

Retelling migration folklores in Bhikhari Thakur's *Bidesia* and *Gabar Ghichor*

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Abstract

Through theatre, folklores have gained a new lease of life as it has a far reaching and lasting imprint on the mind of its audience. Folklore and folk theatre complement as well as promote each other. They raise issues which are contemporary- amalgamating it with their lived reality. They may focus on social, religious and cultural aspects but aim to enrich the cultural ethos of the community. This has led to mushrooming of migration related folklores in Bhojpuri literature and language. In light of the above assertion this paper examines the case of Bhojpuri folk theatre with focus on Bhikhari Thakur's folk plays *Bidesia* and *Gabar Ghichor*. The folk theatre tradition of Bhojpuri region is primarily migration based which can be seen by analysing the extant traditions that have been flourishing in this region. There are mainly three distinct folk traditions in this region- the *banjiniya* (trader) tradition, the *sipahiya* (soldier) tradition, and the *bidesia* (foreigner) tradition. The *bidesia* tradition of Bhikhari Thakur has amassed a lot of popularity and his play *Bidesia* has acquired a cult status to the extent that the tradition itself derives its name from it. The continued popularity of *bidesia* tradition highlights some important issues which this paper would seek to look into. Of particular interest would be the playwright's use of folklores of migration to showcase the problems and social realities of the contemporary Bhojpuri society along with the use of various folk elements in the plays.

Key words: Retelling, Migration, Folk theatre, Bhojpuri, *Banjiniya*, *Sipahiya*, *Bidesia*, Performance

As we know folk theatre is integral to folklore and has been a fertile ground for telling and retelling of folklores. Folk theatre impacts the life of the community and is close to the heart of local populace as it provides a sense of identification with and participation in the performances. Through folk theatre, folklores have gained a new lease of life as it has a far reaching and lasting imprint on the mind of its audience. They complement and promote each other raising issues which are contemporary, making the audience notice it and at the same time amalgamating it with their lived reality. While focusing on social, religious and cultural aspects, folk theatre always promotes folk culture and cultural ethos of the community.

Western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh has been cradle of large scale migration which has resulted in unprecedented levels of inclusion of migration related themes in the folk culture of the region.

Migration has transformed these communities in fundamental ways challenging long and closely held notions of culture and identity and has led to rapid transformation of the folk culture of these areas, galvanising and popularising it in a way unheard of. Migration in the Bhojpuri parlance has primarily meant out-migration of men and seems to have a definite impact on women folk. Women occupy the centre stage in these folk traditions but men too are patronised.

In light of the above assertion it would be interesting to examine the case of Bhojpuri folk theatre with focus on Bhikhari Thakur's plays *Bidesia* and *Gabar Ghichor*. It is the subject of migration that Bhikhari Thakur takes up in these two plays as he weaves stories about migrating men and their 'left-behind' women - their longing, pain, and suffering coupled with angst- in their villages. This has led to mushrooming of migration related folklores in Bhojpuri theatrical tradition. Of particular interest would be the playwright's use of folklores of migration to showcase the problems and social realities of the contemporary Bhojpuri society and also the use of various folk elements in the plays.

People in the Bhojpuri belt migrate because of the economic woes affecting the region which is well documented in the folk theatrical tradition of the area. The extant traditions that have been flourishing in and around this geographical location testify this fact. There are mainly three distinct folk traditions associated with Bhojpuri belt- the *banjiniya* (trader) tradition, the *sipahiya* (soldier) tradition, and the *bidesia* (foreigner) tradition (Singh 2018, 41). The *bidesia* tradition evolved by Bhikhari Thakur has amassed a lot of popularity and its performances can still be enjoyed in rural areas of this region. Bhikhari Thakur wrote twelve plays but the most popular among them was *Bidesia* which acquired a cult status and the tradition itself derives its name from it.

The term '*bidesia*' itself stands for migrants, making it palatable for contemporary audience both in villages and cities to identify with it. The migrants among the Bhojpuri people are referred to as *bidesia*, *pardesi*, *batohia*, which contain elements of both 'affection and complaint for leaving the loved ones behind' (Tiwari 2003, 12). Badri Narayan Tiwari further asserts that these three terms of address represent three different kinds of folk tradition: firstly, in *bidesia* culture, the chances of return of these migrants were slim. When leaving his native place, the migrant broke all ties with his loved ones. Secondly, in the *pardesi* culture, the migrant is forced to leave his native place in order to earn a living, but still maintains communication ties with his family. The pain of this semi-permanent migration still remains and comes through in the Bhojpuri folk songs. A *pardesi* may be called *bidesia* in complaining tones, but a *bidesia* is very seldom called *pardesi*. Finally, in *batohia* culture, the *bidesia* comes back as a traveller to his native place and resumes normal communication ties. (Tiwari 2003, 12)

Migration in simple terms is when someone moves away from a particular place to a new or unknown destination. The process of migration makes the migrant encounter problems which are clearly documented and part of Diaspora literature. But there are many who leave their homeland because of economic compulsions and intend to come back after earning some money required for upkeep of their family. Migrants in Bhojpuri context are set of people who leave their homes in search of better economic prospects and do not necessarily intend to settle at destination points. Migration led to pain of loss and separation which became synonymous with the Bhojpuri society giving birth to a distinct folklore, which emerged as an expression of the pain and anguish of the migrant's separation from their families.

It must be understood that migration is not only an economic phenomenon, but a cultural one too both in the homeland and at the destination points. Migration entailed a heavy emotional loss as many relationships severed – wives from husbands, sisters from brothers, fathers from their old age support, and mothers from their sons. Migration as a phenomena affected one and all. This was more of a forced migration for the Bhojpurias owing to colonial imperialism and its aftermath. The economic woes of the people found outlet and expression in the folk tradition which clearly underlines their pain and suffering:

*Railiya na bairi se jahajawa no bairi se paisawa bairi na mor
saiyan ke bilmawe se paiswa bairi na*

(Tiwari 2003,12)

(It is neither the train nor the ship that is our enemy but rather the money that compels our husbands to migrate to other lands)

In *Bidesia* and *Gabbar Ghichor*, Bhikhari Thakur narrates the tale of migration and its impact on the Bhojpuri masses. It showcases their constant struggle to come to terms with the lived reality. The plays narrate the ordeal, courage and humanity of the Bhojpuri community, educating and sensitising peoples thinking. *Bidesia*, Bhikhari Thakur's magnum opus, expresses the pathos of the Bhojpuri speaking region where migration is common and part of everyday life. *Gabar Ghichor* too, is based on an old folk tale of Bihar and is widely performed for its take on migration and resultant problems. The play has contemporary significance as it conveys the traditional mind set in which it is the women who is weak of the two genders and is expected to make sacrifices. It is the story of the illicit relation resulting out of migration of husband of newly married Galiz Bahu for fifteen long years.

Bidesia presents us with characters as types representing the general rather than the particular. Bidesi is representative of all young men who leave their village as they have no choice and are forced to try their fortune in unknown places like Assam and Bengal. The play presents a young man Bidesi who as newly married, allured by glitter of Calcutta, its prospects and as land of opportunities about which he has heard from his friends:

Bidesi- Ho pran pyaari, sunataru?

Pyaari Sundari- Ka kahatani, E swamiji?

Bidesi- Ego salah ba

Sundari- Bhala kaun salah bate?

Bidesi- Salah ba ki hamara maan karata je tani Calcutta se ja ke ho aie

Sundari- Raua Calcutta jaye ke kahat bani, rawa kauna baat ke takliff baate?

*Bidesi- Haamara kauno baat ke dukh-takliff naikhe, baaki haamra dost ailenh
Calcutta se. Calcutta ke samachar suni ke hamaro tabiyat kaile ba ki hamhun jaib.
Pandrah din me laut ke chali aieb.*

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 29)

(Bidesi: O my love! Listen to me./ Peyari Sundari: What are you saying my lord?/ Bidesi: I have to discuss one thing./ Peyari Sundari: Well, what's the matter?/ Bidesi: The matter is that I wish to make a short visit to Calcutta./ Peyari Sundari: O my lord! You are talking of going to Calcutta. What wants do you have here?/ Bidesi: I am not in want of anything but my friend has come from Calcutta. Listening to his description of Calcutta my mind says that I also will go. I will come back in a fortnight.) (Thakur and Prashad, 2019)

Bidesi's wife, Pyaari Sundari, is a type for all women who are left behind in villages, sacrificing their marital life for the betterment of their family (Chaturvedi: 2017). Through the character of Pyaari Sundari, Thakur highlights the plight of these left-behind women who are financially dependent on men and therefore are outside the domain of decision making. These women represent double marginalisation on account of being women on one hand and village women on the other. For Dhananjay Singh the above dialogue makes it very difficult for us to surmise whether migration was out of choice or because of economic compulsion (Singh 2008, 6).

The metropolis of Calcutta occupies pride of place and has its own allure and charm for these migrants. But there are attendant worries and so one has to be careful and cautious of this city:

Ghoda gaddi, nona paani aaur rand ke dhaka

Yah teen se bachal rah eta kheli kare Calcutta

(Tiwari 1943, 65)

(Horse cart, salty water and prostitute's push, one has to be careful of these three otherwise Calcutta will be up to its tricks)

In another song popular in Bhojpuri area the wife cautions the husband:

Kalkatva tu jan jaaraja, hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me randi bastu hai, mojra karata

hai din raati

hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me malaria bastu hai, gajla kare

hai din raati

hamar dil kaise lagi

Ohi Kalkatva me tamoliya bastu hai, beerwa

lage hai din rati

hamar dil kaise lagi

(Archer: 1943, 171)

(Do not go to Calcutta my King, how will my heart enjoy, Calcutta is full of prostitutes who live and dance through day and night, how will my heart enjoy, Calcutta is infested with malaria which make people ill through day and night, how will my heart enjoy. Calcutta is dotted with paan-cigarette shops, I am scared through day and night, how will my heart enjoy)

Here the loving wife expresses her concern for her migrant husband. She says that Calcutta is full of prostitutes, is rampant with malaria and dotted with paan cigarette shops. Through Pyaari Sundari in *Bidesia*, Bhikhari Thakur makes her deter her husband from leaving for Calcutta:

Piya mor, maati ja ho purabwa.

Purab desh me tona besi, paani bahut kamjor. Piya mor...

Sunat bani aankh paani deta ba, saari bhaial sarbor. Piya mor...

Eknath binu maan aanath rahi, ghusi mahal me chor. Piya mor...

Kahat 'Bhikhari' hamaari or dekha, katina karin nihor? Piya mor..."

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 31)

(O my husband! Please don't go to the east/ In the easterly region there is much black magic and the climate is very unfavourable./ As I hear you, tears are coming to my eyes with which (tears) my sari has become completely wet./ Without one lord (you) my heart will be lordless and thief will break in the house.) (Thakur and Prashad, 2019)

If Bhikhar Thakur supported migration of the allied castes which depended on land owning castes for their sustenance to cities and towns he is also aware of its flip side. In his autobiographical work *Nai Bahar*, Bhikhari Thakur exhorts these castes:

Jajmanika me kucch na bate, lagab silwat lodha chate

Nagad jake kamaiya bahara rahe na dihi akal ke pahara

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 278)

(The traditional trade has nothing to offer, it is just like licking the muller. It is better to earn cash outside so that famine can be faced)

He voices his concern for family of these migrants through this speech of Pyaari Sundari where she narrates the ordeals she has to undergo as a result of her husband's migration:

Piya mor gailan pardesh, eh Batohi bhaiya!

Raat nahi neend din tani chainwa, eh Batohi bhaiya!

Sahatani bahut kalesh, eh Batohi bhaiya!

Rowaat-rowaat hum bhailin paglaniya, eh Batohi bhaiya!

Eko na bhejalan sandesh, eh Batohi bhaiya!

Nahake jawani hum ke dihalan vidhata, eh Batohi bhaiya!”

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 39)

(O brother Batohi! My husband went abroad./ I have no sleep by night or rest by the day./ I am enduring great agony./ I have become mad due to continuous weeping./ He didn't send even a single message./ In vain did God give me youth./ In a few days my hair will be white./ Bhikhari says, I am slave at your feet O! brother Batohi./ Please search for my dear husband by any means.) (Thakur and Prashad, 2019)

Galiz Bahu, in *Gabar Ghichor*, has similar refrain:

Shiv-Sati ji ke pooth, devan me majgooth;

Giraat baani tohare charan me ho swamiji! Gawana

karike gaila, ghar ke na sudhi kaila; Maratani tohra

viyog me ho swamiji!

Haanth-baahin dhaiyla ke, shaadi-gawaana kaila ke;

Aaj le na kaila nigahawa ho swamiji!”

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 163)

(“Thou son of Shiva-Parvati , powerful among Gods I fall at your feet/ Oh! My husband, I am pining in your separation/ You married me with proper rituals yet never cared/ You have never fulfilled your responsibility of being husband”) (Thakur and Gupta 2000, 128)

The migration of men give rise to a piquant situation in these geographical locations as women who were held captive within the four walls of house had to take social and familial responsibilities in absence of their men folk. This resulted in women donning the traditional responsibility of hearth as well as of the outside world.

At destination points the migrants take up menial job and are not allowed to leave for their home and if they somehow manage to get away are always in hurry to return and report back for duty. It is beautifully captured in this endearing song in which the migrant is cajoled not to return so soon by his wife:

Phagun bhari dildaar, ghare rahu balam

Dhol chawa debo, jhali maanga debo

Bul duware par jalsa lagwa debo

Phagun bhari dildar ghare rahu balam

(Mishra 1971, 184)

(Be at home for spring my love. I will get drums ready, cymbals will be arranged, and there will be celebration in the courtyard. Remain at home for spring my love)

Bidesi in *Bidesia* too, is idling his time away in Calcutta in company of Saloni. He has imbibed all the negative elements for which this city was known for. Calcutta figures prominently in all migration related folklores as a city of opportunities and perils. Its importance is evident in this Bhojpuri folksong:

*Keho jaihen Hajipur, ke ho jaihen Patna,
Keho jaihen Calcuttawa ke naukariya E birna
Sasur jaihen Hajipur, Bhasur jaihen Patna,
Piya jaihen Calcuttawa naukariya E birna*

(Mishra 1971, 181)

(Some will go to Hajipur, some to Patna, some will go to Calcutta for job O! Birna. Father-inlaw will go to Hajipur, elder brother-in-law to Patna. my love will go to Calcutta for job O! Birna)

This song clearly specifies the importance accorded to Calcutta by the Bhojpuri people. Being there added a certain dignity, prestige and pride for the family. Dhananjay Singh believes that migration did not always have negative connotations as the above discussion entails. Bhikhari Thakur, too, writes:

*Lalsha rahe je bahar jai. Churra chala ke daam kamai
Gaili Mednipur ke zilla, ohi je dekh li kucch ramlila*

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 312)

(Longed to go out, earn money using knife (barber), went to Mednipur district, there saw some Ramlila)

In Calcutta these migrants in the absence of their life partner and in moments of passion engage in relation with other women but same is not true for women. Saloni is addressed as *randi* by Batohi which is symptomatic of her socially inferior status:

*Randi me na kuch bate, kuta jaise har chate, eko ghat ke tu lagab bidesia
Chori da adharam, mijaj ka ke naram tu, manva me kari lehu saram bidesia”*

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 46)

(There is nothing in a kept; it is just like a dog licking the bone in the useless hope of some blood or meat; you will find no destination (in this way of leading life). (Thakur and Prashad, 2019)

Batohi says these things because for him women like Saloni are not true and cannot be faithful to anyone, neither her villagers, nor her in-laws, nor even her parents. Batohi further advises Saloni:

*“Barivali batiya tu manila ho mat kara soc-bicar
Thore kahe se tu pura samujha , niman bana la rahaniya ho tu a khude hosiyar*

*Hamara kahe se Bidesi ke jaya da, mili jaihan chaila cikaniya ho tohar banal ba
bazaar”*

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 48)

(“Hey landlady, listen to me, don’t do anything without thinking about it first. I will only hint at the problem and you must understand the entire conundrum. Turn your life around, your demeanour and whereabouts, your way of life. Let Bidesiya come back with me. You have a ready market here, you will find a lot many lewd men”) (Singh 2018, 52)

Saloni is not convinced because she has struggled and lived a hard life. She is fully aware of what the absence of a husband would entail in society. Marriage though ‘temporary’ with Bidesi has provided her with respectability and security in society. She is not ready to sacrifice these by losing Bidesi.

Saloni represents the Urhari women who lived a life of penury at these destination points. While Thakur is sympathetic to the conditions of these women, he is also sensitive to their awkward position. Saloni tries to convince Bidesi in all possible manner:

*Ghare cali jaiba lavat ke na aiba tu, as turi ke sab nas kaila balamua
Jaiba bhavanva paranva teyagi dehab, paka janiha jani kahanava balamua
Asal ke hai beti, irikhe phasal ba neti, kar turi ghar jani jaiha balamua”*

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 46)

(If you go home you will not come back; breaking the hope you have destroyed everything./If you go home I will end my life; take what I say as inevitable and fix./ I am a daughter of respectable parents but my own pride only has caused a noose around my neck; don’t go home leaving my hand.) (Thakur and Prashad, 2019)

We can see Saloni’s depth of her emotions for Bidesi. She is blinded by his love and cannot distinguish between right and wrong, true and false love. It is women like Saloni who stay put with such untrustworthy husbands and make their own life difficult. The new woman Bidesi lives with is also sincere in her relationship and her position becomes compromised once the man returns to his village. In the end, Thakur offers a solution, which, though not very liberal, is in keeping with his vision of happy, extended families. In the end, the man and the two women along with the children he has in Calcutta, live together as a complete family.

Marriage, too, is a form of migration from the natal to the marital and as such should be emphasised when discussing folklores of migration. Thus the *bidesia* tradition is not only about out migration of the men but also accounts for these ‘migrating’ women through marriage and even otherwise. Women are portrayed as oppressed, betrayed and downtrodden and do not have the voice to protest. Pyaari Sundari in *Bidesia* becomes a migrant after Bidesi leaves for Calcutta. Same is true for Galiz Bahu of *Gabar Ghichor*. Both are newly married and have to divorce themselves from everyone as the only intimate relation they have in form of Bidesi and Galiz have left them alone and migrated to distant land. While Pyaari Sundari is able to control her passion, Galiz Bahu succumbs to it.

Bidesia subscribes to the notion of ideal women but *Gabar Ghichor* questions the set stereotype of women as found in folk tradition. Galiz Bahu speaks out:

Babua bhailan paiyda, kucch na milal faiyada;

Sab bidhi kaila bekaida ho swamiji!"

(Yadav and Singh 2005, 163)

("I begot a son, it was of no avail/ My husband you forced me to adopt wrong means") (Thakur and Gupta 2000: 128).

She talks about birth of child outside wedlock and instead of happiness which fills the mother and family; it brings shame and unhappiness to her. Galiz Bahu makes her own independent choice, even when she accepts it as a moment of weakness. It gives sympathetic picture of the heroine as she exercises her freedom free from the set stereotype that the community has for her. Though looked down upon in society such women, as Dhananjay Singh asserts are, "the voices of protest and even show sign of rebellion" (49).

Thus we see that *bidesia* folk culture has voiced the cause of deprived and tried to create awareness about the subjugated position of women in the society. Not only in India but across the globe, Thakur's plays are still performed by many artistes or theatre troupes to entertain people. He was a revolutionary and an experimentalist. He did not go for the traditional, contemporary drama (Sanjeev, 2017). His plays, which he called 'nach' or 'tamasa', depicted the pains and pleasures and the hopes and aspirations of the people at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. His plays had folk tunes as *lorikayan*, *jantsari*, *sorthi*, *birha*, *barahmasa*, *poorvi*, *alha*, *pachra*, *kunvar bijai*, *nirgun*, *chaupai*, *kavita*, *chaubisa*, and others. The popularity of the plays was due to their narrating common events and experiences related to the pain of migration, a theme that touched a common chord in the hearts of the Bhojpuri audience. These plays "were a statement on the existing social dichotomies and the process of displacement of the Bhojpuri migrants documenting oral memories of migration (Tiwari 2003, 12).

Of course migration has acquired certain popularity owing to large scale movement of migrant labourers from the underdeveloped regions of India to the mushrooming metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata etc. It has also filled the mindscape of people in India especially during the outbreak Covid when these hapless migrants were forced to go back to their native places because of the insecurity that the pandemic brought with it. This reflects the precarious position of the migrants at the destination points and the need to have a relook at Bhikhari Thakur's *bidesia* folk theatre for its timelessness and universality. The position of the left-behind family members of these outbound migrants is the basis on which Thakur constructs and mounts his plays. The narrative of migration which has a long history in the Bhojpuri belt is the canvas on which Thakur's plays are drawn and enacted with the exception that migrant is not at the centre of his discourse rather it is their left-behind families. The folklores of migration rewrite the histories of the oppressed identities -voiced and created through them. Women represent the new identities and present the new histories which do not subscribe to the earlier narratives where women was oppressed and their histories were not foregrounded and highlighted. The folklores of migration not only question the traditional hierarchies but also counter them through their representations. The 'silenced' women, migrants and the suppressed castes in the villages find a medium to express themselves through these *bidesia*

folklores. Moreover, the performances reinvigorate the tales in the folklore. The contextualisation is such that the audience is able to relate with it and becomes part of the performances.

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