story of hardship that

parallels broader social boundaries in rural Himalayan life. The song maps the porter's movement across shared village spaces: the courtyard, the spring, and the rest platform. At each site, his plea for shelter or recognition is met with refusal, as familial and community hierarchies assert control over who may belong and who must remain outside. Through these repeated denials, the song constructs a layered portrait of exclusion, charting how community spaces become sites of both inclusion and rejection. Performed by women, it carries an added resonance—the singers, themselves often positioned at the margins of society, lend voice to the porter's vulnerability. In doing so, Bhara bisā bhareyā becomes more than a tale of individual suffering; it functions as a delicate but strong commentary on marginalisation, empathy, and the common human desire for inclusion within the social structure.

Personification

Personification in the song attributes human qualities to physical spaces, transforming locations into engaged participants within the narrative of exclusion. The repeated phrase Hudainā ... ko bās personifies spaces as entities possessing agency and will. Rather than presenting spaces as merely physical locations, the song portrays them as active agents that reject, exclude, and deny entry.

Element	Translation	Analysis
Hudainā.....ko bās	The courtyard is not for resting/lodging.	The courtyard itself becomes an active entity, making determinations about who deserves access.
Hudainā.....Padhere kō bas	The spring is not for resting/lodging	Water source becomes an agent withholding hospitality
Hudainā.....Chautari kō bas	The village rest platform is not for resting/lodging	Communal gathering space becomes an instrument of exclusion

This personification achieves multiple effects. First, it renders abstract social norms as concrete, material realities. Rather than attributing refusals solely to individual family members' choices, the song suggests that spaces themselves embody and enforce social rules. Second, personification elevates the emotional register of exclusion. The porter is not simply rejected by people but by the actual landscape, as if the natural world and society conspire together to deny him acceptance.

Metaphorical Layers

The repeated use of the "resting" metaphor throughout the song encompasses both actual physical rest as well as a deeper need for social belonging and acceptance. For a labourer like the porter, physical rest represents more than bodily recuperation; it signifies permission to occupy space, recognition as a community member, and temporary shelter from the vulnerabilities of itinerant labour. The porter's repeated *deu na mā deu na chautāri āmai Chautari kō bas* employs "rest" as a metaphor for acceptance. His request for rest space becomes a request for recognition, inclusion, and a brief respite from social marginalisation. The accumulation of refusals across multiple spaces and family members, therefore, represents comprehensive denial not only of physical comfort but also of social legitimacy.

Imagery

The song utilises clear place descriptions to show the porter's spot in the village. The porter inhabits edges, thresholds, and common spaces that technically belong to everyone but, practically, to no one he can access. The imagery functions to externalise internal emotional conditions. The porter's repeated standing in common areas visualises his internal state of displacement and longing. Readers experience his vulnerability not abstractly but through concrete visualisation of his physical placement within spaces that reject him. This perceptual specificity transforms social exclusion from an abstract concept into a concrete human experience.

Symbolism

The three primary spaces mentioned in the song - courtyard, spring, and Village Platform carry rich symbolic significance within the rural Nepali village structure:

Space	Symbolic Significance	Social Function
āgani	Family intimacy, domestic authority	Represents the private family sphere; father and mother exercise authority here
Padhere	Female domestic labour, gathering	Women's primary space for water collection, daily labour, and social interaction
Chautara	Male socialisation, community authority	Communal gathering space where elder men congregate; the highest prestige location

Each space represents a different tier of social access. The courtyard represents the most exclusive family space; the spring, the semi-public female space; and the chautari, the highest-status communal space. The porter's movement through these spaces, seeking access to each one, symbolises his attempt to navigate and integrate into the village's rigid spatial and social orders. His systematic exclusion from all three spaces symbolises his position as a perpetual outsider across all spatial tiers.

Authority Figures and Familial Hierarchy

The song refers particularly to members who enforce spatial limits:

- Baba: Represents patriarchal authority and household governance
- Daju: Represents external, male community authority

The layering of refusals through multiple family members shows that exclusion is systematic rather than individual. No single family member's refusal alone creates the barrier; instead, the collective assertion of authority by multiple family members results in comprehensive, inescapable exclusion. This structural choice reveals how social orders operate through collective reinforcement of boundaries.

Repetition: Rhythmic

Repetition functions both musically and semantically. On a musical level, a recurrent pattern enhances memorability and communal performance potential, as listeners readily internalise repeated phrases. To illustrate this, the refrain “deu na mā deu na chautāri āmai, Chautari kō bās” (Grant me a place to rest, platform mother, a place at the platform) recurs throughout the song. The insistent return of this line, voiced each time as a plea met with denial, makes the repetition audible on the page and directly enacts the experience of cumulative exclusion. On the semantic level, repetition conveys the unremitting, inescapable nature of social exclusion. Each repeated refusal adds cumulative weight, turning individual denials into systematic barriers. The porter's repeated standing, pleading, and refusals create a rhythmic pattern that replicates the incessant cycle of seeking and rejection that characterises marginal social positioning.

Repeated Element	Function	Effect
Hudainā ... kō bas	Refrain from establishing boundaries	Creates a rhythmic, cumulative sense of repeated rejection
Thareyā	Describes Porter's positioning	Emphasises his static, marginal positioning
Deu na	Porter's repeated plea	Builds emotional intensity through accumulation

Repetition functions both musically and semantically. On a musical level, recurrent pattern enhances memorability and communal performance potential—listeners readily internalise repeated phrases. On the semantic level, repetition conveys the unremitting, inescapable nature of social exclusion. Each repeated refusal adds cumulative weight, turning individual denials into systematic barriers. The porter's repeated standing, pleading, and refusals create a rhythmic pattern that replicates the incessant cycle of seeking and rejection that characterises marginal social positioning.

Synthesis

The formal elements of Bhara bisā bhareyā jointly establish its thematic centre: the vulnerability of marginal figures within rigid social orders and the common human longing for belonging. Personification renders abstract social norms as concrete spatial realities. Figurative language transforms physical rest into a token of social acceptance. Imagery externalises emotional displacement through sensory spatial documentation. Symbolism locates these experiences within specifically Nepali social structures. Repetition creates cumulative emotional and rhythmic force, which reflects the unrelenting experience of exclusion. No single formal element alone conveys the song's full complexity. Instead, the elements function interdependently, reinforcing and amplifying one another. This organic unity demonstrates that the song's artistic achievement does not lie in any single technique but in the sophisticated integration of multiple formal strategies to create a coherent, emotionally strong expression.

Comparative Study

A comparative study of the songs Bhara bisā bhareyā and Mathi hai bata reveals deep thematic and formal connections, despite their different subjects. Both songs portray the vulnerability of rural individuals inside broader social and natural contexts, using personification and repetition to increase emotional and philosophical impact. In Bhara bisā bhareyā, sung by women of the Khas community, the porter faces social exclusion, while the farmer in Mathi hai bata confronts the unpredictableness of nature and fate. Both express shared existential motifs of marginalisation, acceptance, and wisdom amid forces outside individual control. These songs avoid blaming individuals for their hardships, instead situating personal vulnerability within bigger structural or cosmic powers. Personification brings abstract forces to life: denied entry to common areas in Bhara bisā bhareyā, and fate withholding prosperity in Mathi hai bata. Repetition builds effects—persistent exclusion in the first and meditative cycles of labour in the second. These formal techniques reflect South Asian philosophical schools that value accepting limits and emphasise proper conduct over

controlling outcomes. Bhara bisā bhareyā offers an ethnographic study of spatial control that enforces social stratification in Himalayan villages, documenting how exclusion from common spaces mirrors more profound social marginalisation. Mathi hai bata highlights sophisticated ecological wisdom embedded in farming practices, showing the interdependence of human effort and natural forces. Both songs preserve ancestral knowledge, showing how rural communities see their existence as part of intergenerational continuity and prioritise collective memory over individual achievement. Functioning as both community records and living arts, these songs preserve memories of historical backgrounds, space organisation, agricultural methods, and cultural philosophy while remaining emotionally and philosophically resonant today. Their use of personification, metaphor, imagery, and repetition creates artistic unity, making these tools powerful for cultural conservation and philosophical reflection. This analysis of Bhara bisā bhareyā, a Khas community song sung by women, and Mathi hai bata demonstrates the richness of Nepali folk songs as cultural artefacts that offer ethnographic insights, preserve collective memory, and communicate deep wisdom. They remain relevant to communities seeking meaning, connection, and guidance from traditions firmly established in the Himalayan milieu.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined two Nepali harvest folk songs—Mathi hai bata and Bhara bisā bhareyā—as performed by women of the Khas community in rural Sikkim, treating them as oral literary texts embedded within lived agrarian and social reality. Through integrating ethnographic context with lyric-centred formal analysis guided by Function, the study shows that Khas women’s folk songs function not simply as formative accompaniments to labour but as sophisticated cultural stories that encode identity, social structure, ecological awareness, and moral reflection.

The analysis shows that poetic devices, such as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, personification, repetition, and parallelism, operate interdependently to produce organic unity and layered meaning. In Mathi hai bata, agricultural labour serves as a metaphorical framework through which women articulate ancestral continuity, human–nature interdependence, and a philosophical acceptance of fate. In Bhara bisā bhareyā, spatial imagery and repetitive denial construct a strong commentary on social exclusion, hierarchy, and the fragile boundaries of membership within rural Himalayan communities. In both songs, women emerge as active interpreters of social and ecological experience, transforming everyday labour and observation into enduring expressive forms. By foregrounding lyric analysis, this study addresses a significant gap in Himalayan folk song scholarship, which has often privileged performance context and musical structure over textual interpretation. The findings show that women’s agrarian songs are not passive reflections of tradition but dynamic sites of meaning-making that preserve collective memory, articulate marginalised experiences, and transmit cultural values across generations. The application of Functional Theory further demonstrates its suitability for analysing oral literature, as it enables close examination of how poetic devices collectively generate cultural meaning within orally transmitted forms. This research adds to wider discussions in folklore studies, ethnomusicology, and literary criticism by positioning Khas women’s harvest songs as culturally embedded literary artefacts rather than informal or peripheral expressions. It also enriches Sikkimese and Himalayan studies by documenting and analysing under-recognised voices within Nepali folk traditions. While the study focuses on two songs for in-depth analysis, future studies might apply this approach to a larger corpus, comparative regional studies, or interdisciplinary engagements with performance, musicology, and the ecological humanities. Ultimately, the study affirms the lasting significance of folk songs as repositories of social knowledge, ethical reflection, and cultural strength within the rapidly changing socio-cultural setting of the Eastern Himalayas.

This research was supported under the Minor Research Project scheme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

REFERENCES

1. Baily, J., & Collyer, M. (2006). Introduction: Music and migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(2), 167–182.
2. Baraily, S., & Vedabala, S. (n.d.). Traditional Himalayan musical instruments.
3. Bhutia, T., & Rauth, P. (2021). Tamang cultural music traditions.
4. Bicknell, J. (2007). Listening to music and the gendered voice. *Music & Gender Studies Journal*.
5. Bicknell, J. (2007). Women’s voices in Himalayan folk songs.
6. Bista, D. B. (1991). *People of Nepal*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
7. Blackburn, S. (2008). *Oral traditions in the Himalayas*. Oxford University Press.
8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
9. Bressler, C. E. (1994). *Literary criticism: An introduction to theory and practice*. Prentice Hall.
10. Bressler, C. E. (1999). *Literary criticism: An introduction to theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Prentice Hall.
11. Bronson, B. H. (1969). The folk song. In D. L. Eugenio (Ed.), *Philippine folk literature series*. De La Salle University Press.
12. Campbell, B. (1998). Work, sociality, and song in rural Nepal. *Himalayan Anthropology Review*.

13. Campbell, B. (2011). Songs of the fields: Agrarian music traditions in Nepal.
14. Collyer, M., & Baily, J. (2006). Music and migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.
15. Constanica, M. (2023). A study of figurative language on traditional Sikka songs in 2010–2022. *Journal of English Language Teaching, Literature and Culture*, 2(2), 133–154. <https://doi.org/10.53682/jeltec.v2i2.7397>
16. Conway, G. S. (2022). What is a folk song? An exploration through a collection
17. Dundes, A. (1965). *The study of folklore*. Prentice Hall.
18. Eugenio, D. L. (Ed.). (1996). *Philippine folk literature series: Volume II: The folk songs*. De La Salle University Press.
19. Fagsao, J. D. (2019). Selected lyrics of Bontok’s “Antoway, Ayoweng, and Chag-ay” songs: An initial stylistic assessment. *Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal*, 2(3), 276–299. <https://doi.org/10.3390/j2030020>
20. Fisher, J. (1997). Transmission of ritual knowledge in the Himalayas. *Ethnomusicology Forum*.
21. Fisher, J. (2010). *Living traditions: Oral music in Himalayan societies*. University of California Press.
22. Foley, J. M. (1995). *The theory of oral tradition*. Indiana University Press.
23. Goldstein, M. (1998). Buddhist musical rituals of the Himalayas.
24. Guneratne, A. (1994). Ethnicity, ritual, and music among the Tharu and Himalayan groups.
25. Jomanah, B. Z., Bawa, L. S., Untong, L. P., & Mohamad, H. A. (2023). Maguindanaon love songs as an instrument and an introduction to teaching figurative language for the preservation of Maguindanaon culture. *Journal of Natural Language and Linguistics*, 1(1). <https://tinyurl.com/38u8cy69>
26. Kumar, A. (2023). Balan: The ritual dance-drama tradition of Sikkim.
27. Kusch, C. (2016). *Literary analysis: The basics*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688374>
28. Levy, R. (1999). *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organisation of a traditional Newar city*. University of California Press.
29. LiteraryDevices Editors. (2013). *Figurative language*. Literary Devices. <http://literarydevices.net>
30. March, K. (2002). Women’s songs and communal bonding in Nepali villages.
31. McLeod, S. A. (2024). *Ethnographic qualitative research methods*. Simply Psychology.
32. Moran, N. (2017). *Everyday performance: Understanding music through experience*. Routledge.
33. Nettl, B. (2005). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts*. University of Illinois Press.
34. Patel, M. (n.d.). Madal: Nepal’s iconic hand drum.
35. Pun, K. (2024). Sorathi songs as narrative memory.
36. Rai, Y. (2013). *Mundhum: Ritual, cosmology, and musical tradition among the Kirati*.
37. Rauth, P., & Bhutia, T. (2021). Tamang Selo and the symbolism of Damphu.
38. Sarma, D. (2025). Modernisation and the shifting landscape of Himalayan folk traditions.
39. Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance theory (Rev. ed.)*. Routledge.
40. Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
41. Sharma, G. (2006). *Folk music and instruments of Sikkim*.
42. Sharma, R. (2024). *Khas culture in Sikkim: Identity and tradition*.
43. Sherpa, P. (n.d.). *Traditional instruments of the Eastern Himalaya*.
44. Shneiderman, S. (2015). *Rituals of ethnicity: Thangmi practices in Nepal and India*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
45. Slobin, M. (1993). *Subcultural sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Wesleyan University Press.
46. Slobin, M. (2000). *Folk music: A concise introduction*. Oxford University Press.
47. Subba, T. B. (2008). *Ethnicity, state, and development: The case of the Nepali-speaking Himalayan communities*.
48. Tumbahang, G. (2023). *Palam songs: Structure and cultural significance*.
49. Tumbapo, B. (2011). *Oral tradition and musical transmission in Eastern Nepal*.
50. Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
51. Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.
52. Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. University of Wisconsin Press.
53. Vedabala, S., & Gazmer, S. P. (n.d.). *Ban-Jhakri shamanic music traditions*.
54. Velasco, E. A. (2017). Maranao folksongs: Their dominant themes and implications to Maranao culture and identity. *International Conference on Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.17758/URUAE.ED0917117>
55. Ortiz, A. M., & Beach, L. (2013). The ethnographic interview. In *Research in the college context* (pp. 51–64). Routledge.
56. Wolf, Z. R. (2012). Ethnography: the method. *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective*, 4, 293–330.
57. Bressler, C. E. (1999). *Literary criticism: An introduction to theory and practice (2nd ed.)*. Prentice Hall.
58. Brooks, C. (1947). *The well wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry*. Harcourt Brace.
59. Dundes, A. (1965). *The study of folklore*. *Journal of American Folklore*, 78(307), 136–142.
60. Finnegan, R. (1992). *Oral traditions and the verbal arts: A guide to research practices*. Routledge.
61. Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.

APPENDIX I

Lyrics and translation of the Songs

Song -1

Singer-Thala Maya Regmee

Address-Patuk Chada, East Sikkim

Mathi hai bata ropar jhára

There is a spring on the hill above Ropar;

Kambár ma kachheyá

A cloth tucked at my waist,

Aali ma baší suni dew baba

I sit in the alley and listen to the gods, Father;

Ma gáuchu raśeyá

Moreover, I sing with joy.

Betái ko dali, Betái ko báti

A daughter's branch, a daughter's lamp,

Baba ko sáro. Naw muri méro

Father's head, my nine measures (of grain),

Bádhew hai bhákari

The granary is overflowing,

Bádhew hai bhákari a mera Baba

The granary is overflowing, oh my father;

bádhau hai bhákari

The granary is overflowing.

wari ma ropái, pari ma ropái

I plant on this side, I plant on that side,

bichai ma béw kari,

In between I sow the seeds,

háli ra bausa ukalo laga

The plough and oxen go uphill,

ropar la béw chara

We sow seeds in the rice field,

ropár la béw chara a mera baba

We plant seeds in the rice field, oh my father;

ropár la béw chara

We sow seeds in the rice field.

dhánai ma ropnu gyan chupu chupu

In the paddy field, we plant in silence,

hatái ko marmai la

Striking with the palm,

Jhalai ma basna jew mero theyo
I wished to sit in the shade,

deyená karmai la
But fate did not allow it,

deyená karmai la a mera baba
Fate did not allow it, oh my father

deyená karmai la
Fate did not allow it.

dhanai ma ropnu jyan chupu chupu
In the paddy field, we plant in silence.

hatái ko bew chan jel
Tossing seeds with our hands,

daulákai lauchu daulákai khánchu
I carry the basket, I eat from the basket,

baba ko jew chan jél
That is my father's way.

Song - 2

Singer-Laxmi Niroula

Address-patuk chade east Sikkim

bhára bisa bháreya
Barbise Porter,

agani ma thareya
standing in the yard,

deu na ma deu na chautarni amai
O mother, please let me stay,

chautari ko bas
Let me rest in the shade of the chautari (a village rest platform).

bhára baba auna chan
Tomorrow, Father will come.

Chautari bararna khojna chan
He will want to clear the chautari,

Hudáina chautari daju
No, brother, you cannot,

Chautari ko bas
The chautari is not for resting

Bhára bisa bháreya
Barbise Porter,

Padheri ma thareya
The spring is not for lodging.

Hudáina pardheni amai
Padheri ko bas

Bhára dede auna chan
Tomorrow, my sister will come,

Pani bharna khojna chan
She will want to fetch water;

Hudáina pardeshi daju
No, mother, you cannot,

Padhera ko bas
The spring is not for lodging.

Bhára bisa bháreya
Barbise Porter,

Aganai ma thareya
standing in the courtyard,

Deu na ma deu na ghar poti amai
O mother, please let me stay,

Agani ko bas
Let me rest in the house courtyard.

Bhára bhauju auna chan
Tomorrow, my sister-in-law will come,

Agani bararna khojna chan
She will want to clean the yard,

Hudáina pardeshi daju
No, brother from abroad,

Agani ko bas
The courtyard is not for resting.

Appendix II

Photos with the Interviewees

