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Addressing pain of women through folk culture: A case study of Bhojpuri diaspora in Mauritius

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Abstract

Migration has been continuing occurrence in the Bhojpuri-speaking parts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar over centuries. Through this paper we would try to bring out the songs of migration, the songs of women migrants who lamented for their husbands, who migrated to Mauritius leaving them behind in the village. Those who migrated were known as 'Bidesia'. These songs were the folksongs performed by both women and men in different cultural settings. Though the songs composed by men were also feminine in nature. This paper is concerned for Bhojpuri women who experienced the migration of their husbands. 19th Century witnessed the history of migration and cultural expression from these parts and Folksongs became the cultural medium to enunciate the consequence of male migration. Bhojpuri folksongs are the important cultural source to understand the pain and sufferings of left behind women, these songs depicted the protest and articulated men's migration and its after affects over migrant's family left behind. Through this paper we have tried to explore the voices of Bhojpuri women, their expression of pain, struggle, sorrow and desires. Various differences have been acknowledged and documented in this study.

Keywords: Bhojpuri, migration, Bidesia, gender, folksongs, culture

1. Introduction

During the first decade of 19th Century, the entire Bhojpuri region emerged as a cane tract area. Labourers from these regions were highly trained in sugar cultivation and production of Jaggery (Gur, *Raab*). This reason triggered the Colonisers and they converted northern part of India as big market for labour supply. Districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were rich in sugar production area. Thus the system of Indentured labour was developed under which labourers were sent on a contract of five year to work in plantations. For selection of skilled labourers *Arkatiyas* (Labour recruiters) were hired, they fetched large number of skilled labourers from these regions to sugar plantations of Dutch, British and French Colonies.

Emigration from the Bhojpuri region started in 1834 to Mauritius, the push factor was the presence of huge surplus labour and people of Bhojpuri region were more willing to migrate and work in plantations because of the repercussion of 1857 revolution that had drained the region and its resources, leaving behind mass exodus into poverty and misery. Frequent famines and drought were other important factors which gave impetus to migration process.

Though the migration started, it turned to be a black moon for migrant families, wet eyes dried in longing for the members who crossed the seven seas. The departure to foreign shores left behind some untold grief, pain and emotions, which I have tried to record in this study. This saga of separation and heart felled suppressed desires inculcated the feeling of emotional loss, which gave birth to distinct folk culture in Bhojpuri region. The term *Bidesia* comes from the word *Bidesh* which means Foreign thus was used to resemble the migrant labourers by the people who were left behind. (Migration in Mauritius: A Country Profile, 2014) [5].

Bidesia Folk Culture was represented in dramas, folk songs, folk paintings and musical theatre (Nautanki). It is indeed a holistic folk tradition which inculcated the theme of departure of Bhojpuris. In this process Bhikari Thakur became the major patron of Bidesia folk culture. In his songs he covered the emotional, social and cultural loss of the family, relatives and Bhojpuri folk.

Similar folk cultures developed in the regions where Bhojpuri migrants flourished, those migrants carried their cultural heritage with them which comprised of intangible and tangible

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artefacts like folk tales, folk songs, oral memories, copies of *Ramayana*, *Hanuman Chalisa*, *Quran*, *kabir poems* etc. This study will not only cover the decaying history of Bidesia folk culture but also will capture the present situation of migrants, the process of continuity and change which they have undergone through years and also the strength of cultural bonds which have been developed between Diasporic Bhojpuris across the globe.

1.1 Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to obtain a picture of migration experiences and memories in the form of personal narratives, to trace cultural change in second and third generation which is an integral part of the study. The study has covered history of Bidesia folk culture and how much it is still popular in mentioned districts and Mauritius? How women emerged in Bidesia folk tradition? The study also covers bidesia folk songs which are sung by women in the villages. The aim behind collection of songs is to analyse and go deeper to target the feeling of loss, pain and separation. (Cassels, 2010) [2].

2. Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in two villages of each districts of northern part of India namely in Allahabad, Varanasi. The method which was used for collecting data was based on Interview and Observation method. Interview schedule was prepared to conduct session. In Interview method, random sampling method was used. For the proposed pilot study, the sample size was 10 decided. And further in Mauritius the study was conducted through online interview with the help of survey monkey software.

A study was conducted to locate and identify the history and culture of migration, which recorded the songs and memories of Indian people in Northern India and in Mauritius the study will be conducted at later stage. As a researcher I tried to gather and analyse the content which I got in the museum of G B Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. A set of questions was prepared through which the historical material pertaining to the theme was being collected and the respondents were made to sing Bidesia Songs which helped in the collection of oral sources.

Questions were framed in order to get migration history and experiences if any and their views on culture, tradition & religion which they carried, how they carried and how they sustained it. This study has shown how tradition, language and cultural performances was transferred from one generation to another and whether it is still into practice of transferring or not. As we all know that Bhojpuri is the common dialect of Northern India and one of the dominant languages in Mauritius.

I have specifically selected these two districts of Northern India (Allahabad, Varanasi,) to conduct study. If one has to trace the reason behind selection of these mentioned areas, the reason lies in the backdrop of early migration period. Early migration history of Indians was very painful, before Independence Indians suffered from the claws of Britishers. They were treated badly and were paid less in turn of extensive labour. Famine and shutdown of small scale industries became a major reason for migration of fellow Indians from these parts mostly. And still people carrying out the tradition by migrating to various parts of the World in search of better opportunities.

2.1 Findings

The word Bidesia in the above mentioned title has basically two meanings, one is for the migrants who have left their native lands and the other is for folk tradition which has developed in the memory of those who were left behind. The everyday seasons, life, struggles & sufferings, economic activities were reflected in the songs of oral tradition. This oral tradition of Bhojpuri folk culture of India today is called the Bidesia folk tradition.

These songs reflected both internal and external migrations from various regions of the Indian society. From the pilot study it was found that migrants carried this song tradition which demanded question and answers, they carried the folk ballads, theatre and dance forms like *Raam Leela* with cultural practices and musical instruments.

This study was conducted into remotest rural areas from where the migration dated long ago. Members of those families got their eyes wet while recalling the mourning saga which they witnessed. Interview of those respondents were carried out for more than 50 mins each. Many difficulties arrived in the collection of data as it was attached to the sentiments of families directly. To convince them and inquire about the past incidents was indeed a challenging task.

Recitation of songs from the female members and then decoding into English language was even more serious concern. Hopefully people were benevolent and supported in the process of data collection. I recorded various Bidesia songs which reflected the pain and sufferings of wives and mothers. Women at the beginning felt shy and were not confident at first stage but as soon they became aware of the situation they helped me open heartedly. (Tiwari, 2012) [7]

Through this study it was found that Bhikari Thakur who was an Indian playwright, folk dancer, singer, social activist, lyricist and actor was the propagator of Bidesia songs. Respondents told that when he used to sing and dance on Bidesia Songs, a carnival like environment was created. He was known as “Shakespeare of Bhojpuri” for his contribution in form of Bidesia songs. These songs were based on the theme of *Kalyug Prema* (Kalyug Love), *Bhai Bidroh*, *Beti Viyog or Beti Bechba* (Daughter Seller), *Bidhwa Vilap*, *Ganga Asnan*, *Nanad Bhaujai Songs* etc. that still charm and retain the attention of mass audience. The songs were structured such that it mesmerized the audience, as it was very difficult to manage and control the crowd. The demand of public was such that sometimes he had to perform the plays in three or four shifts in a row; otherwise people would have started raging.

The important instruments used for playing Bidesia songs were *Dholak*, *Harmonium*, *kartaal*, *manjra*, *Jhanjh*, *Naal*, *Banjo*, *Tabla*, *Chang*, *khajadi*, *key board*, *Sehnai*, *Bansuri*, *Joridiya*, *Majish* and so on. And the important musical forms that were often sung by migrants were *Poorbi*, *Kajri*, *Birha*, *bidesia*, *Ghajal*, *khadi*, *Loriki*, *Chandaini*, *kajri*, *Tanka*, *Bharvai*, *Doha*, *Sortha*, *Bhajans*, *Savaiya*, *Ekankis*, *Jatsar*, *Chhat Maiyya songs* etc. It is said that unlike today's Bhojpuri songs which is double meaning in standard, the soul of Bidesia songs lied in its purity, it was purely devoted to day to day happenings and sentiments of people.

In the quest of data collection, I also visited the famous G B Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Jhansi, Allahabad from where the one and only project on Bidesia was carried out. At that institute a museum devoted to Bidesia was there. I was able to find out rare information and click photographs

of migrants and chalk out the archived golden documents related to my area of Interest. Luckily I got chance to meet Prof Badri Narayan Tiwari who has done extensive work on Bidesia songs and Bhojpuri Migration, I got valuable information from him regarding the study. He gave me information about how these songs contained elements of migration sung in the homeland and the impact of these songs and comparison of their forms sung in the destination countries. He informed me about the changes that have occurred over the time and space. Through his expert opinion, I came across new form of Bhojpuri songs like *Domekach, Kolhu Geet, Tel Perne ka Geet, Dhobiu, Chamraudha, Murau, Kaharwa, Chaiti, Sohar, Loti, Chaparia, Jhumar, Nayakwa, Biraini, Rpni, Sohni, Lalna, Fagua, Gunau, Lachaari* and so on. He informed me that Bidesia folk tradition had evolved during the colonial period when a huge population of Bhojpuri people left the Indian shores to work in sugarcane, cocoa, jute and other plantations in Caribbean countries owned and run by Europeans.

Through this field study I tried to explore the diminishing cultural forms in Bidesia and document the interpolations and changes through the years to understand the collective memory and the cultural psyche of migrants. I tried to understand how folk culture helped migrants to recover from the pain and loss on leaving their homeland.

Through this study it was found that the second or third generations of migrants though living in different cultural settings such as home, school or office talk to their children about their history, they recall the memorable stories of their parents and grandparents, they consider it as most important part of cultural retention.

My children must know about our roots, how many difficulties our grandparents have gone through, to put us in this situation. Today the amenities which we are utilising are just the gift of our parent's hard work. We also recite and convey our tradition in the same way our mother have done. It is very important for our children to know our culture. (Phulmati, 45 years, Sipah).

Respondents have admitted that their songs, their culture and tradition make them unique from others. Women sing and recite these songs in time of festivals, marriage. They admitted that even now in their talks they mention those songs to give examples for struggle of life to their children. Respondents also hinted that technology changes the culture, their way of living. Earlier the people used to sing and assimilate together for celebrations but now due to advent of technology everyone's life is on fast pace. They are using technology but they are running away from their cultural heritage which is somewhere resulting in the loss of their songs, dances and cultural products which they supposed to be their definition of culture.

Today it is the age of mobile and TV, the young generation is running after cinema. Now no one is interested in watching Raam Leela, Nautanki's, Chaupai's and Kabir songs, hardly we see crowd at Fairs. People feel comfortable in their homes. Earlier women in villages used to sing together or Panchayats use to have weekly celebrative programs. But

technology has taken away the culture from its people.
(Ram Daras, 51 years, Sewaith, Allahabad.)

From this study one could imagine the scene which we sense from the respondents observation that Bidesia Songs were extremely popular among the masses in the same way other folk songs. The women were responsive to my enquiries. I insisted a female respondent to sing a song, but it was quite surprising as soon as she started singing the other women also joined in her endeavour. It was strange to notice that men were ready to talk but when asked to sing they denied, which clearly reflected that singing was gendered performance.

*Kuchho khabbar na aayil, hai raam duhai
Roi roi ke hum ratiya bitayi, hai raam duhai,
Sajan gaile humaar, oh paar re bidesia.
Kaate nahi katar ee ratiya hai raam duhaai.
Biyah ke launen piya, chal gailen humke chorke
Bidesia.* (Kausalya Devi, 45 years, Phahamau, Allahabad).

In the above song women is lamenting over her husband's departure to distant land. She is missing her and this is reflected through this song, she says that time is flowing but there is no news of his husband yet. She is missing him in endless nights.

3. Conclusion

It has been observed that if this study is carried on a wider scale, the results which were noticed on pilot study can give a better shape to the title; it will add more dimensions and help in preserving this folk tradition alive. It was observed that women while answering to the questions were not responding as desired, but the moment we requested them to sing, then they came up with the emotional compositions of songs. Which give us a hope that if this study is continued further a lot of hidden emotions will come forward in form of these songs. If we go further for content analysis then we can unravel the multiple layers of meanings which are underneath the villages and our cultural roots.

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