

Abstract

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

Research Statement: 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.

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 Protector and Emigrants (1881) said that there were agriculturists, artisans, Dalits and other oppressed classes came to the city to earn more money.¹ 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.

Natak/ 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/

¹ Prakash, Brahma (2019), *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India*, 146.

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. According to a report on the migrant at least 4.4 to 5 million labours migrate every year.² 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.

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.

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