

ESHANA

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Editor

Palash Mondal

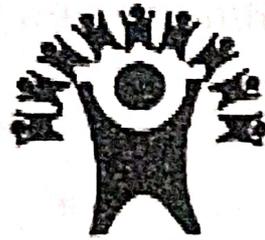


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অরুণা ইতিহাস সমিতি কলকাতা

Aruna Prakashan

2, Kalidas Singha Lane, Kolkata-7000 009

in association with

Bangiya Itihas Samiti Kolkata

Eshana 4

A collection of peer reviewed selected interdisciplinary research papers presented at the 7th International Conference of Bangiya Itihas Samiti Kolkata held at Bethune College, Kolkata on 15th and 16th March 2024.

Editor

Palash Mondal

ISBN: 978-81-970482-7-2

First Published : March 2025

©

Bangiya Itihas Samiti, Kolkata

Published by

Shyamal Bhattacharya

Aruna Prakashan, 2, Kalidas Singha Lane, Kolkata-7000 009

in association with

Bangiya Itihas Samiti Kolkata

Copy editing: Prasenjit Mukherjee

Type setting

Bikash Chowdhury, Kolkata - 700079

Offset

Sarat Impressions Private Limited

18 B, Shyama Charan Dey Street, Kolkata - 700 073

Price : 600/-

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Bhikari Thakurs Legacy: A Cultural Beacon Shedding Light on Migration and Social Realities in Bhojpuri Theatre

Shatrughan Kahar*

Abstract: This article delves into the life and works of Bhikari Thakur, an Indian poet, playwright, and social activist, with a focus on his renowned play like Bidesia. Kaliyug Prem, Gabarghichor, Bhai Birodh, Beti-biyog or Beti Bechwa and Bidhwa Bilap Thakurs observations of the societal impact of labour migration from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to Bengal during the late 19th century form a backdrop to his thematic explorations. Through characters like Sundari, Thakur portrays the struggles of women left behind by migrant husbands, highlighting issues of gender roles, societal norms, and familial responsibilities. The plays criticize social evils such as forced marriages, exploitation of widows, and the breakdown of joint family systems, while advocating for education and empowerment. Thakurs works serve to preserve Bhojpuri culture and language while advocating for a just and egalitarian society. Ethical dimensions of migration, family separation, gender roles, sexual exploitation, and polygamy are explored within the context of cultural and societal norms, prompting ethical reflection and potential avenues for change. Overall, Thakurs works offer not only entertainment but also serve as a mirror reflecting the societal issues of his time, urging audiences to address these issues for societal betterment.

Key Words: Migration, Society, Women, Rural, Value.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the jute mills of Bengal experienced a significant influx of laborers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. However, despite their migration for employment opportunities, these workers often did not bring their families along with them. The report of the Royal

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Commission of Labor in India (1931) states that “the Indian workers remained only partially committed to industrial life with half of his mind in the village from where they had come.”¹ This led to a notable deterioration in family and social values within the community. Issues such as alcohol consumption, extramarital affairs, and a decline in traditional rural values became prevalent among the workers, undermining the established social fabric.² Even keeping their married wife in villages, some workers turned to city brothels for comfort, which went against traditional rural values. Bhikari Thakur closely observed and experienced these phenomena, which later became central themes in his plays and poems. He challenges the inherent decline witnessed among workers transitioning from villages to cities due to the mechanization of the modern world. To help them and strengthen their social ties, Bhikari Thakur organized theater shows called Bidishia in the mid-20th century. These plays became hugely popular among Bengals workers too. Later, a movie based on the play was made, which was liked not only by peoples of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh but also the migrated labourers of Bengal.³ His efforts are directed towards awakening rural values within these individuals⁴

He was born on 18 December 1887 at the village of Kutubpur in the district of Saran, Bihar. His mothers name was Shivakali Devi and father was Dalsingar Thakur. He belonged to a Nai (barber caste), one of the most backward castes in Indian society. The traditional work of his caste was cutting and trimming hair and assisting brahmins in marriage as well as in death ceremonies. They were also used by dikus (village messengers) to send and distribute ceremonial (in cases of marriages and deaths) and other messages in the village and nearby areas. They acted like postal workers in the traditional-feudal village setup.⁵

In one of his works, he says: “Jati Hajjam more Kutubpur mokam. Jati pesha bate, bidya naheen bate babujee” (I am a barber by caste and I come from Kutubpur. My caste is merely my work. It is not my education kind sir.) In this he speaks about his own caste and regrets that his caste people are distributing letters to all without knowing the importance of the letter, or the alphabets. He clearly understood the power of education and continuously chided his people for being illiterate and bounded by jajmani (patron-client) relations with the dikus.⁶ Belonging to a low caste (nayi or barber) and having

lived his life in very poor conditions, Bhikari Thakur was illiterate but taught himself to read and memorize Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas whom he considered his literary guru. And gradually he became an Indian poet, playwright, lyricist, actor, singer-songwriter, and social activist who penned his creativity in the Bhojpuri language. He is recognised as one of Bhojpuri literatures greatest contributors and the most well-known folk writer of Purvanchal and Bihar. In the early 1900s, the artiste started began his career with the talents he possessed and remained active until his death in 1971. He published most of his works between 1938 and 1962.⁷

In modern Indian theatre, Bhikari Thakur (1887-1971), referred to as the 'Shakespeare of Bhojpuri' by Dr. Manoranjan Prasad Sinha for his immense popularity amongst his folk, is a major playwright and artist. Thakur wrote more than a dozen plays and of those, Monologues, Poems, and Bhajans appeared in print as nearly three dozen books. He has to his credit twenty-nine books, consisting of famous plays like Bidesia, Beti-Viyog, Vidhva-Vilap, Ganga - Asnan, Gabarghichor and Kaliyug - Prem, and songs and kirtans like Shiv - Vivah, Ramlila-Gaan, Budhshala ke Beyan, Shanka Samadhan etc. His theatrical style known as 'Bidesia', after his most famous play of the same title, uses folk idioms, music, and elements from folk forms like tamasha and nautanki. Bhikari Thakur, in his travels across Assam and Bengal, had been exposed to jatra, which, along with Ramlila and Raslila influence his dramatic form. In his plays, female parts were played by male actors, who wore false long hair and ornamented them. It has also been noted that Thakur was familiar with the popular Parsi theatre of that time. The stage in his theatre was always an improvised raised platform, with the audience sitting on all three sides. The lighting used consisted of locally available options like lalten and dhibri.⁸

Here we will be going to discuss about some of the content of the plays written and acted by Bhikhari Thakur-

Bidesia

Perhaps his best known and popular work in terms of modern production, Bidesiya is the story of a man who has to leave behind his village and family to seek a job in the city of Calcutta. Although the story seems to be ambiguous, it has strong elements of auteurship, which is very common to

Bidesia style. The play remains relevant even today as modern-day Bihari people have become a migratory community. This has happened due to more than half a decade of misgovernance in the Indian state. The educated flee to Indian metropolises or abroad. Thakur was until recently largely forgotten but because of Bidesiyas modern-day relevance, a revival movement led by the Bihari theatre artists has brought his work to public attention once again.

The play *Bidesia* has primarily five characters, namely Bidesi, Batohi, Sundari, Randi, and Devar. The play is named after the central character Bidesi, who represents the predicament of young village men, who are forced to migrate to foreign lands (*bidesh*) in search for better living. His wife, Sundari is a simple woman, devoted to her husband. When in *bidesh*, her husband meets and falls in love with another woman, typified as 'randi', referring to her socially unacceptable position. Batohi is a wise man of the village, one who is wont to traveling frequently, and so is a man of the world. He is the messenger who goes to town carrying the wife's message. Another character is referred to as 'devar', a young man, who, in the absence of Sundari's husband, tries to come close to her and exploit her sexually. Besides, there are other minor characters like Bidesi's friend, samaji, and some village people. The Sutradhar comes after the mangalacharan, and introduces the prologue, which is mainly in song mode. The songs are set to folk rhythms like *jatsari*, *lorikayan*, *sorathi*, and verse forms like *kabitta* and *chaubola*.

The characters in *Bidesia* are types representing the general rather than the particular. The young man Bidesi stands for all those young men, who are left with no choices but to try their fortune in unknown places like Assam and Bengal. In this play, Bidesi goes to Kolkata, on the suggestions of his friends and based mainly on the promises of opportunities and better prospects there. His wife is a type for all women who are left behind in villages, sacrificing their marital life for the betterment of their family. Bhikari Thakur was very sensitive to the issues of women in their mostly passive and marginalized conditions as wives, daughters, and widows. In this play, through the innocent and sincere character of Sundari, Thakur has drawn attention to the helpless positions of such women who are financially dependent on men and therefore outside the domain of decision making. Also, these women are forced to part with their husbands so that the solitude and depression resulting from this separation

become the reality they live with every day. Further, in the absence of their life partners, and in moments of sexual desire, the men find options of engaging in relations with other women. Though these men are able to recreate a parallel life for themselves in towns, it is their wives who pine for a life that has been destroyed, back in their villages. While Thakur is sympathetic to the conditions of these women, he is also sensitive to the awkward position of the other women in the life of these men. The new woman he 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 Kolkata, live together as a complete family. From a feminist ideological point of view, this may appear to be a convenient solution to a serious problem. However, one has to look at the immediate coordinates of time and place to understand that what Thakur is offering is a practical solution to a problem that is rampant in that region.⁹

Various aspects of rural life and migration stand out in his written and acted plays. First of all, Thakurs work sheds light on the adverse effects of migration on the social fabric of the Bhojpur region. The process of migration, whether from rural to urban areas or within the same city, leads to social disorganization as entire families did not relocate. Upon settling in the city, migrants often become detached from their village roots, succumbing to moral degradation fueled by alcohol and the allure of prostitution. Bitohi, upon discovering that the migrant (Bidesi) had a wife still in the city, confronts him, questioning his choices and urging him to reconsider his path. Bitohi's words –

Bitohi- Who is she, my son? (बटोही- बबुआ ई के हऽ?)

Bidesi- Wife (बिदेसी- मेहरारू)

Bitohi- Whose? (बटोही- केकर?)

Bidesi- Mine (बिदेसी- निज के।)

Bitohi- you take the dirty Path. (बटोही- धड़न्त राह गलीज के।)

When Bitohi informs Bidesi about the hardships endured by his abandoned wife back in the village, Bidesi begins to contemplate a return to his roots. However, complications arise when Bidesi's prostitute also follows him to the

village. Surprisingly, Bidesis first wife accepts the newcomer, integrating her into the family. Through this narrative, the play offers a stark reflection of the lives of migrant workers, reminiscent of the themes explored in Tagore's works. The evolving relationships within rural communities underscore the increasing complexity brought about by migration and its repercussions.

Kaliyug Prem

This play deals with the devastating impact of addiction and moral decline on a rural family, highlighting the challenges they face and the eventual redemption brought by the return of a responsible family member. The passage describes the decline of traditional village life due to various factors such as the destruction of household industries, unreliable farming conditions, lack of modern agricultural resources, and the influence of negative habits from urban areas. Drug addiction, alcoholism, and moral decay are rampant, leading to the breakdown of families and traditional values.

The focus is on a particular family where the head, a young man, is addicted to drugs and alcohol. His addiction leads to the deterioration of his family's livelihood, forcing his elder son, Shankar, to leave home and seek work in Calcutta. The father's addiction escalates to the point where he sells off the family's land, jewelry, and household items to sustain his habits, leaving his wife and younger son in poverty and despair.

Despite efforts from the family to intervene and the involvement of outsiders like a prostitute, the situation remains dire until Shankar returns after five years with wealth earned from his work in Calcutta. His return brings hope and prosperity back to the family, allowing them to rebuild their lives.¹⁰

In his autobiographical work *Nay Bahar*, Bhikhari Tagore highlights both the negative and positive aspects of migration on rural life. While he draws attention to the negative impacts such as the degradation of values and social deterioration, he also acknowledges the benefits of migration. Bhikhari wrote, *Jâjamânikâ me kucha nâ bâte, lāgaba sîlāōṭa lōṛhâ châtē/nagada jākē kâmaiya bahârâ. Rahē nâ dîhî akâla kē pahârâ.* Bhikhari critiques the Jajmani system, stating that there is no benefit in it, particularly for those from lower castes who often have to survive by eating leftovers. He suggests that it's better for such individuals to seek work outside their rural environments, where they can earn

a livelihood and find security, especially during times of famine.¹¹ One example illustrating the positive aspect of migration is depicted in the play *Kalyug Prem*. Here, a family head succumbs to addiction, mistreats his family, and indulges in inappropriate relationships. However, his eldest son, Shankar, decides to work in a jute mill in Calcutta. After earning a substantial amount of money, Shankar returns to the village to provide happiness and support to his mother. Thousands of villagers, inspired by stories like Shankar's, also migrate to Calcutta to work in jute mills, successfully lifting their families out of poverty. This narrative aligns with Bhikhari Tagore's observations on the positive impact of migration on rural communities, as portrayed in his works.

Gabarghichor

It's the story of an illegitimate son of Garbari and Galijs wife. Galij returns from the town to find the village gossiping about his son's parentage. He wants to take Gabarghichor back to Calcutta with him. But both Galijs wife and Garbari intervene. A quarrel ensues as each of them claims Gabarghichor as their own. The panchayat is called and they decide that Gabarghichor be divided into three pieces. A man comes and maps Gabarghichor's body and agrees to do the job for four annas a piece. The mother relents, refusing to pay and giving up all claim on the son. The panchayat sees the light and Gabarghichor is allowed to stay with his mother.¹²

In this play *Gabarghichor*, another vivid portrayal of social chaos stemming from immigration is presented. Interestingly, the characters within his plays serve as reflections of societal virtues and vices. At the center of the narrative stands Golij, whose name ironically means dirty. He abandons his newly wedded wife, leaving her to fend for herself, as he ventures abroad in pursuit of financial gain. Meanwhile, his wife has a child with another man, named as Garbari. In the play *Gabarghichor*, the husband's prolonged absence triggers misery in the lives of women, as his neglect drives his wife to unbearable loneliness and unfulfilled desires. This alienation fosters a culture of extramarital affairs, particularly in rural society. The narrative also raises fundamental inquiries about the rights and status of children born out of wedlock, adding depth to the portrayal of societal upheaval caused by migration-induced neglect.

Bhai Birodh

This play deals with the theme of joint family, which is a very prominent feature of Bihars rural society, where a low-income farming family resides, consisting of three brothers named Upkari, Upadar, and Ujagar. Upkari, the eldest, is educated and respected, while Upadar, the middle brother, manages family affairs but is easily influenced by his wife. The youngest brother, Ujagar, is loved by everyone and has a simple character within the family. The family faces turmoil when Upadar's wife is manipulated by an old woman named Kutni into breaking the family apart for personal gain. Property is divided, causing rifts among the brothers. Upadar's wife, influenced by Kutni, even conspires to have Ujagar murdered. However, the plan backfires, resulting in Upadar's arrest for attempted theft to appease his wife's demands. In the end, the family suffers due to greed and manipulation, leading to fractured relationships and legal troubles. However, at the end they realise the importance of living together but not before a lot of harm had actually taken place.¹³

The play *Bhai Virodah* doesn't extensively delve into the topic of migration. However, it does illuminate the gradual disintegration of joint families and the emergence of nuclear families in the Bhojpur region. This disintegration puts pressure on available land, reducing the land per capita. Consequently, some individuals no longer rely on village land and opt for migration as a means of sustenance. Moreover, a segment of migrant laborers gradually establishes permanent residence in Bengal.

Beti-Biyog or Beti-Bechwa

The drama depicts the plight of a village in a backward area, focusing on a family consisting of Chatak, a financially weak and morally questionable man, his wife Lobha, who is greedy and narrow-minded, and their daughter Upato. Despite their dire circumstances, the girl takes all the responsibilities of the family on her shoulders. But soon she reaches marriageable age.

The narrative contrasts the current state of the village with its past, where societal bonds were strong, and every member was considered part of an extended family, resolving disputes through collective decision-making.

As Upato becomes eligible for marriage, societal pressure mounts on Chatak and Lobha. Unable to afford the expenses, Chatak decides to sell his daughter to a rich, elderly man named Jhhantul. This practice of selling daughters for marriage, though frowned upon, was not uncommon in backward areas.

When news of the transaction spreads, the community condemns Chatak, threatening to ostracize him. Despite this, Chatak proceeds with the marriage, disregarding his daughters emotional turmoil. Upato, upon realizing the situation awaiting her, flees from her new home back to her parents, seeking refuge.

Despite attempts by the village elders to uphold traditional moral duties, the incident highlights the prevalent issues of selling daughters, forced marriages, and the plight of helpless daughters in rural areas.¹⁴

This play is considered a very progressive play. Bhikari Thakur through this play criticises the widespread custom of selling young girls in marriage to much older men. This custom prevailed in Bhojpuri-speaking areas until recently. The protagonist is a young girl whose father sells her to an older person.

Vidhwa-Bilap

The story is about how widows are treated within their homes. It is seen as an extension of *Beti-bechwa* for more often than not young girls married to old men; spend most of their lives as widows. The story reflects the hatred and seclusion a widow has to suffer in brahminical society for no fault of her own. The Drama It follows the story of Upato, who marries an old, sick man named Jhandul and becomes a childless widow when he dies shortly after their marriage.

To manage her wealth and farm, Upato invites her poor relatives, Udabas and his wife, to live with her. They serve her dutifully, but tension arises when Upato donates to a beggar without consulting them, leading to conflict. Udayabas's wife feels marginalized and suggests leaving Upato, deeming her presence inauspicious.

Udabas seeks advice from his friend, Upadesh, who initially advocates for Upatos autonomy over her wealth. However, when Udayabas faces pressure to choose between his wife and his widowed aunt, he succumbs to greed.

Upadesh proposes taking Upato on a pilgrimage and abandoning her, allowing Udayabas and his wife to claim her wealth.

During the pilgrimage, Udabas and Upadesh plot to murder Upato in her sleep. However, when Upato wakes up and pleads for her life, a nearby monk intervenes, scaring off Udabas and Upadesh. The monk provides Upato with shelter and advises her to worship Shri Krishna for salvation from her suffering.¹⁵

The drama highlights the exploitation and marginalization of childless widows in Indian society, highlighting themes of greed, betrayal, and eventual redemption through spiritual guidance.

In the initial phase of setting up jute mills, many women workers migrated to Bengal in search of work. Historians believe that mostly women who were abandoned by their husbands, widows, or childless women worked in these mills. Although the history of the struggles of these women workers in the mill town can be found in historical texts, there is little trace of their earlier lives. Bhikhari Thakurs *Beti-Bechua/Beti Biyog* and *Bidhwa Bilap* outline the earlier lives of these women workers. The tragic story of young girls being married off to old men due to lack of dowry and subsequently being forced to live as widows due to the death of their husbands at a young age has emerged in the two dramas. Not only this, the oppression of widowed women by their relatives forced them to leave their familiar world and flee to the city's jute mills in search of liberation. Although he does not explicitly mention this migration in his play, it is easy to guess that such was the eventual fate of these widows.

Thakur is considered to be the greatest flag bearer of Bhojpuri language and culture. Bhojpuri is widely spoken in major parts of Bihar including Jharkhand, some parts of eastern UP and Bengal. He is not only popular in this linguistic belt but also in the cities where Bihari workers migrated for their livelihood. Many criticized him for upholding feudal and Brahminical values, which to some extent may be true. Despite the support and legitimation of few Brahminical and feudal values in his works, he always pioneered the vision of a just and egalitarian society and this is the difference we have to understand. No vision of egalitarian and subaltern society can be even imagined under these idiotic and nonsensical shadows of Brahminical values.¹⁶

Though his plays revolved and evolved around villages and rural society, they still became very famous in the big cities like Kolkata, Patna, Benares and other small cities, where migrant labourers and poor workers went in search for their livelihood. Breaking all boundaries of nation, he, along with his mandali, also visited Mauritius, Kenya, Singapore, Nepal, British Guyana, Suriname, Uganda, Myanmar, Madagascar, South Africa, Fiji, Trinidad and other places where Bhojpuri culture is more or less flourishing.¹⁷

In short, Bhikari Thakurs works not only entertain but also serve as a mirror reflecting the societal issues of his time, urging audiences to reflect on and address these issues for the betterment of society. As we seen Thakur, in his plays, raised pertinent topical as well as universal issues concerning women, low-caste people and poor people living in villages. Bidesia draws attention to the problem of migration and its effects on the women who are left behind, Beti viyog, to the practice of mismatched marriages which are executed between young girls and aged men in exchange of money for the girl's family, and Vidhva-Vilap to the helpless position of widows in their families. Bhikhari Thakur's another play named as Gabarghichor is about a woman, whose husband was a migrant and she had an illegal relationship with a man of her village and a child named Gabarghichor from that man. Thakur has also talked about the separation of joint families in Bhai Birodh, In Kaljug Prem, he has shown the consequences of drinking and the impact on the family.¹⁸

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