

Effects of Migration in Nautanki performances: the role of media in the Bhojpuri stage performances in Bihar

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Introduction

*“You have to sing, dance and express your emotions - all at the same time. Imagine that! Yet, now there is no demand for us. Young girls dress in “short cuts” and earn thousand rupees a night for moving on the stage. They have no knowledge of singing and acting. Yet the public wants them!”*¹

Kamalesh, a heroine of the nautanki theatre at Kanpur in the 1960s and 70s was frustrated about the new trends in the nautanki theatre industry. She blamed the changes in the socio-cultural scenario after the 1990s for the decline of a two-hundred-year-old cultural tradition.

There were many people like Kamalesh who thought that the changes in the socio-cultural scenario since the late 1980s badly affected the Bhojpuri² drama (nautanki/natak) performances. Some of them blamed the bad effects of the modern Hindi cinema that comes with the migrant labourers and held the emergence of many satellite television channels as the major reasons behind the decline of the cultural taste of the performance.

This research will look into the evolution of the socio-economic and gender relations in the Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances due to the new trends in labour migration since 1990. It will also try to address the challenges faced by the natak or nautanki performers after the emergence of new electronic media as well as Bhojpuri cinema in post 1990s.

¹Malhotra, Deepti Priya (2005), *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*, 266.

²Bhojpur Region: The Bhojpur region in India is an area of approximately 59,003.82 sq km. It includes the western districts of Bihar (28,192.82 sq km.) and eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh (30,811 sq.km.). Presently one district of Bihar named Bhojpur. Arah is the district headquarters of that district. The region named after the kingdom of Bhojpur approximately in 605 A.D. For more details please consult *The History of Bhojpur* by Rajiva Nain Prasad (1987). The proposed research is referring to the Bhojpuri districts of Bihar.

Bhojpuri natak performance and its relation with history and contemporary trends of migration

The migration from the villages of Bihar to the nearest city for the betterment of their lifestyle is not a new phenomenon. Most of these migrants came to Calcutta in the colonial era were from the lower casts. According to Brahma Prakash, the Annual Report on Protectors and Emigrants (1881) said that there were agriculturists, artisans, Dalits and other oppressed classes came to the city to earn more money.³ These migrant workers were young and most of them left their newlywed wife at home. Some of them left their entire family in the villages. Thus, colonial migration shook the core of the Bihari society and became a reason behind the cultural practices of migration. Bideshiya, or the songs/acts written to tell the story of the economically and psychologically broken family members of migrant labour, became one of the important elements in the nautanki performances especially in western Bihar and partly in eastern Uttar Pradesh (or the then United Province). Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971), the folk storyteller belonged from the Dalit (Nai) community became the iconic playwright of the nautanki performances on migration.

Nautanki performance was one of the major elements of entertainment in the small towns and villages of Bihar. It replicated the socio-cultural life of the migrant families in the scripts. Apart from some historical plays (Sultana Daku was one of them), the scripts were based on the challenges of the daily life which includes local politics, agrarian crisis etc. apart from the thoughts on sex and sexuality of women of the families of migrant workers. The “Biraha”(songs on estrangement or separation of a woman from her husband or partner) songs by Bhikhari Thakur also contents so-called illicit affairs of a woman during the absence of her husband/partner. But, it took a new shape during the performances of famous women artists of nautanki performances. Women got a key position at least in the scripts, which decided the languages used in the drama and made it in favour of women.

The situation changed with the emergence of globalization and free economic policies in India after 1991. The new free/ open market changed the concept of labour and labour migration. The economic liberalization created more job opportunities in India and abroad and a large number of village youth aspired to these new jobs. The highest rate of migration is from western Bihar.

³ Prakash, Brahma (2019), *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India*, 146.

According to a report on the migrant at least 4.4 to 5 million labours migrate every year.⁴ A large section of them has gone to work in Mumbai and to the Middle East as construction workers. When returning home they bring back some cultural traditions these metropolises. The nautanki performances had a clash with the new trends in the Bhojpuri cinema. The Bhojpuri cinema either directly copied scripts and props from Bollywood or took some excerpts and transformed it according to the local demand. nautanki performances had to compete or co-opt new trends to survive. Thus they took the easiest way to change the gender positions in the performances.

Migration, gender and impact of new media

Nautanki performances of the post-1990s also gave a new idea about gender identities. The concept to commoditize women characters in the nautanki performances evolved with the availability of electronic mass media and the increasing number of video parlours. nautanki performances became a good adapter of this language due to the absence of the state machinery to impose censorship especially in terms of a women body show. Thus, nautanki performances turned to an “erotic” dance performance full of slangs. These dance performances (popularly known as “nach”) became one of the inevitable parts of nautanki. This trend is not limited in the small towns of Bihar. It has a presence in the big popular fairs and festivals (such as Holi and the animal fair at Sonpur).

However, the nautanki performances of post-1990s got some new concepts due to the exploration of new socio-cultural thoughts. The thoughts are learnt by the migrant labourers from their place of work. The incorporation of a popular song or a script in nautanki enhanced its acceptability among the larger communities. For example the use of Bhojpuri songs of Guddu Rangeela one of the popular Bhojpuri singer in the performance titled *Bekar Bhail Kahal Dhail* told the usual story of love and relationship between a socially and economically backward girl and a rich and upper caste boy.⁵ The use of Bhojpuri popular songs used as a tool to criticize the usual practices regarding caste and economic discrimination. This particular drama replicated a statement against the tradition.

⁴TISS, Ajeevika Bureau & ILO (2017). *Draft Policy Framework for Improving Conditions of Labour Migrants from Bihar*. 2.

⁵Tiwari, B.S. (ND), *Bekar Bhail Kahal Dhail*, 13.

Research Questions

Based on the statement the proposed research will focus on three basic research questions.

- a) Impacts of the trends of migration after the 1990s on the natak/nautanki performances in Bihar.
- b) Evolution of gender relations in the natak or nautanki groups and its effect among the audiences.
- c) Impact of the cultural changes in the workplace of a migrant labour and the role of state censorship policies in natak or nautanki performances.

Literature Review

There are very little serious scholarship exists on Nautanki. The few works that are there do not address the questions I wish to explore.

The two leading scholars of that field, Kathryn Hansen and Deepti Priya Malhotra did some important historical study on the evolution of Nautanki performance. Both the scholars tracked down the emergence and evolution. Hansen, in her book *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (New Delhi, Manohar, 1992), uses a wide variety of sources and does much to contextualize and describe the evolution of nautanki within a larger landscape of popular performances such as jatra and lavani. Her work also gives a strong account of how caste and gender operate in both the production and consumption of nautanki.

Dipti Priya Malhotra on the other hand, talking about the transformation and the new trends in the nautanki performances in her book titled; *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre* (New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2006). Malhotra's aim is to write a biography of famous nautanki actress Gulab Bai (1920-1996). Gulab was popularly known as the "most beautiful women in nautanki theatre" and the inspiration of Hindi litterateur Phaniswarnath Renu's one of the famous short story *Teesri Kasam urf Maare Gaye Gulfam* (1950). Malhotra's book discussed the evolution of nautanki theatre and the transformation in the social status of the nautanki actresses and their struggles with the male-dominated society. She described the present situation of the nautanki theatre and the reaction and comments of previous and contemporary performers and writers. Her book shows the changes in social acceptance of the nautanki artists since 1920s. The attitude

towards the heroines of nautanki theatre is reflected through the descriptive discussion about Gulab Bai's life. Malhotra's book also analysed the changes in the social psychology of rural society in the 1990s. She collected interviews of many actors of nautanki theatre to understand the newly evolving cultural tastes.

There is a partial and descriptive reference in the Hindi books on Bhojpuri folk culture apart from Hansen and Malhotra.

Sanjay Kumar Singh's book is about the folk cultural tradition of the Bhojpur region. In his book, *Bhojpuri Lok Samskriti ebang Hindustani Sangeet* (New Delhi, Kanishka Publishers, 2010), Singh spent an entire chapter (Chapter IV) on the application and evolution of Hindi music and songs in the nautanki theatre. Singh elaborately described the music used in the Bhojpuri folk theatres (especially in nautanki, bhand, and hathras, tamasha etc.). He does not try to discuss the agrarian or social relations that affected nautanki or other folk cultures in the post-liberalisation era. He discussed the use of languages in nautanki and hathras and the language that the nautanki songs are written. Singh consciously kept his argument about nautanki within the history of folk music due to balance the chapter with the central theme of the book.

Sing's book is the source to know the musical instruments used in the folk theatres of northern India. Apart from Singh's book, Shiv Narayan Mishra's *Bibhinna Sangeet Paramparon ke Badya ebang Badak* (New Delhi, Kanishka Publishers, 2014) also gives an idea about the traditional musical instruments used in the nautanki theatres. This will help to understand the transformations in the 1990s.

There are few Hindi articles on nautanki theatre apart from these three books. Ramnarayan Agrawal's article "Paramparik tatha Lok Natya: Uttar Bharat mein Nautanki" (*Natrang*, Vol. 1, No. IV, 1964) described the essentiality of the popular folk theatres like nautanki. Agrawal had also discovered some major differences in the 1960s. According to him, there are three major differences. The emergence of the mythological stories in comparison with the folk tales is the first one. Agrawal expressed his concern for the lack of folk tales which made him think about the second differences than the nautankis of pre-independence period. Increase in the sexually provocative, illicit contents and commercialisation were the second major differences in the nautanki theatres of the 1960s. Agrawal's third emphasis was the transformations in the

costumes and dialects used in nautanki theatres. He was angry about the adaptation of the costumes in the Hindi film in Nautanki and the increase of Urdu languages like the popular Hindi films in the 1960s. According to him, earlier nautankis had used a non-pure language which is a mixture of Urdu, Hindi, Bhojpuri and more popular among the common people in the villages.

Ramnarayan Agrawal indicated future s threats on the nautanki theatres. Krishna Mohan Saxena's article "Kanpur mein Nautanki Mahotsav" (*Natrang*, Vol. 13, No. XLIX, 1988) proved that the expected threat was true. The state came out to save nautanki theatre through organising festivals. According to Sharma described the process of the state initiative to keep the form intact. He said that the state government accumulated old doyens of nautanki theatre to survive the tradition from the aggressive threats of Hindi cinema and other popular mediums.

All the scholars have done much to describe the evolution and transformation of the genre. But their accounts are largely internal to the genre and therefore eschew social and economic reasons that drive this evolution.

Notwithstanding the immense strengths of Hansen's work, there are three areas where her work is of limited use. First, she does not explore the larger social and economic reasons behind the transformations of nautanki. Second, she stops in 1989 and therefore does not look at the post-Liberalization period. Finally, her work is entirely based on material from UP and she has little to say on the large Bhojpuri speaking areas of Bihar.

Malhotra, on the other hand did a pioneering research to understand the nautanki tradition in north India. She described the developments in the inter-community relations since the early twentieth century through the extraordinary life of Gulab Bai. But, her main focus on the life of the nautanki actress. She used the references on changes in the cultural and production relations in the north Indian rural society as a passing reference. Therefore, her concluding part of the book (Part-III, "Nautanki Today") is looking like a simple oral narrative of the present day nautanki actors compared to Gulab's time. Malhotra does not try to analyse the reasons behind the transformation between nautanki and nach performances. She explained that the intention of the book is to give an idea about the social and gender relations of the male and female actors of the nautanki theatre in the twentieth century.

Hindi books and the articles on nautanki theatre partly described the reason behind the transformation. But, none of them attempted to locate the socio-economic reason behind the changes in the cultural taste of the villages of the Bhojpur region of Bihar and UP. The proposed research will try to cover the entire region to locate the exact reason behind the change and the effect of production relations behind the change. Since the question of gender based obscenity has been raised by all the scholars, this study will also try to analyse the changes in gender relations in the villages after the 1990s.

Brahma Prakash's book is the latest addition in the scholarship in the field of folk and popular performances in northern part of the country. His book titled *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India* (New Delhi, OUP, 2019), Prakash takes an attempt to show the established relationship between culture and labouring communities. According to him the question of aesthetics partially depends on the bonding between culture and labour. He said that, "this bondage between culture and labour that aestheticize labouring bodies in their exhaustive work environment and performance context."⁶ Prakash takes help of different folk performances like Bhuiyan Puja (Chapter 2), Bidesia (Chapter 3), Dugola (Chapter 4) etc. to understand the changes happened due to the transformations of labouring forces. His extensive ethnographic research explores the changes in the folk performances. The discussion on nautanki performance while talking on the transformations of Bidesia performances give a hint about the changes happened in the nautanki or Bhojpuri natak performances due to the new trends in labour migration.⁷ However, he did not explore the reasons behind the changes.

Research Methodology:

This research is divided into two parts.

- I. Archival Research (2-3 Months): The first part will be based on collection and analysis of modern Hindi Nautankis/ Natak and show how the changing socio-political and economic relationship affects the Bhojpuri popular stage performances (nautankis/ natak etc.) in Bihar. An analysis of the reports on different government departments, commissions on censorship debates in popular performance and the newspaper articles on this debate will be an important part of the proposed study.

⁶Prakash (2019), op.cit. 3.

⁷Ibid. 160-161.

- II. Field Work (approximately 2 months): The proposed study will focus on the major districts district headquarters well known for Nautanki/ Nach/Natak performances. Arrah, Chhapra, Siwan, Gopalgunj and a part of Muzaffarpur city is known for the Bhojpuri Natak/Nach performances in festivals, fairs and different personal functions. The research will conduct extensive interviews with the (male/female) actors, audiences, writers and also the critics to understand the complexities behind the change in the performances. Due to the recent unfortunate situations happened for the COVID-19 epidemic, the proposed fieldwork will limit into Arrah and Chhapra the two major centres of nautanki/natak artists. But, this research will open the possibilities to do an extensive ethnographic survey among all the above mention districts if possible. The proposed research will also add a section to show the side effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the Bhojpuri natak performances and its audience.

Possible outcomes

Apart from publishing research articles (one based on the literatures and another based on the fieldwork), the proposed research will aim to generate a collection of Nautanki booklets, handbills, advertisements, posters, CDs, interviews of Nautanki artists, directors, writers of Nautanki performances, newspaper clippings, articles published in different vernaculars and photocopies of the selected pages of reports of different government agencies. This collection will be preserved in the resource centre of the host institute for future researchers.

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