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NEGOTIATING WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENQUIRY OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE INPUI TRIBE, MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Being religious is usually taken to mean living in spontaneous awareness of, an encounter with, acknowledgment of, and obedience to the active reality of the presence of a Supreme Being. Thus, religion permeates all aspects of life. In the traditional tribal society, there were no irreligious people. Tribal belief systems are based on the oral and expressed in everyday language – both verbally and in their lived every day. Tribal rituals are often performed collectively and are intended to address everyday problems. The study is concentrated on the Inpui tribe of Manipur, India. According to the 2011 census, the Inpui tribe has a population of 4762, of which 2398 are male and 2364 female. This paper studies the belief system and practice of the Inpui tribe with special reference to the controlling of the spirit and the spirit world. They worship gods for prosperity and release from sickness, disease, and suffering.

KEYWORDS: Supernatural Power, Rituals, Religious Belief, Suffering, And Prosperity.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is defined as a set of organic beliefs, practices, and systems that are most often related to the belief and worship of a controlling force. The sociologist, Emile Durkheim defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.” Edward Burnett Tylor gave the minimum definition of religion as “the belief in Spiritual Beings.” He used the term animism to refer to belief in the soul. Johnstone (1975) defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred.” As one of the basic social institutions, Srivastava (1997) defined religion as a system of beliefs usually involving worshipping supernatural forces or beings. Religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one’s perception of the universe.

Religion is an all-pervading supernatural phenomenon in human life. For this reason, it may have been considered universal. Of all things in the world, religion has exercised the most profound influence over human thought and behaviour from times beyond human recollection. Among the tribal people, religion becomes all the more important, for it is interwoven in their entire social life and shapes most of their social behavior. The supernatural becomes the motivator and custodian of all deeds, tries to discover and rule over new places of human dwelling, and inspires a noble character. It’s philosophy is often intelligible and straightforward and inspires noble

thought. Although it may appear to assume much orthodoxy, it is seldom devoid of logic and coherence (Sinha, 1977).

Although there are no written dogmas, their idea of God and faith in the Supreme Being is well expressed in tribal traditional songs, myths, and folk tales (Longchar, 2000). No daily sacrifice is required to be offered to the Supreme Being because he is considered a benevolent God and does not require propitiation, except during natural calamities and other important occasions. He is worshiped, and offerings are offered to him as a sign of thanksgiving for blessings including bumper harvests or success in the hunt. Prayers are not offered to him as frequently as to the malevolent spirits. When everything else fails, the Supreme Being is appealed to. He may be approached by anyone, even without a priest or intermediary, and can be approached with empty hands. The tribal people believe that he is present in all places and, thus, can worship him at any time and any place (Ibid, 2000).

Before the advent of Christianity in northeast India, the tribes had a particular concept of religion; they believed in some spirit or powerful being that had its abode in natural objects like stones, rivers, trees, mountain peaks, etc. Many spirits were benevolent and evil, and these spirits influenced the life of man (Nembiakkim, 2008). The conversion is rooted so firmly that people do not intend to return to their traditional religion. Besides teaching the Bible, the Church also acts as an instrument to make people conscious of their social obligations. Their belief and commitment never run dry, and they pray almost everywhere. The people's worldview now comes from the Christian faith, where love, peace, and a helping hand are the core values of the people. The impact of religion is so strong that worship and commitment continue, although there is a change in who they worship, from polytheism to monotheism. People look at everything in such a positive frame of mind because Christianity provided an ideology that helped the tribal people to maintain their identity in the face of severe erosion of their traditional religious, social, and political institutions (Downs, 1983).

Keeping this in view, the present study highlights the belief in supernatural power and its relation with religious life among the Inpui Naga tribe of Manipur. The main objective of the study is understanding Inpui's belief in supernatural power and its relation to their religious life, and by extension it's different manifestation in their everyday.

Fieldwork was conducted in fourteen Inpui villages of Manipur. The study is purely qualitative, employing both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary sources of the study are mainly gathered from oral narratives. Formal interviews were conducted with select Inpui village elders to gather data on supernatural power and its relation with religious life and overall pictures of each village's past and present situation. The secondary source material includes relevant published or unpublished written material. Both sources are amalgamated in the process of constructing this paper.

The Inpui Nagas inhabit mainly in fourteen villages in Manipur and scattered in different places in Nagaland and Assam. In the present state of Manipur, they are scattered throughout the districts of Tamenglong, Senapati and Imphal West District. The significant villages of the Inpui tribe in Manipur are Haochong, Ijeirong, Pungmon, Nungtek, Puichi/Oktan, Bakuwa, Kabui Khullen, New Kabui Khullen, Makuilongdi, Inthan, Changangei, Yurembam, Tamphagei and Kabui Inpui.

The Inpui people are traditionally polytheistic in their religious beliefs. They too have a multitude of gods and goddesses of high and low ranks, whose help or blessings they invariably invoke in times of danger and distress. They propitiate the guardian deities in their traditional way to protect them from epidemics, diseases, and disasters. The Inpui believe that there is one Supreme Being, who they refer to as, '*Risangri*'. They also believe in the existence of the devils or the evil spirits. They are malevolent spirits who cause sickness, disease, and suffering to human beings. The malevolent spirits are propitiated with sacrifices and offerings. Such propitiations are done to appease them, so as to not to cause trouble for human beings. The Inpui perform rituals and rites at feasts, festivals, and various occasions connected with seed sowing, harvest, construction of a house, birth, marriage, death, and so on.

The almighty god *Risangri* is believed to be the Supreme in for the Inpui pantheon. His abode is believed to be in heaven, where eternal peace prevails. He is regarded as the creator and the protector of all living beings on earth. *Risangri* is worshiped twice a year, first by killing a goat and the second by killing a pig. On the second worship, on killing a pig, a white flag is placed on the house of the God *Risangri*. On the white flag, cotton is placed at the end of the long bamboo. The upper part of the bamboo leaves is not taken out. It is left as it is, but the lower side of the leaves is taken out. The animal killed for this God should be without shedding blood by pressing with two woods. The meat is eaten by the village elders in the village *Thampe* house. Whoever comes to worship this God should put either *Sangkurei* or *Riangrei* leaf on the ear.

Furthermore, buffed rice and sugarcane will be distributed. On the last day, a hen is also killed, and the priest places the hen along with buffed rice, saying this is for god *Risangri*. While the hen eats buffed rice, the boys kill it by throwing stones. If the hen runs away, the boys will chase the hen and kill. When sick, they also worship to heal by giving hens, vegetables, fruits, or whatever the family wishes. Moreover, the evil spirit is given rice beer mixed with ash and is sacrificed. After performing the rituals for *Risangri*, the *Thampe* will sacrifice rice on the three stones of fire making. These three stones are placed before reaching the *Risangri* place of worship. In this place of worship, there is a slap of stone where people are not allowed to sit as it is believed that it is for God.

Takenri

Sickness god is called *takenri*; sickness like swollen stomach, itches, and scabies are believed to be caused by *takenri*. If people get sick with the above-mentioned sickness, the priest is called and will tell them where the person got the sickness; for example, by taking a bath at the log and so on. The priest will then tell to sacrifice pigs or hens in that log where the person took a bath and got the sickness. The sick family will make sacrifices in that log by killing in that place; then cooking and eating there. However, if the *takenri* wants it raw, it will be offered without killing.

Inthweiri

The *Inthweiri* is believed to be living between the rocks. In the place where *Inthweiri* lives, people cannot throw stones, cut trees, pluck banana leaves, etc. If a person does the cutting or throwing stones, then he/she gets a stomach ache. Suppose the person cuts due to an order given by someone; the person who gives the order will get sick. Ginger spit with saliva is placed on that rock. If a person does not heal by this, the banana leaf, buffed rice, flowers, and fruits will be sacrificed. If the person is not healed with this second sacrifice, the third is by sacrificing a hen or pig; in this, the person gets healed. In such cases, death does not occur; the person gets healed

either by the first, the second, or the third. If the person is healed with the first, he/she need not perform the second or the third.

Riswang

Protector god of the Village is a story narrated by Haochong villagers when they return at night, passing through a narrow road, and if a stone is dropped or thrown at them, they will say that they are Haochong people, then the dropping or stone stops. The Inpui believed *Riswang* to be the protector of the village.

Lungkapopri

Lungkapopri is a god who lives in a cave. If a person gets a swollen hand or leg, then the village priest will examine and say this is caused by *lungkapopri*. Then, the sick family sacrifices banana leaves, buffed rice, flowers, and fruit.

Tapaanthangri

When a person gets a headache, fever, or body pain, then, in banana leaf ash mixed with water and placed in the open space, a cut ginger is placed on the top middle of the ash mixed with water for *tapaanthangri*.

Khunri

The God of clay holes. When a person gets sick by putting his/her feet or hand on the hole, he/she gets swollen hands/feet. This sacrifice is done by placing kabok, flowers, fruit to *khunri*. The person gets healed.

Basaangri

There is a sudden pulling of the body, shivering, and the eye turns white. In this, a black dog is sacrificed to *basaangri* by killing and cooking outside and giving the cooked meat to all people and children. The priest sprinkles water with leaves on the sick family and sprinkles on the cooked meat. After that, the cooked meat is taken in the night and morning. If there is left over, the meat is thrown in the east direction.

Sangkouri

He is a god of good harvest and wealth. Village elders will perform the sacrifice by spreading the mat and placing a pig tied to both feet and pierced by *Nakia* (wood). One of the villages elder touch the robe tied at the pig's feet, and shouts come wealth, come good harvest, then a ritual is performed. After that, the tied robe and the wood are taken out and placed on the verandah of the house at the door. The killed pig's entrails is observed, and prediction for the family is observed by the priest. The priest will predict for the family whether it shows a good harvest or a bad harvest or sickness. If bad things happen, the priest will ask to sacrifice another pig. It is done so according to the priest's advice. The meat is given to everyone, and the leftovers are taken home.

For a good harvest, a hen is sacrificed by making a basket, placing it in the basket, and taking it to the field. The select elder of the tribe will kill the hen and place it on the paddy, which is about to ripen. Then, the basket is kept at the hut in the *jhum* field. The paddy stalk and hen are taken home and cooked. The cooked chicken liver and pealed paddy are mixed and applied on the three fire stones of the house and the cooking pot. The remaining is mixed with rice and given to the children to eat to obtain blessings.

Rituals are performed to ward off ill luck or disturbance by evil spirits, and it is generally considered that it is the spirit of dead people who disturb the living family members. The family fixes a ritual day; on the day, all family members are called to join in this ritual and kill a big dog. All the clans are called along with *Thampe*. Food is cooked, and a hole is dug near the cooking place. The priest performs the rituals by dropping rice beer, meat and food in the hole which is then considered as shared with the dead person. The place is then wiped and covered by a plate. It is covered for four days, and only after the fourth day, they remove the cover. That day, the family will hang their curry in the house, and that night, a dream is observed by the priest. In the morning, they eat the food together by taking down their meat, and the dream is heard. Today is a bad or good dream, and all the village elders drink rice beer.

CONCLUSION

The Inpui ancestors were strict adherents of their religion. The fear of incurring the gods' displeasure enslaved them, and they could not free themselves from it, which they were afraid may cause famine, sickness, or barrenness. Onerous sacrifices had to be made, superstition was rampant, and every step and moment of their lives was fettered with fear. The early decades of the twentieth century is a landmark in the history of the Inpui tribe. In such a time, Christianity was introduced, Instead of performing certain rituals to ward off the malevolent spirits. The current generation of Inpui rejects the sacrificing of animals or using blood to cure any illness or the old ways.

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LYRICS, ICONS, AND SILENCE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF IMTIAZ ALI'S CHAMKILA

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ABSTRACT

This research paper conducts a semiotic analysis of Imtiaz Ali's 2024 film Amar Singh Chamkila, exploring how lyrics, iconic representations, and silence function as sign systems to convey meaning, critique societal norms, and reflect the complexities of cultural identity in 1980s Punjab. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the paper examines the interplay of signs—lyrics as symbols, Chamkila as an icon, and silence as an index—to unpack the film's commentary on art, caste, and social resistance. Through qualitative content analysis and close readings of key scenes, the study reveals how Ali uses these elements to navigate the dichotomy between vulgarity and authenticity, ultimately portraying Chamkila as a poet of the subaltern.

KEYWORDS: *Commentary, Portraying, Narratives, Adoration And Condemnation, Semiotics.*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction sets the stage for a semiotic analysis of Amar Singh Chamkila, a biographical drama directed by Imtiaz Ali, which chronicles the life of the iconic Punjabi singer Amar Singh Chamkila, assassinated in 1988 at age 27. Known for his provocative lyrics and mass appeal, Chamkila's legacy is a complex interplay of adoration and condemnation, rooted in the socio-political turbulence of 1980s Punjab. This paper explores how Ali employs lyrics, iconic imagery, and silence as semiotic tools to depict Chamkila's life, challenge societal hypocrisy, and critique the caste-based boundaries of cultural production. The research question is: How do lyrics, icons, and silence function as semiotic signs in Amar Singh Chamkila to convey meaning and resist dominant cultural narratives? The study adopts Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics—icon, index, and symbol—to analyze these elements. Lyrics serve as symbols, encoding social commentary; Chamkila's persona is an icon, embodying subaltern resistance; and silence acts as an index, pointing to unspoken tensions in Punjab's socio-political landscape. This approach builds on Ali's filmmaking style, known for blending music and narrative to

explore identity and rebellion, as seen in *Rockstar* (2011) and *Tamasha* (2015). The paper's significance lies in its contribution to film studies and cultural semiotics, offering insights into how Ali navigates the tension between art and morality, particularly in the context of caste and gender dynamics. By focusing on a Dalit artist's life, the study also engages with anti-caste scholarship, addressing gaps in mainstream Bollywood representations of subaltern voices. The introduction concludes by outlining the paper's structure: a literature review on semiotics and Ali's cinema, a methodology section detailing the analytical approach, a data analysis of key film elements, a conclusion synthesizing findings, and a bibliography.

Review of Literature

The literature review synthesizes existing scholarship on semiotics, Indian cinema, and Imtiaz Ali's oeuvre to contextualize the analysis of Amar Singh Chamkila. It is divided into three thematic areas: semiotics in film and music, Ali's filmmaking and narrative style, and the socio-cultural significance of Chamkila's music.

Semiotics in Film and Music

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. Peirce's triadic model distinguishes between icons (signs resembling their objects), indices (signs with a causal connection to their objects), and symbols (signs with arbitrary, conventional meanings) (Peirce, 1998). In film, semiotics analyzes how visual and auditory elements convey meaning beyond narrative. Scholars like Christian Metz (1974) have applied semiotics to cinema, emphasizing how *mise-en-scène*, sound, and editing function as signs. In music, Thomas Turino (1999) argues that indexicality—where sounds evoke specific experiences or emotions—is central to meaning-making, particularly in ethnomusicology. An acoustical study by Banerjee et al. (2023) highlights how lyrics enhance emotional resonance in Indian music, suggesting their symbolic role in cultural expression.

Imtiaz Ali's Filmmaking

Imtiaz Ali's films are celebrated for their use of music as a narrative tool, as seen in *Rockstar*, *Tamasha*, and *Jab We Met* (Hindustan Times, 2021). Sonali Srivastav (2022) notes that Ali's protagonists are often flawed, rebellious figures who mirror societal tensions, a trait evident in Chamkila's portrayal. Ali's collaboration with A.R. Rahman and lyricist Irshad Kamil creates soundtracks that advance emotional arcs, blending traditional and modern elements (The Hindu, 2024). Critics argue that Ali's focus on mavericks—characters who challenge norms—reflects his interest in escapism and authenticity (Srivastav, 2022; The Wire, 2024).

Chamkila's Socio-Cultural Context

Amar Singh Chamkila, born into a Dalit Sikh family, rose to fame with provocative lyrics that defied the sanitized Bhakti music dominant in the 1980s (Manuel, 1993). His songs, often labeled "vulgar," resonated with subaltern audiences, particularly women, by addressing taboo themes like sexuality and rural life (Bollywood Hungama, 2024). Scholars like K. Kalyani (2024) argue that Chamkila's music was anti-caste, challenging upper-caste cultural hegemony by centering Dalit-Bahujan experiences. However, Ali's film has been critiqued for underplaying this caste dimension, focusing instead on the vulgarity-purity dichotomy (The Print, 2024). The review identifies a gap in scholarship: while Chamkila's music has been studied for its cultural impact, few analyses apply a semiotic lens to Ali's cinematic representation of his life. This

paper addresses this gap by examining how lyrics, icons, and silence function as signs to navigate Chamkila's legacy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, using semiotic analysis to interpret Amar Singh Chamkila. The methodology is grounded in Peirce's semiotic framework, focusing on lyrics (symbols), Chamkila's persona (icon), and silence (index) as sign systems. The research approach involves three steps: textual analysis, contextual analysis, and interpretive synthesis.

Data Collection

The primary data source is the film Amar Singh Chamkila (2024), available on Netflix. Key scenes, including musical performances, dialogues, and moments of silence, are selected for their semiotic significance. Secondary sources include interviews with Imtiaz Ali (e.g., The Indian Express, 2024; Bollywood Hungama, 2024), critical reviews (e.g., The Hindu, 2024; The Wire, 2024), and scholarly articles on semiotics and Punjabi music. Archival footage and Chamkila's original songs, as referenced in the film, are also analyzed to compare cinematic and historical representations.

Analytical Framework

Peirce's triadic model guides the analysis:

Icons: Chamkila's visual representation (e.g., Diljit Dosanjh's performance, costume, and stage presence) is examined for resemblance to the historical figure and his symbolic role as a Dalit icon.

Indices: Silences, such as pauses in performances or narrative gaps, are analyzed for their causal connection to socio-political tensions, such as militancy or caste-based criticism.

Symbols: Lyrics, particularly those by Irshad Kamil and Chamkila's originals, are interpreted for their conventional meanings, focusing on themes of vulgarity, liberation, and social commentary.

Data Analysis Method

A close reading of selected scenes is conducted, focusing on visual, auditory, and narrative elements. For example, the opening sequence with the song "Baaja" is analyzed for its integration of animation, real footage, and lyrics to establish Chamkila's controversial persona. Contextual analysis situates these signs within 1980s Punjab's socio-political milieu, drawing on historical accounts of militancy and caste dynamics. Interpretive synthesis connects these findings to broader themes of resistance and identity in Ali's filmmaking.

Limitations

The study is limited by its focus on a single film, potentially overlooking other representations of Chamkila (e.g., Mehsampur, 2018). The reliance on secondary sources for historical context may introduce biases, and the subjective nature of semiotic interpretation requires careful validation through multiple readings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis is organized into three subsections, each focusing on one semiotic element: lyrics (symbols), Chamkila's persona (icon), and silence (index). Each subsection identifies key scenes, analyzes their semiotic functions, and connects them to the film's broader themes.

Lyrics as Symbols

Lyrics in Amar Singh Chamkila serve as symbols, carrying conventional meanings that reflect societal tensions. The film uses both Chamkila's original songs and new compositions by A.R. Rahman and Irshad Kamil. For instance, the song "NaramKaalja" draws on traditional Punjabi folk lyrics, emphasizing female agency and sensuality. Its line "meranaramkaaljatarke" (my soft heart spices up) symbolizes women's liberation, challenging the patriarchal norms of 1980s Punjab. Similarly, "Baaja" juxtaposes Chamkila's "tharki" (vulgar) image with the violent backdrop of militancy, using lyrics to critique societal hypocrisy. A close reading of a scene where Chamkila defends his lyrics to a journalist reveals his awareness of audience tastes, symbolizing his role as a mirror to subaltern desires (). These lyrics encode anti-caste resistance, as argued by Kalyani (2024), by centering Dalit-Bahujan experiences over sanitized Bhakti narratives.

Chamkila as an Icon

Chamkila's persona, portrayed by Diljit Dosanjh, functions as an icon, resembling both the historical figure and a broader archetype of the rebellious artist. The film's use of real footage and Diljit's physical transformation (e.g., wearing a wig to mimic Chamkila's style) reinforces this iconic resemblance. A key scene where Chamkila performs in Toronto, outshining Amitabh Bachchan's audience, highlights his iconic status as the "Elvis of Punjab". However, his dejection in this moment, as noted by The Hindu (2024), suggests a tension between fame and authenticity, a recurring theme in Ali's films like *Rockstar*. Chamkila's Dalit identity is visually emphasized through his humble attire and rural settings, positioning him as an icon of subaltern resistance against upper-caste cultural hegemony.

Silence as an Index

Silence in the film indexes unspoken socio-political tensions, particularly around caste and militancy. The opening assassination scene, followed by a silent pause before "Baaja" begins, points to the unresolved mystery of Chamkila's death. Moments of silence during performances, such as when Chamkila faces threats from extremists, index the fear and censorship artists faced in 1980s Punjab. A poignant scene where a family member loots Chamkila's riches after his death, filmed with "matter-of-fact coldness," uses silence to index betrayal and societal greed. These silences contrast with the film's vibrant musicality, highlighting the unspoken caste-based marginalization that Ali's narrative partially overlooks, as critiqued by Kalyani (2024) ().

Synthesis

The interplay of lyrics, icons, and silence creates a semiotic network that portrays Chamkila as a poet of the people, navigating the tension between vulgarity and authenticity. While lyrics symbolize social commentary, Chamkila's iconic persona embodies resistance, and silence indexes societal constraints. Ali's use of multimedia—animation, archival footage, and live performances—enhances this semiotic richness, aligning with his narrative style in *Rockstar* and

Tamasha. However, the film's limited engagement with caste dynamics, as noted by critics, suggests a missed opportunity to fully explore Chamkila's anti-caste legacy.

CONCLUSION

This semiotic analysis reveals that Amar Singh Chamkila uses lyrics, icons, and silence as interconnected signs to depict the life of a controversial artist and critique societal norms. Lyrics function as symbols of subaltern expression, Chamkila's persona as an icon of resistance, and silence as an index of socio-political tensions. Together, these elements highlight Ali's fascination with mavericks who challenge conventions, a theme consistent with his earlier works (.). The study contributes to film studies by demonstrating how semiotics can unpack complex cultural narratives in Indian cinema. However, the film's focus on the vulgarity-purity dichotomy somewhat overshadows Chamkila's anti-caste significance, as noted by scholars. Future research could compare Ali's portrayal with other cinematic representations, such as Mehsampur (2018), to assess their treatment of caste and authenticity. The findings also suggest broader implications for studying how Bollywood navigates subaltern voices, particularly in the context of digital platforms like Netflix, which enable experimental storytelling.

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