

Sohar: Childbirth Songs of Joy

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Indian folk songs trickle down through the social, cultural, and religious strata of a village's life, constantly nourishing the traditional beliefs and values of the people. Folk entertainment, festivals, fasts, and life-cycle ceremonies (*samskār*), performed amidst singing, storytelling, and merriment, provide diversions in the monotonous lives of villagers.

The birth of a son is an important social occasion in the life-cycle ceremonies practiced by the Hindus of India, a joyful event celebrated with songs, rituals, feasting, and gift-giving. This article is based on four field research trips to villages in the Fatehpur, Kanpur, and Unnao districts of Uttar Pradesh,¹ and focuses on pregnancy and birth rituals, and the context, content, and performance of *sohar* songs.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH RITUALS

Childbirth songs are sung in anticipation of a child's birth, during the birth, and for six to twelve days after a boy's birth. The songs are rituals in themselves, acts of reverence toward the deities, praying for and rejoicing in the arrival of a male family member who will continue the patrilineal line, provide for parents and other relatives in their old age, and perform *srāddh*.²

The generic name for childbirth songs is *sohar* (variants: *sobhar*, *sohal*, and *sohilo*). This inclusive term comprises *sādh*, *sariyā*, *maṅgal gīt*, *badhāi*, *caruā*, *pīpar*, *ajawāin*, and a few other song forms. The words *sohar*, *sariyā*, and *maṅgal* actually appear in many songs (see Song Nos. 3, 5, 6, and 8). Many of the names of these song forms designate the ceremonies they describe and, are sung at appropriate times during the pregnancy/birth cycle. All of these songs are sung by women,

with or without the accompaniment of *ḍholak* (a double-headed drum) and *maṅjīrā* (small hand-cymbals).

As soon as the pregnancy is ascertained, the mother-in-law (*sās*) and other older members of the family impose restrictions on the *jaccā*,³ e.g., 1) when going out to defecate, she must be accompanied by someone, and 2) she must avoid walking near *pīpal* or *babūl* trees (considered the abodes of spirits) or other such 'haunted places' (*bhutaḥ jagah*).⁴ Someone sleeps near her at night and the *jaccā* keeps an iron object with her.

The family priest is consulted regarding the general health and stars of the *jaccā*. The *jaccā* is relieved from doing heavy work and is fed more nutritious food. The family is obligated to provide for any unusual cravings a *jaccā* may have, for it is believed that the proper development of the embryo may be impaired if the pregnant woman's yearnings are not satisfied (see also Beal 1974, 97).

SONG NO. 1: *BADHĀĪ (SOHAR)*

- Jaccā*: Bring me *kalamī* mangoes to eat; I crave them.
I implored my father-in-law; I implored my mother-in-law. (R)
- In-laws: Oh daughter-in-law, eat lemons and oranges.
There aren't any mangoes in this season. (R)
- Jaccā*: I implored my husband's elder brother. (R)
Hu-El-Br: Oh younger brother's wife, eat bananas.
There aren't any mangoes in this season. (R)
- Jaccā*: I implored my husband's younger brother. (R)
Hu-Yo-Br: Oh elder brother's wife, eat peas.
There aren't any mangoes in this season. (R)
- Jaccā*: I implored my husband. (R)
My husband begged for them at the first and second gardens. At the third garden, there is a mango grove. (R)
He plucked a few unripe and a few ripe ones, and he hid some in the sack. (R)
My husband begged for them in vain at the first and second gardens. From the third garden, he brought some for his queen. (R)
- Husband: Eat some unripe and some ripe ones, and distribute a few to your female friends. (R)
- Jaccā*: Long live my husband; you satisfied my craving. (R)
Husband: Long live my wife; you added fame to my name. (R)

Commentary: In this song, the *jaccā* has a craving for mangoes, which are out of season; each family member tries to persuade her to eat something else, but her husband makes a great effort to find mangoes for her. The first, second, and third gardens symbolize the husband's long journey.

The news of the pregnancy is sent to the *jaccā*'s natal home. It is common for a *jaccā* to be taken to her parents' home by her brothers, at least for the first pregnancy. If the *jaccā*'s in-laws do not permit this, her brother brings gifts for the *pacavāṅsā* and/or *sataṅsā* (ceremonies of the fifth and seventh months, respectively). Depending upon finances, a family may send as much as it wishes, but generally the brother brings five pieces of clothing⁵ for his brother-in-law (*bahanoī/jjā*) and a *piyarī* (a yellow sari) for his sister, along with *purīs*, sweets, and fruit. During the ceremony, the brother ties the ends of his sister's and brother-in-law's garments together (*gāṅṅhī joḍanā*) and worships them while they sit on a *cauk*⁶ (with symbolic washing of feet, applying *tilak* (a mark on the forehead), and offering them sweets and the clothes he has brought). For the *koṅch bharanā* or *koṅch ḍālanā*, all three stand up; the brother puts some rice and a lump of raw sugar on the corner of the front part of the garments, first on his sister's and then on his brother-in-law's. The brother then blesses the couple with the offering of *nichāvar* to the *parajan*⁷ of the household. The edible items brought by the brother are distributed among relatives and neighbors the same evening or the next day (a custom known as *bāyan*—see Song No. 5). During *pacavāṅsā* and *sataṅsā*, the women sing *sohar* songs.

The older women of the household visit different shrines and saints in the area to pray for the wellbeing of the *jaccā* and the unborn child, put amulets on the *jaccā*, and draw human-images with a ground coal mixture, in front of the home entrance, to ward off evil spirits (*najar*).⁸ These activities are rigorously observed if the family has suffered sad experiences in previous pregnancies. From eight months on, the *jaccā* refrains from using makeup and braiding her hair. (It is believed that leaving the hair loose will ease her delivery.) The family stops sending clothes to the washerman. As time for delivery nears, a room (*sovar*), well away from general view, is plastered with cowdung and made ready for the delivery.

When the labor pains begin a young member of the family (in songs, usually the husband) runs to fetch the *dāī* (midwife)⁹ to deliver the baby. Immediately after the delivery, women and children waiting outside blow conchshells and bang metal plates together, to announce the news to the neighborhood and to scare evil spirits away. The level

of enthusiasm in this noise-making is itself a sign whether the child is a boy or a girl (see also Luschinsky 1962, 81). The midwife cuts the umbilical cord (which is usually buried in a corner of the delivery room) and bathes the baby.

SONG NO. 2: *SOHAR*

Mother Yaśodā is restless today.

For a second she is in the courtyard, in another second she walks into the house, and the next second she climbs onto the roof. (R)
She takes off her blouse and clothes and hangs them on a rope; she unbraids her hair. (R)

In the wee hours of the morning, a son is born to her. (R)

The umbilical cord is cut with a golden knife and the baby is bathed in a silver pot. (R)

The baby is laid down in a winnowing basket made of reeds; pearls are offered in oblation. (R)

The baby is dressed in yellow silken clothes and is laid down upon a throne. (R)

Commentary: A pregnant woman's labor pains begin; she gives birth to a son. The song mentions the rituals of cutting the umbilical cord and bathing the newborn. Utensils made of gold and silver and the offering of gems signify the lavishness with which every family wishes to celebrate. As in this song, many *sohar* songs refer to the *jaccā* as Mother Yaśodā and the newborn as Kṛṣṇa, or to Rām, Sītā King Daśarath, and Queen Kausalyā as the ideal husband, wife, and in-laws. To the Hindus, these characters represent perfect role models.

If the baby is a boy, the midwife demands rich rewards. The family invites close female relatives and neighbors to come and celebrate with singing (at a generally specified time a few hours to a few days after the birth). In the case of a girl's birth, however, the celebration is usually limited or non-existent (Bahadur 1978, 2; Kuldeep 1972, 57; Pandey 1958, 20; Planalp 1956, 391; Tripathi 1951, 80; and Tripathi 1977, 262). There are two main reasons why a daughter's birth is not joyously celebrated: first, daughters leave their natal homes after marriage and are therefore not considered part of the patrilineal line; second, dowry at the time of her marriage and subsequent gift-giving obligations impose a great burden on a girl's family.

I have not yet heard a single *sohar* song in which the birth of a daughter is celebrated.¹⁰ One song tells how a *jaccā* is treated royally by her husband's family after she gives birth to a son, and the last lines-

“ If she had given birth to a daughter, she would be sitting on the door-sill; she would have fallen from everyone’s eyes ” (Tewari 1977), amply illustrate Indian society’s attitude towards the birth of a girl.

After the midwife leaves, the barber’s wife takes over the care of the *jaccā*. She massages the new mother and baby every day with mustard oil and gives them sponge baths. Special food preparations for the *jaccā* are begun almost immediately after the birth, by various household members; some foods (such as *harīrā* and *sunḥailā*)¹¹ require special ingredients, and much grinding and sifting.

At the appointed time for the newborn’s celebration, invited families arrive for singing. *Sariyā* songs (sung only after the delivery) are usually long and describe the labor pains, the husband’s rushing to bring the *dāī*, the *dāī*’s bargaining for her reward, and finally the delivery and the *dāī* leaving with many presents. (*Sariyā* songs are not very popular these days, however—see Rohatagi 1971, 155 and Upadhyay 1978, 6.) Other song types describe the special food preparations made for the *jaccā*, often depicting the efforts of a husband in bringing ingredients and of family members, as well as the barber’s wife, helping in grinding and sifting. Some songs focus on up-coming ceremonies, describing the mother-in-law performing the *caruā* ceremony,¹² husband’s elder brother’s wife making the mixture of *pīpari*,¹³ or the husband’s sister performing *satiyā*¹⁴ or applying *kājal*¹⁵ to the baby’s eyes. Rewards for such services are frequently mentioned as well.

SONG NO. 3: SOHAR

Yaśodā will deliver a son today.

Mother-in-law will come to perform the *caruā* ceremony; she will receive the present of an arm-bracelet. (R)

Husband’s elder brother’s wife will come to grind peppers; she will receive the present of a nose-ring. (R)

Sister-in-law will come to apply *kājal* to the child’s eyes; she will receive the present of earrings. (R)

Husband’s younger brother will come to play the flute; he will receive a wrist-watch. (R)

Girlfriends will come to sing *mangal* songs; they will receive sweets. (R)

As soon as possible, a barber is sent to the *jaccā*’s parents’ home with *rocanā* (a ritual mark on the forehead, similar to *tilak*). This means of communication (practical even now, due to the unreliability of the postal service) has become a tradition. Upon receiving the *rocanā*, the *jaccā*’s natal family rewards the in-law’s barber for bringing the good

news; they then prepare to send gifts to the *jaccā*'s conjugal family, in time for the *chaṭhī* ceremony.

SONG NO. 4: *SOHAR*

- Sītā: Sītā is sitting under a tree laden with leaves.
 “ Who will cut reeds and who will make a cottage for me? Who will help, all night, in this trouble? ”
- Sages: The sages came out of the forest and consoled Sītā.
 “ Sita, we will take care of you through this trouble.”
 In the wee hours of the morning, Lav and Kus were born.
- Sītā: “ Listen, call the barber to take *rocanā* to Ayodhyā.
 Give the first *rocanā* to King Dasarath and the second to Queen Kausalyā.
 Give the third *rocanā* to my husband's younger brother Lakshmaṇ, but do not tell Rām anything.”
 In appreciation of the *rocanā*, Daśarath gave five pieces of clothing, and Queen Kausalyā gave many ornaments.
 Lakshmaṇ gave a headdress, but Rām was not told anything.
 Sitting under a laden tree, Rām was brushing his teeth.
- Rām: “ Oh dear brother Lakshmaṇ, your forehead is shining. Where did you get that *rocanā*? ”
- Lakshmaṇ: “ My dear elder brother's wife Sītā has given birth to Lav and Kuś. For that reason I received this *rocanā*.”
 Daśarath gave five pieces of clothing, Queen Kausalyā gave many ornaments. Lakshmaṇ gave a headdress, but no one told Rām anything.
- Rām: “ Oh that sinful barber didn't tell me. I would have given many rich rewards.”

Commentary: This episode is taken from the epic Rāmāyaṇ. Rām banishes Sītā from Ayodhyā when he hears idle gossip questioning her chastity. In the forest, Sage Valmīki takes care of her and she gives birth to the twins, Lav and Kuś. As custom dictates, the happy news is relayed to the husband's family through the barber. Sītā sends *rocanā* to her in-laws and to Lakshmaṇ, but forbids the barber to tell Rām. (Indian women have apparently expressed their displeasure with Rām here, for abandoning his faithful wife on mere hearsay).

The brother usually brings the presents for the *chathī*, which, as the name indicates, takes place on the sixth day after the birth. (If the sixth day is not auspicious, the ceremony may be performed on the fifth or seventh day.). Immediate family relatives are invited for feasting. A painting is drawn on a cowdung-plastered wall and is worshipped (see Rohatagi 1971, 164). The sister-in-law applies *kājal* to the eyes of the newborn and the *jaccā*, and receives presents for her services. This is also the first day that the *jaccā* starts eating regular food again, but she is still not expected to take over all her normal duties.

On the twelfth day, the ceremony of *barahīṇ* or *barahon* is performed. (In some households it is performed on the eleventh day.) On this day, the *jaccā* and the baby are bathed and given new clothes in the morning. They worship the sun god by turning around nine times, offering oblations of water and barley seeds to the sun after each turn. Friends and relatives are invited for feasting, and women sing congratulatory songs. After this ceremony, the *jaccā* is considered pure, and resumes normal interaction and work in the family. The delivery room is cleaned and plastered with cowdung. This marks the end of the ceremonies associated with childbirth.¹⁶

THE CONTEXT, CONTENT, AND PERFORMANCE OF SOHAR SONGS

Sohar songs can be divided into two categories. I refer to songs sung from the time of conception to the time of labor as 'songs of anticipation.' These include songs of a *jaccā*'s cravings, husband's and other family members' desire for a male child, worshipping of goddesses and local deities to assure the birth of a son, labor pains, and the arrival of the midwife. The second category, 'songs of rituals and celebration,' includes congratulations, preparation of ritual and edible items, and exchange of gifts.

The social settings of these two categories of songs are different. For 'songs of anticipation,' household women, drop-in relatives, and neighbors engage in casual singing during leisure hours (except during the *pacavāṅsā* and *satavāṅsā* ceremonies). For 'songs of rituals and celebration,' the family sends the barber's wife to invite families formally to join in rejoicing. The invitations to such gatherings are of two kinds: 1) to join in celebration and singing, and 2) to join in celebration, singing, and dinner. The decision about who is invited for what depends upon the social relationship and kinship which families have with one another.

Honoring this invitation by attending and participating in singing is a social obligation and may result, if not answered, in repercussions by the host family to the invited family. Families dress formally for

such occasions; new daughters-in-law, particularly, are dressed and jewelled in their best. According to social rank and relationship, women of the host and invited families exchange ritual touching of feet (see Wadley 1975).¹⁷ Daughters-in-law are instructed beforehand to show utmost modesty during the celebration.¹⁸

The setting for 'songs of rituals and celebration' is formally prepared. The courtyard is plastered with cowdung and covered with *darī* (Indian carpets for casual use). *Sohar* songs are sung both during and after the ritual at such gatherings.

SONG NO. 5: *SOHAR*

- The interior room was washed and plastered, spotlessly clean.
- There sat the *jaccā* in great pain.
- Jaccā*: "Dear sister-in-law, I touch your feet in reverence. Dear sister-in-law, please make my bed in the room."
- Si-in-law: "I am not your barber's wife, not your *bārin*,¹⁹ and not your midwife. Brother's wife, I am not your father's servant either, that I should heed your commands."
- Jaccā*: "You are not my barber's wife, not my *bārin*, and not my midwife. Dear sister-in-law, you are your brother's sister; for the sake of your nephew, please make the bed."
- Si-in-law: "Oh dear brother's wife, for the sake of this bed, give birth to a son."
- Jaccā*: "Don't taunt me, my sister-in-law. I am in such pain and far from my home; please don't tease." In the early morning, she gave birth to a son. Her girlfriends started singing *sohar* songs to the accompaniment of instruments. In the courtyard, congratulatory songs were sung by the women. The playing of *sahanāī* at the father-in-law's gate was very pleasing. Bring the cowdung and plaster the courtyard; mark the area for worship; bring a *kalas*²⁰ and a wooden board, and light the lamp.
- Si-in-law: "Oh dear brother's wife, all arrangements are complete; come sit on the *cauk* with your son."
- Jaccā*: "I have been blessed with new sight, due to my son's

birth.

Hearing the *sariyā* songs, the lotus of my heart has blossomed.

There is a basket woven with nine colors, in which *bāyan* is being sent to every household, in happiness for a son's birth in our home."

Commentary: This song illustrates the rituals of thanksgiving that take place amidst music and merriment. Giving birth to a son is a turning point in a *jaccā*'s life. She takes an upward step in status and importance. As the song says so poetically, she is "blessed with new sight" and "the lotus of her heart" blossoms. The beginning conversation between the *jaccā* and her sister-in-law illustrates the lower status of the new daughter-in-law in her conjugal family and her sister-in-law's superior status.

The family priest calculates the most auspicious times for the rituals and helps the family perform the core of each ritual, as specified in priestly texts. Thereafter, women's oral traditions dominate the ritual activities (see also Wadley 1978, 338). Sohar songs may be compared to Sanskrit mantras, in that they communicate with women's deities, whose compassion has blessed the family. As Arya (1968, 13) points out, "The *sohars* . . . though expressive of the emotion of joy at the occasion of childbirth, are more of a thanksgiving to the deities than a mere celebration . . . to the folk mind many of these songs in the spoken language are indeed equivalent to *mantras*."

By attending, families thus participate in thanksgiving and, though possibly unconsciously, request similar blessings for their own daughters-in-law. Many *sohar* songs end with "whoever sings these auspicious songs and whoever hears them will be blessed with similar results." The older women, during feet-touching and leave-taking, bless new daughters-in-law with such sayings as:

As her happy days have come, may your happy days also come.
(*Jaise inke din bahure taise tumharav bahurain*)

or

May you bathe in milk and be blessed with sons.
(*Dūdho nahāo pūtoṅ phalo.*)

The final comment before departure is, "Next time I see you, I want to see a son on your lap." Thus participants strive to achieve similar good fortune in their own families.

At the time of leave-taking, the *jaccā*'s family gives *gulagulā*,²¹ *batāsā*,²² or other sweets (usually five in number) to the heads of the in-

vited families. Families invited for dinner enjoy eating special dishes typically made for such ceremonies.

During these formal and informal get-togethers, older women may initiate the singing, then gradually persuade the younger women to take over, while they direct the food preparations, welcome arriving guests, and exchange local gossip. Nevertheless, the older women keep their ears tuned to what is being sung, and correct song texts when necessary. These gatherings are therefore important means by which social customs, rituals, and songs are orally transmitted (see Jacobson 1975, 46). Through songs, women collectively praise, worship, and reinforce their devotion to local deities; provide a relaxed situation for new daughters-in-law to make friends, away from the restricted atmosphere of their conjugal homes; perpetuate the hierarchical ranking among kinfolk and other persons; and regenerate their beliefs in established concepts and values, transmitting them to the next generation.

Joyous singing and gift-giving (*neg* or *negācārī*) are recurring topics in *sohar* songs. Gifts are given in gratitude to relatives who perform ritual obligations and bless the newborn, the *jaccā*, and the family. Although the gifts are given in expectation of eventual gifts in return, there is a strong feeling of joy in sharing with one another. This is especially true for the cognates (especially from the *jaccā*'s natal home), who seize this opportunity for social display, hoping to increase their prestige. The following three songs herald the demands for gifts:

SONG NO. 6: *SOHAR*

- A pregnant woman is going here and there, carrying
 cowdung in her hand.
- Jaccā*: “ Whichever room you suggest, I shall plaster it.”
 Before her mother-in-law has a chance to answer, her
 sister-in-law quips.
- Si-in-law: “ Oh *bhaujī*, you’re going to have a female child any-
 way, so why don’t you go clean the barn? ”
 In the wee hours of the morning, the *jaccā* gives birth
 to a son.
 People rejoice, and women sing *sohar* songs.
 The playing of the *sahanāī* at the father-in-law’s gate
 is very pleasing.
 The sister-in-law is so happy that she dances on one
 foot, asking for gold bracelets from her *bhaujī*.
- Jaccā*: “ Oh sister-in-law, your taunts that I should go to the
 barn still hurt me.
 Your father didn’t have these bracelets made for me,

nor did your brother purchase them;
My parents gave them to me, and I will not give them
to you.”

Commentary: A pregnant daughter-in-law is portrayed preparing her delivery room, while her sister-in-law taunts her. The song aptly describes the joyous celebration that follows a son’s birth.

SONG NO. 7: (*BADHĀI*) *SOHAR*

- Si-in-law: I swear to my brother that I will demand a nose-ring.
Jaccā: If you insist on a nose-ring, my sister-in-law, I will
leave for my parents’ home. (R)
Si-in-law: If you, brother’s wife, leave for your parents’ home,
I swear to my brother that I will come there also.
(R)
Jaccā: If you, sister-in-law, come there, I swear that I will
lock the gate. (R)
Si-in-law: If you, brother’s wife, lock the gate, I swear that I will
jump the wall. (R)
Jaccā: If you, my sister-in-law, come there by jumping the
wall, what gift will you bring? (R)
Si-in-law: I will bring *khaḍuā*, *pauṭā*, and *khagavār*²³ in plenty.
(R)
Jaccā: If you, sister-in-law, bring this much, I will certainly
give you a nose-ring. (R)

SONG NO. 8: *SOHAR*

- Jaccā:* I will not invite my sister-in-law, oh my husband!
I will invite my mother for the *caruā* ceremony and
will dash the hopes of my mother-in-law. (R)
I will invite my brother’s wife to grind long peppers
and will dash the hopes of my husband’s elder
brother’s wife. (R)
I will invite my sister to apply *kājal* and will dash the
hopes of my sister-in-law. (R)
I will invite my brother to play the flute and will dash
the hopes of my husband’s younger brother. (R)
I will invite my friends from home and will dash the
hopes of my friends here. (R)

Commentary: The most important relationship, in the song texts
and to a great extent in real life also, is between a *jaccā* and her sister-

in-law. To a *jaccā*, a sister-in-law is a troublemaker, yet at the same time a close companion. In the *sohar* songs, the sister-in-law is short-tempered, pesty, and demanding. However, the sister-in-law is also depicted dancing happily and doing chores for the *jaccā* (although only after a son's birth—see Song Nos. 5, 6, and 7). Both *jaccā* and sister-in-law depend on each other. As a newlywed, the *jaccā* relies heavily on her sister-in-law to help her with household work and as a link to her in-laws and husband. In return, the *jaccā* teaches her, more than anyone else, about the marital relationship and is a powerful ally after her own marriage, sending gifts to her own in-laws in turn, and bringing her back home for extended visits.

Another ally for a *jaccā* is her husband's younger brother. He is her closest male friend, next to her husband, in affinal relationship. She can send messages to her own brother and can acquire anything (within reason) from the outside world through him. In the songs, the husband's younger brother is always portrayed as a helpful, compassionate individual.

The birth of a son in itself raises the status of the *jaccā* in the family; in addition, if her natal family sends expensive gifts to her husband's family during life-cycle ceremonies, she is respected even more highly, regardless of her rank in the hierarchy. Many folk songs describe the cold reception accorded a *jaccā*'s brother who brings few gifts, in contrast to one who comes laden with presents and is therefore treated well by his sister's husband's family.

Relatives who are frequently mentioned in *sohar* songs are: husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband's elder brother and his wife, husband's younger brother and his wife, and husband's sister. Later childhood songs which describe a child's playfulness, his toys, and childhood ceremonies (*muṇḍan*, *chedan*, etc.) also include the cognate line (mainly, *jaccā*'s mother, father, brother and his wife. Address terminology is given in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1: Terms of Address

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Address Terminology</i>	
	<i>To jaccā</i>	<i>To newborn</i>
Husband's father	sasur	bābā, dādā
Husband's mother	sās	dāī, dādī
Husband's elder brother	jeṭh	tāū, bade cācā
Husband's elder brother's wife	jeṭhānī	tāī, baḍī cācī
Husband's younger brother	devar	cācā
Husband's younger brother's wife	devarānī	cācī

Husband's sister	nanad	buā
Husband's sister's husband	naṇḍoī	phūphā
<i>Jaccā's</i> father	bappā, pitā	nānā
<i>Jaccā's</i> mother	ammā, mātā	nānī
<i>Jaccā's</i> brother	bhaiyā	māmā
<i>Jaccā's</i> brother's wife	bhaujī, bhābhī	māīṇ, māīmī
<i>Jaccā's</i> sister	dīdī, bahinī	mausi
<i>Jaccā's</i> sister's husband	jījā, bahanoī	mausā, mausiya

Sohar songs are sung by a group of women, simultaneously, with one woman (sometimes several) acting as the leader by singing louder and initiating the repetitions of the lines. (The number of times a line is repeated is given within brackets after each line—see appendix.)

Sohar songs can be divided into two groups according to performance practices: 1) songs which follow a refrain-stanza-refrain style of singing and are generally accompanied by *ḍholak* and *mañjīrā*, and 2) songs which repeat the last few words of each line. For example, in Song Nos. 4, 5, and 6, the text in italics in each line is repeated—the first line of Song No. 4 “*Chāpā kā peḍ chiuliyā to ohi tare Sītā baiṭhīn ho*” is sung like this: “*Chāpā kā peḍ chiuliyā to ohi tare Sītā baiṭhīn ohi tare Sītā baiṭhīṇ ho.*” Songs in this category are sung, almost always, without any accompaniment. *Sohar* songs in the first group generally refer to a sequential episode, such as the *jaccā's* restlessness, birth of a son, and rituals of cutting the umbilical cord; the performance of specific rituals by relatives and their subsequent rewards; or a dialogue with or about a relative. The subject matter for the second group of songs usually deals with the *jaccā's* final stage of pregnancy, the labor pains and her worries about the delivery room, a family member's desire for a male child (usually the husband or sister-in-law), the birth of a son, and joyous celebrations. Nevertheless, there is a thematic overlap in these two categories. Women themselves state that the songs in the second category are not accompanied by instruments (*ehi par ḍholak nā calī—ḍholak* will not be played in this song) and are melodically similar.

Many *sohar* songs are composed in dialogue form. The dialogue is often between the *jaccā* and her sister-in-law, the *jaccā* and her husband's younger brother, or the *jaccā* and her husband. Musically, they use traditional melodies without any variation in tune and hardly any musical elaboration in singing. However, among the younger generation new song-texts set to film tunes are popular. The melodic range is usually less than an octave, with melodic activity concentrated within a tetrachord. The skip of a third is most prevalent within a single melodic line, as well as in joining the verse to the refrain (and vice versa),

although skips of a fourths are also common. The melodic form is basically ABA or AB throughout the song.

CONCLUSION

Sohar songs contain compact information on folk beliefs, social customs, and family rituals. As such, they are an important body of women's oral literature. Generally their authorship is anonymous and their age unknown; these songs have been handed down from generation to generation, and are remembered and sung only for the appropriate occasions. They are an essential component of cultural upbringing in Hindu society and fulfill the functions of values transmission, social delineation, and thanksgiving.

APPENDIX:

SONG NO. 1 *BADHĀĪ (SOHAR)*

- HAMEN KALAMĪ ĀM MAṄĀ DO HAMĀRĀ MAN MACALĀ. (2)
 Man sasurā ke āge macalā, man sāsā ke āge macalā. (1) (R×2)
 Bahū nimbū nāraṅgī khāo. (2)
 Is ritu meṅ ām nahīṅ haiṅ hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Man jeṭhā ke āge macalā. (2) (R×2)
 Choṭī kele kī phaliyāṅ khāo. (2)
 Is ritu meṅ ām nahīṅ haiṅ hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Man devarā ke āge macalā. (2) (R×2)
 Bhābhī maṭar kī phaliyāṅ khāo. (2)
 Is ritu meṅ ām nahīṅ haiṅ hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Man rājā ke āge macalā. (2) (R×2)
 Rājā ek ban māgaiṅ dusar ban. (2)
 Rājā tij ban ām bagaicā hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Kuch kacce bhī toḍe kuch pakke. (2)
 Kuch jholā bīc chipā lo hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Rājā ek ban māgaiṅ dusar ban. (2)
 Rājā tij ban raniyā ke pās tumhārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Kuch kacce bhī khao (khālo) kuch pakke. (2)
 Kuch sakhiyoṅ bīc luṭādo hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Jiyo jiyo rajan ke beṭe. (2)
 Tumane pūrī karāī merī sādḥ hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)
 Jiyo jiyo rajan kī beṭī. (2)
 Tumane khūb karāyā merā nām hamārā man macalā. (2) (R)

SONG NO. 2 *SOHAR*

- MAHARI KUCH ANAMANĪ KAISĪ ĀJ. (2)

Chin āṅgan chin bhītar dolay. (2)
 Chin caḍhi jāt atāri mahari kuch; chin caḍhi jāt atāri. (R)
 Colī cīr araganī ṭāṅgev. (2)
 Keś diye chuṭakāy mahari kuch; keś diye chuṭakāy. (R)
 Bhor hot pau phāṭan lāge. (2)
 Horil roy sunāo mahari kuch; horil roy sunāo. (R)
 Sone ke churavan nār kaṭāvaun. (2)
 Rupe khapaḍ anhavāye mahari kuch; rupe khapaḍ anhavāye. (R)
 Sirakī ke sūp lāl pauḍhāye. (2)
 Motiyan ākhat dāre mahari kuch; motiyan ākhat dāre. (R×2)
 Piyare pītāambar lāl pahirāye. (2)
 Siṅhāsan pauḍhāye mahari kuch; siṅhāsan pauḍhāye. (R×2)

SONG NO. 3 SOHAR

AJU JASUDĀ KE LĀL HOIHAIṆ. (2)
 Sāsū jo aihaiṆ caruā caḍhaihaiṆ. (2)
 Aju kaṅṅanan ke neg hoihaiṆ. (2) (R×2)
 Jijī jo aihaiṆ pīpar pisaihaiṆ. (2)
 Aju besarin ke neg hoihaiṆ. (2) (R×2)
 Nanadī jo aihaiṆ kājar lagaihaiṆ. (2)
 Aju bālan ke neg hoihaiṆ. (2) (R×2)
 Devar jo aihaiṆ baṅśī bajaihaiṆ. (2)
 Aju ghaḍhiyan ke neg hoihaiṆ. (2) (R×2)
 Sakhiyāṅ jo aihaiṆ maṅgal gaihaiṆ. (2)
 Aju leḍḍun ke neg hoihaiṆ. (2) (R×2)

SONG NO. 4 SOHAR

Chāpā kā peḍ chiuliyā to *ohi tare Sītā baithiṅ* ho.
 E ho ko morā kharatin kāṭī *ko bangalā chavāvai* ho.
 E ho ko morī jāgai rayaniyā bipat mori kāṭai rayan morī kāṭai ho.
 Ban se nikare haiṅ risi muni *Sītā samujhāvaiṅ* ho.
 Sītā ham tumharī jagibe rayaniyā *bipati tumharī kāṭab* ho.
 Bhor hot pau phāṭat *Lav Kuś jalmeṅ haiṅ* ho.
 E ho dhāū re nagar ke nauvā *Avadh rocanā jāī* ho.
 Pahilā rocanā rājā Daśarath *dusar Kausilyā rānī* ho.
 E ho tisarā rocanā Lachiman devar *Rāmā se nā batāev* ho.
 Dasarath dihin pānciv kapaḍā *Kausilyā rānī abharan* ho.
 E ho Lachiman dihin sir kī pagaḍī *Rāmāiyai (Rāmā se) nā batāev* ho.
 Chāpā kā peḍ chiuliyā to ohi tare Rāmā baiṭhe *karaiṅ dativan* ho.
 Bhaiyā bhahar bhahar māthā hoy *rocanā kahāṅ pāev* ho.
 Hamarī to bhaujī Sītala Deī *Lav Kuś jalmeṅ haiṅ* ho.
 E ho unahī ke Lav Kuś jalmeṅ rocanā *ham (huṅvā) pāvā* ho.

Daśarath dihin pāñciv kapaḍā *Kausilyā rānī abharan* ho.
 E ho Lachiman dihin sir kī pagaḍī *hamā se nā batāen* ho.
 Ab ohi rī papiniyā ke nauvā hamaiṅ nā batāis *bahut kuch deita* ho.

SONG NO. 5 *SOHAR*

Līpiho potiho obariyā ari jhakar makar hoy mahar mahar hoy re.
 E Ho ohi tare baithiṅ jaccārānī *bidhanā bahut haiṅ* re.
 Ari ari lahuri nanadiyā maiṅ *pañyāṅ tore lāgaun* re.
 Nanadī yah raṅgaracanī palakiyā *bichāvau gaj obar* re.
 Nā teri nāuni bārin *nā terī helin* re.
 Bhābhī nā tere bāpā kī maiṅ ceriyā *balaiyāṅ terī dāsav* re.
 Nā merī nāuni bārin *nā merī helin* re.
 Nanadī apane ho bhaiyā kī bahiniyā *bhatīje mis dāsav* re.
 Haṅsi kai liheni palakiyā *bichāi gaj obar* re.
 Bhābhī karau palakiyā kī lāj *horilavā jalamiyo* re.
 Boliyā nā bolau boluvā *ari boluvā nā bolau* re.
 Nanadī saragu nihāre gharu dūri to *boluvā nā bolau* re.
 Bhorī hoti pau phāṭat horil avatare lālan avatare re.
 Jaise bajaiṅ lāgi ānaṅd badhaiyāṅ *gāvaiṅ sakhī sohar* re.
 Āṅgan bajat badhaiyāṅ *bhītar sakhī gāvaiṅ* re.
 E ho sāt sabadh śahanaiyā sasur dvāre bājai sakal jagu jānay bahuta
 nīko lāgai re.
 Gaiyā kā gobaru maṅgāo are aṅganā lipāo are cauk purāo are kaliś
 dharāo are paṭulī darāo are dīpaku jalāo re.
 Bhābhī ab bidhi purai hai Rām *cauk lai baiṭhav* re.
 Phūṭī sī aṅkhiyāṅ ubhari gaiṅ *lālā ko jalam bhao* re.
 Mere kamal uṭho hulasāy ari *sariyā sabadh sunau* re.
 Sāt sikan kero deravā *ai naurāṅg bīno* re.
 Mere ghar ghar phirat bayanavā *hamāre ghar lālu bhaye* re.

SONG NO. 6 *SOHAR*

Oriyan oriyan bahuā phirai *hāthe gobar liye* ho.
 Ab kahanā kī lipī obariyā *jaun tum kahau* ho.
 Sāsū kaun obariyā ham lipī *jahāṅ tum batāvau* ho.
 Sāsū to bolai nā pāi *nanad ūthi bolai* ho.
 Bhaujī ākhir biṭiyā pajaiṅ *bhusaulā ghar līpeu* ho.
 Bhor hot pau phāṭat horil jalam bhe haiṅ lālan jalam bhe haiṅ ho.
 Are bājai lāgi ānaṅd badhaiyā *gāvaiṅ sakhī sohar* ho.
 Ab sāt sabadh śahanaiyā sasur dvāre bājai bahut nīki lāgai bahut
 chabī lāgai ho.
 Ek goḍe nacaī nanadiyā *kakanā bhaujī lebai* ho.
 Nanadī tumhare bhusaulā ke bol *kareje more sālaiṅ* ho.

Nā tumhare bāpā ke gaḍhāye nā *bhaiyā tumhare mol kinhe* ho.
Nanadī kakanā to hamare naihar ke *kakanā nahīṅ debai* ho.

SONG No. 7 *BADHAI (SOHAR)*

BHAIYĀ KĪ SAUṆ HAM TO NATHUNIYĀ LEBO. (2)
Ari jo tum nanadī nathuniyā lehau. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ ham to naihar calī jaibo. (2) (R)
Jo tum bhabhī naihar calī jaihou. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ ham to huan calī aibo. (2) (R)
Jo tum nanadī huana calī aihau. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ ham to kuluph (kivāḍ) dai lebo. (2) (R)
Jo tum bhabhī kuluph dai lehau. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ ham to divāl phāṅḍī aibo. (2) (R)
Jo tum nanadī divāl phāṅḍī aihau. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ kāh badhāo lai aihau. (2) (R)
Das ke khaḍuvā das ke pauṅṭā. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ das ko khagavār lai aibo. (2) (R)
Jo tum nanadī itano lai aihau. (2)
Bhaiyā kī sauṅ ham to nathuniyā debo. (2) (R)

SONG No. 8 *SOHAR*

AB NĀ NANADIYĀ BOLAIBAI HO RĀJĀ. (2)
Māyā bolāy ke caruā caḍhavaibai. (2)
Sāsū kā jiyā tarasaibai ho rājā. (2) (R×2)
Bhābhī bulāy ke pīpar pisaibai (pisavaibai). (2)
Jijī kā jiyā tarasaibai ho rājā. (2) (R×2)
Bahīnī bulāy ke kajarā lagavaibai. (2)
Nanadī kā jiyā tarasaibai ho rājā. (2) (R×2)
Bhaiyā bulāy ke baṅsī bajavaibai. (2)
Devar kā jiyā tarasaibai ho rājā. (2) (R×2)
Sakhīyāṅ bulāy ke maṅgal gavaibai. (2)
Goioṅ kā jiyā tarasaibai ho rājā. (2) (R)

NOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge financial support for field research from the American Institute of Indian Studies (1976 and 1985–86). Additional short-term field research was also carried out during 1977 and 1981.

2. *Srāddh*: a religious oblation offered by a son, each year after his parents' death.

3. *Jaccā*: A pregnant woman is called *jaccā* until she is pronounced clean and resumes normal activities, after the commencement of the twelfth day ceremony (*barahīṅ*).

4. Most village houses do not have latrines; the common practice is to go out in the fields. For the well-being of the *jaccā*, families often set up a temporary latrine adjacent to the house.

5. These five pieces of cloth consist of a headdress, scarf, upper garment, undergarment, and shoes (*paḡaḡī*, *dupaṡṡā*, *aṅgarakhā*, *dhotī*, and *jūtā*, respectively), a customary set known as *pāñc joḡ* or *pāñciv kapaḡā* (see Song No. 4). Nowadays, cloth pieces for pants and/or a suit are popularly given.

6. *Cauk*: a square area, plastered with cow-dung, upon which ceremonies take place.

7. *Nichāvar* is a propitiatory offering of money to assure the safety of loved ones. The brother takes some money in his right hand and rotates it above the heads of his sister and brother-in-law, seven times clockwise and once anti-clockwise, then distributes the money among the *parajan* of the family. A family (*jajamān*) has many *parajans* working for them, such as washerman, carpenter, barber, and water carrier. For their year-round services, these workers were traditionally given a share of the harvest, clothes, and food during festivals, and special rewards of cash and gifts during ceremonial occasions, such as the birth of a son. Nowadays, such traditional compensations have been replaced by cash payments for the services provided.

8. Such beliefs are common in other parts of India as well (see Babb 1975 and Srivastava 1974).

9. Very few villages can claim to have a trained midwife. Usually the role is assumed by a lower caste woman (e.g., a *dhanukin*) who performs this delicate task. Experienced older women of the household and neighborhood provide additional support and expertise.

10. Pandey 1958, 22 contains one *sohar* song announcing the birth of a daughter, to the husband's disappointment.

11. Many spices are dried and made into powder and mixed with dried fruit in a syrup of raw sugar to make *harivā*.

12. The mother-in-law prepares the *caruā*, a baked clay pot. She plasters the outside of the pot with cow-dung paste and makes a design with thick lines of cow-dung, onto which she sticks barley grains. The pot is then filled with water and placed on the fire until the water boils. She ties dried ginger, *ajawāin* (a kind of aromatic seed), turmeric root, *pīparāmaur* (the root of long pepper), and other spices into a piece of cloth and puts them into the water. After the water has boiled awhile, it is left to cool, then is given to the *jaccā* to drink. The herbal water hastens the healing process and is an antiseptic. For this preparation, the mother-in-law receives a present.

13. Immediately after birth, the husband's elder brother's wife grinds *pīpar* (long pepper) and mixes it with mustard oil in an earthen bowl; the *jaccā* drinks this mixture. For this preparation, the husband's elder brother's wife receives a present.

14. The husband's sister makes a paste by rubbing charcoal in milk; with this paste she draws five human images (two on one side and three on the other) on the door to the *jaccā*'s room. She receives a present for performing this service.

15. *Kājal* is another childbirth ceremony, observed on the sixth day after the delivery. At this time, the sister-in-law applies *kājal* (collyrium) to the newborn child's eyes for the first time. *Kājal*, a black paste made out of lampblack and other ingredients, is widely used in India; it is applied to children's eyes as a preventative medicine and to their foreheads every day, to protect them from evil eyes. In the *kājal* ceremony, the sister-in-law applies the *kājal* to one of the infant's eyes and then pretends that her fingers hurt, so that she cannot apply the *kājal* to the other eye. The *jaccā* and other family members then try to persuade her to do it, by giving her some gifts.

16. If the child is born in *mūl* (during an inauspicious astrological time), the father is not permitted to see the child until the twenty-seventh day, when a *mūl* ceremony is performed by the priest. The *jaccā* and baby are bathed; then the *jaccā* and her husband and baby worship the nine planets (*navagrah*). After the worship, a bowl full of oil is put on the floor. The father puts the child on his shoulders and peers into the bowl, so that his first glimpse of the child's face is in reflection. The sun is worshipped as in *chāthī*. Only after the *mūl* ceremony is the *jaccā* considered pure and allowed to resume her normal routine.

17. The most respectful way of touching feet (among women) is to kneel or crouch in front of the other woman, place one hand on each foot, then lift the right hand only, alternately touching one's own forehead and the woman's right foot (three times), then alternately touching both hands to one's forehead and the other woman's feet (twice).

18. After a wedding, relatives and neighbors are formally invited to look at the bride (the ceremony of *mukh* or *muh dikhāi*). However, this practice does not provide any opportunity to observe the new daughter-in-law properly. The bride in turn is barely given time even to recognize the neighbors, in addition to being exhausted from the long round of wedding rituals. Invitation to, attendance, and participation in ceremonies, such as birth, give her a chance to begin social life in her new neighborhood.

19. *Bāri* is a caste among Hindus which prepares and sells cups and plates made of leaves.

20. *Kalaś*: a metal pot (*lotā*) filled with water is established as a temple during a ritual, usually by a priest, amidst recitation of Sanskrit verses. The top of the *kalaś* is covered with a plate full of rice and a lamp.

21. *Gulagulā* is a sweet made by deep-frying a raw sugar-flour mixture.

22. *Batāsā* is a kind of sugar candy.

23. *Khaḍuā*, *pauṭā*, and *khagavār* are names of ornaments worn by women.

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