

# The Other Woman in Indian Folklore

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The popularity of the practice of "the other woman" or the co-wife in Indian rural areas is understandable when we look at the social position of women. As is well known, domestic and other rights are allotted to a woman in accord with her husband's status. The rule generally followed is that "she is to be treated according to the status of her husband." A woman without a husband is described as "a lamp without a wick." In the Indian countryside the idea of spinsterhood is unimaginable. There are many songs, proverbs, and sayings that stress the norm that a husband is essential for a woman. An ordinary woman stays with her husband whether he is virtuous or not. Her security, her regard, her status, her whole life is linked to her married position. This overdependence upon the husband creates a favorable social context for male superiority.

Women's attitudes towards polygamy are expressed in many, many folk songs and proverbs. Here we will discuss some songs which are complaints about various co-wives, not necessarily the first wife or the second wife, but the "other" woman. Marriages are arranged by family elders according to traditional standards, and especially the first wife is carefully chosen by the elders. For other co-wives the choice is less limited.

A man's relationship with a woman other than his own wife is a very popular theme in folk songs. The co-wife, as mentioned in the folk songs, may not be properly married to the man, but either he goes regularly to her place or she lives in the same house. Generally, the wife and the concubine (or the co-wife) live in the same house. Often they are co-operative, but many times not.

In folk songs specific reasons are given for choosing a co-wife. Two reasons are emphasized as accounting for the relationship of the husband with the other woman. One of the most articulated reasons is the barrenness of the wife and her failure to bear male children. Apart from these two, a wife's inability to perform her domestic role as householder often leads to the addition of another woman to the household. In addition, the frivolous nature of males is also said to be an important cause behind this conflict.

The following song presents a picture of a woman who is deprived of her prestige, privileges, and status because of her inability to produce children. She prays to the local deity to bring happiness into her life. The song ends by showing how the deity helps her:

O black *Bhairon*! Give a cradle in my passage,  
 Because I have but one son, my father-in-law taunts me; give a  
 cradle in my passage.  
 To have a son, my husband brings home a younger wife.  
 O daughter! I will put an end to your father-in-law's taunts,  
 I will give you a dear child, I will put a cradle in your passage.  
 O daughter! I will inhibit your husband;  
 O daughter! One son will be in your lap, another one will be in  
 your arms.  
 O daughter! Your lineage will flourish.  
 The black *Bhairon* placed two cradles in my passage.

In Indian folklore the productivity of a woman is regarded as one of her most valued qualities. A woman who is childless is usually depicted with a co-wife living in the same house.

There are many songs which describe a husband marrying again because his will is not fulfilled by the wife. Although a woman may have many sons, her submission counts a lot as well. There are some songs in which a woman asks why her husband should want to marry again when she has given him all the things he wants. Here is an example:

O necklace of my life, O my king! Why have you brought a  
 co-wife?  
 If I were blind, you could have brought a co-wife,  
 I have eyes like lemons, why have you brought her?  
 If I were a lisper, you could have brought a co-wife,  
 I have a tongue like a lotus-petal, why have you brought her?  
 If I had crippled arms, you could have brought a co-wife,  
 I have arms like the branches of magnolia, why have you brought

her?

If I were barren, you could have brought a co-wife;  
My five sons are hale and hearty, why have you brought her?

Here the reason for the husband's attachment to the other woman is due mainly to his male nature. That is what village women believe. But the question of why he gives more attention and care to the other woman than to his own faithful wife is not easily explained in the folklore. The very root of the relationships between the wife and female friends of the husband is based on competition, jealousy, rivalry, and conflict over getting the husband's attention and affection. Various songs describe the desire of a woman to work magic on her husband to divert his attention from other women. In some songs a woman identifies magic and charms performed by the other woman as the reasons for her husband's indifference towards her. She also wants to do some magic on him. She says:

I will bring an unused jar full of water,  
Today I will prepare white rice.  
I will work magic on my co-wife's lord.

Love constitutes a principal theme in Indian folklore. Perhaps this is the reason that anything which comes between the lovers is mentioned again and again. When two women share one man's attention, then love, wealth, ornaments, even daily routine are divided between those two women. How it works out is the content of the following song:

O elder co-wife! If he brings bricks for your house, he also builds  
a palace for me.  
The other wife is dancing!  
O elder co-wife! He eats at your house, he gargles at my house.  
O elder co-wife! Do not think the beloved is yours, I gave him  
to you on loan for some days.  
Do not be so proud!

It is a great relief to the younger wife depicted in this song that her husband does some of the routine things at her place. But most of the songs present the husband's attitude as favoring one of the other women. Not only folk songs but various proverbs and sayings also describe the image of the co-wife. A very popular Indian proverb says:

A co-wife, even if made of unbaked flour (as a toy), is not at all desirable.

There are songs which prohibit men from having more than one wife or female friends. According to some proverbs this will bring ill-luck for that man, as for example in this saying:

To love another woman, is like staying amongst enemies, like a tree on the riverbank, which may fall down at any time.

The woman's wish to possess her husband exclusively, is the subject of many songs. This saying expresses these sentiments:

The way to love is (like) a delicate thread!  
It cannot bear another woman's weight.

Another one also stresses this point:

Any pain can be bearable;  
The thought of a co-wife is unbearable.

These popular sayings describe the strong feelings of village women about the other woman. Here is one more proverb, which is self-explanatory:

As two swords cannot fit in one case, so two women cannot live in one man's heart.

The popularity of such sayings indicates the deep-rooted emotions of women on this subject. A couplet points out that to have relations with other than one's own wife is shameful. It causes a loss of status for the husband in the community.

Another woman is (like) a sharp knife, which eats from three sides, Taking away wealth and health; one loses his prestige in the group.

Apart from these normative couplets and sayings, many folksongs express the sorrow and the despair of the wife, even when she submits meekly to her lot of being the rejected wife. Songs are also found which describe a woman's suicidal tendencies due to the conflict and tension caused by the other woman in her life and the loss of her husband's love and affection. In one song, the wife wants to taste poison and die. In another, the wife threatens to run away to her parents' house and leave the children behind. In one song, the wife prays to a snake to bite her so that her tensions may come to an end.

The belief of village women seems to be that any beautiful woman can misguide a man. This motif is referred to in folklore again and again. To the village woman's mind, the women of big cities know how to manipulate and misguide a man. In some songs the woman

not only threatens the husband because of his attachments to another woman but she is even ready to assault him. For example, she sings:

O dear! Am I a child? Why did you break the bed of *bhabhiji*?  
When I was a child, I was timid, now I am equally good in quarrelling.

The husband's love for another woman and the factor of a co-wife are also sometimes attributed to fate. It is thought to be a result of one's own evil doings in this life or in a past life. This allows for some adjustment between these women. It also gives a rationale for the first wife to live together with the other woman. In one interesting song a woman says to her husband:

O *sahiba*! You will walk in my courtyard as the Sun rises with rays in the sky.  
O *sahiba*! I will walk in my courtyard as the lightning shines in the sky.  
O *sahiba*! Co-wife will walk in my courtyard as the footwear of my left foot.

It is a well established fact that in a married woman's life the *sokan* or the other woman is the most unwanted thing. It should be noted here that in comparing relations with symbols of nature this woman puts her co-wife at the lowermost level, the footwear of the left foot, not even the right one! So the wife's hatred for her can be well imagined. She has expressed her feelings against the other woman very clearly in her songs. One latent trait behind all these emotions seems to be the overdependence (morally, socially, and economically) of the woman on her husband. The status and treatment which she receives from others correspond fully with the atmosphere of her house and the treatment she receives from her husband. There is a close correlation between these two things. And this encourages the singing of folk songs in which the other woman who shares authority, status, roles, possessions (ornaments, costly dresses), and passions is severely criticised.

The status of a co-wife is very low in the eyes of the wife. But the man is often depicted as loving the other woman more dearly than the woman to whom he is already married. There are some proverbs which reveal the distinctive, delicate, and coquettish position of the other woman. One of them says:

Second wife is like a peahen, (playing) in the palms,  
She eats much, but if you say harsh words, she will die.

In one song the husband loves a rope dancer. When the wife forbids him to visit her, he boldly expresses his love for that woman. The song records their conversation:

“ O king! Leave going to Natni.”  
 “ Whether you quarrel or my father quarrels,  
 Or my mother quarrels, I cannot leave going to Natni.  
 O dear! Marrying you cost me three hundred rupees, for Natni  
 I have spent twelve and a half hundred rupees.”  
 “ O dear! You speak as if coming to eat me, the voice of Natni  
 looks sweet to me.”

At the end there is a couplet in which the husband tells the wife that after her death, he will perform the rituals (death rites) miserly but if Natni dies, he will spend money with an open heart to show his love for her.

Despite such unfaithfulness on the part of her husband, generally his wife tolerates his doings. She consoles herself by telling the other woman that:

My husband is a dandy, a lover of too many,  
 O other women! You are beating the bush,  
 He will remain my husband alone.

Thus she satisfies herself with the privilege of being his married and legal wife. It is a consolation to her that although such a man may be a lover to others, he is husband to only one woman. Sometimes she complains that “the co-wife has stolen her sleep. Because of the thought of her she could not wink for a moment.” Such songs from the Indian countryside which describe the co-wife are very popular among village women. While the woman complains about the bad habits of her husband, even then she still lives with him and tries to adjust her emotional and mental attitude. Usually, she does not leave her husband's house. She lives there and bears the agony alone. In many songs she talks with birds and tame animals and tells them of her sorrow. She tells the secrets of her heart in songs and tales and thus lessens the weight of her loneliness and tension.

These songs and proverbs have a major psychological function. They release tension and stress caused by the husband's involvement with the other woman. Actually there are also songs which project a humorous and jocular image of a man who has more than one wife. These songs pity his position, depicting the impossibility of living satisfactorily in such a situation. The main theme of such songs is that both the first and second wives trouble the poor husband over small

things and do not attend to his needs. The betrayed woman regards these songs as "protest songs" but they are so much institutionalised in the folklore that they do no personal harm or insult to anybody. The society accepts these songs as an innocent outlet for the women's sorrow.

The other woman, the co-wife, the secondary wife, or concubine is one of the main causes of strain and stress in the life of millions of women. If asked directly these women may not admit that their husbands are not faithful, but the presence of innumerable songs on the subject of the co-wife, the frivolous life of the husband, and the popularity of these songs suggest that the institution of co-wife is widespread, even today, in the Indian countryside.