

Culture, Migration and Epidemic: The Nautanki theatres/ Bhojpuri Nataks in 1990s

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Introduction

Nautanki, theatre, is popularly known as ‘natak’ performance in the entire Bhojpur¹ region. It is one of the essential elements of the popular folk culture in Western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Apart from that, there are variations of nautanki theatre in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and partly in Haryana and Maharashtra. It got immense popularity among the people, especially the working-class people because they used this as part of relief from their day to day work. But, the popularity of nautanki theatre reduced since the late 1980s to early 1990s. Several elements would come up to fulfil the gap that results in the decrease of the demand of nautanki among the ordinary people. The changing nature of migration also created a new section of migrant workers and the economic liberalisation allowed them to introduce to the neo cultural mediums such as video films, new Bhojpuri films, cable televisions and mobile phones. To compete with these new cultural elements, nautanki theatre changed its course and tried to ‘modernise’ itself. The article attempted to locate the reasons behind these changes, and want to see the impacts of the new trends in migration on it. This paper will also briefly look to the impacts of recent COVID-19 epidemic on the nautanki theatre.

Nautanki Theatre: History and the role of migration in the transformation

The word ‘Nautanki’ has evolved from the ‘Natak’ or drama. As Kathryn Hansen quoted from the *Manak-Hindi-Kosh* (1964) that nautanki is a “type of folk drama performed among the common people, whose plot generally romantic or marital, and whose dialogues are usually in the question-answer form in verse”.² Hansen believes the same. Her book tried to prove the

¹ Bhojpur 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.

² Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki theatres of North India*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1993, p. 12.

derogation of a traditionally popular folk theatre to sexual innuendos and bad skits. She refers to the earlier glory of the nautanki theatre of Kanpur, Hathras and Benaras. There are some other referred to as the source of the nautanki theatre as Hansen mentioned in her book. The Sanskrit drama, known as 'nataka' can also be a source of nautanki theatre.

Hansen admitted that there would be some debates regarding nautanki theatres. But, she did not address these debates. However, she accepted that Nautanki is a form of 'intermediary theatre' because of its journey in between the boundaries of languages, religions and regions. The relation between migration and nautanki theatre comes here. Apart from pleasing the wealthy landlords, the main aim of the local nautanki theatre groups to perform in front of migrant labours. Because, according to some of the nautanki theatre actors and directors, the migrant labourers have more money than the local people. After the abolition of the zamindari system, the small businessmen and migrant labours are the two most important groups who are the potential audiences of this performance. The transformation of nautanki theatre happened much before the 1990s due to migration from the village to the big cities. Satyendra Kumar described the changes in the rural and semi-urban areas of Bhojpur. The changes occurred not only due to the economic reasons but a huge transformation in class and caste dimensions and changes in agrarian relations also responsible in the context of outmigration from Bhojpur.³ Kumar's argument showed the reason behind the transformation of nautanki theatre in the Bhojpur region. Both Hansen and Deepti Priya Malhotra, the two leading researchers on Nautanki are failed to understand the changes. Malhotra strongly criticised the nautanki performances in the 1990s. Quoting Kamallesh, one of the famous nautanki actresses in the 1970s, Malhotra said that the new form of nautanki theatre is everything except the real traditional nautanki theatre. It transformed into "young girls dress in "short-cuts" and earn a thousand rupees a night for moving on the stage. They do not know singing or acting. Yet the public wants them!"⁴ Malhotra, the biographer of Gulab Bai, the most acclaimed actress of the nautanki theatre, marked the new traditions of Nautanki in the 1990s as 'obscenity'.⁵ She ignored the statement of Kamlesh regarding the popularity of the new nautanki theatres among the "common people". Although, Malhotra mentioned the changes in popular taste with time, she also criticised the

³ Satyendra Kumar, *Badalta Gaoñ Badalta Dehaat*, New Delhi, OUP, 2018, pp. 3-12.

⁴ Deepti Priya Malhotra, *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2006, p. 266.

⁵ *ibid.*

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh governments' decision on revoking the entertainment tax on Nautanki. She predicted that the decision by the state governments allowed various groups to jump into the profession. Most of them had no sense of the glorious tradition. Therefore, nautankis, which were once popular as family entertainment, became a thoroughly male affair.⁶

Atul Yadvansi, one of the popular names in Nautanki theatre in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar agreed to Malhotra. In a long interview on the history, glory of the traditional nautanki theatre and its decline, Yadvansi blamed the new nautanki or Bhojpuri nataks as one of the reasons behind the degradation of the nautanki theatre tradition. He dismissed the new Bhojpuri nataks as nautankis and advised to keep safe distance from the discarded performances. He also said that the nautanki theatres had a long tradition which reflects the glory of the Bhojpur region. Yadvansi also claimed that the quality of nautanki deteriorated with the new trends and the new migration from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He claimed in the interview that there was no such connection between migration and nautanki except some dramas written by Bhikhari Thakur and others to remember the coolie migrants. According to Yadvansi, that was limited in a specific form of nautanki theatre.⁷ The name of this specific form is Bideshiya. Bhikhari Thakur, one of the popular and well-known folk dramatists in Bihar, gave this name for a set of particular nautankis dedicated to the migrant labours from Hindi speaking states. The wife of the coolie migrant labour was the central character of Bideshiya. The entire drama is based on her grief, her lust and anger towards her husband. Thakur mostly used two traditional forms of folk songs, 'Lorikayan' and 'Jansari', to describe the crisis of the migrant wife. One of the famous songs of the Bhikahiri Thakur's Bideshiya showed the impact of migration in the popular nautanki theatres.

“Jabna junebhail swami se sumangali ta,

Janli je bhagjagal ho ram.

E swamiji, naihar se nehaturidihliNtay,

Sasura suhavan lagal ho ram.

E swamiji, gharaba-bhitarbabaithaiketá,

Gail kabna mulukwa bhagal ho ram.

⁶ Malhotra, *ibid*, p. 289.

⁷ An interview with Atul Yadvansi, noted actor and director of nautanki theatre. Atul is from Allahabad and the interview was taken on 22.08.2020 at 8.35pm.

*E swamiji, khatawa mein patawa peithat tay
Sunike agraiti pagal ho ram.*” (ND)⁸

[When Sumagali (the heroine or wife of the migrant labour) fled from her father’s house with you, o my beloved husband, your house becomes the only shelter for her. Now, how could you able to go to another place and left me? The house looks so empty without you. I am getting mad (for you) to read your letters from abroad.]

Yadvansi’s logic for Bedeshiya was one form of nautanki theatre which has lost its relevance. Otherwise, there was no relation between nautanki and migration. The original nautanki has some other meaning.⁹

Yadvansi’s perception was wrong. Brahma Prakash in his recent book on cultural practices of labouring communities described nautankis as one of the specific form related to migration. It can be possible that there are different forms of nautanki. Prakash’s book is the latest addition in the scholarship of this field of folk and popular performances in the northern part of the country. Prakash takes an attempt to show the established relationship between culture and labour communities. According to Yadvansi, the question of aesthetics partially depends on the bonding between culture and labour. He said that “this bondage between culture and labour that aestheticise labouring bodies in their exhaustive work environment and performance context.”¹⁰ Prakash takes the help of different folk performances like Bhuiyan, Bidesia, Dugola etc. to understand the changes that happened due to the transformations of labour forces. His extensive ethnographic research explores the transformations in folk performances. The discussion on nautanki performance while talking on the transformations of Bidesia performances give a hint about the changes that happened in the nautanki or Bhaojpuri natak performances due to the new trends in labour migration.¹¹ Although he accepted that there are changes in the various cultural

⁸ Ram Bujhawan Singh (ed), *Bhikhari Thakur Rachanavali*, Patna, Bihar Rashtrabhasa Parishad, 2015, p.25. Translation mine.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India*, New Delhi, OUP, 2019, pp. 160-161.

forms related to labours, especially migrant labours in northern India, but, did not clearly say how the new trends of migration in the neoliberal economy have played a role to do it.

Prakash's book makes it clear that there are some relations between migration and new nautanki theatre which Atul Yadvasi declined to accept. But, Sanjay Kumar Singh accepted the moving nature of nautanki theatre and he claimed that is a mix of traditional folk drama and homogenised Persian and Corinthian theatre. Singh quoted Pt. Muktibhadra Dikshit, a dramatist and scholar of the Banaras Hindu University and said that modern nautanki theatre evolved with the emergence of the modern cities (Calcutta, Bombay, Patna etc.).¹² He also said that there were different schools of modern nautanki theatre. Therefore there were several dissimilarities in the nautanki performances in one place to another. It was differed between the characters of the population from place to place and builds a strong relationship with migration. Singh admitted that the decline of the new nautanki theatres caused due to the growing popularity in radio, television and growing popularity of new Hindi and Bhojpuri cinemas. And therefore, nautanki became full of sexual innuendos because of the demand from the audience.

Sharmila Rege gave an extensive analysis of different popular cultural practices. Discussing the popularity of Lavani one of the popular forms like the nautanki theatre, Rege expressed her concern that the popularity of a cultural practice cannot be judged without political contexts. Quoting Robert W. McChesney, one of the well-known political economist and media historian, Rege said that most of the cultural theorists overlooked the political importance of cultural practices due to their submissive attitude towards consumer capitalism in neo-liberal times. Therefore, talking about the presence of politics in cultural practices is ignored. Thus, according to Rege, the distinction between mass and popular culture has been eliminated. The place was occurred by a popular pleasure, which has a match with the idea of "customer sovereignty" of the "new right".

This postmodern turn in the popular and cultural studies created tension between popular and mass culture. While the term "mass culture" has emerged in the 1950s to describe the culture

¹² Sanjay Kumar Singh, *Bhojpuri Lok-Sanskriti ebaN Hindustani Sangeet*, New Delhi, Kanishka Publishers, 2010, pp.66-67.

associated with the “lonely crowd” as a major form of entertainment, “popular culture” was emerged in 1980s with the to deal with the ideological debates centred around the possibility of corrupting influence of the popular forms of entertainment.¹³

The debates between the old and new nautanki, Atul Yadvansi’s intention to mark nautanki as traditional popular culture, and rejecting nautanki theatres of the 1990s can be explained as the conflict between the ideas of popular and mass culture. Transitions of both popular and mass culture into the common concept of popular pleasure in the post-modern times have reflected in the modern nautanki theatres. But, the modern Nautanki theatre has a socio-political context that one does not ignore. The next section of the essay is trying to show the transition through a comparative discussion on the popular acceptance of a mass culture reflected in the Nautanki theatres and the transformations in the scripts or the storyline with the changing concepts of labour migration.

The transition of the nautanki theatres in Bhojpur in the 1990s: The role of Migration and Neoliberal Economy

The scholars on nautanki theatres always referred to one particular folk tale related to nautanki theatre. The story of *nautanki sehzaadi* has considered as the origin behind the name of nautanki theatre. The story, as Kathryn Hansen and Sanjay Singh both explained in their book and Atul Yadvansi in his interview is a love affair between Nautanki, the princes of Multan and Phool Singh, prince of Sialkot. Phool Sing mesmerised to see Nautanki and disguised as women to get an entry to Nautanki’s place. He took help from a women flower merchant to get permission. After a prolonged love affair and ignoring the long enmity between Multan and Sialkot, both of them got married. Their love story became popular among the folk dramatists and the folk dramas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh became popular as Nautanki.¹⁴

The interesting thing in of the narrative is that the story of nautanki sehzaadi in Uttar Pradesh has many similarities with the story of *Reshma-Chhuarmal* in Bihar and *Vida-Sundar* in Bengal.

¹³ Sharmila Rege, “Conceptualising Popular Culture: ‘Lavani’ and ‘Powada’ in Maharashtra” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 16, 2002, pp. 1038-1039.

¹⁴ Hansen, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-17 and Sing, *op.cit.*, pp. 66-67.

While *Reshma-Chuhaarmal's* story has a caste angle and performed as one of the popular nautankis in everywhere, the story of *Vidya-Sundar* still known as the narrative between two feudal lords that is also popular for the *Jatra* performances in Bengal.

Badri Narayan is talking about the movement and transformation of different narratives and transformative role of modern society and politics into it. The tale of *Reshma-Chuharmal* is a love story between the *Bhumihar*¹⁵ girl (Reshma) and *Dusadh*¹⁶ boy (Chhuharmal) has acceptance among the entire Bhojpur region, first as a folk tale and then as a nautanki theatre named "Rani Reshma-Chuharmal ka Khela". Badri Narayan observed a caste-based interpretation of the folk tale while tracing the ethnography of the narrative of Reshma and Chuharmal. He observed that while the story reflected the "glorious past of the Dusadh community in its Dusadh version, Bhumihars get a different narrative." Thus the conflict behind the identity construction through a folk narrative created armed conflicts which caused the death of a Dalit actor who played the role of Chhuharmal, the hero. The incident happened in Dudnagar of Aurangabad district. This incident causes a prolonged caste conflict among the Bhumihars and the Dalits in Bihar in 1978.¹⁷ These caste-based conflicts have changed its track at the beginning of 1990s. Several fairs and festivals have brought up in the name of Chhuharmal. According to Narayan, there are various reasons behind the transformation of the narrative. The emergence of Dalit identity politics in North-India gave a different dimension of the Dalit-folk narratives and Reshma-Chuharmal's story also got a different dimension.

¹⁵ *Bhumihar*: The Bhumihars were a prominent land-owning group of eastern India until the 20th century, and controlled some small princely states and zamindari estates in the region. The Bhumihar community played an important role in the peasant movements of India, and was highly influential in politics of Bihar in the 20th century. It derives from the word *bhoomi* ("land"), referring to the caste's landowner status. The term *Bhumihar Brahmin* was adopted by the community in the late 19th century to emphasise their claim of belonging to the priestly Brahmin class. The alternate name "Babhan" has been described as a distorted colloquial term for "Brahmin". Bhumihar women do not inherit family property. Inter community marital alliances are prohibited. Polygamy is practiced if the spouse id failed to produce a child. To know more, please visit K.S. Singh (ed.), *The People of India: Bihar*, Vol.XVI, Part. 1, Calcutta, Anthropological Survey of India & Seagull Books, 2008, pp. 170-173.

¹⁶ *Dusadh*: The Dusadhs are generally agricultural labourers. They belong to the category of scheduled castes. They worked as the palanquin carriers in the colonial period. The members of this community maintained caste based restrictions. They do not accept food and ration from the Doms and Muslims. On the other hand, Dusadhs also can not participate or make relations (marital or other) with the higher caste people like Brahmans and Bhumihars. To know more about Dusadhs see, *ibid*, pp. 304-306.

¹⁷ Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2001, pp. 23-25.

Narayan identified at least two fairs on the memory of Chhuharmal. One in Chardih, Mokamah and the other in Chhuharmal Nagar, Anisabad, Patna.¹⁸ Apart from the fairs, there is a change in nautanki performances. Narayan observed that whether the nautankis like “Jhansi Ki Rani” or “Maharana Pratap” were considered as “popular family nautanki” and used to perform in the festivals like Dussehra and Diwali. The situation changed due to the emergence of Dalit-Bahujan political movements and a Dalit folk hero like Chhuharmal and others became the popular subject in Bhojpuri nautanki or khela. Narayan observed how the issue of the fodder scam against Laloo Prasad Yadav became an important topic of Nautanki in the 1998 Chuharmal fair in Anisabad.¹⁹

Badri Narayan also accepted that apart from the emergence of Dalit Bahujan politics, the changes occurred due to new job opportunities came to the Dalits. The nautankis also printed in the booklets mainly for the lower and middle-income Dalits who got government or non-government jobs due to the new economic conditions in the 1990s.²⁰

Bhojpuri natakas or nautankis after the 1990s had similar reasons behind the changes. The economic liberalisation in the 1990s created several new jobs in the big cities. According to a report prepared by Ajeevika Bureau, the changes in the crop pattern, mechanisation of agriculture, long phase of terrorism and violence shifted the trends of migration from Bihar and other north-Indian states to Punjab. The new trends of migration shift to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Delhi NCR since the 1990s. The report also said that these states became the most preferred destinations for Bihar’s migrant labour. The number of migrant labourers from Bihar has increased up to 4.4 to 5 million.²¹ According to the report, almost 58 per cent of the households in the seven districts of Bihar (Gaya, Motihari, Nalanda, Purnia, Rohtas, Gopalganj and Madhubani) have one migrant labour in their families. Due to the deteriorating condition of the village economy in the 1990s, the people migrated in large numbers from their villages to earn more.²²

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 94-95.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 97-98.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 111.

²¹ Ajeevika Bureau and TISS Patna Centre, *Draft Policy Framework for Improving the Conditions of Labour Migrants from Bihar*, October 12, 2017, pp. 4-5.

²² Ibid.

Javed Akhter Khan, noted dramatist and professor of Hindi literature in Patna University, said that the new trends in the Bhojpuri nautanki came with the trends in migration since the 1990s. He said that the changing style of nautanki played a significant role to survive in the gradually changed situation. Khan agreed that that is not a sudden change. There was a tradition to tell stories of the migrant workers in several performances since the colonial period. A song by Bhikari Thakur has already been mentioned earlier in the article regarding the pain faced by a migrant worker's wife. Khan also refers a drama by Bhikhari Thakur which has certain similarities with one of the dramas by well known German playwright Bertolt Brecht. But, the new Bhojpuri nautankis is something different from the Bhikhari Thakur's nautanki. He said that the present-day nautankis have more influence from Hindi films, especially popular Hindi films. Hindi films are the only mode of entertainment for most of the migrant labours in big cities. Due to its easy availability (in cheap price) and access, migrant workers preferred Hindi movies than the Hindi nautanki.²³

Therefore, according to Khan nautanki theatres in the 1990s became a localised replica of the Hindi films in the 1990s. Khan also said about another trend that started at the beginning of 1990s in the villages. A business of running video parlours was emerged to entertain people. Most of these video parlours showed adult Hindi films or pornography. That also affected the old format of Bhojpuri nautanki theatre. The new nautankis tried to include contents with erotic elements to attract more and more audiences. Khan also agreed that several people believe in the revival of the old form of nautanki theatre. But, the main thing that they forget is that time has changed. The new nautankis are ready to capture the place. Indeed, those performances are not appropriate, but as Khan said, that the people who are in favour of the revival of traditional nautanki in do not understand the main theme of the nautanki performances that directly related to migration in the 1990s.²⁴

²³ An interview with Javed Akhter Khan, Professor of Hindi Literature and Director Natmandap Theatre Group, Patna. Date 12.07.2020 at 12.59pm.

²⁴ Ibid.

Javed Akhtar Khan's comments on the changes and transformations in the Bhojpuri natak industries is similar to Manoj Kumar Singh's (Bhabuk) idea on the transformations of nautanki performances. According to Singh, the trends in the nautankis between the 1920s to 1960s were playing around the main concepts like selling of girl-child (Beti-Bechva), child marriage (Bal-Vivah), Ramayana (Manthara-Kaikeyi Samvaad) etc. Although some of the nautankis have some patriotic flavour (like 'Sudesia Natak' which played in the 1940s and the entire group was banned by the police due to projection of patriotism).²⁵

Singh described the changes in the nautanki scripts in the post-independence period. The story of the people who fought against the British administration due to different reasons became one of the main subjects in the nautanki theatre. Apart from this, some plays based on the Hindu mythological stories like Raja Harishchandra, Dushmant-Shakuntala etc. Apart from that, the storyline of the major chunk of the nautanki theatres was taken from the popular novels or popular Hindi cinemas of the 1950s and 60s.²⁶

Singh gave an example of one of the famous Bhojpuri nautanki *Kehu na Hamar* (No one is there for me). The drama was written by Srinivas Mishra, a Sanskrit Teacher and noted dramatist in the nautanki theatre. The drama was based on the inequality and corruption in the northern Indian villages. The drama described the failure of the Nehruvian dream to increase the importance of rural India than the urban due to the corruption in the village level. Tirmal, the hero of the Nautanki, migrated to the city (Patna) in this particular case, to get rid of the growing corruption and untouchability issues in the villages. The main story has some similarities with many of the popular Hindi films in the 1950s. The writer said in the introduction that the book came much after the plays started performing in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.²⁷

So, this has proven that the nautanki performances had some influences from the popular Hindi cinemas and vice versa. As per example, Phaniswarnath Renu's famous short story *Mare Gaye Gulfaam* became one of the iconic Hindi movies in the history of Indian cinemas. The movie, *Teesri Kasam* based on the life of a famous nautanki heroine Gulab bai. Like other nautanki

²⁵ Manoj Kumar Singh-Bhabuk, "Bhojpuri Natak ka Safar" in *Chhayanaat*, No. 91, July-September, 2000, pp. 73-74.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Srinivas Mishra, *Kehu na Hamar*, Patna, Bhojpuri Academy, 1963, pp. 1-2 & 12-14.

heroines Gulab also faced similar struggles that faced by the nautanki actress of modern times. This has been discussed later in this article.

The accusation against the new nautanki theatres as the replica of the Hindi films in the 1990s is wrong. But, this is true that the trends to use Hindi film songs, props, dialogues and others abruptly in the nautanki theatres is a new phenomenon.

Bekar Bhail Kaial Dhail (To hold something is useless) is one of popular Bhojpuri nautanki which carried all the elements of a popular Hindi film in the 1990s. Written by B.S. Tiwari of the Baraon village of Sasaram, Bihar wrote this with the help of any of the popular Hindi film scripts in the mid-1990s. A triangle love story between the hero and two heroines, the drama has many other angles. The recent trends of cast politics have also reflected in the play. Two sons of the local head of the village legislative body (Panchayat) Birju and Shankar are talking to attend a rally of Laloo Prasad Yadav, one of the prominent icons in the lower cast uprising in Bihar. While Birju is a little reluctant to join this rally, Shankar is eager to meet this charming leader. Their father the head of the village legislative body (Panchayat) is not happy with the political activities of his elder son and asked his younger son Birju to keep himself away from his elder brother.²⁸ A clash between the low caste peoples of the new generation is prominent in the entire script. The caste clash between the local higher caste businessman and his relative and the evolving lower caste groups due to the new political and economic trends is one of the major subjects of the drama. However, an affair between lower-caste Birju (the village headman's younger son) and high caste Basanti (the moneylender's daughter) is the key theme like many of the Bollywood films of that time.

This popular Bhojpuri drama also used some popular Bhojpuri erotic songs by famous Bhojpuri erotic singer Guddu Rangeela. The song is,

“ *KahbaN Jaibu*

Gori Abai Gari Haije Khara Ba,

²⁸ B.S. Tiwari, *Bekar Bhail Kail Dhail*, Patna, Narayan and Co. 1995, pp. 18-19.

Chhapra Siwan Gopalgunj ke Chumma Ego Bhada Ba. ”²⁹

[Where are you going in a hurry, dear? The car is here. If you want to go to Chaapra, Siwan or Gopalgunj, I will take you. The fair is nothing but a sweet kiss.]

Although, rejected by several thespians in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the recent trends of Bhojpuri songs and dances that frequently used in the Bhojpuri natak or Nautanki performances. Most of them also imposed full of erotic dialogues to attract the village audiences. As Brahma Prakash rightly observed about the Bhojpuri natak and Bidesia groups to change the earlier style of double entendre songs and moved towards playing cassettes of some erotic songs with an equally erotic dance number becomes the new trends of the post-1990s.³⁰

Ehe ha Samaj (This is the Society) is another popular Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performance which is another erotic love story. Vasant, a village boy who went to the city for better economic opportunities, fell on a trap by some questionable women. The characterisation of two women (Gulabo and Basmati) and the exchange of seductive dialogues between them to seduce the main male character Vasant, showed not only a typical cheap Hindi film script but also a clear sign of patriarchy.³¹ The drama also used one of Guddu Rangeela’s erotic song on *Holi* festival and how migrant worker’s wife playing *Holi* with one of the brothers of his husband.

Most of the popular Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances indeed have some erotic messages. But there are many popular nautanki performances which have some social appeal. *Mai*, written by Umashankar Sahu began with this message from the author. The message is, “I am dedicating this Bhojpuri natak to my family. This ‘natak’ reflects the growing evilness of the present-day society and shows the way of removing that evilness.”³² *Mai* also has some similarities with Hindi films but never left the patriarchal nature of explaining society. Sujata, the wife of the elder brother, who is migrant labour, is projected here as a vamp. She has been harassed by her younger brother-in-law Raushan who accused her of misbehaving with her mother-in-law

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 13, translation mine.

³⁰ Brahma Prakash, *op.cit.* pp. 152-155.

³¹ Kapil Pandeya, *Ehe Ha Samaj*, Patna, Narayan and Co, ND, pp. 16-17 & 18-25.

³² Umashankar Sahu, *Mai*, Patna, Narayan Book Depot Pvt. Ltd., ND, p. 1.

Kushalya. This drama also has a song that reflects the struggle of the parents to establish their children.³³

Rege pointed out some interesting observation about the transformation of popular performances. Talking about *Lavani*, the dance theatre performances by the lower caste women, Rege pointed out that the projection of bodily needs or expecting sexual pleasure from other men apart from her husband is a traditional fact of *Lavani*. *Virah* or songs to express the frustration and sexual desire in the absence of her husband is also common since the Peshwa (the prime minister of the Maratha regime) regime (1674-1818) as one of the forms of popular entertainment. The censorship imposed only in the mid-nineteenth century (1853) when Vishnudas Bhave, the pioneer of modern Marathi theatre or as Rege said bourgeois theatre took out the *Lavani* and performances from its dark phase and remove the “obscene” elements from the traditional Marathi culture.³⁴ Atul Yadvansi’s claims towards the modern Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances as mentioned earlier is also related to modernisation and sanity of female actors of the modern nautanki theatre.

Not only Yadvansi, but most of the veteran nautanki performers also do not want to accept the present form of popular nautanki theatre. Previous scholars of migration and nautanki performances have some different visions. Although they approved the ever-dynamic nature of the women characters in the Bhojpuri natak performances related to migration, they accepted the fact that except Bhikhari Thakur, other authors/playwrights of popular nautanki performances tried to get fame through cheap publicity through obscene dialogues or exposing female characters with obscenity.³⁵ The analysis of the changing nature of sexuality in the context of Bhojpuri natak performances has discussed in the next section of the article.

Gender, Sex and Sexuality: Evolution of Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances and the role of migration

³³ *ibid*, pp. 38-39.

³⁴ Rege, *op.cit.*, pp. 1041 & 1043.

³⁵ Dhananjay Singh, *Prabashan ke Lok Sanskriti Mein Stri ki Chhavi*, Patna, Tata Institute of Social Sciences-Patna Centre, June 2017, p. 24.

Babita, a nautanki heroine in the 1990s expressed her desire to work in the dance bars in Mumbai again. She went to Mumbai in the middle of the 1990s and earned more than she had earned as a nautanki heroine. Although from Kanpur, Babita performed with several popular nautanki companies in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. She also said that she felt safe while working as a bar dancer in Mumbai. Though she did not say anything directly, it can be assumed that she considers the nautanki theatres unsafe compared to the Bars. She said that her mother was also a nautanki actress and faced all kind of assaults from the manager and other male actors of the group. She was also practising sex work to earn more money to manage her family. Babita's father knew all these affairs, but, did not say anything. When Babita's mother grew old, her nautanki company and her clients abandoned her. She was almost penniless after spending 35 years in this profession. Babita did not want to suffer like her mother. Therefore she along with many other young girls performed in the several Bhojpuri natak or nautanki groups were migrated to Mumbai to work on the dance bars to earn more money. Babita helped both of her younger brothers to finish their education and get established. She, along with other girls faced a huge crisis while the Bombay High Court imposed a ban on the dancing bars in 2006. Babita returned and started performing again in the nautanki theatres. She said that she was facing the same exploitation as her mother.³⁶

Mona, popular heroine in nautanki theatres in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar had a different story. As she said in an interview to Deepti Priya Malhotra that she was joined in the nautanki theatre group at a very young age. A small landowner saw her performance and fell in love with him. After a few years of living together, they got married and had two children. They opened a "nautanki company" where they had chosen to play several historical and literary plays like *Anarkali*, *Laila* etc. They even adapted the life of Phoolan Devi, the famous bandit turned Dalit politician, which became popular among the lower caste people and migrant labours. Mona was also exploited by her male colleagues, while she was young and thanked her husband for her rescue. She accepted the fact that there were certain changes in nautanki theatre with time, but, she did not blame the changes. Rather, she said that it was the demand of time. The life of a

³⁶ Malhotra, op.cit. 270-272.

nautanki actress can only be secured if she earned enough money for her future. Otherwise, they would be thrown as a waste paper and lived the rest of her life on the road.³⁷

Babita's interview and Mona's life story gives a new understanding of the nautanki performances in the 1990s. The women characters in the nautanki performances are also sexually abused by their male colleagues from the group. Although this is not a new phenomenon in the Bhojpuri natak or nautanki theatre, it has increased with the new concept and scripts. As Atul Yadvansi and Javed Akhter Khan explained a couple of times that the Bhojpuri natak or nautanki adapted the idea of migration since the medieval period. The use of the detailed descriptions about the marital conditions of the left-behind women and their households has been one of the important motifs of the songs and nautankis related to migration. On the other hand, there was no such discussion about the male migrants. The descriptions of sexual desires of a left-behind have traditionally used in the folksongs showed the gendered character of the songs and other performances related to migration.³⁸

So, the gendered nature of the migration-related songs and performances are not new. According to Asha Singh, the father-in-law or brothers-in-law or any "handsome stranger" was the main culprits to fulfil the sexual desires of the left-behind women. Singh also mentioned that there were only a few women protagonists who wrote about the provocation and sexual torture from the family members and other male neighbours from the village.³⁹ The gendered nature of the migration-related folk got a new dimension after the insertion of video parlours and new trends in the Bhojpuri cinema started in the 1990s. The previous section of the article used an interview of playwright Javed Akhter Khan who blamed the video parlours for making the Bhojpuri folk songs and theatres as sexual innuendos. Khan also said that the extensive projection of pornographic feature films compelled the playwrights and directors of the nautanki theatre to introduce seductive dialogues and dance items. Even 'nach' or the seductive dance programmes was one of the popular performances in the marriage ceremonies or any other functions and the election rallies to attract more people. He also said that the nach performances is subsided the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Asha Singh, "Of Women by men: Understanding the "First Person Feminine" in Bhojpuri folksongs", *Sociological Bulletin*, 64 (2) May-August, 2015, pp. 174-176.

³⁹ Singh, *ibid*, p. 175.

Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances from the last couple of years at the Sonpur annual animal trade fare in Bihar. He does not blame the migration behind this decline, but, said that the problem began in the 1990s when the new migrant workers returned from their workplace and introduce the new technologies (such as video parlours and MMS and mobile videos in the later period) in the villages.

Among many other new directors and producers of the new trends nautanki, Guddu Rangeela and Rampad Harami were the two most prominent names. Both of them are involved in various nautanki theatres as the director, actor and composer songs and dance sequences. The use of seductive words the dialogues especially from the women characters are common in the natak/nautanki performances. As said by Sweety, stage name of Sita Kumharin of village Dudhpura at Samastipur, Bihar, work as a co-actor in the group of Rampad Harami. She said that most of the audiences of the present-day nautanki want erotic dance numbers than emotional dialogues. They took photos of the heroine and other dancing girls and passed dirty comments during the dance performances. She also said that she feels safe in the group because her male colleagues are good and they behave very gently with her. As Rampad Harami's group is quite popular among the recent nautanki groups, Sweety earn a fat amount of money. She sent this money to her parents in the village. She has an elder brother who worked in a construction site in Mumbai, but currently unemployed due to the recent pandemic. Sweety also has no work in the past few months but her group paid some money to fulfil her needs during the pandemic. Sweety does not consider the comments from the male audiences as an insult. She finds it normal.⁴⁰

The problem of the gendered nature of sexuality and the domination of male ideas between obscene and non-obscene is standard problem in the masculinised vision of the nautanki theatres. Gulab Bai, one of the icons of the nautanki theatres was also a victim. She was struggled all her life to get fame in the field of nautanki theatre. Abused and exploited since the young age, Gulab's struggle was against the male members and partners and sometimes the patriarchal nature of the nautanki theatre. Later she built her own company (The Great Gulab Theatre

⁴⁰ An interview with Sita Kumharin aka Sweety, a Nautanki actress from Dudhpura Village, Samastipur, Bihar. Interview date 1.09.2020 at 2.48pm.

Company) and employed several male actors. But, she also became critical about the attitudes of the new girls who came to the nautanki theatre. Though she was critical on the imposition of cinema scripts over the nautanki theatre and struggled all her life to coexist with cinema, failed to understand the changing times and taste that affected the nautanki theatre and blamed the new actresses for bringing the illicitness in the nautanki performances.⁴¹

Perhaps Gulab should not be blamed for her attitudes towards the new natak or nautanki actresses. The idea of illicitness related to sexuality was a constructed set up of Victorian bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century. The rules and regulations, codes and conducts had prepared to talk about obscene words, indecent behaviours to save the social order in the nineteenth century. Several places built to practice the so-called “illegitimate” sexual practices. The concept of not only the open sexual practices but the writings, dialogues or acts as “sin” is a kind of repression that imposed by the bourgeoisie, who dominated the economy of the country as well as the colonies. The use of power mechanisms through censorship and permissions had used to control the desires.⁴² The establishment of Society for the Suppression of Vice in England in the first phase of the early nineteenth century (1802) was a sign of the repressive power of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Demanding prohibition on blasphemous, licentious and obscene books and prints were one of the major activities of the society. However, the main intention was to control the low wage working-class people who became a challenge for the new capitalist class as well as the institutional Christianity of the nineteenth century England. The priests and the other members of the English Church were anxious to control the expanding market cheap books and prints, popular among the labours.⁴³ The projection of the dominating and gendered nature in the name of protecting the society, especially women and maintain purity was nothing but an impression of the patriarchal domination upon the poor and “weaker” sections of the society.

A similar treatment was also taken in India to suppress the subaltern popular literary and cultural activities. The *Dramatic Performance Act of 1876* had imposed to check the popular folk

⁴¹ Malhotra, op.cit, 230-31.

⁴² Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: The will to knowledge*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 3-13.

⁴³ M.J.D. Roberts, “The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its Early Critics, 1802-1812”, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1983, pp. 160-161.

performances in the name of obscenity. Several popular and street performances which were the only medium of entertainment for the working class had been banned by the colonial government. The colonial idea of civilised society has established its roots with the modern education system. The sense of chastity and obscenity in literature and audio-visual performances in the psyche of the “concerned” Indian citizens had been defined by the predetermined training of the colonial education system. Therefore, most of the Bhojpuri natak and nautanki performances had their audiences in the villages or small towns. Most of the nautanki or natak companies were unaware of the changes that happened in society. The girls in the nautanki groups were tortured by the male members or sexually abused by the manager or owner of the group or the zamindar clients but did not know any way out. The economic liberalization opened the opportunity for them. The new economic system created a new section of audiences with different tastes or attitudes, however, the basic structure of the power and patriarchy remains the same. Although being a woman and a sufferer of her time, Gulab Bai was also the representative of the same patriarchal structure. That is why she blamed the actresses behind the decline of the traditional nautanki theatre.

Apart from the allegation of exploitation of the female actors in the Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances, there is another category of actors who faced almost similar treatments like the women actresses in the nautanki theatre. The effeminate male actors, who played dance numbers sometimes in the nautanki or natak performances, were popularly known as *launda*. These effeminate male or transgender actors are traditionally engaged in the several celebratory occasions in north India. Their dance is popular during marriage ceremonies, child-birth and several festivals like *Holi*, *Diwali* or *Chhat* in Bihar. The “*laundas*” or effeminate male/boys or transgender person has been used for sexual pleasure by a certain group of person. These practices have been done secretly and behind the closed doors of the landlords or the moneylenders or political leaders. Though sometimes it becomes an “open secret”, the condition of the “*laundas*” or the male prostitutes remain the same. They never get recognition from the society because these kinds of homosexual practices have been considered as a sexual abnormality. The idea of considering homosexual practices as “abnormality” was also a notion from the West. Sexuality as we have discussed earlier in this paragraph as a matter of secrecy in the nineteenth century England has always been ruled by silence or sometimes part of an obligatory confession to different institutionalised practices like the church or other religious places, or psychiatrists or

psychoanalysts in some cases.⁴⁴ The sense of censorship and silence about homosexual practices, which is also a product of Victorian bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century, came to India with the colonial rulers.

Rajkumar Das, popularly known as Mishtu among his friends in West Bengal and *Munna launda* among his clients in Bihar blamed this virtual censorship behind the exploitation of effeminate male or transgender persons. He said that his colleagues cannot be able to lodge any complain of sexual abuse to the local police stations because of the lack of proof. He accused some of the political leaders in Bihar who involved in this practice. He also performed in several “*nach*” programmes in different occasions and some nautanki theatres in the Arrah, Patna and Gaya district of Bihar during his teenage. He said that most of the Bhojpuri natak performances where he enacted as launda nach performer was happened in the densely populated areas or sometimes at the fairs. There were three different categories of audiences. The first section who bought high price tickets was sitting in the chairs. The buyers of the middle price tickets got the wooden benches to sit and the buyers of the lowest price tickets sat on the ground. Though Das did not aware of the price range, he has confirmed that most of them were poor labouring class people of the locality.⁴⁵

Rajkumar Das gave some important information. The shop owners or small moneylenders and businessmen in the Burrabazar area Kolkata also organised launda dance performances and performances of the dance girls for their employees from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh during several festivals like Holi, Diwali, Chhat etc. He enacted in several performances. Das also got offers for dance performances from the Howrah, Kharagpur, Purulia and other traditional migrant labour belts in West Bengal. Most of his dances were usually with the popular dance numbers of the Hindi films, but, he also performed with the Bhojpuri songs if the demand came from the audiences. He recently joined in an NGO in Kolkata and therefore he unable to perform in the launda dance frequently.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Michael Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College of France 1974-75*, New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2010, pp. 167-172.

⁴⁵ An interview with Rajkumar Das aka Mishtu, current secretary Balaram Dey Street Anandam, Kolkata and performer of several launda dance performances. Date: 11.09.2020 at 5.00pm at their Kadapara office.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Atul Yadvansi criticised the present-day new nautanki or natak performances due to these kinds of obscene and anti-cultural elements. He said that the Bhojpuri natak performances by Rampad Harami and others are taking the opportunity to project their cheap performances as nautanki. The government of Uttar Pradesh once imposed amusement taxes upon the nautanki performances in the early 1990s. According to Yadvansi, that was the right step to prevent those rubbish performances. He is in favour of some censorship to prevent the “purity” of traditional nautanki theatre. Atul Yadvansi expressed his concern about the bad phases of nautanki theatre or the Bhojpuri natak groups due to the recent pandemic. He said this would create another form of entertainment which may affect the nautanki theatres badly, and it will deteriorate to another low than its previous performances.⁴⁷

The role of state censorship and recent pandemic behind the transformation of the taste in Nautanki performances

Several attempts had been taken by different cultural groups to revive the lost glory of the nautanki theatre. Atul Yadvansi was one of them. He began his career as a side actor and later took a pioneering role to revive nautanki. He modified several famous nautanki theatres such as Sultana Daku and Amar Singh Rathore, to fit for the present-day audiences. Apart from modifying old nautankis, Yadvansi also wrote several new plays based on contemporary social and political issues. According to him those plays were also popular among the people and performed in all big cities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and several other megacities. Yadvansi won several awards and fellowships and offering classes and several national and other state-based institutions.

Apart from enthusiasm, Yadvansi’s idea of the revival is constructed by one kind of class consciousness in cultural practices. Although as per the telephonic interview it does not look like that he intentionally tried to exclude the poor labouring class from their right to entertain themselves, but, blaming the migrants behind the decline the standard of Bhojpuri natak or nautanki theatre is one kind of exclusion. The current development has done by the actors and playwrights who tried to provide entertainment for a certain class of people who are unaware of

⁴⁷ Interview with Atul Yadvansi.

the tradition. Therefore they tried to incorporate erotic dance numbers, forcefully include launda dance programme and modified scripts according to the popular Hindi films. Umashankar Sahu, the writer of the play *Mai*, said that the Hindi films also adapted several storylines from the Bhojpuri and Hindi stories and incidents. He thinks that it is a cultural exchange (he used the word “*sanskritik adan-pradan*”), and it will benefit both the cultures. Sahu does not deny the fact of using the concept of Hindi popular films in nautanki performances. He said that the natak companies are dependent on popular demands. The government never gives any subsidy. So they are compelled to earn more money to run and maintain a big group. Most of the groups never put the erotic song, dialogue or dance sequences abruptly, without any demands from the script. There are very few groups who used launda dance in the nautanki performances. However, Sahu accepted that such demands have increased since the last ten or twenty years. Though he is not able to tell whether there is any impact on migration is involved or not. As an inhabitant of Rampur Kothi village of Siwan district Bihar, Sahu accepted the fact that migration changed the socio-economic structure of the village. Political parties, landowners and local moneylenders give priorities to the migrants. Those who migrated to the southern states (Kerala and Karnataka to be precise) and some foreign countries (mostly the Gulf countries) started bringing video cassette players and video cassettes to the village. These activities by a section of the migrants changed the cultural taste of the entire region.⁴⁸

Shau’s perception is true. As per the data on overseas migration available from the Government of India, the number of migrants has been increased from 36,493 in 2006 to 150,000 in 2017.⁴⁹ The data also said that most of the abroad going migrants are limited to a handful of districts including Gopalganj, Siwan, Madhubani and Purnia.⁵⁰ Another survey on the migrants showed that the trends of migrating abroad are common among the Scheduled Castes, Muslims and

⁴⁸ An interview with Umashakar Sahu, a thespian and writer of several modern Nautanki thatre. Date: 16.09.2020 at 11.53am.

⁴⁹ *The Telegraph*. Link: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/bihar/state-2nd-in-labour-migration/cid/1366177>.

Accessed on 11.09.2020 at 2.09 pm.

⁵⁰ *ibid*.

Other Backward Casts.⁵¹ The same report also indicated an improvement in the financial condition of these communities has improved due to migration.⁵²

The economic liberalisation created the opportunities to encounter the new socio-economic dimensions in the villages of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Caste relations in the villages slightly changed with some differences. These changes affected the popular cultural performances such as nautanki, natak or dance programmes. Apart from the financial uplift of the “lower caste” communities due to migration the uprising of Dalit-Bahujan and other backward caste-based politics in the 1990s also changed the caste compositions in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The decline of “historical traditional caste system” and the emergence of new cultural community or *samaj* as described by Balmurli Natrajan are helping to establish a parallel cultural identity by their own.⁵³ Migration, to some extent, helped them to build this identity.

The recent pandemic however raised few questions on the sustainability of such cultural performances. The recent rules for social distancing along with several other restrictions on organising performances created a difficult situation. As Rajkumar Das and Sita Kumharin (aka Sweety) said earlier, that the pandemic made them sit on their houses. Although Rajkumar has a job in Kolkata and Sweety get some financial help from her group but most of their close acquaintances do not get anything for months. Umashankar Sahu and Atul Yadvansi also accepted the fact that the nautanki performers are in crisis. Their crisis became darker with the growing attraction of watching films and videos on smartphones. A recent report in one of the e-papers published a piece of news where Nitish Kumar accused the web-based channels of the erotic contents that became popular among the poorer classes and caused an increase in the rate of sexual violence in all over the state.⁵⁴ Several complains came from one particular web series at a particular web-based channel from the NGOs working on women rights in Bihar. They said that the male members of the family unnecessarily spent more to buy data packs for watching

⁵¹ Priya Deshingkar, Sushil Kumar, Harendra Kumar Chobey and Dhananjay Kumar, *The Role of Migration and Remittances in Promoting Livelihoods in Bihar*, London, Overseas Development Institute, December 2006, p.11.

⁵² *ibid*, p.4.

⁵³ Balmurli Natrajan, *The Culturalization of Caste in India: Identity and inequality in a multicultural age*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 10-11 & 26-27.

⁵⁴ <https://www.timesnownews.com/columns/article/ott-platforms-in-india-bollywood-ott-content/613558>. Accessed on 12.09.2020 at 9.05 pm.

those web series.⁵⁵ As per reports, the business was increased of these particular web-based channels up to 110 per cent during the lockdown.⁵⁶ This news shows a change in the cultural taste of the working class (migrants or local) which may signal the end of the open stage nautanki performances.

Conclusion

Increasing use of mobile phones to watch web series clearly showed one thing. The pleasure of watching became more and more personal among the middle and lower middle-income groups (some of them are migrants) in all over India. This would increase the notion of the “personal space” and reduce the need to share the joy of viewing something with friends, family members or other acquaintances. That would automatically reduce the demand of the community based cultural performances like Nautanki, launda dance and others. Apart from that, the absence of strict censorship rules in the web-based platforms give a free hand to the owners of the web-based platforms to produce more web series with erotic contents. However the Bhojpuri natak or nautanki or nach performances do not compare with the web-based channels.

Apart from the increasing demand for personal space, the transformations of the public sphere bring changes in socio-cultural scenario of all over India. The institutions of Hindi political sphere, as described by Francesca Orsini, were based on strong nationalist ideas.⁵⁷ The idea created a section of strong reformist intellectuals who brought the concept of traditionalism in popular performances to use it in the nationalist movements. The involvement of nautanki performances in the nationalist movement in Allahabad, Kanpur and other places in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh happened because of the political and financial influence of nationalist elites. This political scenario has changed in the 1990s with the advent of caste-based vote-bank politics. The emergence of regional political parties took the populist path to engage their supporters to different political movements. They used the Bhojpuri natak or Nautanki theatres to entertain

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ The Times of India, 27.07.2020. (Link: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/ott-platforms-see-increased-viewership-and-new-sign-ups/articleshow/74739107.cms> accessed on 27.07.2020 at 3.59 pm.

⁵⁷ Francesca Orsini, “The Hindi Political Sphere” in Arvind Rajagopal (ed.), *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History*, New Delhi, OUP, 2009, pp. 121-134.

their supporters while assembling them for the political rallies. The larger cause to engage people to a particular political goal has gone. However, it gives independence to natak or Nautanki companies. They performed for money and nothing else. Sometimes the governments took initiatives to promote cultural icons from Nautanki and Bhojpuri natak traditions to attract Bhojpuri community for an electoral cause. The announcement of a full-length feature film on Bhojpuri cultural icon Bhikhari Thakur was patronised by the Bihar government may be a good example.⁵⁸ The film has never completed.

The Bhojpuri natak or nautanki performances were survived due to its acceptance and adaptation of changes in both social and technical sector. The idea of Indian bourgeois nationalism and its training to the indigenous community influenced the character of the performance but never tried to change its basic characteristics. The use of Bhojpuri language and effort to keep the socio-cultural structure of that region in the modern Bhojpuri natak or nautankis helped it to remain alive. The gaps or discrepancies between the rural, semi-urban and urban areas are also gone in favour of the nautanki. Increasing trends of migration might bring some money in the rural areas but it did not develop the basic infrastructure (electricity or internet services) as good as any big cities. Therefore, nautanki became their only entertainment for many years. Migration brought new ideas from the popular Hindi films, but, could not able to give access of all the entertainments that a person in the city already had. Therefore, we can say that the nautanki/natak, nach and launda nach performances are the only source of popular entertainments.

Therefore, it can be said that the nautanki or natak performances challenged the social structure of the modern nation state which, according to D.R. Nagraj said as “megalo-narratives”⁵⁹. The narrative, built by the hegemonic classes are challenged by the Dalit or low caste based politics began in the 1990s. As the result of the trend, Rampad Harami became popular than the traditional nautanki performers.

⁵⁸ *Hindustan*, 16.02.2005.

⁵⁹ “megalo narratives”: D.R. Nagraj pointed out four types megalo-narratives built by the hegemonic classes in India. They are: “one, a totalistic political organisation called the nation state; two, the knowledge system of technoscience; three, the ideal form of social life, namely, westernised secularism; four and most powerful—the utopia of linear progress and development.” All are representative institutions of the project of modernity. To know more see, the introduction by D.R. Nagraj in Ashis Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, New Delhi, OUP, 2005, pp. Xii-xiii.

However, it has not been clear whether it would survive after the pandemic or not. The transformation of cultural practices has a close relation with migration and we hope that the nautanki or Bhojpuri natak traditions will transform with the trends of migration after the pandemic. If not, then it will turn to history.