

Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Folk Culture

Research >
South Asia

The 'Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Folk Culture' project deals with the memory of migration, which flows in various cultural forms in the homeland as well as in destinations of migrants. The historical reality of international migration provides a basis of common cultural heritage for people of Indian descent in the various regions in the world, though each region has an interesting cultural story in itself. The joint experiences of these migrants, however, make it clear that common cultural heritage is not only fixed in places and things, like fortresses, shipwrecks, archives, and arts, but also travels around the world in the minds of men and women who, as migrants with their own culture as baggage, are either obliged, or choose, to face new futures in foreign countries.

By Badri Narayan Tiwari

In the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, as the abolition of slavery progressed around the world, European colonies found themselves in great need of manpower for their plantations. India, meanwhile, was suffering from an economic depression, due to both the decline of the weaving industry caused by the Industrial Revolution in England, and the extreme population pressure on agriculture and cultivable lands. This pressure on the resources of the country, combined with the colonial masters' demand for cheap and abundant labour, led to the migration of a large number of migrant labourers from the Bhojpuri region.

The Bhojpuri region is a cultural entity that transcends political borders. This area comprises the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh and the western part of Bihar in India. In the north, it reaches across the river Ganges and past the Nepal frontier, up to the lower ranges of the Himalayas, from Champaran to Basti. In the south, it crosses the Sone River and covers the great plateau of Chotanagpur, where it finds itself in contact with the Bengali of Manbhum, the Oriya of Singbhum, and the scattered tribal languages of the Chotanagpur plateau. The area covered by Bhojpur is some fifty thousand square miles; more than 15 per cent of the total Indian population speaks Bhojpuri.

Bhojpuri culture can boast national and even international spread, due to the large-scale migration from this region. The descendants of those migrants, who have now integrated into the societies of the countries to which their ancestors were originally taken, also use this language. Bhojpuri is mainly spoken in Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, British Guyana, and Uganda, as well as in some parts of Burma and Nepal. The people of Indian descent in various regions across the world can thus claim a common cultural heritage based on the historical reality of the migration from the Bhojpuri region.

Culture, change, and migration

Migration is usually considered an economic phenomenon, but it also creates a cultural phenomenon in both the homeland and the land of destination. For the Bhojpuri people, this migration was first and foremost a heavy emotional loss. Many relationships were torn apart – wives torn from husbands, sisters torn from brothers, fathers from their old-age support, and mothers from the 'apples of their eyes'. All were leaving for foreign shores and there was no way to hold them back. The social, economic, political, and historical manifestations of colonial imperialism were drawing them to this migration, which was more of a forced migration for the Bhojpuris. This economic compulsion is expressed in the folk tradition of the people of the Bhojpuri region of India, and the following folk song clearly expresses the pain and suffering that they feel:



Photograph taken from the exhibition *Van Vrouwenleven*. Collection of photos of women in Suri-name.

Both photos: Collection of the Royal Institute of the Tropics (KIT), Amsterdam

Railiya na bairi se jaha jawa no bairi se paisawa bairi na mor saiyan ke bilmawe se paiswa bairi na
(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 spite of the best efforts of the Bhojpuri people, the migration did not stop. As a result, both externally and internally, the pain of loss and separation became an important aspect of Bhojpuri society. This pain gave birth to a distinct folklore, which emerged as an expression of the pain and anguish of the migrants' separation from their families.

Bidesia folk tradition

Bidesia was the affectionate form of address given to the migrants by loved ones who were left behind in the homeland, and so lends its name to the new folk culture that emerged out of this migration, *bidesia* folk culture. This folk culture is represented in many forms, such as *nautanki* (musical theatre), dramas, folk songs, and folk paintings. It is a complete folk culture, or holistic folklore tradition, which developed as an outcome of the vacuum caused by the departure of the migrant Bhojpuris. In this project, the term *bidesia* will be studied, not only in its *nautanki* form only but also in its role as a metaphor for cultural tradition that emerged in and around the migration of Bhojpuri people.

In *bidesia* folk culture, the migrants are referred to as *bidesia*, *pardesi*, *batohia*, and other terms, which contain elements of both affection and complaint for leaving the loved ones behind. 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 *an muluk*, or 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 however, 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.

It seems that the use of the word *bidesia* for migrant labourers in Bhojpuri folk songs began after the year 1837, when migration from the region began. Since very little folk tradition was written or published, it is difficult to fix the exact time period. From what is documented, little as it may be, it can be said that in 1850 Kesodas, a Sadhu following Kabir's ideology in one of his *nirgun* compositions, used the term

videsh – referring to overseas migration – instead of *pardes* – referring to internal migration:

Bhave naahin mohe bhavanvan
Ho Ram, videsh gavanvan
(I don't care for palaces,
Hey Ram, my beloved has gone to a foreign land)

In 1884, Pandit Beni Madhav Ram, a resident of Kashi, composed a folk song in which the word *bidesia* was used for the first time to address a person who had departed:

Kahe mori sudhi bisaraye re bidesia
Tarhpi tarhpi din rain gavayo re
Kahe mose nehiya lagae re bidesia.
(Why did you make me lose my consciousness, O *bidesia*?
I am suffering constantly day and night.
Why did you lock your eyes with mine, O *bidesia*?)

The composition of *bidesia* folk songs also began in this time period, and later formed the basis for the *bidesia* folk culture. In these songs as well, as can be seen in the previous stanza, the word *bidesia* was used for the first time as a *tek*, or repetitive ending to a song line. Scholars believe that this was the special feature of *bidesia* folk tradition.

In this time period, a form of folk theatre also called *bidesia* emerged in the Bhojpuri region. *Bidesia* theatre drew huge audiences, especially when performed by Bhikhari Thakur and his acting troupe – Bhikhari Thakur himself composed many popular *bidesia* plays. Each play was filled with *bidesia* songs, which were based on such 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. The interspersions of comic relief and satire on the existing system also established *bidesia* theatre as an extremely popular form of folk art and culture. These plays were also a statement on the existing social dichotomies and the process of displacement of the Bhojpuri migrants.

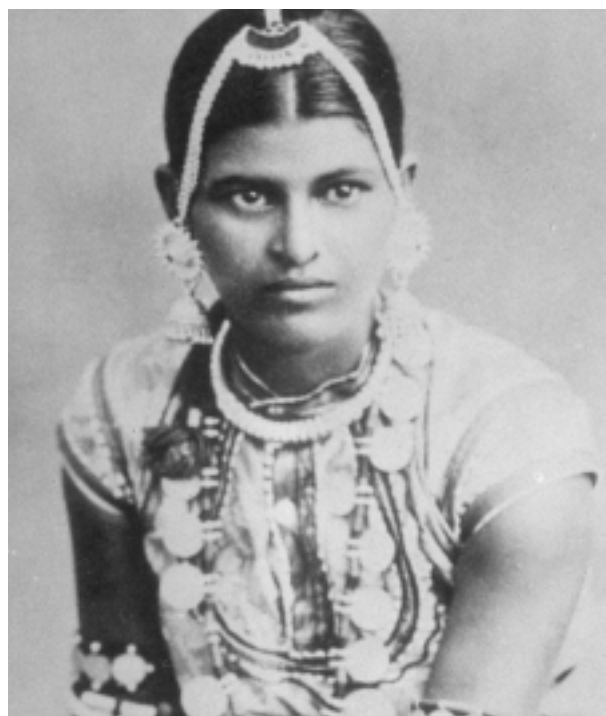
Documenting oral memories of migration

Sadly, *bidesia* folk culture, which is mainly an oral tradition, is in danger of extinction today. It is thus of paramount importance to collect, document, and analyse these traditions, as one could then develop the story of Bhojpuri overseas migration by relating the traditions to other archival and secondary sources. Notably, this folk tradition is popular not only in the homeland of the migrants, but also in their destinations like Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad, Fiji, and the Netherlands, where the present generations in search of their cultural identity are trying to reconstruct the history of their ancestors. These oral folk traditions were an important component of the cultural baggage of those ancestors, which helped them recover from the pain caused by the separation from loved ones in their homeland. A study of these cultural traditions will not only help present-day, non-resident Bhojpuris discover their roots, but it will also help them strengthen their common cultural heritage and folk traditions. The preservation of oral folk traditions in all cultures is important, as it preserves the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. <

Dr Badri Narayan Tiwari obtained his PhD from the Department of History at the University of Allahabad and is lecturer at the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute in Allahabad. From 1 April 2002 until 1 July 2002 he was a Gonda Fellow at the IAS in Leiden. His research focuses on 'Migration, Change, and Diasporic Culture in the Bhojpuri Region of Bihar, Suriname, and the Netherlands'.
gbpimuseum@rediffmail.com

Info >

Supported by the Gonda fund I researched and transcribed various Suriname Hindustani folk songs, bearing the memory of migration, collected and recorded by U. Arya and preserved in Kern Institute Library, Leiden University. This project is the outcome of the collaborative effort of the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute (Museum), Allahabad. For her extensive help, I am thankful to Susan Legène, head of the Curatorial Department of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam, who held the project's identification mission and with whom I will continue in a joint research project.



Portrait of a Hindu-stani woman, Suri-name c. 1890