

Research Article

LOVE BENEATH THE KARMA TREE: (Romantic expressions in Baiga tribal folk karma songs)

Ramesh Budharam ¹, Krishnamani Bhagabati ²¹⁻² Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (A Central University) Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, India. 484887

Edited by

Dr. Srinivas Katherasala

Osmania University

Reviewed by

Prof. Gurram Srinivas

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Prof. Shashi Punam

Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Corresponding Author

bramesh@igntu.ac.in

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Abstract

Folk traditions in India serve as vital expressions of cultural identity, emotional life, and ritual practice. This paper examines romantic expressions in Baiga Karma Geeth, folk songs performed during the Karma festival among the Baiga, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of Central India. While existing scholarship has documented Baiga ritual systems and ecological knowledge, the affective and romantic dimensions of their expressive culture remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study analyzes eight selected Karma Geeth that articulate themes of affection, longing, separation, and future commitment. The research is based on ethnographic engagement and oral documentation, drawing primary material from Padmashri Arjun Singh Dhurve and his group. Through poetic translation and interpretive analysis, the paper demonstrates how the Karma festival functions as a culturally sanctioned space where Baiga youth negotiate romantic relationships within socially regulated norms. The songs employ ecological metaphors such as forests, nature, vines, the moon, and the sacred Karam tree to express emotional attachment to community, while also revealing gendered forms of symbolic agency. References to migration and changing livelihoods reflect the pressures of modernity, which increasingly disrupt traditional courtship practices. As knowledge of Karma Geeth becomes largely confined to elder tradition-bearers, the study contributes to cultural preservation in alignment with constitutional and international frameworks for safeguarding Indigenous heritage. By documenting and translating these songs, the research supports the transmission and recognition of Baiga intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Baiga tribes; Karma Geeth; Romance; Fairs and festivals; Youth identity; cultural continuity.

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1 Introduction

India is home to a remarkable diversity of Indigenous communities whose cultural expressions reflect distinct identities, worldviews, and relationships with nature (Sundar, 2010, Xaxa, 2011). According to the Census of India and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the country officially recognizes 705 Scheduled Tribes, among whom 75 are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) due to their declining populations, fragile livelihoods, and limited exposure to modern developments (Government of India, 2014, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). Each tribal group contributes uniquely to India's cultural mosaic through distinct languages, indigenous ecological knowledge systems, ritual traditions, and expressive arts such as music and dance, which function as vital modes of cultural transmission and identity formation (Geertz, 1973, Singh, 1993, Sinha, 1965).

Across different regions of India, tribal folk traditions reflect a living heritage sustained through oral transmission and collective memory (Elwin, 1955, Singh, 1993). For instance, the Gond and Oraon communities of Central India celebrate the Karama festival with dance and drum ensembles similar to those of the Baiga, emphasizing communal participation and agrarian spirituality (Elwin, 1955, Roy, 1912). The Santhals of Jharkhand and Odisha are known for their rich narrative song cycles and dance traditions such as Chhau, which preserve mythological history and social values through performance (Archer, 1947, Sinha, 1965). The Bhil and Garasia tribes of Rajasthan practice the Gair dance, symbolizing collective joy, seasonal renewal, and social cohesion (Roy Burman, 1987, Singh, 1993).

In Northeast India, the Hornbill festival showcases the warrior traditions and inter-tribal unity of the Naga communities, reinforcing identity through ritual display and performance (Haimendorf, 1982). Similarly, in southern India, the Todas of the Nilgiris express community pride and spiritual belonging through buffalo-centered rituals deeply tied to their pastoral ecology (Mandelbaum, 1989). These examples illustrate that folk performances are not merely art forms but embodiments of cultural identity, transmitting values of cooperation, ecological harmony, and spiritual belonging across generations.

Within this larger context of Indigenous cultural richness, the Baiga stand out for their profound spiritual connection to the forests of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Traditionally shifting cultivators and forest stewards, the Baiga view the land as a living ancestor. Their cultural cosmology prohibits ploughing the earth, which they believe would wound Mother Earth (Elwin, 1954). Music, dance, and ritual are therefore intertwined with ecological ethics, making expressive traditions central to both social organization and environmental consciousness.

Among the numerous Baiga cultural practices, the Karma festival holds a special significance as a celebration of fertility, prosperity, and communal unity under the sacred Karam tree. It is during this festival that Karma Geeth songs synchronized with group dance create a transformative space where youth can interact more freely. Unlike everyday life, which maintains strict boundaries of social conduct between unmarried young men and women, the festival temporarily relaxes these restrictions, allowing courtship through performance, metaphor, and bodily rhythm.

2 Objectives and Significance of the Study

Rapid modernization and socio-economic transformation have profoundly affected Indigenous communities across India, leading to the accelerated erosion of traditional knowledge systems, oral traditions, and expressive cultural forms. Scholars have consistently noted that globalization, market penetration, and the spread of mass media have disrupted intergenerational transmission of folklore, ritual practices, and Indigenous aesthetics (Nongbri, 2003, Xaxa, 2019). Among these forces, the increasing dominance of digital entertainment, amplified DJ music, and commercial popular culture has significantly marginalized traditional song forms, especially those rooted in ritual and communal participation.

Within this broader context, the cultural traditions of the Baiga community face particular vulnerability. The Baigas, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), have historically relied on oral modes of knowledge preservation due to widespread illiteracy and limited access to formal education (Elwin, 1943, Government of India, 2014). As a result, Baiga folk songs, narratives, and ritual performances remain largely undocumented, existing primarily in the memories and practices of elder tradition-bearers. With the passing of these elders, invaluable cultural knowledge risks permanent loss.

Moreover, large-scale migration from Baiga habitations to urban and semi-urban centers for wage labor has weakened communal spaces where folk traditions were traditionally performed and learned. Studies on tribal migration indicate that such displacement often leads to cultural dislocation and declining participation of youth in ancestral practices (Xaxa, 2014, ?). Among Baiga youth, there is an observable shift in cultural preference, with decreasing engagement in folk music and ritual performances and growing attraction toward mainstream entertainment forms, further threatening cultural continuity.

Although anthropological research has documented Baiga healing systems, ritual life, and ecological knowledge in considerable depth, the emotional and expressive dimensions of their folk traditions, particularly romantic and affective expressions embedded in Karma Geetham, remain underrepresented in academic discourse. This gap marginalizes a crucial aspect of Baiga cultural life: the emotional world of youth, which plays a central role in shaping identity, courtship practices, gender relations, and community cohesion. As scholars of Indigenous expressive culture argue, emotions articulated through song and performance are not merely personal sentiments but culturally structured modes of social communication (Blackburn, 2004, Narayan, 1993).

This study therefore gains significance by documenting and interpreting selected romantic Karma Geeth sourced from Padmashri Arjun Singh Dhurve and other Baiga artists, providing poetic English translations and contextual analysis. These songs function as culturally

sanctioned spaces for courtship and emotional expression, allowing Baiga youth to negotiate desire, responsibility, and social norms within a collective ritual framework. In doing so, they sustain social bonds and reinforce shared values even amid changing material conditions.

By foregrounding love, longing, and commitment as vital components of Baiga cultural expression, this research highlights the adaptability and resilience of Baiga folk traditions in the face of ecological degradation, economic precarity, and cultural homogenization. Importantly, scholarly documentation of these traditions contributes to cultural preservation, visibility, and dignity, ensuring that Baiga voices and emotional worlds are recognized within broader discussions of Indias Indigenous heritage. In an era when Indigenous cultures are increasingly endangered, such research is not merely descriptive but ethically and politically significant.

3 Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with Indian folk traditions has frequently emphasized the ritual, mythological, and performative dimensions of tribal cultures. Researchers such as Verrier Elwin have documented the cosmology and ritual worldviews of Central Indian tribes, acknowledging song and dance as living forms of cultural memory. However, the emotional narratives embedded within tribal song traditions have remained less examined, especially aspects related to romance, desire, and courtship.

Theoretical frameworks in folklore studies view folk songs as identity narratives that reflect a communitys worldview (Bascom, 1965). Additionally, performance theory particularly Victor Turners concepts of liminality and *communitas* explain how rituals allow temporary suspension of social hierarchies, producing intensified emotional experiences. Applied to the Baiga context, the Karma festival becomes a liminal space where youth, otherwise constrained by social norms of modesty, can express affection more freely. Gender-focused studies of tribal songs (Sundar, 2010, Xaxa, 2011) indicate that womens voices often carry subtle negotiations of autonomy and desire. Yet Baiga female agency in love songs remains largely unrepresented in literature. Further, while the impact of modernization on tribal cultural change has been widely discussed, its influence on youth relationships and romantic practices is rarely foregrounded. Translation studies scholars (Bassnett, 1998, Venuti, 2012) argue that translation of Indigenous oral forms into English must balance poetic resonance with cultural fidelity. Presenting Baiga romantic songs through poetic translation therefore becomes both a preservation effort and an act of cultural representation.

In summary, existing literature highlights:

- The ritual significance of Karma festival
- Performance spaces as sites of emotional expression
- Gendered voices in tribal tradition
- Tensions between continuity and change

However, direct scholarly focus on romance in Baiga Karma Geeth is absent. This study addresses that gap by providing original translations and interpretation of romantic songs, revealing the emotional and social relationships embedded in Baiga cultural identity.

4 Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in textual analysis, culturally sensitive translation, and ethnographic understanding. The primary material includes Baiga oral songs collected directly from Shri Arjuna Singh Dhurvwey (Padma Shri awardee) and his artistic team, recorded by the researcher during repeated visits to Dhurkuta village in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh in September 2024 to September 2025. These field recordings are supplemented by Baiga folk songs published in Arjun Singh Dhurve Dada ke Baiga Geet, which documents the communitys oral traditions in written form. From these sources, songs associated with the Karma festival and containing distinctive romantic expressions were purposively selected for detailed analysis.

The analytical process emphasizes poetic translation, aiming to preserve the emotional resonance, symbolic imagery, and rhythmic aesthetic of the original Baiga lyrics while rendering them accessible for scholarly discourse. Particular attention is given to cultural metaphors such as the Karam tree, nature, ornaments, vines, and forest pathways that encode Baiga notions of intimacy, longing, relational reciprocity, and ecological identity.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks: Dell Hymes theopoetic (Hymes, 1981, 1996), Richard Baumans performance-centered folklore theory (Bauman, 1977, 1986), and the symbolic/structural anthropological approaches of (Geertz, 1973, Lévi-Strauss, 1966, ?). Ethnopoetic analysis is employed to interpret the songs line structure, repetition, sound patterns, and narrative flow. Baumans performance theory situates the songs within their ritual and social context, emphasizing embodiment, interaction, and the eventfulness of folk performance. Symbolic and structural anthropology informs the interpretation of ecological motifs, bodily ornaments, and food-sharing as culturally embedded signs of identity and emotional life.

Ethnographic contextualization supported by insights from tradition bearers such as Shri Sukhlal Bhusariya anchors the analysis in Baiga social norms, gender expectations, and cultural practices. Selective comparative references to Oraon, Munda, and Gond song traditions further highlight what is distinctively Baiga in romantic expression. Together, this methodological approach provides a comprehensive and culturally grounded framework for analyzing Baiga love songs as expressions of tribal identity, emotional heritage, ecological belonging, and social continuity.

Table 1: Overview of Research Design

Component	Description
Data source	Oral collection from Shri Arjun Singh Dhurvey (Padmashri Awardee) and other Baiga artists Baiga tribal songs, Dhurkuta and Silpidi villages of Dindori District of Madhya Pradesh.
Number of songs Analyzed	Eight Karma festival songs with romantic themes
Selection criteria	Evidence of courtship, affection, longing, or marriage intentions within Karma context
Translation strategy	Poetic translation prioritizing emotional fidelity and symbolic imagery
Analytical focus	Love expression, youth identity, gender roles, cultural continuity and change
Research orientation	Qualitative, interpretive, culturally grounded

This methodology supports both documentation and interpretation, ensuring that Baiga emotional knowledge is preserved with respect and contextual depth.

5 Madhya Pradesh: Where Indias Tribal Soul Lives

Madhya Pradesh, often regarded as the tribal heartland of India, has one of the largest and most diverse tribal populations in the country. According to the ([Census of India, 2011](#)), Scheduled Tribes constitute over 21% of the states population, with 46 officially recognized tribes reflecting significant ethnic and cultural diversity. The Bhil and Gond communities dominate demographically, together accounting for more than 70% of the tribal population Bhils forming about 37.7%, largely concentrated in western districts such as Jhabua, Dhar, Alirajpur, and Barwani, and Gonds comprising around 35.6%, spread across central and eastern regions, particularly along the Narmada basin.

In addition, the state is home to three Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) the Baiga, Sahariya, and Bharia whose cultures are deeply rooted in forest ecology, animistic beliefs, healing traditions, and rich oral heritage, though they face acute socio-economic vulnerabilities. Other tribes such as the Korku, Kol, Munda, and Halba further enrich the cultural mosaic through distinct languages, rituals, music, and dance forms. The cultural vitality of Madhya Pradeshs tribes is also reflected in national recognition, with tribal artists like Bhuri Bai (Padma Shri, 2021) for working on Pithora and Bhil-style paintings, Durga Bai Vyam (Padma Shri, 2022) for Gond art/paints promotion, and Arjun Singh Dhurve (Padma Shri, 2022) for promotion of Biaga tribal culture dance and songs receiving prestigious awards for preserving and revitalizing indigenous art traditions. Together, these demographic, cultural, and artistic dimensions position Madhya Pradesh as a crucial region for understanding Indias tribal heritage, living traditions, and contemporary indigenous contributions.

5.1 Baiga Cultural Context Overview

The Baiga are an Indigenous forest-dwelling community of central India, officially classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). According to the ([Census of India, 2011](#)), the Baiga population in India is 552,495, with 414,526 residing in Madhya Pradesh, mainly in the forested districts of Mandla, Dindori, Balaghat, Umaria, Shahdol, and Anuppur ([Census of India, 2011](#), [Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024](#)). Smaller populations are found in Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh.

Culturally, the Baiga are best known for their deep ecological worldview, in which forests, land, ancestors, and spiritual forces are inseparably linked. Their traditional subsistence practice, Bewar (shifting cultivation), reflects intimate environmental knowledge and sustainable forest use ([Sahapedia, n.d.](#)). Baiga society is organized around clan and lineage systems, with ritual specialists and healers playing a central role in health, dispute resolution, and spiritual life. One of the most distinctive cultural markers is ritual tattooing, especially among women, symbolizing identity, fertility, protection, and continuity of tradition.

The Baiga religious worldview is animistic, centered on forest spirits, sacred trees such as mahua, and ancestral powers. Songs, myths, and ritual narratives form a rich oral tradition through which ecological knowledge and cultural values are transmitted across generations ([Madhya Pradesh Tourism, n.d.](#), [Sahapedia, n.d.](#)).

The Baiga have been extensively documented by Verrier Elwin, one of the most influential anthropologists of tribal India. Elwin conducted long-term fieldwork among the Baiga in Pathangarh village of Dindori district and produced the classic ethnography *The Baiga* (1954), which remains a foundational text on their culture, religion, tattoos, and healing practices. His personal association with tribal society including his marriage to a Gond woman, Kosi Bai further enriched his empathetic and immersive approach to Baiga life ([Elwin, 1954](#)).

5.2 The Karam Tree and Festival

The Karma festival, celebrated after the monsoon harvest, honors the Karam treea sacred symbol of prosperity, fertility, and well-being. Youth gather in open village spaces to perform group dances throughout the night, accompanied by drums such as the mandar and timki. This ritual environment enables social participation and emotional release, especially for young people negotiating relationships and identity.

5.3 Social Norms and Courtship Behavior

In everyday life, Baiga cultural norms emphasize modesty between unmarried boys and girls. Direct expression of love is often restricted in public spaces. However, during the Karma festival, the community temporarily relaxes these boundaries, allowing courtship through dance movements, playful songs, and poetic dialogue between partners.

5.4 Language Features in Karma Songs

Songs in the Baiga tradition draw from Sadri, Chhattisgarhi, and localized Baigani dialects. Common stylistic traits include:

- Nature symbolism: moon, vines, forest paths - metaphors for emotional states
- Repetition and rhythm: used for communal singing and dance synchronization
- Dialogue form: teasing and question-answer exchanges between lovers
- Cultural lexicons: kinship terms, body ornaments, seasons - love-coded meanings

The song-text becomes a social script through which affection is voiced and relationships are negotiated without overt confrontation of community authority.

6 Romantic Imagination in Baiga Karma Songs: An Interpretive Analysis

This section constitutes the central analytical core of the present study and offers a detailed interpretation of selected Baiga folk songs performed during the Karma festival and other occasions. Drawing on eight representative Karma Geeth, it examines how romantic expression is articulated, experienced, and culturally regulated within Baiga tribal society. These songs provide valuable insight into Baiga oral traditions, where love is not treated as a private or marginal emotion but is embedded within ritual performance and collective celebration. By situating romance within the communal space of the Karma dance, Baiga folk culture transforms personal emotion into a socially meaningful experience shaped by shared values, norms, and traditions.

The analysis demonstrates that Baiga romantic imagination is closely connected to ritual life, nature, music, movement, and everyday practices. The songs express emotional experiences central to youth identity, particularly the tensions between affection and modesty, desire and social obligation, and continuity and change within tradition. Across the selected songs, romantic relationships are portrayed as embedded in community rituals such as the Karma dance; expressed through natural imagery, food-sharing, bodily movement, and ornamentation; negotiated within village boundaries, family authority, and cultural expectations; and marked by emotional honesty that includes longing, hesitation, vulnerability, and deep attachment. Together, these songs reveal how emotional bonding, affection, and social connection are woven into the fabric of Baiga ritual life, establishing romantic expression as an integral component of Baiga tribal oral history and cultural identity.

6.1 Song-1 तेज डारे सुरता (The rhythm ignites the heart)

तेज डारे बाई सुरता परान ला तेज डारे रे...
अंगरी के छुटकी रुन झुन बाजे,
जब माँदर बाजे तब सुरता लागे,
तेज डारे सुरता परान ला तेज डारे रे...

Literally, this song expresses deep emotional attachment and love felt during the Karma dance. The singer addresses a woman and says that her presence and affection strike his very life force. The sound of anklets and the rhythm of the mandhar drum awaken feelings of closeness and longing. The repeated reference to anklets jingling while dancing shows a real, physical scene from the dance floor. The drumbeat triggers memories of the beloved, and the emotions become so intense that the singer feels overwhelmed, as if his life might leave him. However, despite this emotional intensity, he firmly declares that he cannot abandon the person he loves. In simple terms, the song literally describes how music, dance, and movement awaken powerful feelings of love and attachment, and how the singer expresses unwavering emotional commitment during the communal Karma celebration.

6.2 Song-2 आन गाँवें बाई तँ छूटे माया (Love does not part with distance)

आन गाँवें बाई तँ छूटे माया, आन गाँवें रे...
गाँव माँ रहतन हँसतन बतातेन आन,
गाँव बाई नै छूटय माया, आन गाँवें रे,
धोती ला लेवय उलटा हो खिलना,
दूसर गाँव से बाई नई होवय मिलना।
आन गाँवें—आन गाँवें बाई नै छूटय
माया आन गाँवें रे...

This is a love song and narrative are deeply rooted in tribal folk culture, A man and a woman belonging to different villages cannot meet freely or regularly without attracting social attention. Therefore, love relationships often develop during community gatherings such as fairs, weekly markets, festivals, and folk dances like Karma, where people from different villages come together. The repeated line

“आन गाँवे बाई तँ छूटे माया” (my love does not leave me even though you are from another village) reflects the emotional struggle between personal affection and social reality. The song expresses longing, attachment, and the pain caused by distance. The mention of everyday objects like the dhoti and routine village movement makes the emotion realistic and grounded in daily tribal life.

Marriage is shown as the socially accepted solution to love in tribal culture. When the young man says that daily meetings are possible only through marriage, it reflects a traditional belief that love must eventually be formalized within community norms. However, when the woman agrees and prepares for marriage, the man stepping back highlights an important cultural truth: folk songs often portray human hesitation, fear of responsibility, and emotional uncertainty, not idealized romance.

6.3 Song-3 रुन-झुन भीतरि कलेजा (When the heart goes rung-rung)

हारै रुन-झुन भीतरि कलेजा खाथै घुना,
खड़े-खड़े रोटी खाय, पत्थराँ मा गीत गावय,
हारै गीत परय रुन-झुन भीतरि कलेजा खाथै घुना ।,
गोड़या मा चूरा पैरी, कन्हैया या करधन कानय,
माँ बाँहड़ी पहर के दिखथस रुन-झुन भीतरि...

Song Source: Shri Sukhlal Bhusariya, Silpidi Village, Dindori District, Madhya Pradesh

This song and narrative represent romantic expression in tribal folk culture, where love is shown through conversation, sharing food, music, and admiration, rather than explicit declarations. A young man and a young woman sit together away from the village, symbolizing a private emotional space created within nature. They praise each other's beauty, showing mutual attraction and affection. The act of sharing a simple food item like a roti is culturally significant. In tribal society, sharing food symbolizes care, trust, and emotional closeness. When the woman asks for a song and the man sings a Karma song, it reflects how music and dance are central to expressing love in tribal life. The man's description of the woman's anklets, bangles, waistband, and earrings highlights admiration rooted in everyday cultural ornaments rather than luxury, keeping the emotion grounded in village life.

In the folk context, this is not just a romantic moment but a socially recognizable form of courtship, often sung during communal gatherings. Such songs allow young people to express love within cultural boundaries, blending nature, music, simplicity, and emotion. Overall, the song celebrates gentle romance, mutual respect, and emotional bonding, which are core elements of tribal folk love traditions.

6.4 Song-4 डोंगरी घुमा ले चलव” (Come Walk with me to the hills)

तोला लेके वो बाई डोंगरी घुमा, तब राम तोला लेके रे...
डाडरी मा जाम पके खोदराई,
कोदों खेते बोरी पके ओही मा लोभावय, राम तोला लेके रे...

Source: Shri Sudarshan Singh Mukadam, Dhurkuta Village of Dindori District, (M. P)

This song reflects tribal courtship and romantic interaction expressed in a simple, natural, and culturally familiar way. In tribal folk culture, love is often shown through invitation, persuasion, shared experiences, and nature, rather than direct declarations. The young man invites the woman to walk with him to a hill, a space away from the village that symbolizes privacy and emotional freedom. The woman's hesitation reflects social boundaries, parental authority, and fear of community judgment, which are strong realities in tribal life. The man does not force her; instead, he persuades her by describing natural attractions jamun fruits, forest produce, streams, and fields.

In tribal culture, such references to fruits, forests, and shared eating are symbols of care, enjoyment, and emotional closeness. When the woman finally agrees, they share food and return home separately, showing that the encounter remains within cultural limits. However, emotionally, a deep bond is formed. Folk songs like this portray love as something that grows naturally through shared moments in nature, while still acknowledging social restrictions. Overall, the song represents gentle romance, persuasion, mutual consent, and emotional bonding, which are central themes of tribal folk love traditions.

6.5 Song-5 Love माया के मारे (Caught in love)

माया के मारे मैं तो आ गया डोला माँ, माया के मारे...
धोती के छोर मा पाँचों रुपैया, पाँचों रुपैया ला
फेंक देयवँ डोला माँ, माया के मारे...
न तो मोल खाये जायें, न तो मोल पिये जायें,
न तो मोल कछु न सुहाये, माया के मारे...

Source: Shri Jaysingh Totadiya, Dhurkuta village Dindori District (M.P)

This song expresses intense emotional attachment and longing, which are central themes of tribal folk love songs. In tribal society, love is often portrayed through everyday actions rather than grand expressions. The young man crossing from one hamlet (डोला) to another symbolizes effort and emotional pull. His repeated visits, even under the excuse of drinking, reflect how love draws him irresistibly toward the woman. The act of tying a small amount of money to the end of his dhoti and throwing it toward her is not about money itself, but about

gesture and intentiona symbolic offering of care and presence. The woman's response shows emotional dependence: without him, food and drink lose their taste, and nothing feels meaningful. Such expressions are common in tribal folk traditions, where love is described as overpowering (माया के मारे), affecting the body, mind, and senses.

In the folk-cultural context, this song highlights how love is felt as an unavoidable force, stronger than routine life, hunger, or comfort. Sung in communal settings, such songs allow individuals to express deep emotions openly while remaining rooted in familiar village life, making them powerful reflections of tribal emotional worlds.

6.6 Song-6 कहाँ रहस खाड़े, इमली बिही ? (Where were you, O tamarind grove?)

हाय तोला देखवौ—देखवौ लोग,
ये इमली बिही के मोर नई तो दिखस रे,
इमली लगाय तं बिही लगाय तं यहाँ लगाय तं वाड़े,
चारों तरफ खोज डारवँ, कहाँ रहस खाड़े इमली बिही...
एक टंगिया मा रुखवा ला मार देवँ,
पासा मिली जाही, करके खूब राह्य आशा, ये इमली...

Source: Padmshri Shri Arjun Singh Dhurve, Dhurkuta village Dindori District (M.P)

Literally, the song tells a story of a young man and a young woman who are in love. The woman calls the man to meet her in a fruit orchard (imli, guava, mango). The orchard is dense with trees. Both of them come to the place, but because of the thick bushes and trees, they fail to find each other. The man searches everywhere, even marking a tree with his axe, but finally returns home disappointed. The next day, they argue each blaming the other for not coming only to realize that both were present but missed each other. In tribal folk culture, love is often expressed through nature-based settings such as forests, orchards, hills, and rivers rather than private indoor spaces. Calling a lover to a garden or forest symbolizes a safe yet secret meeting place away from village supervision. The dense orchard represents both natural beauty and emotional confusion.

This song reflects a common folk theme: missed meetings and misunderstanding in love. The failure to meet does not mean lack of love, but rather the challenges created by environment, timing, and circumstance. The playful argument afterward shows intimacy and emotional closeness. Such songs are sung during community gatherings and dances to express longing, anticipation, disappointment, and reconciliation, all within a familiar cultural setting. The use of fruits, trees, and forest tools like the axe keeps the story rooted in everyday tribal life. Overall, the song portrays love as natural, sincere, and sometimes imperfect mirroring real human relationships within tribal society.

6.7 Song-7 सुधा तोरे बरन (Your beauty is unmatched)

तोरे बरन कहाँ पावों, सुधा तोरे बरन रे
हाथे में तो चूड़ा, चाकी कान तरकिया,
आँखों से गज भुजा ला चमकाये, सुधा तोरे बरन
गरे मा तो छुटा मूँगा, मूड़ी मा कलंगिया,
हँस-हँस माया ला लगाये, सुधा तोरे बरन

Source: Padmshri Shri Arjun Singh Dhurve, Dhurkuta village Dindori District (M.P)

Literally, the song is a dialogue of admiration between a young man and a young woman who are in love. The young man praises the woman's beauty, her ornaments, bangles, earrings, necklace, and the way her entire body shines with decoration. He says that such beauty cannot be found anywhere else. The woman responds by describing her own ornaments and then praises the man in return, saying that his smiling face and loving nature make him equally beautiful. The song moves back and forth as mutual appreciation. In tribal folk culture, love is often expressed through mutual praise, teasing, and description of everyday ornaments, rather than direct emotional confession. Ornaments like bangles, earrings, necklaces, and head decorations are not symbols of wealth but of identity, femininity, and cultural belonging. Describing them in song is a way of expressing attraction and respect.

Such songs are commonly sung during community dances like Karma, where young men and women interact within socially accepted limits. The playful exchange of praise allows emotions to be expressed publicly without crossing cultural boundaries. Overall, the song celebrates beauty, affection, equality, and shared admiration, showing how tribal folk traditions turn love into a graceful, poetic conversation rooted in daily life and cultural aesthetics.

6.8 Song-8 जिवा ने मानय रे (When my heart refuses to part)

तीर-तीरई दिन छिटकय मय गय अंगोर,
जिवा नय मायन रे-रे...
मार लेबी मुर्गी, बनाय लेबी झोर,
आन गाँव जाय जाबी ले लेऊँ सोर,
जिवा ने मानय रे...

Source: Padmshri Shri Arjun Singh Dhurve, Dhurkuta village Dindori District (M.P)

Literally, the song is sung at the closing moment of a festival dance, especially during Dussehra or Karma celebrations. The singers realize that the day has passed, the sun has fully risen, and it is time to stop dancing. There is reluctance and sadness because such joyful moments are rare. The women suggest cooking chicken and eating together, symbolizing celebration even at the end of the festival. They also assure that even if people return to different villages, they will remain connected and keep in touch.

In Baiga tribal culture, festivals like Karma and Dussehra are not only ritual events but also key emotional and social spaces where relationships romantic, familial, and communal are strengthened. Songs sung at the conclusion of these dances express reluctance to separate, emotional warmth, and continuity of bonds. Although this song does not describe romantic love explicitly, it reflects an important dimension of Baiga emotional life: togetherness and attachment beyond individual romance. The mention of cooking and sharing chicken (झोर/सुखा) signifies collective intimacy, care, and mutual belonging. Food-sharing is a powerful symbol of emotional connection in tribal society.

The line assuring continued concern for one another “जहाँ भी रहोगे, हम खबर लेते रहेंगे” highlights the strength of social and emotional networks. In Baiga oral tradition, love is not limited to couple-centered romance; it is embedded in community, memory, and shared experience. Thus, this song plays a crucial role in tribal oral history by marking the emotional closure of celebration, transforming separation into reassurance, and reinforcing bonds that persist beyond the physical gathering. It demonstrates how Baiga folk songs express love in its collective, sustaining, and socially grounded form.

The Baiga tribal love songs presented here collectively reveal a rich and nuanced understanding of romantic relationships as lived, negotiated, and emotionally embodied experiences within Baiga society. These songs do not present love as an abstract or idealized emotion; rather, they embed romance firmly within dance, nature, labor, food-sharing, ornamentation, village geography, and social boundaries. As part of the oral tradition, these songs function simultaneously as emotional expression, cultural memory, and social commentary.

7 Discussion: Relevance and Transition

This analysis demonstrates that romance in Karma Geeth functions as a vital cultural resource through which young Baiga people articulate identity, emotion, and belonging. The connection between love and ecology is especially prominent: metaphors of vines, rivers, moonlight, and the sacred Karam tree reflect not only romantic attachment but also the Baiga understanding of human relationships as rooted in the natural world (Elwin, 1954). Emotional expression is therefore intertwined with environmental knowledge, reinforcing the belief that the forest sustains both life and love.

The songs additionally highlight culturally negotiated gender roles. Although social norms prescribe modesty and restrict direct interaction between unmarried boys and girls, performances enable women to express affection and desire in symbolic and poetic forms. As suggested in earlier scholarship on tribal women's expressive agency (?), Karma Geeth provide a creative space in which gender expectations are respected yet subtly reshaped, granting voice to young women within socially accepted boundaries. Moreover, these songs reinforce social cohesion by ensuring that courtship does not occur in isolation but remains situated within community participation. Love unfolds in collective spaces during dance circles, under the watchful and supportive eyes of kin rather than in private settings. Romance is thus a shared cultural project that strengthens interdependence and maintains communal harmony (Bascom, 1965).

At the same time, the recurring theme of longing and separation in several songs reflects the pressures of contemporary change, particularly migration for wage labor and modern schooling, which influence traditional interaction patterns. Yet the Karma festival persists as a resilient cultural space where Baiga youth reaffirm identity and belonging despite external disruptions (Sundar, 2010). The written documentation of these songs reveals a growing recognition of their cultural value and represents a self-conscious effort toward preservation, reflecting pride in Baiga intangible heritage. Thus, Karma Geeth serve simultaneously as expressions of living tradition and as markers of transition, embodying both the resilience and adaptability of Baiga cultural identity in a transforming world.

8 Conclusion

Karma Geeth must be understood not merely as artistic performances, but as living emotional archives that encode the social values and aspirations of Baiga youth. Through their imagery of the forest and the Karam tree, these songs affirm that love and environment are deeply interconnected in Baiga worldview. Romantic expression becomes a culturally acknowledged route to explore desire, negotiate gender roles, and build social bonds while maintaining respect for community norms.

At a time when migration, urban influence, and lifestyle transitions are altering traditional structures of interaction, these songs continue to provide emotional resilience, sustaining cultural identity for younger generations. Translation and documentation of Karma Geeth thus play a crucial role in preserving Indigenous emotional heritage, elevating Baiga voices within academic discourse and ensuring future recognition of their cultural contributions. Celebrating Baiga love songs ultimately celebrates their enduring creativity, pride, and belonging within India's diverse cultural landscape.

9 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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12 Authors' Contribution

In accordance with the collaborative nature of this research, Ramesh Budharam and Bhagabati Krishnamani contributed equally to the development and completion of this work. Both authors were deeply involved in the conceptualization phase, collaborating on the initial design and the development of the study's theoretical framework. Their joint efforts extended to the practical execution of the research, where both authors conducted the fieldwork and performed the subsequent qualitative and quantitative analyses. In terms of documentation, both authors worked together to draft the original manuscript. Finally, both participated in the critical revision of the article for intellectual content and provided final approval for the version submitted for publication.

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