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Indentured Labourers and Cultural Diaspora: Exploring Folk Music and Food of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: The several readings on Indentured Labourers in the diasporic world of Malaysia and Mauritius have given a brief idea of the families from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh who have contributed to an international cultural identity to Folk Music like Sohar and Chhattha Geet, and Folk Food like Thekua, along with everlasting cultural memories of these regions. The group of such Indentured Labourers formed different communities, such as the Bhojpuri-speaking community in foreign lands like Mauritius, to establish institutions that protect the Bhojpuri language and culture and to create a new transcultural relation. A similar transcultural relationship can be observed in the diasporic world of Fiji, Guyana, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and many others, as indentured labourers from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh migrated to these host lands as well. Hence, the proposed paper shall trace the history of the Diaspora and the formation of diasporic cultural identity in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh through cultural forms such as music and food.

Keywords: Folk Food (Litti Chokha, Thekua, Anarsa), Folk Music (Sohar, Chhattha Geet), Cultural Diaspora, International Cultural Identity, Cultural Memories, transcultural relations.

Introduction

“Ka Khaun, Ka Piyun, ka leke Pardes Jaun?” (Tiwari, 00:01:08- 00:01:13)

What shall I eat, what shall I drink, and what shall I take away with me? (translated by me)

The above words have been taken from one of the most famous folk tales passed down through generations in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh as part of the oral tradition in Bhojpuri. This folk tale is a unique tale that is both half-narrated and half-sung to a child by its mother. It is done in order to fulfill its desire of listening to a tale during its bedtime. The tale is not only a source of entertainment for children from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, but also a source of enlightenment about the inhumane and ironic governing system in the regions mentioned above. Many such oral traditions like

“Hasat Khelat hamar Babu Gaile; Mann bedil kahe Aile?” (Paanday, 00:00:01- 00:00:04)

Laughing and playing, my child has gone, but why has he arrived in rhapsodic mood? (translated by me)
or

“Jaisan bakri k Ponch Waisan Mama K Monchh, Mama hali hali...” (Anajli, 00:00:04- 00:00:09)

Like Goat’s tail is your moustache, O Uncle, do it at the earliest... (translated by me)

and many more have occupied a cultural space in the lives of People belonging to Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the regions of India which are still remembered for being the origin of many such oral traditions like Sohar (A collection of folk Songs sung by Bhojpuri speakers to celebrate both life cycle of newly born babies and preparations of marriage); Tales of Shiva Charcha (A collection of folk songs and tales related to Lord Shiva); Bidesia or Purbi (A collection of songs sung by women whose husbands have migrated to other town or country for earning a good living for their family) and Chhattha Geet (A collection of Chhattha Folk Songs transferred orally from one generation to other). The vastness and elegance of these oral traditions are preserved by passing them down orally to future generations rather than sealing them in Museums as national treasures. Since the time of its creation, the passing of these oral traditions has been encouraging us to live with an understanding of our own aesthetic and vibrant cultural paradigms in the diasporic world, a world of the host lands where people have traumatically migrated with their collective memory and myth from their original homeland. Hence, it is found that, with the transfer of these oral traditions, the people from the said regions live with a blend of traditional and modern cultural identities on the diasporic platform of the global world. These diasporic platforms, as host land countries like Malaysia, Mauritius, Indonesia, Australia, and the list to be continued, in the global world are highly enriched with the diaspora of folks from Western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the regions to which Dr Rai has collectively referred as Poorvanchal based on Cultural identity. Dr Rai writes in the Introduction chapter of his book, “Poorvanchal is a sub- region of the total Bhojpuri region of India. Politically, it strictly refers to 28 districts in the Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. Culturally, it refers to a specific Bhojpuri- speaking belt comprising Eastern U.P. and some parts of Western Bihar.” (Dr. Amod, p.6)

Folk Song Culture of Bidesia

The Bhojpuri oral traditions of Sohar, Gaari (lighthearted, and sometimes crude folk songs are sung to insult the groom’s family in a playful manner), Vivah Geet (collection of both Sohar and Gaari), Bidesia, and Chhattha Geet have not only been transcended in other regions of India like Delhi, Bengal, Maharashtra, Bangalore and many more, but also surpassed the national frontiers of Malaysia, Mauritius, Indonesia, Australia and many

more. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we can find not only traces of mythic location, history, and achievements, but also a long-lasting, strong ethnic group consciousness. The traces of such idealization can be found in the Bidesia culture of folk songs in Fiji, through which the pain of those Bhojpuri indentured labourers emerges who have been forcefully taken away to the foreign lands of Fiji, Trinidad and other countries as per the norms of the Girit System. In the Bhojpuri-speaking community, the folk culture of Bidesia includes songs that portray the way of recalling males who are migrating for better earnings and females who are migrating mostly because of their marriages. In this folk song culture, there is a vibrant expression of both separations of pain and many aspects of complaint, like why the migrant husband took so much time to meet his beloved wife or what happened to her while he was far away from his homeland. One such complaint can be read in the following dialogue exchanged between a migrant husband and a lonely wife.

“Kahe dhani angawa ke paatar ho ram

Kahe dhani chowkathiya dhaile jhuruvas ho ram

Toharo je maiya prabhu ho awari chhinariya ho

Tauli naapiye telwa dihalan ho ram

Toharo bahiniya prabhu ho awari chhinariya ho

Loiye ganiye hathwa ke dihalan ho ram

[Husband: Why do you look so thin, dear wife?

Why do you look so sad, standing at the doorway, dear wife?

Wife: Oh husband! Your mother is such a bitch

She gives me only a few drops of oil

Oh husband! Your sister is such a bitch

She gives me some flour to cook].” (Singh, 153)

Geet Gawai Culture and UNESCO

The traces of a similar idealization can also be observed in the Vivah Geet or Geet Gawai Culture (the inscription of which was included on the 2016, Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, an initiative of UNESCO), a culture that is popularized in Mauritius by the diasporic Bhojpuri-speaking indentured labourers whose numbers had increased from 75 in 1834 to 28,000 in 1838. The population of Indians had increased to two-thirds of the total in the Sugar Estates of Mauritius by 1871, a proportion that has been maintained in

contemporary times. However, the new generation of contemporary times was moving far away from their cultural roots and adopting Western culture in the name of modernizing themselves; only after realizing this did the Bhojpuri-speaking community successfully establish the Mauritius Bhojpuri Institute in 1982. The efforts of Bhojpuri Girmitiyas in Mauritius have contributed to a new cultural identity to Bhojpuri folk songs included in Geet Gawai. The Culture of Geet Gawai is a traditional practice that takes place at the home of the bride and groom and involves family members and neighbours. This cultural practice has been celebrated by Bhojpuri-speaking people (mostly in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh). This practice includes the worship of the ancestral God and forefathers and begins with five married women who share the same ancestors. These women sort items like turmeric, rice, grass, and money leaves in a piece of cloth and offer them to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and forefathers; meanwhile, other participants sing songs in order to honour them. The lines of one such song are quoted below, which is sung in order to invite all the deities and forefathers.

“Hardi k rangal chitthi, Nevta patai la
Hardi k rangal chitthi, Nevta patai la
Dehila Purkha log k Haathji
Dehila Babaji k Haathji
Pitra Nevati la Haathji...” (Pitar Nevtai Geet, 00:00:01- 00:00:30)
A letter coloured with turmeric is handovered
A letter coloured with turmeric is handovered
A letter is handovered to Ancestors
A letter is handovered to Forefathers
Forefathers are invited wholeheartedly... (translated by me)

Chhattha Geet Traditions in Malaysia

The cultural diaspora of another version of Bhojpuri folk songs can also be observed in the lines of an article edited by Aradhana Takhtani and published in Times of India dated Nov 9, 2024. She writes,

“Celebrated singer and now former doyen of Bhojpuri devotional and folk music, Sharada Sinha’s ‘Deenanath Ho’, ringing in the air, rangolis, diyas and flowers decorating the ‘puja sthan’, colourful canopies, women in all their finery wearing the traditional orange vermillion and men carrying the ‘daala’ on their heads,

lend a perfect backdrop to the Chhath festivities and prayers observed in Geeta Ashram Mandir in Kuala Lumpur on Friday.” (Takhtani)

With the cultural festival of Chhattha, the folk songs associated with the festival have also migrated to these host lands of the cultural diaspora. The lines of such folk songs are like

“Kanch hi baans ki behangiya

Behangi lachkat jaaye,

Hoyi na Balamji Kahariya,

Behangi Ghate Pahuchaye...” (Paudwal, 00:00:32- 00:00:57)

The Bamboo basket of raw bamboo,

The Bamboo basket sways

O husband! There wouldn't be any basket-carrying people,

Sway this basket on your head to the shore of River Ganges...) (translated by me)

The traces of such vibrant oral traditions from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh in the diasporic world of Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, Malaysia, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and many more clearly signify that these oral traditions have not only migrated to other parts of the nation, but with the migrating Indentured Labourers, they also travelled to foreign lands. The carrying away of these oral traditions from the native lands of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar to foreign lands was successfully achieved because of qualities such as simple structure and ease of singing, which are characteristic of these oral traditions in Bhojpuri literature. Also, because of its less written literary material, “it is directly related with folk and thus find easy dissemination and recognition in the hinterland of Indian society and is at an arm's length from urban society.” (Dr. Amod, p.17.)

Transcultural Food Recipes in Mauritius

The international cultural identity of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh in the diasporic world is defined not only by its vastness in folk music but also by its long-standing food culture, which includes a variety of items such as Curry and Rice, Litti-Chokha, Dal-Puri, Sattu, Thekua, Anarsa, and many more. The indentured labourers migrated to several host lands, acting as a catalyst not only for the transference of folk music but also for many other artefacts, including food recipes. Thus, the traditional tastes and cultural memories associated with cuisines from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh are spread across the geographical boundaries of Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad

and Tobago, Malaysia, and many other host lands. Like the Geet Gawai folk culture, the Bhojpuri folks in Mauritius have also preserved the traditional taste (as better as they could) and cultural memories of Bihar cuisines. A similar taste of Dal Puri (Lentil-stuffed flatbread) can be observed in the Mauritius Dhol Puri, which is considered the National dish of Mauritius, blending the taste of Bihar's traditional Dal Puri with Bean Curry as its filling. The entire process of bringing the traditional food recipes and ingredients of one nation and then adapting them to local availability and tastes to enrich that nation's food culture is essentially an interaction between the food cultures of two different nations. Such interactions of food culture are transcultural in nature. These transcultural interactions in food culture are creative on the diasporic platform; hence, with tolerance for pluralism, a multicultural life with an enriched art of living in host countries is possible. In this way, the cultural diaspora of food from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh has been enriched on the diasporic land of Mauritius with many different tastes like those in the National dish of Mauritius. These tastes even include the Mauritian snack Baijas, which have evolved from the Bhajia of Bihar, which are actually deep-fried fritters. Achads or Mauritian pickles and Mauritian Parathas also have a similar taste to the modified versions of Achars (Indian Pickles) and Indian Parathas, respectively.

Feasting Traditions of Chhattha in Malaysia

The transcultural food recipes from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh are also popularised on the diasporic platform of Malaysia, as they were popularised on the lands of Mauritius. However, due to the migration of a huge number of Tamil and Telugu folks as Girmitiyas, a number of South Indian Cuisines were included in the Culinary Culture of Malaysia; however, the people of Kualalampur, Malaysia (a region in Malaysia where the Bhojpuri-speaking community resides), as mentioned above, celebrate Chhattha, which is the greatest folk festival of Bihar. And while celebrating the Chhattha festival, they recall the cultural memories of the similar taste and traditional food culture of Chhattha Prasad in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. These culinary cultural memories of Chhattha Prasad can be observed as folk food of such regions in Malaysia which includes dishes like Rasiyao (a porridge made up of rice, jaggery and water) Lauki- Bhaat (A combination of food which consists of rice and vegetable of gourd as its main ingredient), Thekua (a sweet biscuit that is traditionally made up of wheat flour, butter- ghee and jaggery), and kachauni (a kind of sweet laddu made up of rice as the main ingredient and a tasteful amount of butter ghee and jaggery). So, indubitably, such cuisines of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, with rich descriptions of food and feasting traditions, can easily be found in this region of Malaysia.

Traditional Wedding Food as Bridging Catalyst

The traditional wedding rituals from the said regions are not only famous in Mauritius but also in Fiji and other countries that have been a host land for diasporic people from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. These wedding ceremonies included Matkor, Haldi, Telwaan, Bhatwaan, and shaadi, in which the relatives and invited guests are offered traditional food like phulouri- bhaat (a food combination including rice and a kind of curry prepared with fritters made up of urad dal or white lentils), and many more traditional items like Dal- Puri and Kheer or sweet porridge. Such combinations of food are prepared not only for the family members and invited guests who accompany the bride and the groom, symbolizing the strength and power of their family tree respectively, but also for the invited forefathers without whose blessings a marriage in the culture of India mostly in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh is incomplete. These combinations of food in the marriage culture of India have been playing an important role in bridging a bond of love and togetherness of a family with both living and heavenly ancestors and every other family member belonging to the same family tree. This bond of love and togetherness is brought together to show power and strength before the families of the opposing sides, who gather in one place at an event full of traditional rituals and sweet battles, as one can witness in the Gari culture. This is why folk food is referred to as the bridge in wedding rituals in India, especially in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. This sweet journey of connecting families with traditional food culture is well observed in diasporic communities, where people from India with diverse cultures and identities are being united. The unification of Indians with different cultural identities can be well observed while reading *On the other side of the Midnight: A Fijian Journey*, *House for Mr. Biswas*, and many such works written by diasporic writers like Brij V Lal, V. S. Naipaul and many more. In fact, the introduction of such migrated folk foods throughout the host lands of the diasporic world has hyphenated and blended the cultures and traditions of Indian people (mostly from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh), with a number of cultures and traditions existing in those host lands of the diasporic world. This bridging food culture of the migrated foods let us observe the food festivals and celebrations of the World Street Food Congress in the countries like Philippines and Singapore, where the Food Congress have marked Litti Chokha and Litti Chicken (non-veg counter version of Litti Chokha) as the culinary cultural identity of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh folks who migrated to other countries not only as Girmitiyas during colonial rule, but also as individuals for better opportunities in present times of their survival.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, folk songs and folk food of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh are like the universal mind and soul of the people who once, with different ethnic cultures, resided in these regions, and hence, by just introducing their songs and food, they easily blended like a homogenous mixture with different cultures and traditions of the host lands in the diasporic world. The inclusion of such food culture of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh on a global platform in the diasporic culture is what Robin Cohen in his essay, stated as “The possibility of a distinctive yet creative and enriching life in a host of countries with a tolerance of pluralism.” (Cohen)

This concept of pluralism holds a collective memory of folks from both homeland and host land, fostering a cultural identity beyond nationalism.

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