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**Culture, Migration and the
Time of an Epidemic:
The Nautanki Theatres /
Bhojpuri Nataks in 1990s**


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**Culture, Migration and the Time of an Epidemic:
The *Nautanki* Theatres/ Bhojpuri *Nataks* in the 1990s**

Rajat Kanti Sur

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Introduction

The *nautanki* theatre is popularly known as the ‘*natak*’ performance in the Bhojpur¹ region. It is one of the essential elements of the popular folk culture in Western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Apart from that, there are variations of the *nautanki* theatre in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and partly in Haryana and Maharashtra. It got immense popularity among the people, especially the working-class people, because they used this as a reprieve from their day-to-day work. But the popularity of the *nautanki* theatre reduced from the late 1980s to early the 1990s. Several elements came up to fill the gap that resulted in the decrease in the demand for *nautanki* among ordinary people. The changing nature of migration also created a new section of migrant workers, and the economic liberalization allowed them to be introduced to neo-cultural media, such as video films, new Bhojpuri films, cable televisions and mobile phones. To compete with these new cultural elements, the *nautanki* theatre changed its course and tried to ‘modernize’ itself. The article attempts to locate the reasons behind these changes, and wants to see the impact of the new trends of migration on it. This paper will also briefly look at the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on the *nautanki* theatre.

The *Nautanki* Theatre: History and the Role of Migration in its Transformation

The word ‘*nautanki*’ has evolved from ‘*natak*’ or drama. As Kathryn Hansen quotes from the *Manak-Hindi-Kosh* (1964), the *nautanki* is a “type of folk drama performed among the common people, whose plot generally romantic or marital, and whose dialogues are usually in the question-answer form in verse”.² Hansen believes the same. Her book tries to prove the derogation of a traditionally popular folk theatre to sexual innuendos and bad skits. She refers to the earlier glory of the *nautanki* theatre of Kanpur, Hathras and Benaras. There are some other references to the source of the *nautanki* theatre, as Hansen mentions in her book. The Sanskrit drama, known as ‘*nataka*’, can also be a source of *nautanki* theatre.

Hansen admitted that there would be some debates regarding *nautanki* theatres but she did not address these debates. However, she accepted that the *nautanki* is a form of ‘intermediary theatre’ because of its journeys between the boundaries of languages, religions and regions. The relation between migration and the *nautanki* theatre comes here. Apart from pleasing the wealthy landlords,

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the main aim of the local *nautanki* theatre groups is to perform in front of migrant labourers because, according to some of the *nautanki* theatre actors and directors, the migrant labourers have more money than the local people. After the abolition of the zamindari system, the small businessmen and migrant labourers are the two most important groups who are the potential audiences of this performance. The transformation of the *nautanki* theatre happened much before the 1990s due to migration from the village to the big cities. Satyendra Kumar described these changes in the rural and semi-urban areas of Bhojpur. The changes occurred not only due to economic reasons but also because of a huge transformation in class and caste dimensions and changes in agrarian relations in the context of out migration from Bhojpur.³ Kumar's argument showed the reason behind the transformation of *nautanki* theatre in the Bhojpur region. Both Hansen and Deepti Priya Malhotra, the two leading researchers on *Nautanki*, have failed to understand these changes. Malhotra strongly criticized the *nautanki* performances in the 1990s. Quoting Kamalesh, one of the famous *nautanki* actresses of the 1970s, Malhotra said that the new form of *nautanki* theatre was everything except the traditional *nautanki* theatre. This new theatrical form, according to her, had transformed into a space where "young girls dress in 'short-cuts' and earn a thousand rupees a night for moving on the stage. They do not know singing or acting. Yet the public wants them!"⁴ Malhotra, the biographer of Gulab Bai, the most acclaimed actress of the *nautanki* theatre, marked the new traditions of *nautanki* in the 1990s as "obscurity".⁵ She ignored Kamalesh's statement regarding the popularity of the new *nautanki* theatres among the "common people". Although Malhotra mentioned the changes in popular taste with time, she also criticized the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh governments' decision of revoking the entertainment tax on the *nautanki*. She predicted that the decision by the state governments allowed various groups to jump into the profession. Most of them had no sense of the glorious tradition they had inherited. Therefore, *nautankis*, which were once popular as family entertainment, became a thoroughly male affair.⁶



Figure 1. Atul Yadvansi
(Picture courtesy Facebook)

Atul Yadvansi, one of the popular names in *nautanki* theatre in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, agreed with Malhotra. In a long interview on the history, glory and the decline of the traditional *nautanki* theatre, Yadvansi blamed the new *nautanki* or Bhojpuri *nataks* as one of the reasons behind the degradation of the *nautanki* theatre tradition. He dismissed the new Bhojpuri *nataks* as *nautankis* and advised to keep a safe distance from such distorted performances. He also said that the *nautanki* theatres had a long tradition which reflects the glory of the Bhojpur region. Yadvansi also claimed that the quality of *nautanki* deteriorated with the new trends and the new migration from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He claimed in the interview that there was no such connection between migration and *nautanki* except some dramas written by Bikhari Thakur and others to remember the coolie migrants. According to Yadvansi, that was limited in a specific form of *nautanki* theatre.⁷ The name of this specific form is Bideshiya. Bikhari Thakur, one of the popular and well-known folk dramatists in Bihar, gave this name for a set of particular *nautankis* dedicated to the migrant labour from Hindi-speaking states. The wife of the coolie migrant labourer was the central character of Bideshiya. The entire

drama was based on her grief, her lust and anger towards her husband. Thakur mostly used two traditional forms of folk songs, 'Lorikayan' and 'Jansari', to describe the crisis of the migrant wife. One of the famous songs of the Bhikhari Thakur's Bideshiya showed the impact of migration in the popular *nautanki* theatres.

*Jabna junebhail swami se sumangali ta,
Janli je bhagiagal ho ram.
E swamiji, naihar se nehatu ridihli Ntay,
Sasura suhavan lagal ho ram.
E swamiji, gharaba-bhitar babaithaiketá,
Gail kabna mulukwa bhagal ho ram.
E swamiji, khatawa mein patawa peithat tay
Sunike agraiti pagal ho ram. (ND)⁸*

(When Sumagali, the heroine or wife of the migrant labourer, fled from her father's house with you, o my beloved husband, your house becomes the only shelter for her. Now, how could you go to another place and leave me? The house looks so empty without you. I am getting mad [for you] for having to read your letters from abroad.)

Yadvansi's logic for Bideshiya was one form of *nautanki* theatre which has lost its relevance. Otherwise, there was no relation between *nautanki* and migration. The original *nautanki* has some other meaning.⁹

Yadvansi's perception was wrong. Brahma Prakash, in his recent book on the cultural practices of labouring communities, described *nautankis* as one of the specific forms related to migration. It can be possible that there are different forms of *nautanki*. Prakash's book is the latest addition in the scholarship in this field of the folk and popular performances in the northern part of the country. Prakash attempts to show the established relationship between culture and labouring communities. According to Yadvansi, the question of aesthetics partially depends on the bond between culture and labour. He says that "this bondage between culture and labour that aestheticize labouring bodies in their exhaustive work environment and performance context."¹⁰ Prakash takes the help of different folk performances like Bhuiyan, Bideshiya, Dugola, etc. to understand the changes taking place due to the transformation of the labour forces. His extensive ethnographic research explores the transformations in folk performances. The discussion on *nautanki* performance while talking about the transformations of Bideshiya performances hints at the changes that took place in the *nautanki* or Bhojpuri *natak* performances due to new trends in labour migration.¹¹ Although he accepted that there are changes in the various cultural forms related to labouring communities, especially migrant labourers in northern India, he did not clearly state how the new trends of migration in the neoliberal economy have played a role in this transformation.

Prakash's book makes it clear that there are some relations between migration and the new *nautanki* theatre which Atul Yadvansi declined to accept. But Sanjay Kumar Singh accepted the moving nature of the *nautanki* theatre and claimed that it was a mix of traditional folk drama and homogenized Persian and Corinthian theatres. Singh quoted Pt Muktibhadra Dikshit, a dramatist and scholar of the Banaras Hindu University, and said that modern *nautanki* theatre evolved with the emergence of modern cities (Calcutta, Bombay, Patna, etc.).¹² He also said that there were different schools of modern *nautanki* theatre. Therefore, there were several dissimilarities in the *nautanki* performances from one place to another. It differed between the characters of the population from place to place and built a strong relationship with migration. Singh admitted that the decline of the

new *nautanki* theatres was due to the growing popularity of radio, television and new Hindi and Bhojpuri cinemas. Thereafter, the *nautanki* became full of sexual innuendos because of audience demand.

Sharmila Rege provided an extensive analysis of different popular cultural practices. Discussing the popularity of *Lavani*, a popular cultural dance form like the *nautanki* theatre, Rege expressed her concern that the popularity of a cultural practice cannot be judged without political contexts. Quoting Robert W. McChesney, a well-known political economist and media historian, Rege said that most cultural theorists overlooked the political importance of cultural practices due to their submissive attitude towards consumer capitalism in neoliberal times. Therefore, the presence of politics in cultural practices was ignored. Thus, according to Rege, the distinction between mass and popular culture had been eliminated. Their place was now occupied by a popular pleasure, which matched the idea of 'customer sovereignty' of the 'new right'.

This postmodern turn in popular and cultural studies created tension between popular and mass culture. While the term 'mass culture' emerged in the 1950s to describe the culture associated with the 'lonely crowd' as a major form of entertainment, 'popular culture' emerged in the 1980s to deal with the ideological debates centred on the possibility of the corrupting influence of popular forms of entertainment.¹³

In the debates between the old and new *nautanki*, Atul Yadvansi's intention to mark the *nautanki* as traditional popular culture and his rejection of the *nautanki* theatres of the 1990s can be explained as the conflict between the ideas of popular and mass culture. Transitions of both popular and mass culture into the common concept of popular pleasure in postmodern times have been reflected in the modern *nautanki* theatres. But the modern *nautanki* theatre has a socio-political context that one cannot ignore. The next section of the essay tries to show the transition through a comparative discussion on the popular acceptance of a mass culture reflected in the *nautanki* theatres and the transformations in the scripts or the storyline with the changing concepts of labour migration.

The Transition of the *Nautanki* Theatres in Bhojpur in the 1990s: The Role of Migration and the Neoliberal Economy

The scholars on *nautanki* theatres always referred to one particular folktale related to *nautanki* theatre. The story of *Nautanki Sebzaadās* considered the origin behind the name of *nautanki* theatre. The story, as Kathryn Hansen and Sanjay Singh both explained in their book and Atul Yadvansi in his interview, is a love affair between Nautanki, the princess of Multan and Phool Singh, prince of Sialkot. Phool Singh was mesmerized to see Nautanki and disguised himself as a woman to get entry to her palace. He took help from a woman flower merchant to get entry. After a prolonged love affair and ignoring the long enmity between Multan and Sialkot, both of them got married. Their love story became popular among the folk dramatists and the folk dramas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and became known as *nautanki*.¹⁴

The interesting thing in the narrative is that the story of *Nautanki Sebzaadās* in Uttar Pradesh has many similarities with the story of *Reshma-Chhubarmal* in Bihar and *Vidya-Sundar* in Bengal. While the *Reshma-Chhubarmal* story has a caste angle and is performed as one of the popular *nautankis* everywhere, the story of *Vidya-Sundar* is still known as the narrative of two feudal lords that is also popular in the *Jatra* performances in Bengal.

Badri Narayan talks about the movement and transformation of different narratives and the transformative role of modern society and politics in it. The tale of *Reshma-Chhubarmal*, a love story

between a *Bhumihar*¹⁵ girl, Reshma, and *Dusadh*¹⁶ boy, Chhuharmal, has acceptance in the entire Bhojpur region, first as a folk tale and then as a *nautanki* theatre named *Rani Reshma–Chhuharmal ka Khela*. Badri Narayan observed a caste-based interpretation of the folktale while tracing the ethnography of the narrative of Reshma and Chhuharmal. He observed that while the story reflected the “glorious past of the Dusadh community in its Dusadh version, Bhumihars get a different narrative”. Thus the conflict behind the identity construction through a folk narrative created armed conflicts which caused the death of a Dalit actor who played the role of Chhuharmal, the hero. The incident happened in Dudnagar, in the Aurangabad district. This incident caused a prolonged caste conflict among the Bhumihars and the Dalits in Bihar in 1978.¹⁷ These caste-based conflicts changed track in the beginning of the 1990s. Several fairs and festivals have been brought up in the name of Chhuharmal. According to Narayan, there are various reasons behind the transformation of the narrative. The emergence of Dalit identity politics in North India gave a different dimension of the Dalit-folk narratives and Reshma–Chhuharmal’s story also got a different dimension. Narayan identified at least two fairs in the memory of Chhuharmal: one in Chardih, Mokamah, and the other in Chhuharmal Nagar, Anisabad, Patna.¹⁸ Apart from the fairs, there was a change in the *nautanki* performances. Narayan observed that whether it was *nautankis* like *Jhansi Ki Rani* or *Maharana Pratap*, they were considered “popular family *nautanki*” and performed on festivals like Dussehra and Diwali. The situation changed due to the emergence of Dalit–Bahujan political movements and a Dalit folk hero like Chhuharmal and others became the popular subject in Bhojpuri *nautanki* or *khela*. Narayan observed how the issue of the fodder scam against Lalu Prasad Yadav became an important topic of *nautanki* at the 1998 Chhuharmal fair in Anisabad.¹⁹

Badri Narayan also accepted that apart from the emergence of Dalit–Bahujan politics, the changes occurred due to new job opportunities that came to the Dalits. The *nautankis* were also printed in the booklets mainly for the lower- and middle-income Dalits who got government or non-government jobs due to the new economic conditions in the 1990s.²⁰

Bhojpuri *nataks* or *nautankis* after the 1990s had similar reasons behind the changes. Economic liberalization in the 1990s created several new jobs in the big cities. According to a report prepared by Ajeevika Bureau, the changes in the crop pattern, mechanization of agriculture and a long phase of terrorism and violence shifted the trends of migration from Bihar and other North Indian states to Punjab. The new trends of migration shifted to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Delhi-NCR since the 1990s. The report also said that these states became the most preferred destinations for Bihar’s migrant labour. The number of migrant labourers from Bihar has increased up to 4.4 to 5 million.²¹ According to the report, almost 58 percent of the households in the seven districts of Bihar (Gaya, Motihari, Nalanda, Purnia, Rohtas, Gopalganj and Madhubani) had one migrant labourer in their families. Due to the deteriorating condition of the village economy in the 1990s, the people migrated in large numbers from their villages to earn more.²²

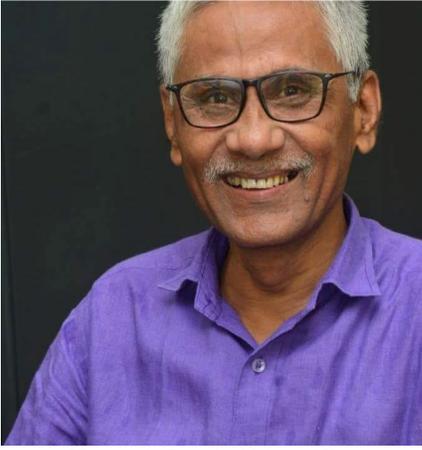


Figure 2. Javed Akhtar Khan
(Picture courtesy Facebook)

Javed Akhtar Khan, noted dramatist and professor of Hindi literature at Patna University, said that the new trends in Bhojpuri *nautanki* came with the trends in migration since the 1990s. He observed that the changing style of *nautanki* played a significant role in their surviving the gradually changing situation. Khan agreed that that is not a sudden change. There was a tradition to tell stories of the migrant workers in several performances since the colonial period. A song by Bhikhari Thakur has already been mentioned earlier in the article regarding the pain faced by a migrant worker's wife. Khan also referred to a drama by Bhikhari Thakur which had certain similarities with one of the dramas by well-known German playwright Bertolt Brecht. But the new Bhojpuri *nautankis* were different from Bhikhari Thakur's *nautanki*. He said that the present-day *nautankis* had gained more influence from Hindi

films, especially popular Hindi films. Hindi films were the only mode of entertainment for most of the migrant labourers in big cities. Due to its easy availability (cheap prices) and access, migrant workers preferred Hindi movies to the Hindi *nautanki*.²³

Therefore, according to Khan, *nautanki* theatres in the 1990s became a localized replica of the Hindi films of the 1990s. Khan also spoke about another trend that had started in the beginning of 1990s in the villages. The business of running video parlours was emerging to entertain people. Most of these video parlours showed adult Hindi films or pornography. That also affected the old format of Bhojpuri *nautanki* theatre. The new *nautankis* tried to include content with erotic elements to attract more and more audiences. Khan also agreed that several people believe in the revival of the

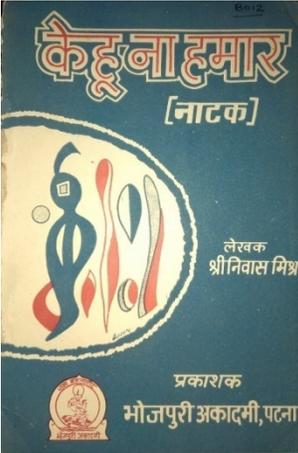


Figure 3 Kehu Na Hamar
(Picture cover page)

old form of *nautanki* theatre. But, the main thing that they forgot was that times had changed and the new *nautankis* were ready to take their place. Indeed, those performances were not appropriate, but as Khan said, the people who were in favour of the revival of traditional *nautanki* did not understand the main theme of the *nautanki* performances that directly related to migration in the 1990s.²⁴

Javed Akhtar Khan's comments on the changes and transformations in the Bhojpuri *natak* industries are similar to Manoj Kumar Singh's (Bhabuk) ideas on the transformation of *nautanki* performances. According to Singh, the trends in the *nautankis* between the 1920s to 1960s were around some central concepts like the selling of girl-children (*Beti-Bechra*), child marriage (*Bal-Vivah*), Ramayana (*Manthara-Kaikeyi Samvaad*), etc, although some of the *nautankis* had some patriotic flavour (like 'Sudesia Natak' which played in the 1940s and the entire group was banned by the police due to their projection of patriotism).²⁵

Singh described the changes in the *nautanki* scripts in the post-independence period. The story of the people who fought against the British administration due to different reasons became one of the main subjects in the *nautanki* theatre. Apart from this, there were some plays based on Hindu mythological stories like 'Raja Harishchandra', 'Dushyant-Shakuntala',

etc. The storyline of the major chunk of the *nautanki* theatres was taken from the popular novels or popular Hindi cinemas of the 1950s and 60s.²⁶

Singh gave an example of one of the famous Bhojpuri *nautankis*, *Kebu na Hamar* (No one is there for me). The drama was written by Srinivas Mishra, a Sanskrit teacher and noted dramatist in the *nautanki* theatre. The drama was based on inequality and corruption in the northern Indian villages. The drama described the failure of the Nehruvian dream to increase the importance of rural India over the urban due to corruption at the village level. Tirmal, the hero of the *nautanki*, migrated to the city (Patna) in this particular case, to get rid of growing corruption and untouchability issues in the villages. The main story had some similarities with many of the popular Hindi films in the 1950s. The writer said in the introduction that the book came much after the plays started being performed in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.²⁷

This has proven that the *nautanki* performances had some influences from popular Hindi cinemas and vice versa. As another example, Phanishwarnath Renu's famous short story *Mare Gaye Gulfaam* became one of the most iconic Hindi movies in the history of Indian cinema. Similarly, the movie *Teesri Kasam* was based on the life of a famous *nautanki* heroine, Gulab bai. Like other *nautanki* heroines, Gulab also faced similar struggles that were faced by the *nautanki* actresses of modern times. This has been discussed later in this article. The accusation against the new *nautanki* theatres being the replica of Hindi films in the 1990s is wrong. But it is true that the trends to use Hindi film songs, props, dialogues and others abruptly in the *nautanki* theatres is a new phenomenon.

Bekar Bhail Kail Dhail (To hold something is useless) is a popular Bhojpuri *nautanki* which carried all the elements of a popular Hindi film in the 1990s. B.S. Tiwari, of the Baraon village in

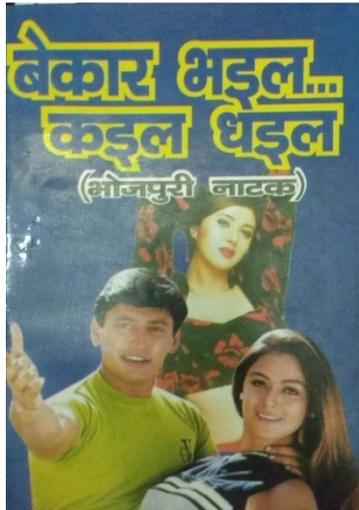


Figure 4. Bekaar Bhail Kail Dhail (Picture: cover)

Sasaram, Bihar, wrote this with the help of some of the popular Hindi film scripts in the mid-1990s. A love triangle between the hero and two heroines, the drama has many other angles. The recent trends of caste politics are also reflected in the play. Two sons of the local head of the village legislative body (Panchayat), Birju and Shankar, are talking about attending a rally of Lalu Prasad Yadav, one of the prominent icons in the lower-caste uprising in Bihar. While Birju is a little reluctant to join this rally, Shankar is eager to meet this charming leader. Their father, the head of the village legislative body (Panchayat), is not happy with the political activities of his elder son and asks his younger son, Birju, to keep away from his elder brother.²⁸ A clash between the lower-caste people of the new generation is prominent in the entire script. Also, a caste clash between the local higher-caste businessman and his relative and the evolving lower-caste groups due to the new political and economic trends is one of the major subjects of the drama. However, an affair between the lower-caste Birju, the village headman's younger son, and high-caste Basanti, the moneylender's daughter, is the key theme like many of the

Bollywood films of that time. This popular Bhojpuri drama also used some popular Bhojpuri erotic songs by famous Bhojpuri erotic singer Guddu Rangeela. The song is:

Kabban Jaibu

Gori Abai Gari Haije Khara Ba,

*Chhapra Siman Gopalgunj ke Chumma Ego Bhada Ba.*²⁹

(Where are you going in a hurry, dear?

The car is here.

If you want to go to Chaapra, Siwan or Gopalgunj, I will take you. The fair is nothing but a sweet kiss.)

Although rejected by several thespians in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, these were the recent trends of Bhojpuri songs and dances that were frequently used in the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances. Most of them were also full of erotic dialogues to attract the village audiences. As Bramha Prakash rightly observed about the Bhojpuri *natak* and Bideshiya groups, changing the earlier style of double entendre songs and moving towards playing cassettes of some erotic songs with an equally erotic dance number became the new trend of the post-1990s.³⁰

Ehe ha Samaj (This is the Society) was another popular Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performance that was an erotic love story. Vasant, a village boy who went to the city for better economic opportunities, fell into a trap set up by some questionable women. The characterization of the two women (Gulabo and Basmati) and the exchange of seductive dialogues between them to seduce the main male character, Vasant, showed not only a typical cheap Hindi film script but also a clear sign of patriarchy.³¹ The drama also used one of Guddu Rangeela's erotic songs on the *Holi* festival to show the migrant worker's wife playing *Holi* with one of her husband's brothers.

Most of the popular Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances indeed had some erotic messages. But there were many popular *nautanki* performances which had some social appeal. *Mai*, written by Umashankar Sahu began with this message from the author: "I am dedicating this Bhojpuri *natak* to my family. This '*natak*' reflects the growing evilness of the present-day society and shows the way of removing that evilness."³² *Mai* also had some similarities with Hindi films but never left the patriarchal mode of depicting society. Sujata, the wife of the elder brother who is a migrant labourer, is projected here as a vamp. She is harassed by her younger brother-in-law, Raushan, who accused her of misbehaving with her mother-in-law, Kushalya. This drama also has a song that reflects the struggle of the parents to nurture and establish their children through their life.³³

Rege pointed out some interesting observations about the transformation of popular performances. Talking about *Lavani*, the dance theatre performances by lower-caste women, Rege pointed out that the projection of bodily needs or expecting sexual pleasure from other men apart from the husband was a traditional trope of *Lavani*. *Virab* or songs to express the frustration and sexual desire in the absence of the husband were also common since the Peshwas regime (1674–1818) as a form of popular entertainment. Censorship was imposed only in the mid-19th century (1853) when Vishnudas Bhave, the pioneer of modern Marathi theatre, or what Rege called bourgeois theatre, took out the *Lavani* and such performances from their dark phase and removed the "obscene" elements from traditional Marathi culture.³⁴ Atul Yadvansi's claims towards the modern Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances as mentioned earlier are also related to modernization and the sanity of female actors of the modern *nautanki* theatre.

Not only Yadvansi but most of the veteran *nautanki* performers also do not want to accept the present form of popular *nautanki* theatre. Previous scholars of migration and *nautanki* performances have some different visions. Although they approved the ever-dynamic nature of the women characters in the Bhojpuri *natak* performances related to migration, they accepted that except Bhikhari Thakur, other authors/playwrights of popular *nautanki* performances tried to get fame and cheap publicity through obscene dialogues or exposing female characters with obscenity.³⁵ The

analysis of the changing nature of sexuality in the context of Bhojpuri *natak* performances has been discussed in the next section of the article.

Gender, Sex and Sexuality: Evolution of the Bhojpuri *Natak* or *Nautanki* Performances and the Role of Migration

Babita, a *nautanki* heroine in the 1990s, expressed her desire to work in the dance bars in Mumbai again. She went to Mumbai in the middle of the 1990s and earned more than she had earned as a *nautanki* heroine. Although from Kanpur, Babita performed with several popular companies in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. She also said that she felt safe while working as a bar dancer in Mumbai. Though she did not say anything directly, it can be assumed that she considers the *nautanki* theatres unsafe compared to the bars. She said that her mother was also a *nautanki* actress and faced all kinds of assaults from the manager and other male actors of the group. She was also practising sex work to earn more money to manage her family. Babita's father knew all these affairs but did not say anything. When Babita's mother grew old, her *nautanki* company and her clients abandoned her. She was almost penniless after spending 35 years in this profession. Babita did not want to suffer like her mother. Therefore, she, along with many other young girls, performed in several Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* groups who migrated to Mumbai to work at the dance bars to earn more money. Babita helped both of her younger brothers finish their education and get established. She, along with other girls, faced a huge crisis when the Bombay High Court imposed a ban on dance bars in 2006. Babita returned and started performing again in the *nautanki* theatres. She said that she was facing the same exploitation as her mother.³⁶

Mona, a popular heroine in *nautanki* theatres in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, had a different story. As she said in an interview to Deepti Priya Malhotra, she had joined *anautanki* theatre group at a very young age. A small landowner saw her performance and fell in love with her. After a few years of living together, they got married and had two children. They opened a "*nautanki* company" where they played several historical and literary plays like *Anarkali*, *Laila*, etc. They even adapted the life of Phoolan Devi, the famous bandit-turned-Dalit politician who became popular among the lower-caste people and migrant labourers. Mona was also exploited by her male colleagues while she was young and thanked her husband for her rescue. She accepted the fact that there were certain changes in *nautanki* theatre with time, but she did not blame the changes. Rather, she said that this was the demand of time. The life of a *nautanki* actress could only be secured if she earned enough money for her future. Otherwise, they would be thrown as waste paper to live the rest of their lives on the road.³⁷

Babita's interview and Mona's life story gives a new understanding of the *nautanki* performances in the 1990s. The women characters in the *nautanki* performances are also sexually abused by their male colleagues from the group. Although this is not a new phenomenon in the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* theatre, it has increased with new concepts and scripts. As Atul Yadvansi and Javed Akhtar Khan explained a couple of times, the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* has adapted the idea of migration since the medieval period. The use of detailed descriptions about the marital conditions of the left-behind women and their households has been one of the important motifs of the songs and *nautankis* related to migration. On the other hand, there was no such discussion about the male migrants. The descriptions of the sexual desires of the left-behind have been traditionally used in the folksongs, showing the gendered character of the songs and other performances related to migration.³⁸

So, the gendered nature of the migration-related songs and performances is not new. According to Asha Singh, the father-in-law or brothers-in-law or any “handsome stranger” were the main culprits to fulfil the sexual desires of the left-behind women. Singh also mentioned that there were only a few women protagonists who wrote about the provocation and sexual torture from the family members and other male neighbours from the village.³⁹ The gendered nature of the migration-related folk got a new dimension after the insertion of video parlours and new trends in the Bhojpuri cinema, which started in the 1990s. The previous section of the article used an interview of playwright Javed Akhtar Khan who blamed the video parlours for turning Bhojpuri folk songs and theatres into sexual innuendos. Khan also said that the extensive projection of pornographic feature films compelled the playwrights and directors of the *nautanki* theatre to introduce seductive dialogues and dance items. Even ‘*nach*’ or seductive dance programmes was one of the popular performances in marriage ceremonies or any other functions and election rallies to attract more people. He also said that the *nach* performances had subsided in to the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances in the last couple of years at the annual Sonpur animal trade fare in Bihar. He did not blame the migration behind this decline but said that the problem began in the 1990s when the new migrant workers returned from their workplace and introduced new technologies such as video parlours, MMS and mobile videos in the later period in the villages.

Among many other new directors and producers of the new trends of *nautanki*, Guddu Rangeela and Rampad Harami are the two most prominent names. Both of them are involved in various *nautanki* theatres as the directors, actors and composers of songs and dance sequences. The use of seductive words in the dialogues especially by the women characters are common in the *natak/nautanki* performances. As said by Sweety, the stage name of Sita Kumharin of village Dudhpura in Samastipur, Bihar, who works as a co-actor in Rampad Harami’s group, most of the audiences of the present-day *nautanki* want erotic dance numbers rather than emotional dialogues. They take photos of the heroine and other dancing girls and pass dirty comments during the dance performances. She also said that she feels safe in the group because her male colleagues are good and behaved very gently with her. As Rampad Harami’s group is quite popular among the recent *nautanki* groups, Sweety earns a large amount of money. She sends this money to her parents in the village. She has an elder brother who worked at a construction site in Mumbai but is currently unemployed due to the recent pandemic. Sweety has also had no work in the past few months but her group paid

some money to fulfil her needs during the pandemic. Sweety does not consider the comments from the male audiences as an insult. She finds it normal.⁴⁰

The problem of the gendered nature of sexuality and the domination of male ideas between obscene and non-obscene is a standard problem in the masculinized vision of the *nautanki* theatres. Gulab bai, one of the icons of the *nautanki* theatres, was also a victim. She struggled all her life to find fame in the *nautanki* theatre. Abused and exploited since a young age, Gulab’s struggle was against the male members and partners and sometimes the patriarchal nature of the *nautanki* theatre. Later, she started her own company (The Great Gulab Theatre Company) and employed several male actors. But she also became critical of the attitudes of



Figure 5. Gulab Bai

(Picture courtesy

<https://images.app.goo.gl/NtD7sdwbnvX44ggp8>)

the new girls who came to the *nautanki* theatre. Though she was critical of the imposition of cinema scripts over the *nautanki* theatre and struggled all her life to coexist with cinema, she failed to

understand the changing times and taste that affected the *nautanki* theatre and blamed the new actresses for bringing illicitness in contemporary *nautanki* performances.⁴¹

Perhaps Gulab should not be blamed for her attitudes towards the new *natak* or *nautanki* actresses. The idea of illicitness related to sexuality was a set-up of the Victorian bourgeoisie in the early 19th century. The Victorian rules and regulations, codes and conducts been prepared to talk about obscene words and indecent behaviour to save the social order in the 19th century. Several places were built to practise so-called 'illegitimate' sexual practices. The concept of not only the open sexual practices but the writings, dialogues or acts as 'sin' is a kind of repression that was imposed by the bourgeoisie, who dominated the economy of the country as well as the colonies. The use of power mechanisms through censorship and permissions had been used to control desire.⁴² The establishment of the Society for the Suppression of Vice in England in the first phase of the early 19th century (1802) was a sign of the repressive power of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Demanding prohibition on blasphemous, licentious and obscene books and prints were one of the major activities of the society. However, the main intention was to control the low-wage working-class people who became a challenge for the new capitalist class as well as the institutional Christianity of 19th-century England. The priests and the other members of the English Church were anxious to control the expanding market of cheap books and prints popular among the labourers.⁴³ The projection of the dominating and gendered nature in the name of protecting the society, especially women, and maintaining purity was nothing but an impression of the patriarchal domination upon the poor and 'weaker' sections of the society.

A similar treatment was also taken in India to suppress subaltern popular literary and cultural activities. The *Dramatic Performance Act of 1876* was imposed to check popular folk performances in the name of obscenity. Several popular and street performances, which were the only medium of entertainment for the working class, had been banned by the colonial government. The colonial idea of civilized society had established its roots in the modern education system. The sense of chastity and obscenity in literature and audio-visual performances in the psyche of the 'concerned' Indian citizens had been defined by the predetermined training of the colonial education system. Therefore, most of the Bhojpuri *natak* and *nautanki* performances had their audiences in the villages or small towns. Most of the *nautanki* or *natak* companies were unaware of the changes that happened in society. The girls in the *nautanki* groups were tortured by the male members or sexually abused by the manager or owner of the groups or the zamindar clients but did not know any way out. Economic liberalization opened up opportunities for them. The new economic system created a new section of the audience with different tastes and attitudes; however, the basic structure of the power and patriarchy remained the same. Although a woman and a sufferer of her time, Gulab bai was also representative of the same patriarchal structure. That is why she blamed the actresses behind the decline of the traditional *nautanki* theatre.



Figure 6. *Launda Dance*
 (Picture courtesy: google photos
<https://images.app.goo.gl/RuJRMjyB3SU5EUthR7>)

Apart from the allegations of exploitation of the female actors in the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances, there is another category of actors who faced almost similar treatment like the women actress in the *nautanki* theatre. The effeminate male actors who sometimes played dance numbers in the *nautanki* or *natak* performances, were popularly known as *launda*. These transgender actors are traditionally engaged in several celebratory occasions in north India. Their dance is popular during marriage ceremonies, child-birth and several festivals like Holi, Diwali or Chhat in Bihar. The '*laundas*' or transgender persons are used for sexual pleasure by a certain group of people. These practices are undertaken secretly and behind the closed doors of landlords or moneylenders or political leaders. Though sometimes it becomes an

'open secret,' the condition of the '*laundas*' or male prostitutes remains the same. They never get recognition from the society because these kinds of homosexual practices have been considered as a sexual abnormality. The idea of considering homosexual practices as 'abnormality' was also a notion from the West. Sexuality, as we have discussed earlier in this paragraph, was a matter of secrecy in 19th-century England, has always been ruled by silence or sometimes part of an obligatory confession to different institutionalized practices like the church or other religious places, or psychiatrists or psychoanalysts in some cases.⁴⁴ The sense of censorship and silence about homosexual practices, which is also a product of the Victorian bourgeoisie in the late 19th century, came to India with the colonial rulers.

Rajkumar Das, popularly known as Mishtu among his friends in West Bengal and *Munna launda* among his clients in Bihar, blamed this virtual censorship behind the exploitation of effeminate male or transgender persons. He said that his colleagues could not lodge any complaint of sexual abuse at the local police stations because of lack of proof. He accused some of the political leaders in Bihar who were involved in this practice. He has also performed in several '*nach*' programmes at different occasions and some *nautanki* theatres in the Arrah, Patna and Gaya districts of Bihar during his teenage years. He said that most of the Bhojpuri *natak* performances where he acted as a *launda nach* performer took place in the densely populated areas or sometimes at the fairs. There were three different categories of audiences. The first section who bought high-price tickets sat in the chairs. The buyers of the middle-price tickets got the wooden benches to sit and the buyers of the lowest-price tickets sat on the ground. Though Das was not aware of the price range, he confirmed that most of them were poor labouring-class people of the locality.⁴⁵

Rajkumar Das gave some important information. The shopowners or small moneylenders and businessmen in the Burrabazar area of Kolkata also organized *launda* dance performances and performances of dance girls for their employees from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh during several festivals like Holi, Diwali, Chhat, etc. He enacted several performances. Das also got offers for dance performances from the Howrah, Kharagpur, Purulia and other traditional migrant labour belts in West Bengal. Most of his dances were usually on popular dance numbers of Hindi films but he also performed on Bhojpuri songs if the demand came from the audiences. He recently joined an NGO in Kolkata and is, therefore, unable to perform the *launda* dance frequently.⁴⁶

Atul Yadvansi criticized the present-day new *nautanki* or *natak* performances due to these kinds of obscene and anti-cultural elements. He said that the Bhojpuri *natak* performances by Rampad Harami and others were taking the opportunity to project their cheap performances as *nautanki*. The government of Uttar Pradesh once imposed amusement taxes upon the *nautanki* performances in the early 1990s. According to Yadvansi, that was the right step to prevent those rubbish performances. He is in favour of some censorship to prevent the ‘purity’ of traditional *nautanki* theatre. Atul Yadvansi expressed his concern about the bad phases of *nautanki* theatre or the Bhojpuri *natak* groups due to the recent pandemic. He said this would create another form of entertainment which may affect the *nautanki* theatres badly, and the performances would deteriorate to a new low.⁴⁷

The Role of State Censorship and Recent Pandemic Behind the Transformation of the Taste in *Nautanki* Performances

Several attempts had been taken by different cultural groups to revive the lost glory of the *nautanki* theatre. Atul Yadvansi was one of them. He began his career as a side actor and later took a pioneering role to revive the *nautanki*. He modified several famous *nautanki* theatres such as Sultana Daku and Amar Singh Rathore, to make them fit for present-day audiences. Apart from modifying old *nautankis*, Yadvansi also wrote several new plays based on contemporary social and political issues. According to him, those plays were also popular among the people and were performed in all the big cities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar along with several other megacities. Yadvansi won several awards and fellowships and offered classes at several national and other state-based institutions.

Apart from enthusiasm, Yadvansi’s idea of the revival is constructed by one kind of class consciousness in cultural practices. Although as per the telephonic interview, it does not look like he intentionally tried to exclude the poor labouring class from their right to entertain themselves but blaming the migrants behind the decline in the standard of the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* theatre is one kind of exclusion. The current development was by the actors and playwrights who tried to provide entertainment for a certain class of people who were unaware of the tradition. Therefore, they tried to incorporate erotic dance numbers, forcefully include the *launda* dance programme and modified scripts according to the popular Hindi films. Umashankar Sahu, the writer of the play *Mai*, said that Hindi films also adapted several storylines from the Bhojpuri and Hindi stories and incidents. He thinks that it is a cultural exchange (he used the word ‘*sanskritik adan-pradan*’), and it would benefit both the cultures. Sahu does not deny using the concept of Hindi popular films in *nautanki* performances. He said that the *natak* companies are dependent on popular demands. The government never gives any subsidy so they are compelled to earn more money to run and maintain a big group. Most of the groups never include erotic songs, dialogues or dance sequences abruptly, without any demands from the script. There are very few groups who use the *launda* dance in the *nautanki* performances. However, Sahu accepted that such demands have increased since the last ten or twenty years. Though he is not able to tell whether there is any impact on migration, as an inhabitant of Rampur Kothi village of Siwan district, Bihar, Sahu accepted the fact that migration changed the socioeconomic structure of the village. Political parties, landowners and local moneylenders give priorities to the migrants. Those who migrated to the southern states (Kerala and Karnataka, to be precise) and some foreign countries (mostly the Gulf countries) started bringing video cassette players and video cassettes to the village. These activities by a section of the migrants changed the cultural taste of the entire region.⁴⁸

Sahu's perception is true. As per the data on overseas migration available from the Government of India, the number of migrants has increased from 36,493 in 2006 to 150,000 in 2017.⁴⁹ The data also said that most of the abroad-going migrants are limited to a handful of districts including Gopalganj, Siwan, Madhubani and Purnia.⁵⁰ Another survey on the migrants showed that the trends of migrating abroad are common among the Scheduled Castes, Muslims and Other Backward Castes.⁵¹ The same report also indicated an improvement in the financial condition of these communities due to migration.⁵²

Economic liberalization created opportunities to encounter new socio-economic dimensions in the villages of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Caste relations in the villages slightly changed, with some differences. These changes affected popular cultural performances such as *nautanki*, *natak* or dance programmes. Apart from the financial uplift of the 'lower-caste' communities due to migration, the uprising of Dalit-Bahujan and other backward caste-based politics in the 1990s also changed the caste composition in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The decline of the "historical traditional caste system" and the emergence of new cultural community or *samaj* as described by Balmurli Natrajan are helping establish a parallel cultural identity on their own.⁵³ Migration, to some extent, helped them build this identity.

The recent pandemic, however, raised a few questions on the sustainability of such cultural performances. The recent rules for social distancing, along with several other restrictions on organising performances, created a difficult situation. As Rajkumar Das and Sita Kumharin (aka Sweety) said earlier, the pandemic confined them to their houses. Although Rajkumar has a job in Kolkata and Sweety gets some financial help from her group, most of their close acquaintances do not get anything for months. Umashankar Sahu and Atul Yadvansi also accepted the fact that the *nautanki* performers are in a crisis. Their crisis became graver with the growing attraction for watching films and videos on smart phones. In a recent report in one of the e-papers, Nitish Kumar accused the web-based channels of erotic content that became popular among the poorer classes and caused an increase in the rate of sexual violence all over the state.⁵⁴ Several complaints came for one particular web series on a particular web-based channel from the NGOs working on women rights in Bihar. They said that the male members of the family unnecessarily spent more to buy data packs for watching those web series.⁵⁵ As per reports, the business of these particular web-based channels was increased up to 110 percent during the lockdown.⁵⁶ This news shows a change in the cultural taste of the working class (migrants or local), which may signal the end of the open-stage *nautanki* performances.

Conclusion

The increasing use of mobile phones to watch web series clearly shows one thing: the pleasure of watching has become more and more personal among the middle and lower middle-income groups (some of them migrants) all over India. This would increase the notion of the 'personal space' and reduce the need to share the joy of viewing something with friends, family members or other acquaintances. That would automatically reduce the demand of community-based cultural performances like the *nautanki*, *launda* dance and others. Apart from that, the absence of strict censorship rules on web-based platforms gives a free hand to the owners of the web-based platforms to produce more web series with erotic content. However, the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* or *nach* performances cannot not compare with the web-based channels.

Apart from the increasing demand for personal space, the transformation of the public sphere brings changes in the sociocultural scenario all over India. The institutions of the Hindi

political sphere, as described by Francesca Orsini, were based on strong nationalist ideas.⁵⁷ The idea created a section of strong reformist intellectuals who brought the concept of traditionalism in popular performances to use in the nationalist movements. The involvement of *nautanki* performances in the nationalist movement in Allahabad, Kanpur and other places in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh happened because of the political and financial influence of nationalist elites. This political scenario changed in the 1990s with the advent of caste-based vote bank politics. The emergence of regional political parties took the populist path to engage their supporters indifferent political movements. They used the Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* theatres to entertain their supporters while assembling them for political rallies. The larger cause to engage people with a particular political goal has gone. However, it gives independence to *natak* or *nautanki* companies. They perform for money and nothing else. Sometimes, the governments took initiatives to promote cultural icons from the *nautanki* and Bhojpuri *natak* traditions to attract the Bhojpuri community for an electoral cause. The announcement of a full-length feature film on Bhojpuri cultural icon Bhikhari Thakur that was patronized by the Bihar government may be a good example.⁵⁸ The film was never completed.

The Bhojpuri *natak* or *nautanki* performances survived due to their acceptance and adaptation of changes in both social and technical sectors. The idea of Indian bourgeois nationalism and its training of the indigenous community influenced the character of the performance but never tried to change its basic characteristics. The use of Bhojpuri language and the effort to keep the sociocultural structure of that region in the modern Bhojpuri *nataks* or *nautankis* helped it remain alive. The gaps or discrepancies between the rural, semi-urban and urban areas have also gone in favour of the *nautanki*. Increasing trends of migration might bring some money in the rural areas but it did not develop the basic infrastructure (electricity or internet services) like in any of the big cities. Therefore, the *nautanki* became their only entertainment for many years. Migration brought new ideas from popular Hindi films but could not give access to all the forms of entertainment that a person in the city already had. We can say that the *nautanki/natak*, *nach* and *launda nach* performances are the only source of popular entertainment.

Therefore, it can be said that the *nautanki* or *natak* performances challenged the social structure of the modern nation-state which, according to D.R. Nagraj are “megalo-narratives”⁵⁹. The narrative, built by the hegemonic classes and challenged by the Dalit or lower-caste-based politics, began in the 1990s. As the result of the trend, Rampad Harami became more popular than the traditional *nautanki* performers.

However, it has not been clear whether it would survive after the pandemic or not. The transformation of cultural practices has a close relation with migration and we hope that the *nautanki* or Bhojpuri *natak* traditions will transform with the trends of migration after the pandemic. If not, it will turn to history.

Notes

¹ Bhojpur Region: The Bhojpur region in India is an area of approximately 59,003.82 sq km. It includes the western districts of Bihar (28,192.82 sq km.) and eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh (30,811 sq.km.). Presently, one district of Bihar is named Bhojpur. Arrah is the district headquarters of that district. The region named after the kingdom of Bhojpur approximately in 605 A.D. For more details, please see Rajiva Nain Prasad, *The History of Bhojpur*, 1987. The proposed research refers to the Bhojpuri districts of Bihar.

²Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki theatres of North India*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 12.

³Satyendra Kumar, *Badalta Gaon Badalta Debaat*(New Delhi: OUP, 2018), 3–12.

⁴Deepti Priya Malhotra, *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2006), 266.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid, 289.

⁷An interview with Atul Yadvasi, noted actor and director of *nautanki* theatre. Atul is from Allahabad and the interview was taken on August 22, 2020 at 8.35p.m.

⁸Ram Bujhawan Singh, ed., *Bhikhari Thakur Rachanavali* (Patna, Bihar: Rashtrabhasa Parishad, 2015), 25. Translation mine.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India*(New Delhi: OUP, 2019), 160–61.

¹²Sanjay Kumar Singh, *Bhojpuri Lok-Samskriti ebaN Hindustani Sangeet* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2010), 66–67.

¹³Sharmila Rege, “Conceptualising Popular Culture: ‘Lavani’ and ‘Powada’ in Maharashtra,” *Economic and Political Weekly*(2002): 1,038–39.

¹⁴Hansen, op.cit, 16-17 and Singh, op.cit, 66–67.

¹⁵ Bhumihar: The Bhumihars were a prominent land-owning group of eastern India until the twentieth century, and controlled some small princely states and zamindari estates in the region. The Bhumihar community played an important role in the peasant movements of India, and was highly influential in politics of Bihar in the twentieth century. It derives from the word *bhoomi* (land), referring to the caste’s landowner status. The term *Bhumihar Brahmin* was adopted by the community in the late nineteenth century to emphasize their claim of belonging to the priestly Brahmin class. The alternate name ‘Babhan’ has been described as a distorted colloquial term for ‘Brahmin’. Bhumihar women do not inherit family property. Inter-community marital alliances are prohibited. Polygamy is practised if the spouse fails to produce a child. To know more, please visit K.S. Singh, ed., *The People of India: Bihar*, 66,part 1, (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India & Seagull Books, 2008),170–73.

¹⁶Dusadh: The Dusadhs are generally agricultural labourers. They belong to the category of scheduled castes. They worked as the palanquin carriers in the colonial period. The members of this community maintained caste-based restrictions. They do not accept food and ration from the Doms and Muslims. On the other hand, Dusadhs also cannot participate or make relations (marital or other) with the higher-caste people like Brahmans and Bhumihars. To know more about Dusadhs see, *ibid*,304–06.

¹⁷Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2001), 23–25.

¹⁸Ibid,94–95.

¹⁹ibid,97–98.

²⁰ibid, 111.

²¹Ajeevika Bureau and TISS Patna Centre, *Draft Policy Framework for Improving the Conditions of Labour Migrants from Bihar*, 4–5. October 12, 2017.

²²ibid.

²³An interview with Javed Akhtar Khan, Professor of Hindi Literature and Director Natmandap Theatre Group, Patna. July 12, 2020 at 12.59p.m.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Manoj Kumar Singh-Bhabuk, “Bhojpuri *Natak* ka Safar” in *Chhayanat*, no. 91 (2000): 73–74.

²⁶ibid.

²⁷Sinivas Mishra, *Kehu na Hamar*(Patna: Bhojpuri Academy, 1963), 1–2 and 12–14.

²⁸B.S. Tiwari, *Bekar Bhail Kail Dbail*(Patna: Narayan and Co., 1995), 18–19.

²⁹Ibid, 13, translation mine.

³⁰Brahma Prakash, op.cit.152–55.

³¹Kapil Pandeya, *Ehe Ha Samaj*(Patna: Narayan and Co, n.d.), 16–17 and 18–25.

³²Umashankar Sahu, *Mai*(Patna: Narayan Book Depot Pvt. Ltd., n.d.), 1.

³³Ibid,38-39.

³⁴Rege, op.cit.,1,041 and 1,043.

- ³⁵Dhananjay Singh, *Prabhasan ke Lok Sanskriti Mein Stri ki Chhavi*, Patna: Tata Institute of Social Sciences-Patna Centre, (June 2017): 24.
- ³⁶Malhotra, opcit. 270–72.
- ³⁷Ibid.
- ³⁸Asha Singh, “Of Women by men: Understanding the “First Person Feminine” in Bhojpuri folksongs”, *Sociological Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (2015): 174–76.
- ³⁹Singh, ibid, 175.
- ⁴⁰An interview with Sita Kumharin aka Sweety, a *Nautanki* actress from Dudhpura Village, Samastipur, Bihar. Interview date 1.09.2020 at 2.48p.m.
- ⁴¹Malhotra, opcit, 230–31.
- ⁴²Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: The will to knowledge*(London, Penguin Books, 1990),3–13.
- ⁴³M.J.D. Roberts, “The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its Early Critics, 1802-1812”, *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 1 (1983): 160–61.
- ⁴⁴Michael Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College of France 1974-75*(New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2010), 167–72.
- ⁴⁵An interview with Rajkumar Das aka Mishtu, current secretary Balaram Dey Street Anandam, Kolkata and performer of several *launda* dance performances. September 11, 2020 at 5.00p.m. at their Kadapara office.
- ⁴⁶Ibid.
- ⁴⁷Interview with Atul Yadvansi.
- ⁴⁸An interview with Umashankar Sahu, a thespian and writer of several modern *nautanki* theatre dramas. September 16, 2020 at 11.53a.m.
- ⁴⁹*The Telegraph*, accessed on September 11, 2020, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/bihar/state-2nd-in-labour-migration/cid/1366177>.
- ⁵⁰Ibid.
- ⁵¹Priya Deshingkar, Sushil Kumar, Harendra Kumar Chobey and Dhananjay Kumar, *The Role of Migration and Remittances in Promoting Livelihoods in Bihar* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2006),11.
- ⁵²Ibid, 4.
- ⁵³Balmurli Natrajan, *The Culturalization of Caste in India: Identity and inequality in a multicultural age*(London: Routledge, 2013),10–11 and 26–27.
- ⁵⁴“OTT platforms in India,” *Times Now*, accessed on 12 September, 2020,<https://www.timesnownews.com/columns/article/ott-platforms-in-india-bollywood-ott-content/613558>.
- ⁵⁵Ibid.
- ⁵⁶Desikaran, Aparna, “OTT platforms see increased viewership and new sign ups,”*Times of India*, July 27, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/ott-platforms-see-increased-viewership-and-new-sign-ups/articleshow/74739107.cms>
- ⁵⁷Francesca Orsini, “The Hindi Political Sphere” in Arvind Rajagopal, ed., *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History*(New Delhi: OUP, 2009), 121–34.
- ⁵⁸*Hindustan*, February 16, 2005.
- ⁵⁹“megalo narratives”: D. R. Nagraj pointed out four types megalo-narratives built by the hegemonic classes in India. They are: “one, a totalistic political organization called the nation-state; two, the knowledge system of technoscience; three, the ideal form of social life, namely, westernized secularism; four and most powerful — the utopia of linear progress and development.” All are representative institutions of the project of modernity. To know more see, the introduction by D.R. Nagraj in Ashis Nandy, *Exiled at Home* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005),xii–xiii.

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