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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Saas-Bahu Relations in a Changing Society: Gender, Labour and Resistance in Haryanavi Jakdi

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ABSTRACT

Haryanavi folk songs provide an important space for expressing the everyday experiences of rural women. Among these songs, Jakdi is significant because it brings ordinary domestic experiences, family tensions, humour, emotional struggles and changing social values into folk performance. The relationship between the saas (mother-in-law) and bahu (daughter-in-law) is one of the recurring concerns of these songs. This relationship is often understood simply as a conflict between two women, but Jakdi presents a more complicated picture of gender, authority, labour, generation and social change. This paper examines four Haryanavi Jakdi songs that represent different dimensions of the saas-bahu relationship. The first song presents an open physical quarrel that becomes a public spectacle. The second humorously describes the changing relationship between the bahu, her husband and the saas as the husband's economic position improves. The third challenges the common accusation against the bahu and focuses on the saas's criticism of her clothing, mobility, religious activities and cooking. The fourth makes women's domestic and agricultural labour visible by showing what happens when the bahu is absent from the household. The paper reads these songs through Raymond Williams's concept of lived culture and James C. Scott's idea of everyday resistance. It argues that Jakdi transforms ordinary domestic experiences into cultural expression and gives women a space to negotiate authority through humour, complaint, mockery, verbal opposition and performance. At the same time, these songs show that women's resistance remains closely connected to the family structure within which they live. Thus, Jakdi becomes both a record of women's everyday lives and a subtle cultural space for questioning gendered power relations.

KEYWORDS

Gender; Domestic Labour; Patriarchy; Family; Modernity.

Introduction

Folk literature grows out of the everyday life of a community. It carries the memories, emotions, beliefs, customs, conflicts and experiences of people who may not always find a place in formal literary and historical records. Folk songs are therefore more than forms of entertainment. They can preserve the social experiences of ordinary people and provide an understanding of how communities interpret family, gender, work, relationships and social change. Raymond Williams in this famous essay Culture Is Ordinary states, "Culture is ordinary" (Williams, 1958/1989, p. 3), is particularly useful in this context. His approach moves the understanding of culture away from only great literary works, institutions and elite traditions and towards the experiences of ordinary people. Culture is created through everyday relationships, practices, emotions and struggles.

Haryanavi folk culture provides many examples of such lived cultural expression. Women's songs Jakdi, in particular, have traditionally provided a space where experiences associated with marriage, family, domestic responsibilities, motherhood, separation, relationships with in-laws and restrictions on women's mobility can be expressed. Dr. Devender Kumar notes that- Jakdi is a well-known type of Haryanvi women's folk song and is very important for understanding a woman's "inner world" in her own words. Most Jakdi songs were created by

women who worked together in fields and at home, doing daily tasks like grinding grain, cooking, taking care of children and animals, spinning, sewing and dyeing clothes since these tasks are mostly done by young women, Jakdi songs become a reflection of their daily lives and experiences. (Kumar, 2018, p. 30).

Jakdi occupies an important position within this tradition. It draws its material from familiar situations and converts everyday incidents into song. As the present collection of four songs demonstrates, Jakdi does not require extraordinary characters or heroic events. Its drama emerges from the household. A quarrel between a saas and bahu, an argument about clothing, a complaint about salt in food, a woman's movement outside the home, or the absence of a daughter-in-law from household work can become the subject of a song. In this sense, Jakdi gives cultural importance to experiences that might otherwise be considered too ordinary to enter formal literature.

The saas-bahu relationship is particularly important because it brings together questions of age, gender, authority, labour, sexuality, family and generational change. The saas generally occupies a position of seniority within the household, while the bahu enters the family as a younger woman who is expected to adjust to existing customs. This produces an unequal relationship in which the younger woman may be continuously observed, instructed, and judged. However, the four Jakdi songs considered here do not simply reproduce the stereotype of the quarrelsome saas and troublesome bahu. They present different sides of the relationship. The first song depicts direct physical confrontation. The second turns the changing economic status of the husband into a humorous competition between mother and wife. The third openly defends the bahu against the saas's accusations. The fourth, rather than focusing on direct conflict, demonstrates the value of the bahu's labour through her absence. These songs are particularly significant because they allow domestic experiences to move from the private sphere into a shared cultural space. Priya Malik's discussion of Jakdi notes that- These songs emerge from women's everyday lives and include experiences connected with married life, family relations, harassment, sarcasm, humour and self-expression. The fact that such experiences are repeatedly sung means that an individual woman's experience can become a shared female experience. (Malik, n.d. -a).

Prem Chowdhry's research on rural Haryana is important here. Her work examines women's participation in production and reproduction and their exclusion from the control of resources and decision-making. She describes the role of women in her book The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana as, "women veiled, yet highly visible in the fields, the women acknowledged as an economic asset, but lacking substantive economic worth" (Chowdhry, 1994, p. 122). She also uses folk songs, oral traditions, interviews and other popular sources to recover women's experiences and histories. In an interview discussing women's songs, Chowdhry describes these forms of women's expression as "subversive in one word" (as cited in Malik, n.d.-c, para. 10). This observation provides an important starting point for reading Jakdi not simply as entertainment but as a form through which women could express disagreement and comment upon social relations. The present paper therefore uses two theoretical perspectives. Raymond Williams's idea of lived culture helps explain why the ordinary details appearing in these songs- food, clothes, household work, employment, mobility, quarrels and family relationships- are culturally meaningful. James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance helps explain the ways in which women negotiate power through seemingly small acts such as complaint, humour, mockery, verbal opposition and refusal.

Scott's Weapons of the Weak focuses on the "ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups" and argues that resistance frequently takes place through everyday rather than dramatic forms. His study emphasises that such resistance may remain below the level of open collective rebellion. Although Scott's original study concerns peasant relations in rural Malaysia, his concept is useful here because it directs attention towards the small and ordinary ways in which people negotiate unequal power. The combination of Williams and Scott provides a useful framework for understanding the four Jakdi songs. Williams helps us see these songs as expressions of lived experience, while Scott helps us identify the subtle forms of negotiation and resistance within that experience. The songs consequently become more than stories about family quarrels. They become cultural texts through which women express frustration, claim recognition, question authority and make their work visible.

The concept of lived culture is particularly useful for studying folk songs because folk traditions do not exist separately from social life. They are created and recreated through everyday experience. Williams's approach reminds us that culture is not something possessed only by educated or socially powerful groups. Ordinary people create culture through their relationships, work, emotions, conversations and struggles. The four Jakdi songs provide a clear example of this process. Their subjects are familiar: quarrels between women, family authority, food, clothes, work, mobility, employment and marriage. The songs do not describe these things from a distant perspective. They speak from within them.

The first song begins with an intense confrontation: "रे दो लडती देखी सास बहू कळियारी सासड नै या बहुअड पीटै, पीटै लत्ते तार कै" (Shashi Usha Group, 2023) The song presents the quarrel in a dramatic manner. The saas-bahu conflict becomes physical rather than remaining a verbal disagreement. What makes the song especially interesting, however, is that the quarrel does not remain private: "आते जाते लोग देखये देखये हे मुँह पाड कै" People passing by stop and watch the women fighting.

This moment reveals something important about rural social life. The household is not completely separate from the community. Domestic events can become objects of public attention and humour. The song itself reproduces this movement from the private to the public, something that might have been an embarrassing family incident becomes a shared cultural narrative. The significance of this song lies not only in the violence of the quarrel but also in the way the folk form gives the incident a collective life. The women who sing or listen to the song are not merely spectators. They recognise a familiar situation and transform it through performance. The Jakdi tradition therefore demonstrates Williams's understanding of culture as something produced through ordinary life. The household becomes a cultural space. The courtyard, kitchen, fields, family gathering and women's conversations provide the material from which the song emerges.

In a study by Puneeta and Sharma (2023), it is similarly argued that Jakdi provides an important space for examining women's negotiations within the patriarchal family. They describe the genre as "inherently oppositional" because it is associated with an exclusive female space, while also pointing out that patriarchal values can sometimes be reproduced within the songs themselves. This tension is important for the present analysis that Jakdi does not always reject patriarchy completely, but it creates a space where its effects can be discussed, mocked, negotiated and sometimes challenged.

The conflict between saas and bahu is often presented as a personal disagreement between two women. The songs, however, suggest that the relationship is connected to a larger structure of domestic authority. The saas is usually the senior woman in the household. She was once a bahu herself and therefore knows the experiences and difficulties of a daughter-in-law. With age and experience, however, she gains authority in the family. The new bahu enters the household as an outsider and is expected to learn its customs and follow its rules. Thus, the saying "सास भी कभी बहू थी" reminds us that the saas and bahu share a similar experience, even though their positions and roles change over time. This relationship can therefore become a struggle over who has the right to decide what is appropriate behaviour for a woman.

The third Jakdi directly challenges the conventional assumption that the daughter-in-law is responsible for family conflict- "रे बहुआं का दोष नहीं सै, ये सास बिगड़ती आवै सै" (NACHAI GAVAI HARYANA & Nandal, 2026) The opening is significant because it immediately reverses the usual accusation. Instead of blaming the bahu, the song announces that she is not at fault. The song then lists the reasons for the bahu's dissatisfaction. One of them is the older woman's clothing- "रे ये नहीं उमरां नै देख्य, ये नये-2 फैशन पहरे सै" The reference to fashion may seem humorous, but clothing is not simply a matter of personal taste. Within a patriarchal household, clothing can become connected with respectability, age, modesty and control over women's bodies.

The song continues- "रे ये पहरै पैंट पलाजो, ये दो-2 गोझ लगावै सै" The pant-palazzo becomes a marker of generational difference. The younger woman represents a changing idea of femininity, while the older woman measures that change against the values she has inherited. The conflict is therefore not simply between two personalities. It is also a conflict between two experiences of womanhood. The saas represents one set of expectations, while the bahu embodies another. This is consistent with Puneeta and Sharma's observation that Jakdi can reveal both resistance and the internalisation of patriarchal values. The saas may herself have experienced restrictions when she was a daughter-in-law, but after acquiring authority she can reproduce similar restrictions upon the younger woman. The result is a cycle in which women may become the immediate agents through whom patriarchal expectations are maintained. Yet the song does something important, it makes these expectations laughable.

One of the strongest aspects of the four songs is their attention to women's labour. Domestic labour is often treated as a natural responsibility of women rather than as actual work. The fourth Jakdi challenges this invisibility by showing what happens when the bahu is no longer present. The song begins- "बहू गई रै बेट्या टन्टा कट गया मतना जाइये लेणे नै" (Haryanavi Tadka, 2019) The absence of the bahu immediately creates difficulty in the household. The song then recalls everyday tasks- "तातै पाणी की भरी बाल्टी साबण दू तन्नै न्हाणे नै" It also connects the bahu's work with agricultural labour- "गोबर गेरौ लाओ भरोटै करो लामणी खेता मैं" These lines are particularly valuable because they prevent us from reducing rural women's work to cooking and cleaning. The bahu participates in a much wider system of household production. Her responsibilities involve water, sanitation, animals, agricultural work and the general

maintenance of the family. The most striking feature of the song is that the value of her labour becomes visible only when she is absent. When she performs the work every day, it is treated as normal. When she leaves, the household suddenly understands how much depended upon her. The song later expresses regret- "बहू गई रै बेटा जी ना लागै गलती हो गई कहणै मैं" The statement "गलती हो गई" is important because it suggests recognition after loss. The family's appreciation does not necessarily emerge while the bahu is working; it emerges when her work is no longer available. This makes the song an important cultural record of invisible labour. It reveals the contradiction at the centre of domestic life; women's work is considered ordinary because it is performed continuously. The fourth Jakdi gives this broader social issue an everyday form. Instead of discussing women's economic contribution theoretically, it shows a household discovering its dependence on a woman's labour. Thus, the song transforms domestic labour into cultural memory.

James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance is particularly useful for interpreting the humorous and argumentative quality of Jakdi. Scott's study demonstrates that resistance does not always appear as open rebellion. It may take the form of everyday actions and expressions through which relatively powerless people negotiate their position. The third song offers a strong example. The bahu complains about the saas's movement: "तडके हे दिन लिकड़ै घर तै जावै, ये शखर दोपहरी मैं आवै सै" (NACHAI GAVAI HARYANA & Nandal, 2026) The mother-in-law's mobility becomes a source of suspicion. The song continues- "हे ये लेवै सत्संग का बहाना, ये चुगली चाटी लागै सै" The bahu interprets the saas's activities negatively. Even participation in satsang becomes an opportunity for accusation. This reveals the extent to which women's mobility can be monitored within the household. The issue is not simply where the saas goes. It is whether she has the freedom to move outside the domestic space without being questioned. But the song does not present the accusation in a solemn manner. It turns it into humour. This is where everyday resistance becomes visible. The bahu does not overthrow the household system. She does not necessarily reject marriage or family. Instead, her experiences are expressed through song. The very act of singing about the unreasonable behaviour of the saas can reduce the symbolic authority of that behaviour. The resistance is therefore indirect. The singer (bahu) does not necessarily say, "I reject the entire system". Instead, she says, in effect, "Look at how unreasonable this behaviour is". This distinction is important. Scott's concept allows us to take such apparently small acts seriously. His work emphasises that the struggles of relatively powerless groups often occur through ordinary forms rather than spectacular rebellion. In Jakdi, humour becomes one of these ordinary forms.

Food is another important site of domestic power. The third song makes this clear through a seemingly trivial complaint about salt- "रे ये रोटी कोन्या खावै, सब्जी मैं नमक बतावै सै" The song then adds: "रे ये लेवै नमक का बहाना, बहुआं नै गाळ दिवावै सै" On the surface, the scene is comic. The saas complains about the salt in the vegetables. But the humour points towards something more serious. Cooking becomes a measure through which the bahu's competence is evaluated. Here, problem is not really the salt. It is authority. Who has the right to decide whether the food is prepared properly? Who is allowed to criticise? Who has to accept the criticism? These questions reveal how larger gender structures enter everyday life. Patriarchy does not always appear through major social institutions. It can be experienced through repeated instructions about food, clothes, household work, speech, mobility and behaviour. The third song makes this process visible by collecting these small criticisms and placing them together. The humour also changes the meaning of the criticism. What might be painful in an individual household becomes funny when sung collectively. The singer can expose the absurdity of constant criticism without necessarily directly accusing a particular person. This movement from personal experience to collective humour is one of the most significant cultural functions of Jakdi.

The second song provides perhaps the clearest representation of social and economic transition. It begins with the bahu questioning her saas- "इब क्यों रोज लडै मेरी सासु इब यो बालम मेरा सै" (Parveen Chahal Haryanvi Lok Geet, 2025) The humour develops through a comparison between the husband's earlier economic position and his new status- "जब लग लई अठन्नी चवन्नी, तब लग बेटा तेरा सै इब बण रा री यो बैंक मैनेजर, इब यो बालम मेरा सै" This is a remarkably sharp observation about changing family relations. When the man has little money, he is described as the saas's son. Once he becomes a bank manager, the bahu claims him as her husband. The repeated contrast between "तेरा" and "मेरा" creates a comic competition between mother and wife. But underneath the humour lies a question of status and power. Economic mobility changes the structure of the household. Employment provides not only money but also social prestige. The man's new occupation changes the family's lifestyle and consequently, the relationship between the women. The song continues: "जब लग पहरी निकर बुर्सट, तब लग बेटा तेरा सै इब यो पहरै पैट कोट री, इब यो बालम मेरा सै" The transformation from nikar-burset to pant-coat represents more than a change in dress. It signals a movement from one social world to

another. The final contrast concerns food- "जब लग खाई चूल्हे की रोटी, जब लग बेटा तेरा सै इब खावै री यो होटल मैं खाना, इब यो बालम मेरा सै" Traditional chulhe ki roti is contrasted with hotel food. Employment, clothing, food and marital identity are therefore brought together. This is exactly why Williams's idea of lived culture is useful. Modernity is not presented as an abstract theory. It enters everyday life through clothes, food, employment and relationships. The song also demonstrates that folk culture is not frozen in the past. It absorbs contemporary vocabulary and experiences. The figure of the bank manager could not have occupied the same cultural meaning in an earlier rural context. Its appearance in the song shows how folk traditions respond to social and economic change. Recent study on Haryanavi women's folk songs similarly observes that- With the advancement of globalization and technology, Haryanavi folk songs have also undergone an immense transformation. This advancement has blurred the distinction between the traditional Haryanavi folk songs and the commercially produced Haryanavi pop songs. The localized, ritual-based settings have been transmitted to a globalized technology base setting. (Mann et al., 2026, p. 2)

Jakdi therefore needs to be understood as a living tradition rather than a static remnant of the past. The repeated statement in the second song "इब यो बालम मेरा सै" can be read as more than a joke. The bahu is asserting her identity as wife. She is claiming that the man who is his mother's son is also her husband. Her repeated "मेरा" creates a verbal claim to recognition. The humour makes the assertion socially acceptable, but it does not make it meaningless. The contest between "बेटा तेरा" and "बालम मेरा" reveals competing forms of female authority. The mother claims emotional and familial seniority; the wife claims marital intimacy. Neither completely eliminates the other. This is an important example of everyday resistance because the bahu's resistance is playful rather than revolutionary. She does not demand that the family structure disappear. She negotiates her place within it. Scott's framework helps us recognise the importance of this kind of negotiation. The struggle over power may occur through words, jokes, teasing, complaints and symbolic claims. The Jakdi performance itself strengthens this voice. An individual woman may not always have the freedom to confront an older family member directly. But within a women's singing space, the same conflict can be narrated, repeated, laughed at and shared. The song therefore creates a temporary cultural space in which the younger woman's voice becomes audible.

These songs show that the household is slowly changing. The older order can be seen in the authority of the saas, the expectation that women should obey, restrictions on women's movement, domestic work, traditional food and older ideas of respectable womanhood. At the same time, the new order appears through salaried jobs, the figure of the bank manager, modern clothes, hotel food, greater freedom of movement and new words and expressions. The use of the term "BP" in the song is especially interesting. It shows how modern medical language has entered everyday household conversations and reflects the changing lifestyle and experiences of women. "फेर BP हाई हो जाया, ये पड़ी खाट मैं पावै सै" (NACHAI GAVAI HARYANA & Nandal, 2026) A contemporary medical expression appears within an older folk form. This small linguistic detail demonstrates the flexibility of folk culture. Folk traditions do not simply preserve the past but they absorb the present. This is why Jakdi should be regarded as a living cultural form. The genre changes as the lives of the women who sing it change. A study by Mann et al. also notes that digital technologies have expanded the circulation of Haryanavi women's folk songs while simultaneously changing their performance and commercial context. This contemporary development is important because it shows that the transition visible in the songs is not finished. Jakdi continues to negotiate new social realities.

Conclusion

The four Haryanavi Jakdi songs examined in this paper reveal the saas-bahu relationship as a complex site of gender, domestic labour, generational conflict, humour, authority, negotiation and resistance. Rather than treating these songs as simple stories about quarrelling women, the analysis has understood them as expressions of lived culture and everyday resistance. Raymond Williams's concept of lived culture helps explain why the ordinary details appearing in Jakdi are so important. Clothing, food, domestic work, agricultural labour, employment, mobility and family arguments may appear insignificant when considered separately, but they are precisely the places where social change is experienced. Williams's statement that "Culture is ordinary" (1958/1989, p. 3) provides a useful way of understanding why these apparently ordinary experiences deserve serious cultural attention.

James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance, meanwhile, helps us understand the different ways in which women negotiate household authority. The bahu does not usually engage in dramatic rebellion. Instead, she uses

humour, complaint, mockery, verbal opposition, and assertion. These forms of resistance are small, but they create spaces in which authority can be questioned.

The first song presents physical conflict and shows how domestic violence can become a public spectacle. The second song represents economic mobility through the humorous struggle between the mother and wife over the husband's identity. The third challenges the stereotype of the troublesome daughter-in-law and exposes the saas's criticism of clothing, mobility, religious activity and food. The fourth song makes women's labour visible by demonstrating how deeply the household depends upon the bahu's domestic and agricultural work. Together, the songs also complicate the simple opposition between saas and bahu. The saas is not merely an individual oppressor. She is herself a woman shaped by the same patriarchal system. Her authority over the bahu can reproduce expectations that may previously have been imposed upon her. The conflict is therefore both generational and gendered.

At the same time, the songs reveal a family structure undergoing change. The bank manager, new clothing, hotel food, women's mobility and even the contemporary term "BP" enter the traditional folk world. These references demonstrate that folk culture is not frozen in the past. It changes with the lives of the people who create and perform it. Most importantly, Jakdi provides women with a cultural space in which private experiences can become collective expression. The songs preserve frustration, anger, humour, aspiration, labour and negotiation. They allow women to speak about domestic life without necessarily presenting themselves as political rebels.

The significance of Jakdi, therefore, lies precisely in its ordinariness. Its songs show that resistance does not always have to be loud. Sometimes it appears in a joke, a complaint, a repeated phrase, a criticism, a refusal to accept blame or a song sung among women. The saas-bahu relationship represented in these songs is consequently more than a story of conflict between two generations. It is a story of a changing household, changing ideas of womanhood, changing economic conditions and changing forms of female agency. Through Jakdi, women's everyday experiences become part of cultural memory. The songs preserve a transition in which rural women negotiate authority not necessarily by leaving the family structure, but by finding a voice within it.

In this sense, Haryanavi Jakdi is both a record of women's everyday lives and a subtle form of cultural resistance. Its humour, quarrels, complaints and songs make visible what is often ignored; the labour women perform, the restrictions they experience, the authority they negotiate and the agency they exercise. Jakdi thus deserves to be read not merely as folk entertainment but as an important cultural text for understanding gender, labour, family and resistance in Haryanavi society.

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