

The Confluence of Bhojpuri and Bengali Folk Culture

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ABSTRACT

Understanding Culture is essential to any study or discussion about the social and political enquiry. The paper seeks to understand the complexities and coexistence of Bhojpuri and Bengali folk culture. Whether it is songs, theatre or film, both seem to influence and complementary to each other. This paper is an attempt to understand the amalgamation of different cultures and how they have been enriching their cultural folk tradition without harming and destroying each other. The article is also an attempt to analyse how Bhikhari Thakur who is called the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri has played an essential role in the confluence of Bhojpuri and Bengali folk culture and voicing the issues and aspirations of the oppressed in his art form Bidesiya.

1. Introduction

Culture is defined as a set of values, beliefs, symbols, ideas, forms of behaviour and style of art and craft which the members of a group have evolved to streamline their social life, and thereby distinguished themselves from other groups. The term culture, however, does not have a confined, defined and refined meaning. Learning is a dynamic concept which has multiple and multidimensional implications. Raymond Williams pointed out that culture has at least three distinct if not discrete meanings. Culture for him is firstly a process of cultivation and growth it carries through today in its biological usage. It is also a pattern of living and a way of understanding.

Furthermore, finally, culture is a thing, a product, an artistic work. These meanings, of course, often overlap. In this way, one cannot find a definitive definition of culture in William's essay. In this paper, we would seek to understand the composite culture of India through a case study of Bhojpuri and Bengali folk culture. Bhojpuri migrants in West Bengal have learned immensely from Bengali folk culture by mingling up with the different genre, interacting with each other and building mutual understanding and respect between different cultural groups without damaging or destroying each other's identity. For example, *Bidesia* is a legendary folk performance from Bihar, which is similar to *Jatra* in West Bengal. This paper also seeks to understand cross-cultural communication between Bhojpuri and Bengali folk culture. The cross-cultural and emotional connectivity will be substantiated with several folk songs and plays developed by famous folksinger and playwright like Bhikhari Thakur, who is also known as Shakespeare of Bhojpuri. Many of Bhojpuri folk songs reflect the memory and emotions with Kolkata city as the city of not only survival for migrant labourers of Bihar but also as the city where their beloved has moved. It reflects the beauty of Indian composite culture and unity in diversity where we learn each other's language, art and craft and embrace and respect each other's festivals. This paper is an attempt to map that confluence of culture in Bhojpuri folksongs and theatre.

2. Calcutta (Calcutta) as Perceived in the Songs and Theatre of Bhikhari Thakur

Bhikhari Thakur (1887–1971), a poor lower-caste barber who worked as a migrant labourer in Kolkata, developed the theatrical form *bidesiyā*. Author of dozens of famous plays and numerous songs, Bhikhari Thakur founded his *bidesiyā* travelling troupe around 1916 when the indentured migration was at its peak.¹ As a migrant labourer working in various other parts of Eastern India, Bhikhari Thakur was able to watch several kinds of performances. Thakur, at the age of 30, had to leave for 'Pardes' (foreign land). At that time Kolkata was perceived as 'Pardesh' in the common parlance. It was the land of survival for many people of the Bhojpuri region. Bhikhari Thakur's uncle, who was in Medinipur, got him a barber's job at Kharagpur. He worked as a labourer in the day time and read Ramayana in the nights there. He went to Jagannathpuri, where he saw the 'Jatra', before returning to Kolkata and subsequently to his village. His play *Bidesiya* depicted not only the fraudulence in recruitment and hardship faced by labourers on the plantation of sugar colonies² but also the sorrow of the young bride. Her husband was forced to leave her in the village and go to *Pardes* (Calcutta) to look for a job. His plays usually enacted on benches inside tents or in the open on wooden planks covered with durries. Therefore the *Bidesiya* theatre drew massive attention of the audience. Thakur, who is also popularly known as Shakespeare of Bhojpuri, was the first person to cast male actors in female roles wearing female clothes.³ Despite all his extraordinary skills, he felt hurt if somebody addressed him as 'Re' or as 'Bhikhariya'. In *Nai Bahar*, he wrote, "*Sabse kathin jaati apmana*" (Humiliation of one's caste is the most difficult to stomach). His pen rebelled

¹BrahmParakash, 'Performing Bidesiya In Bihar : Strategy for Survival, Strategies for Performance, Asian Theatre Journal , vol. 33, no.1, January 2016, p. 64.

²P. PratapKumar, Indian Diaspora " Socio-Cultural and Religious worlds, United Kingdom: Brill Academy, 2015.

³See. Social and cultural dimensions of Indian indentured labours and its diaspora, London: Routledge 2016.

against the social heritage that deprived humans of humanity by depicting the pain of the women in his writings. In those days, the system of selling off the daughters was prevalent among the upper castes. Poor parents, who could not arrange a dowry for their daughters, sold them off as wives to old or unsuitable men. Thakur wrote a heart-rending play *BetiViyog* to protest against this practice. The play, popularly known as *Beti Bechwa* (Selling Daughters) had such an impact in the Bhojpuri-speaking region that at many places girls refused to get married. At other sites, the villagers drove away from the grooms. In 1964, the play was being staged in Kumardhuvi area of Dhanbad district. During one of the shows, more than 500 labourers of Hazaribagh district broke down. They marched to a nearby Shiv temple and took an oath that they would never sell their daughters. This incident took place at Layakdeeh Colliery.

3. The Convergence of Bhojpuri and Bengali Folk Culture

Bhikhari Thakur was a revolutionary who did not go for traditional, contemporary drama. His plays, which he called '*nacch*' or '*tamasha*', depicted the pains and pleasures and the hopes and aspirations of the people at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. His dance troupe performed at Kulti, an industrial township in West Bengal. Many people have developed a typical prejudice against the adjective '*nachaniya*' and lost interest in him. However, for many, he was the hero of the common man. His performances of play went to the rural hinterlands of, Chhapra, Balia, Ara and Patna, as well as Kolkata and the colliery areas.

Despite being born in the barber caste, receiving little education, and struggling with poverty, humiliation and apathy all his life, the way, he managed to build his personality-filled with curiosity and great respect for him.

4. Folk Culture as a Tool of Transformation of Society

In the context of Bhojpuri culture, Bidesiya tradition became the subaltern culture as counterposed to elite culture.⁴ Migration was a phenomenon among the lower classes during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Bidesia can be located in the context of the turmoil in the wake of colonial expansion. BhikhariThakur who had moved out of his rural location to see the world had come back with new ideas from the city Calcutta which he adapted to Bhojpuri subaltern classes.⁵ Bidesia represented a mode of protest. Their folk songs of this period are narratives of their woes. Through oral tradition, the passing down of these songs from generation to generation seems to be part of cultural politics of the indentured labour of the Bhojpuri region.

Such cultural expressions in the absence of any other overt form of protest did contest power.⁶ The most important part of Bhikhari Thakur's play was the content which gave voice to the pain and misery of the migrant labourers, daughters, widows, older men and women and Dalits and Backwards and he did this risking physical attacks and persecution. People went to see his plays ignoring the fiats of

their families. Besides *NaiBahar* and *Beti Viyog*, Bhikhari also tried to suggest a comprehensive solution to the caste war in Hindu society through his *Chauvaran Padvi*. While the Hindi-speaking belt never witnessed a renaissance, whatever little happened in that direction was the contribution of Bhikhari Thakur and others like him, including RasulMiyan of Gopalganj, Hajjam of Siwan, Fida Hussain Narsi of Moradabad and Pandit Radheshyam of Bareilly. They all were playwrights who dealt with social issues and rural awareness. The significance of Bhikhari Thakur as an essential historical and cultural figure of Eastern India is in his creative amalgamation of religious and secular, tragedy and comedy, traditional and modern in *bidesiyā*. He integrated dance, drama, music, song, dress, design, lighting, and technology, incorporating everything he found appropriate and exciting from other famous theatres. He re-created stories and songs from *Rāmachariatmānas* (Story of Rama) and *Māhābhārata* with his interpretations and innovations. His life is an example of how a person can rise above his self. Thakur busted many myths of the world of literature, culture and art. He established that a hero could be from anywhere – even from the bottom of society. Moreover, only such a hero can understand and identify with the pains and disappointments of the people.⁷

In India's largest linguistic region, i.e., the Bhojpur region, migration has created three distinct folk traditions—the *Banijiya* (trader) tradition, the *Sipahiya* (soldier) tradition, and the *Bidesiya* (foreigner) tradition. Despite being entrenched in social and cultural differences, the sentiments in these traditions have had mutual interaction. Migration in the Bhojpur region has primarily meant out-migration of men, the effects of which are pressing on women. In the absence of men, several responsibilities have to be shouldered by women, which involve a wide array of roles. In this process, women have to emotionally suffer separation on the one hand and endure familial and social oppression (including sexual exploitation) on the other. A cursory look at any aspect of folk traditions is enough to show that while the exploited side of separated women is highlighted, the empowered facet is underplayed. This cynical yet idealistic imagery of women is particularly true of songs and stories are sung and told by men, and to a lesser degree, those by upper-caste women. The image is of an oppressed, betrayed and downtrodden woman who has not found her voice to protest.

In contrast, some of the folksongs of low-caste women are potent symbols of resistance, sometimes quite shrill and even vulgar going by standards of the language. Vulgar and frivolity in language create in the minds of the opposition an image of an empowered entity, even though the former casts these songs stress as uncivilised, rustic, backward, and so on.. Folksongs are oral traditions stored in memory, locked inside which a feminine ideology has historically questioned traditional hierarchies and revealed cruel social realities.⁸

5. Conclusion

We all know that India is called the land of unity in diversity. There are numerous cultures which have distinct

⁴See Chandrashekhar's dissertation, 'Subaltern Articulation: Examining the Bidesia Dance -Drama form of the Bhojpuri Region', M.Phil. dissertation submitted to JNU, p.14.

⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶ Ibid, 26.

⁷<https://www.forwardpress.in/2017/01/bhikhari-thakur-lifes-nachaniya/> retrieved on 1.02.2020.

⁸ See, Dhananjay 'The Image of Women in Folk Traditions of Migration' Journal of Migration Affairs.

characteristics and still co-exist. This research explored the potential of cultural coexistence, with particular reference to Bhojpuri and Bengali folk culture. By going through the folk culture of Bhojpuri, I found that it has learned a lot from Bengali culture. Furthermore, the influence of Bhojpuri folk culture can also be seen on Bengali culture. The Shakespeare of Bhojpuri

started a remarkable journey of his play and *tamasha* from Calcutta. Meanwhile, we see that amalgamation of both the cultures have developed a deep-rooted organic cultural - emotional bonding, mutual respect and shared experience which enabled their culture to grow further.

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