

**SUBALTERN ARTICULATION OF ASPIRATIONS :  
EXAMINING THE BIDESIA DANCE-DRAMA  
FORM OF THE BHOJPURI REGION**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the Degree of  
**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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DECLARATION

Certified that this dissertation entitled "SUBALTERN ARTICULATION OF ASPIRATIONS: EXAMINING THE BIDESIA DANCE-DRAMA FORM OF THE BHOJPURI REGION", submitted by Mr. Chandra Shekhar Prasad in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. This is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began my career in Jawaharlal Nehru University, entering the University as an M.Phil. student, a year had already passed by waiting for the belated M.A. examination results from Bihar. This waiting for 'Godot' had been tumultuous - in mind and body. Snailing my way to this end, when I can hold my M.Phil. dissertation, couldn't have been possible without the constant passive support of one person. Not to dishonour my relationship with this man, I will not name him.

Then came another person at the fag end of this 'longue duree'. My thanks to him for he constantly disengaged me from digressive engagements I often had with this text.

I can't help recall many others - friends, foes and people (problematically located in between) - who made me aware of what life and academics is all about. Thanks to them as well.

In the end of course, I feel gratified by Dr. Kiran Saxena's, at times harsh and soft, comments on my work and its pace. Thanking her formally would be too small a word.

Coming to the most crucial part, it is hard to believe Mr. Om Prakash. But for him, written words wouldn't have been type-set. My thanks to him as well.

**CHANDRA SHEKHAR**

## INTRODUCTION

While going through various texts on Saran District in Bihar, right from popular writings to social scientific works in history which are more empirical in nature, one is struck by two remarkable omissions. First, the virtual absence of a historiography of peasant protest in Saran and related to this, second, the absence of any large scale organised mobilization of the peasantry in this District.

The history of the erstwhile Saran District seems, therefore, in the light of the above observations, to be one of a historical community where social tension and conflicts seemed not to coalesce and aggregate but get dissipated. There is hardly any empirical evidence contrary to this for in the colonial period there never seemed to have been a binary opposition between contending social forces, in a pure political sense.

In populist historiography, Saran district is represented by the stereotypic images of its migrants who as despairing, nostalgic people did little more than sing a few songs of lament and separation. As for politico-historical writing, apart from mentioning a few engagements of Swami

Sahjanand Saraswati and Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan with the Saran peasantry, there has hardly been an indepth analysis of the social dynamics of this society with its particularities, whether socio-cultural, economic or political. It is here that a need was felt to change the tools of cognition and analysis and look at the Saran society (mostly during the interwar period) through a particular cultural form known as bidesia.

The choice of the topic is determined by various factors. First and foremost, its choice is the outcome of an enhanced interest in popular culture as 'protest' as it has gradually been constructed as a way of life. "At its most extensive, 'culture' can embrace ways of working, leisure, family life, all of arts, religion, politics and learning - virtually everything which makes human life human."<sup>1</sup> This method, partially promised to look at the somewhat fuzzy dynamics of Saran compared to other adjoining regions. Secondly, the absence of any interest on the part of social scientists to work on a historiography of Saran became clear when the adjoining regions got slowly appropriated in academic writings. To the west of Saran, Sandria

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1. Michael Mullett, Popular Culture and Popular Protest in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Croom Helm, New York, 1987, p.7.

Freitag and Nita Kumar wrote two books on Banaras, Oudh lying further West got a central place in historiography of colonial India. Within Bihar Bhojpur became an interesting focal point for academics with Veer Kunwar Singh being almost revered. Gandhi's Champaran satyagraha drew various contending writings on the northern neighbour of Saran. Anand A. Yang's book on Saran in 1992 is what looked like a belated effort to resurrect this region and its history. But this book too does not break the ice. It goes on to describe the zamindari of Hathua raj (primarily) and deduces conclusions from migration which are more a part of political economy of Saran rather than a socio-cultural construct in this Bhojpuri speaking region.

The more pertinent question that kept on lingering in my mind was, as to why Saran did not become part of any seminal work either in history or in other writings. Was this fact a <sup>^</sup>confirmation of my assumption that it hardly had anything exciting to offer as it had neither the great peasant mobilizations which occurred in other regions during colonial period (under the aegies of the All India Kisan Sabha), nor did it have an instance of a millerianic rebellion, nor could it offer the excitement of a Telangana or Tebhaga organised under the red flag. It is here that my hypothesis, regarding the 'self-regulating' mechanism of



social conflicts in Saran society, took shape. But an explanation of this phenomenon always edged on a deterministic approach, in order to get an answer as to how this 'silence' could be possible.

One plausible hypothesis seemed to be the absence of big zamindaris and a large number of middle peasantry that led to 'conflict avoidance'. At times, the relatively small number of 'dalits' and an almost equal number of upper caste and lower caste members seemed to provide the clue. But then, given the language and metaphors of interaction in present day Saran the afroresaid enumeration seemed problematic. (The question then was, how could an exploitative form either through language or social interaction - sustain itself,) given this particular demography. Was it 'avoidance protest' at work with a large number of workforce falling in the category of seasonal migrants and who through the 'money order economy' were able to stand up to absolute exploitation.

With all these contending social constructs in mind, Saran then seemed to be a very exceptional area of study. In the dissertation, therefore, though the scope for any elaborate conceptualisation seems an impossibility; I have tried to construct the dynamics of this region, in its

particularities through a cultural form - the bidesia tradition of dance-drama. The method has been to look underneath the surface of this genre locating it in a particular socio-economic milieu and then going for a dense reading of the interaction between popular semantics and popular culture. This method promises to elaborate the role of popular participation in the process of making history.

In the conventional sense bidesia may not be formalised as politics. But like all other terms used in social sciences viz. secularism, nationalism, feudalism etc.,<sup>1</sup> the term politics adopted to explain the engagements and disengagements of a peasant society with its surroundings during colonial times, through a cultural form, can be given space within a new discourse - cultural politics.

The above introduction thus makes it pertinent that the notion of culture be examined. And this examination from a political perspective means looking for its carriers (people of the lower orders) not merely as part of a community, but as parts with conflicting interests reflected in their differential engagements 'within' and 'outside'. This

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1. On the inherently contested and contestable nature of concepts in political discourse, see William M. Connolly, The Terms of Political Discourse, D.C. Heath, Lexington, 1974.

entails placing *Bidesia* in the realm of popular culture for it was in vogue among the popular classes which were its actors and audience as well.

## CHAPTER I

### DEFINITION OF POPULAR CULTURE AND ITS NUANCES IN THE BHOJPURI SPEAKING REGION

#### Section I: Definition of Culture: Popular

Conceptually speaking, the term culture carries an interesting semantic ambiguity. On the one hand it connotes the "totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behaviour of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups."<sup>1</sup> Even this anthropological conception of culture is far from univocal as evident, for instance, in the different nature of emphasis in the works of British and American anthropologists. To put the matter schematically, while the former try to locate the notion of culture in social institutions, the latter ground it in social processes outside institutions.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Franz Boas, The Mind of Primitive Man, New York, revised edition, 1938, p.159.
  2. Refer to Peter Burke, History and Social Theory, Polity Press, U.K., 1992.

Definitions of culture, by now, have been accepted as a contestatory domain. Moreover when a tendency in social sciences has increased to spread its scope of inquiry, culture becomes also an ideological construct. It is not merely passive reflexes of a society but an active component which also acts upon social being. The second meaning of culture is more exclusivist. In the Oxford English Dictionary, culture means to grow, cultivate, make, flourish and develop, as used in a phrase such as 'the culture of mushroom rooms'.

Culture, while denoting a particular aspect of dialectic, constructed historically seems insufficient to describe the life of a peasant society. This definitional problem becomes more acute when the term society or community used for a people particularly located (temporally and spatially), runs into counter evidence. ✓

The construction of colonial historiography in India, for obvious reasons cannot encompass community in its ideal meaning. S. Kaviraj talks about enumeration of identities which otherwise were more complex because they were not 'pure political identities' as used by colonialism and the

nationalists.<sup>1</sup> In turn this means looking for real stratifications within such a community, which obviously got reflected through cultural practices. Herein comes the question of defining culture of the subaltern classes, which in social science parlance is known as popular culture. Counterposed to this is what is known as elite culture. (In the context of *Bidesia* tradition (through which cultural politics of the Bhojpuri region is sought to be defined) there is a link between the subaltern classes and political narratives (authoritative allocation of power) that constitute history)

#### Relationship between Popular Culture and Elite Culture

Popular is defined, in historiography, as something in contrast to something it is not. There have been many debates on this conceptualisation of popular. Nevertheless, if culture has to assume an ideological category its specific capacity to negotiate as an affecting process, through its subjects (people), has to be kept in mind.

Without going for counterposing popular culture and elite culture the locational problematic regarding *Bidesia*

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1. Refer to Sudipta Kaviraj, "State, Society and Discourse in India" in J. Manor (ed.), Rethinking Third World Politics.

can be resolved by that *Bidesia* was the product of migration. As Chapter II will elucidate, migration was a phenomenon among the lower classes during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. And *Bidesia* was conceived by these very classes. With time it negotiated its place among other classes of the Bhojpuri speaking region. In this sense, *Bidesia* was popular as it represented the new found articulation of the subaltern classes of Saran.

But it should be kept in mind that unlike the Popular, as defined in the European context which was primarily the product of the Industrial revolution, whereby public spaces got appropriated by individuals opera etc., *Bidesia* was to be located in the context of the turmoils in the wake of colonial expansion. (*Bidesia* was not entirely traditional or folk culture,<sup>1</sup> as it was not entirely a product of and located in a peasant society. It was the product of an epoch in Indian colonial history when production started for the market and thus in its wake brought about a new cultural territory. It had as its immediate precedent, *Birha* - a particular form of singing - which too is a denominator of popular expressions. There may be a problematic involved in

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1. Many social scientists, particularly historians have used the term 'folk' and 'popular' culture interchangeably. There are problems with this but I will use them as synonyms in the later chapter.

locating culture (popular culture being one of its manifestation) because "one common representation... constructs culture<sup>1</sup> as an instance of social totality situated 'above' the economic and social domains that supposedly constitute the first two steps of the ladder."<sup>2</sup> Such an arrangement means the determining effect of economy on social and cultural domain of existence.

As a theoretical question, which I may not like much to elaborate now, this methodological order viz. economy, society, culture in understanding society has to be looked at historically. In such an analysis, it is clear that preceding popular culture, was folk culture and after popular culture came mass culture. This generic change can be attributed to what Marx calls commodity fetishism which in turn fetishises social relations.<sup>3</sup> My derivative from this argument is that fetishism of social relations also means distinction in the realm of consciousness or constructs which tend to be more hierarchised. The tradition of intel-

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1. Read Popular Culture simultaneously in the continued pasage.
  2. Roger Chartier, Cultural History Between Practices and Representations, Polity Press, UK, 1988, p.47.
  3. Refer to David Wells, Marxism and the Modern State: An Analysis of Fetishism in Capitalist Society, Selectbook Service Syndicate, New Delhi, 1983.



lectual history in France having acquired a major role therefore looks at culture differently. The terms of the problem therefore get altered drastically when one proposes to study not only a "culture produced by the popular classes", instead looking at culture as politics. But *Ridesia* cannot be featured even in this full proof sense. It can be enumerated by Bakhtin's perception of culture which has carnival as its centre and has a different world-view in contrast to the dogmatism and conservatism of the culture of the dominant classes.

The Bakhtinian perception of popular culture which also involves the jesting inversion of all values and established orders may be considered political acts. The absence of political finesse in such act can be attributed to the absence of a clear cut delineation between society and politics. In other words, the political economy of existence in such a social formation (that of pre-industrial society or a societal structure in transition) can only be limited to protest through popular culture as day to day mode of being.

#### **Summary of the above Discussion**

"There is attributed to the subordinate classes of preindustrial society a passive accommodation to the cultur-

al sub-products proffered by the dominant classes (Mandrou), then an implied suggestion of at least partly autonomous values in respect to the culture of the latter (Bolleme), and finally an absolute extraneousness that places the subordinate class actually beyond or, better yet, in a state prior to culture (Foucault). To be sure, Bakhtin's hypothesis of a reciprocal influence between lower class and dominant cultures is much more fruitful."<sup>1</sup>

*Bidesia's* specific traits are what represent it as a form of popular culture in the above sense. It was a 'collective mentality'<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, but was also being articulated in a cultural form by a specific stratum of society. In the early 20th century, located in Saran and spread over the Bhojpuri region, *Bidesia* represented a mode of 'protest'.

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1. Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, xix.
  2. The notion of 'collective mentality' and its articulation by a specific social stratum, may apparently seem paradoxical. But going by the ontological development of *Bidesia* plays one gets a feeling of the 'collective' mediating in a way, so that stratified articulation gets mellowed down.

## Section II: The Folk Genre in Bhojpuri Region

G.A. Grierson noted in the 1880's that a music genre was already thriving in the Bhojpuri region, in the form of *Birha*. As recorded by British officials and later by researchers, *Birha* is an entertainment genre of the lower castes of this region. In this sense *Birha* constitutes a part of popular culture.

The evolution of *Birha* is interesting, as one gathers from the oral tradition, because it was a genre of the lower castes which gradually occupied the public arena. This phenomenon is explicit when one finds the gradual ascendance of *Birah* from its rural location to its becoming a part of the temple festival season (September to early December), especially in Benaras. However, in course of time *Birha* moving from an exclusive genre; from being a genre of the village and that too of the Ahir caste (now called Yadav), has changed thematically too, when it has occupied a public arena. Now its themes are more religious than an expression of *Birah*. While talking about folk genre in the Bhojpuri region, it is interesting to note the genre's development from one space to another over time. Along with thematic change the structure of the performance, with the inclusion of musical instruments over time, has also undergone a

change. However, the original genre which still exists within the village and caste associations is called *Khari Birha*.

Oral history holds that the 'modern' history of *Birha* (as distinct from *khari Birha*) was the creation of Bihari Lal Yadav, who lived from 1857 to 1926. The significant feature, from the point of view of my concern here, of Bihari Lal Yadav is his migration to Banaras and performing at city temple festivals<sup>1</sup>. This cooption of a folk genre according to me is responsible for *Birha* moving away from birah to narrating the *Ramayana*. This is quite understandable as in Banaras under the Raja, *Ramlila* enjoyed wide patronage with the royalty being a physical part of it.<sup>2</sup>

The modern form of *Birha*, traceable from the second half of the 19th century can thus be looked at as the cultural creation of the subordinate classes. However it got ✓ appropriated by high culture.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *Birha* after Bihari's success got divided into gharana system with dif-

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1. City temple festivals called shringars ( ).
2. Refer to Sandria B. Freitag, Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India, Delhi: OUP, 1990.
3. High culture means cultural practices of hegemonic classes.

ferent lineages coming up.

Contrary to this in Saran, the popular culture genre represented through *Bidesia* remained rooted in its rural milieu. This is not to say that *Bidesia* was not a living tradition and did not undergo changes. But during Bhikhari Thakur's time, apart from changes in textual constructs<sup>1</sup> *Bidesia* tradition did not undergo any major thematic changes.

Another striking phenomenon while comparing *Birha* with *Bidesia* is that *Birha* adopted the theme of its urban locale, as Bihari moved from his village (in Ghazipur) to Banaras, *Bidesia* on the other hand was the adaptation of ideas to its village locale. Bhikhari Thakur who had moved out of his rural location 'to see the world' had come back with new ideas from the city (Calcutta) which he adapted to Saran's subaltern classes. Both Bihari and Bhikhari had got affected by high culture but their engagement and disengagement with the 'outside' were entirely different. In this sense, writing about popular culture being just 'one' thing, either mode of protest or mode of prostration is a difficult proposition. Ultimately the locale of a culture (with the pro-

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1. There are different versions of Bhikhari Thakur's plays periodically located. Some printed versions from Calcutta are available with his nephews.

pounder occupying a secondary place) makes a particular form being received in a particular way by different social classes differently - the difference being quantitative and not qualitative.

*Bidesia*, as it exists in its modern form is no more popular in the traditional sense of the popular (as defined by social theory). It has got interwoven with mass culture which is a modern day phenomenon. Apart from changes in the theme of the dance-drama highly influenced by Hindi films, its organic feature is gone. This concept of 'organic feature' of popular culture can be a contentious issue. But we can find a change in *Bidesia*, that of transforming from a subaltern culture, expressing the hopes, aspirations, 'stupidity' and inverted engagement with high culture to becoming a part of the decadent middle class cultural tastes. The innovative vulgarity is now more visible in terms of language and gesture of performance. This, however, is a common feature with all the folk genre as they gradually lose their validity to exist as particular forms. This clearly has to do with the breaking up of definite modes of existence of different social groups and that of society as a whole. Now, in the Bhojpuri region, many tunes of occupational songs are lost. For example, *Mallah geet*,

Dhabi geet are almost gone. Sohar (birth songs) and Virah geet are fast losing their traditional appeal and form. Songs associated with seasons are existent but without the old refinement. Mass culture, however, has tried appropriating most of this genre in either Hindi films or crude Bhojpuri films. Instead of these old generic forms, now popular cultural expressions can be attributed to religious gatherings of Hindus and Muslims around village temples or mosques. (The entire demography of popular culture has undergone an unrecognizable change. A point to be noted here is that more the relative isolation of an area, in terms of communication and distance from urban centres, more effectively has popular genre been able to sustain itself).

In the Saran society benefits of seasonal migration were often noticeable. In village Deoria, for instance, those who went to Bengal were said to live in 'better style'. In Chan Chaura village, anyone who migrated was "looked upon with respect by his family, no matter however junior he may be simply because he is an earning member of the family. These migrants considered themselves above the category of their brethren."<sup>1</sup> This tendency of being looked

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1. From Saran District Village Notes (SVN), 1915-1921 on Mashrak Thana no.79 and Manjhi Thana no.117. Cited in Anand A. Yang, op. cit. p.198.

upon was one major reason for the Saran peasantry to opt for seasonal migration, though in the initial phase of growing agricultural crisis of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries many families from the districts permanently fled to low rent paying zamindaris. However, this tendency got checked and gave way to seasonal migration. More so with the developments in communications, railways, became the major mode of transport for migrants. And migration became seasonal. Apart from development of temporary movement as a mechanism for "maximization" reflecting the "rationality" of peasant decision making and action;<sup>1</sup> seasonal migration enabled an efficient allocation of resources "because the combined income... exceeds income from the alternatives: namely, full time employment ...or permanent migration."<sup>2</sup> However the risks of permanently moving away from a familiar setting after the easing of economic crisis in agriculture was a major deterrent against permanent migration. Moreover, the squalor of migrant's living condition and the work required in Calcutta left little scope for women as labour.

✓ This political economy of existence was what gives

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1. Anand A. Yang, p.199.
  2. Ralph E. Beals and Carmen F. Menezes, "Migrant Labour & Agricultural Output in Ghana", Oxford Eco. Papers 22, 1970, p.111.



Bidesia a distinction from other folk genre. If on the one hand Bidesi (some one living in a foreign land) was "looked upon with respect by his family", there is also this existential dilemma of the Bidesi due to the memories, back home. "Thy wife weeps daily and hourly (Ah Ram!) thy another weeps; yes, thy mother weeps the whole year through."<sup>1</sup> This gets reflected, partially, in Bhikhari Thakur's plays which constitute a political genre in cultural expressions. This combination of existential living, initially got reflected in songs which can be characterised as *Birah geet*. Over time the experience of working and living together in a "foreign" land fostered community consciousness. In Calcutta this community living and the men's "attachment with city women, neglecting young wives in their homes" also gave the migrants a particular type of security in a alien land. In turn, a new cultural consciousness developed. Now, "At the foot of the Ochterlony monument in the 'Maidan' there is a large informal gathering of Bhojpuri people (especially on holidays)" and "we have... folk songs, folk tales and informal talks and speeches."<sup>2</sup> It was this particular space which provided Bidesia genre to experiment in Bhikhari

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1. From a folk song in the Bhojpuri speaking region.

2. Udai Narain Tiwari, The Origin and Development of Bhojpur, Asiatic Society (Calcutta), XXVI, 1960.

Thakur, who left home as a boy, wandered east and over time formed a travelling team of performers. As oral history has it, Bhikhari Thakur for a long time wandered in Bengal. By the time he came back to perform in his home land, Bidesia was no more unfamiliar to the people, probably due hearsay. And his 'shows' also became popular because they constantly adapted themselves. The availability of numerous versions of his plays, printed in Calcutta and elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> are a pointer to this fact.

### Section III: Bidesia as a form of 'Cultural Politics'

Cultural politics in the Bhojpuri region can be traced way back to those times when people were taken off to the underdeveloped colonies of the British empire as indentured labour. Their folk songs of this period are narratives of their woes. Through oral tradition the passing down of these songs from generation to generation seems to be part of cultural politics of the indentured labour of the Bhojpuri region. The fact, of keeping memories alive through a particular cultural expression (singing) and most of all the urge to compose such songs means that the people, in the

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1. These plays are with his nephews who reside in his ancestral vilage.



absence of any other overt form of protest, did contest power.<sup>1</sup>

As elaborately discussed in Chapter II, the location of *Bidesia* in a particular socio-economic milieu could not help *Bidesia* from becoming a culture which had a politics to it. *Bidesia* (called 'Tamasa'<sup>2</sup> by Bhikhari Thakur)

### **From Religious Symbols to 'Rationality' - *Bidesia* as a new folk genre**

In the Bhojpuri speaking region, the political economy of existence of the society at large and of groups which occupy the lowest rung of this society; there has been a transition from religiosity to 'rationality'. This statement becomes clear after we analyse and compare *Bidesia* to other folk genre preceding it and being contemporary to it. Many songs in the bhojpuri speaking region related to transplantation of paddy in particular, have symbols which are overtly religious. These are mainly sung by women who are most numerous as labourers in paddy transplantation. One of the song goes like:

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1. Refer to Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), Contesting Power, Delhi: OUP, 1991.
  2. Tamasa is synonymous to 'show' used to denote a film show or an opera show. Its usage can be 'A Show is Going on'.

"How much do we work, me and my husband; yet we suffer so much. I have to go and get food for him. And in the house my devar (brother-in-law) looks at me meaningfully when I go there [to get food]. May be I will succumb to it. But O Lord (Krishna) save me!"

This song simultaneously says various things. One is the suffering of the self and the labouring lot. Another component is the chances of succumbing to a promiscuous relationship. But the religiosity of existence, which is traditionally defined and definite too, is urged to be secured. And in all this it is the lord which<sup>1</sup> ought to help. Contrary to this *Bidesia* uses the symbols of religiosity only to seek legitimacy. When thematically it constructs a play, solutions to promiscuity lie in rationalising an 'accident' (of either husband having another wife in *Bides* or wife bearing an illegitimate child in her husband's absence). There are various other elements in *Bidesia* which further point to this fact.

It is therefore pertinent to look into various forms of folk expressions which are articulated only in the context

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1. I use which instead of who because Krishna/Lord for the subaltern classes has remained a symbol of *sakha* instead of *Prabhu*.

of their specific cultural locations. These cultural locations are largely rural in their settings. Hence symbols, meanings, metaphors in the every day life of villagers are contained in their interaction with agrarian cycle. This agrarian cycle largely determines their mode of thinking. Because this agrarian cycle also controls peasants movements, of their interpersonal and community relationships. But at times this system is broken due to external factors and internal intrusions. In the Bhojpuri speaking region external factors were facilitated by the coming of Britishers. The pattern of colonial administration<sup>1</sup> largely affected the balance of agricultural operations. Many folk forms in Bhojpuri speaking region have succinctly grasped the trauma of new agrarian administrative techniques.<sup>2</sup> Internal intrusion was articulated by the lack of agrarian capital among small peasant proprietors and middle peasants. This decline of agrarian capital was the direct outcome of two factors:

(a) Decline in productivity, perceptible decline in Crops;

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1. Refer to Anand A. Yang, The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920, Delhi: OUP, 1989.
  2. A folk song in Bhojpuri language refers to the tyranny of the zamindar (*zalim zamindarwa*).

and

(b) Increasing pressure on land.

Combining these two factors with a certain history of indentured labour in this region had created a mentality of mobility among the lower stratum. (To demonstrate the mentality of the people, popular forms of singing, acting have become increasingly crucial to study the patterns of colonial domination.)

Popular forms often are subtle in their critique of existing social patterns of alienation and domination. In the context of *Bidesia* form of popular dance-drama three things emerge as analytical categories. At this point Bakhtin's<sup>1</sup> notion of carnival is crucial. In Carnavalesque, the particular moment of free space is exploited by the popular to subvert the traditional order of propriety and rule<sup>2</sup> but on the other hand *Bidesia* form is intrinsically linked with two orders. One is the rural order of agrarian cycle and other is the colonial order of industrialisation. It is interesting to note how *Bidesia* interweaves these two patterns of shared experience at the level of mentalite and

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1. Refer to Mikhael Bakhtin, The Dialogical Imagination, University of Texas Press (Austin), Paperback, 1985.

2. Ibid.

ideology. The mentalite of *Bidesia* operates at the level of anxiety. An ideology becomes manifest when nuances of social themes come to the fore or rather appropriated from various other upper caste reform movements.

While looking at *Bidesia* as a genre which articulates the living of the subaltern people, means (given its location in the late 19th, early 20th century colonial India) having a problematic if we try at construction of mentality or analysing it as pure ideology. *Bidesia's* constructs through only 'one' of these ways of constructing the past is fraught with dangers because these ways of positioning social science method are the products of two experiences existing simultaneously. 'Mentalites' is a French current where as 'Ideology' (having a Marxist, foundation) is a development of the inter-war period.

The very fact that *Bidesia* as a nuance is nothing in itself, means that it is not mere cultural expression nor is it pure ideology, otherwise it would have been part of politics. *Bidesia* is part of cultural politics whereby I want to show that it is as much a determinate of a kind of politics which is expressive and can be expressive only through culture and it is cultural because it is part of a

certain mentality, not necessarily homogeneous,<sup>1</sup> which presupposes a differentiation or the concept of binary opposition between two belief systems, "the 'traditional' and 'modern'."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Peter Burke, History & Social Theory, Polity Press, UK, 1992, p.940.

2. Ibid.



## CHAPTER II

### PROBING THE SUBJECT IN ITS HISTORICITY

The Bidesia dance-drama form originated in the Bhojpuri region in the early 20th century. Oral tradition mentions Bhikhari Thakur as the founder of this dance-drama form. This is not to claim that *Bidesia* was a *sui generis* form; it had obvious roots in the socio-cultural milieu of its time. One thing, however, is uncontrovertible. That *Bidesia* was an extremely 'popular' form of cultural expression. Bhikhari Thakur's performance is believed to have drawn crowds as large as twenty thousand people. This figure may be a little exaggerated, but the repetition of the verses at least four times in a song or *chaupai* etc. nevertheless hints at the extent of popular enthusiasm.

To identify *Bidesia* as a popular cultural form articulating, in however muted a way, subaltern aspiration is not to overlook its cognitive and political limitations arising from its location in a particular socio-historical order. The Bhojpuri region in the first quarter of the 20th century was witnessing immense onslaughts from within (National movement, migration to new lands etc.) and without (the great economic depression following the First World War). It was a society where the fight between 'the old and the

new' had suddenly intensified. But because the initiative was from 'above' - in the sense that the internal dynamics of this peasant society were sought to be kept in check (by the Congress's 'passive resistance'), the peasants reacted to changes in contradictory and 'common sensical' ways.<sup>1</sup> To put it differently, the specific location of the Bhojpuri peasantry (including migrant labourers) does have interconnections with their traditional forms of cultural expression. Not even Bidesia - where, as legend has it, Bhikhari Thakur used to innovate random, satirical narratives on the stage; (on one occasion when he seemingly spoke up against the Buxar raj, the 'Rajbhakts' retaliated by breaking his teeth) - could openly confront the relations of power in the contemporary society. And so it is not at all striking to see that Bidesia tradition was in part projected, self-consciously or otherwise, as a continuation of a tradition

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1. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was the first to use the category of 'common sense' to describe the ideological life-world of the subaltern class, particularly the peasantry. Gramsci's notion is an obvious departure from the ordinary usage of the word in the English language where it has positive connotations. In Gramsci's formulation common sense is inherently contradictory, incorporating the ideas and beliefs of the dominant classes. The notion that corresponds to the everyday notion of common sense in the English language in Gramsci is 'good sense' - that aspect of the subaltern's life world or common sense which is autonomous and hence a site of resistance to the hegemony of the dominant classes.

that the Bhojpuri region carried. And in this sense, it did not constitute a radical political break.

In terms of its content, Bidesia as a tradition was strongly influenced by the social reforms movement that was underway in Bengal at the turn of the century. The relatively large scale migration of Bhojpuri speaking 'bhaiyas' to Calcutta and other districts of Bengal and Assam made this influence more widespread. Moreover with a long history of seasonal migration on which the economy of the Bhojpuri region depended, Bidesia did not look 'unusual' even to the dumbest migrant, since he could understand and explain the new images and meanings which the Bidesia performance carried. And to cap the Bidesia performance with popularity, the idioms were indigenous. As for the essence of the plays they were an adaptation, through a process of assimilation of (outside) ideas entailing a complex process whereby only those ideas were allowed to come in and only to the extent that they did not seem subversive.

It has been plausibly argued that the peasantry's world view is that of a community fighting to make its future secure. In the well-known formulation of Marx, "The lower middle class, ...the peasant ...are not revolutionary, but conservative.... They... defend not their present, but

their future interests."<sup>1</sup> Without essentializing Marx's thesis, it may be said that the ideological life-world of the Saran peasant was in large part derived from the past where it did not incorporate elements of the dominant ideologies. In the post-Permanent Settlement period, however, the new ruling coalition, the colonial masters and the zamindars with their whole array of confidants and local power operators *gumashta* and *sipahis* - had begun to challenge the ideological legacy of the past. Though the colonial administration had refrained from intervening in the local arrangements of power, particularly after the failed revolt of 1857, allowing the old social relations to continue unhindered the systemic dynamism of the colonial intervention could not be continued. If initially it was possible for the peasant world view to be structured by a self-contained village community or else a fiefdom, the face of World War I changed most of what the Britishers had planned. Revenue from land now was not the source of income for the colonial economy. Non-availability of cheap labour in agriculture (due to low wages) and demand for it in the cities during the war period developed cracks in the peasant economy and consequently its world view. Uncertainty of the

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1. K. Marx and Frederick Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1977, p.46.

future and their gradual pauperisation did make the peasantry susceptible to rebellious ideas. But in the absence of any initiative from 'above', either from a local rebel leader or a political party sympathetic to them, they could not move beyond. The peasantry of old Saran, where Bidesia first sprang, were content with their money order economy, which along with wages in cash as opposed to kind also carried ideas with it, ideas of social reformism of the Bengali Bhadrak, which introduced an element of dynamism in the recursive, ideologically static society. In the early 20th century this new 'ideological' development was being professed by those who were neither the socially oppressed in the traditional sense (the subaltern classes of in the old social order) nor were they part of the ruling elites, colonial masters and zamindars. They were the intermediaries the newly emerging middle class. This class was a critique of the old social order but did not have a clear vision of the new. Though some did try for more radical goals but they did not go far. After all the people, only when they had the infrastructure, could grasp an idea in its radical form. Bidesia, in this sense, was affected by this social reformist streak, but in a mediated way. Like most migrants, Bhikhari Thakur (while in self-exile in Calcutta and Bengal) had been influenced by the

'new world' and its forms of cultural expression. So Bidesia form has many features in common with Jatra. At the level of performance too the Bengali influence is discernible.

At a later date, Bhikhari Thakur had his own performing troupe in Bengal and in all probability borrowed heavily from the Jatra tradition for he must have witnessed a number of Jatra performances. Thus he presumably carried back whatever he could and his innovative mind made use of the tools that were available in the local tradition (ulatbasi in Kabir and *Ramlila chaupai* form) mixing them up with the form of the Jatra genre, outside.

As for the ideological content of the dance-drama, therefore, it was a complex intermix of both those themes which sprang up from local experience i.e. the concrete material conditions of being of the peasant society and those that were borrowed by the intermediate, reform minded middle classes from the social reforms movement in Bengal. The lower classes, which constituted the audience, responded to the reformist subjects of the plays favourably because of its own severe socio-economic dislocation in the war period. And yet, as Marx put it in a different context, it was a situation where the old order could not sustain itself, but

the new could not be born.<sup>1</sup> The objective conditions of being put limits in the way of the radicalisation of the cultural forms of expression.

This also in part accounts for the overt passivity of the subaltern classes who failed to come out with any explicit signs of protest apart from articulating their aspirations in a muted and implicit kind of way in *Bidesia*. Undoubtedly, it was an objective limitation of the type of politics that was indulged in by the main vehicle of organized political struggle, the Congress, during the early 20th century. The other important factor stems from the micro-level arrangement of different social forces in the Saran society. It is to this that we will turn in the following pages.

#### **Location of Different Social Groups and the Immediate Material Conditions of Existence**

As cited in various government reports (during the British period) the peasantry of Saran (as also north Bihar) was differently located as compared to the peasantry of rest of the Bengal Presidency. This point is to be emphasized to show as to how this specific location of Saran agrarian order, gave rise to particular social relations of exist-

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1. See Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto.

ence. In turn this specificity of location (their material existence of being), in a major way helped determine their modes of cultural expressions as well. This is particularly important, because different social groups through Bidesia interacted with outside ideas and among themselves, differently. And the only plausible explanation for this differential interaction can be sought from their specific location in the agrarian structure.

In Saran 90 per cent of the total occupied area of the district (which constituted 86 per cent of the total area) was held by tenants who were categorized in the official literature as 'occupancy tenants'.<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century approximately 84 per cent of the total population were fully engaged in agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Of these 20 per cent of the population or approximately 5 lakh people were pure wage labourers and another half had holdings below the subsistence level."<sup>3</sup> The break up of land holding in Saran, taken caste-wise is interesting because it shows a clear overlapping between size of land holdings and the

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1. Anand Yang, The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920, Delhi: OUP, 1989, p.48.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.48.



local level social empowerment of different groups. Thus by the end of the 19th century the upper castes occupied 54% of the total land holding rights (Brahmins, Rajputs and Bhumi-hars who constituted 21% of the population) followed by Kayasthas, Muslims and Baniyas. The so-called agricultural and lower castes accounted for the remaining 4 per cent holdings.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the agricultural labourers therefore came from the lower caste, primarily shudras and the untouchables. "In Saran the Scheduled Castes comprised 11 per cent of the population roughly equal to the number of landless labourers computed in official sources."<sup>2</sup> Out of these 11 per cent, as the Survey Settlement Record (1893-1901) has it, 4.9 per cent of the total land was rented out to Scheduled Castes which means that a miniscule section of the SCs were marginal farmers, whereas the other caste group (the shudras) constituted the rest of the agricultural labourers and marginal farmers.

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1. Ibid.

2. Here it should be noted that status considerations separated people who used a plow and actually worked in the fields (mostly lower and labouring castes) and those who rarely, if ever, soiled their hands. The latter (mostly upper castes) supervised cultivation. James Ray Hagen, "Indigenous Society, the Political Economy, and Colonial Education in Patna District: A History of Social Change from 1811 to 1951 in Gangetic North India", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1981, pp.93-95.

This was the group that was most vulnerable economically and from among them came those who migrated. But along with the 'push factor' of economic deprivation one ought to remember that Saran district had had a long history of people working outside. In other words if the 'push factor' due to the underdevelopment of agriculture existed, the fact of longstanding migration was not less important. The Saran peasantry long back had come in contact with the outside world. The 'avoidance protest'<sup>1</sup> that the Saran peasantry used was foregrounded in this history of outmigration. This perhaps also served as a kind of conflict-attenuating device. The importance of migration in terms of its impact on the the content as well as the form of the Ridesia expression has been already mentioned. Not only "the seasonal exodus ultimately reflected the Saran raiyats' inability to break out of the prevailing systems of local control but it also got reflected in its diligently following the idioms and symbols of the traditional order."<sup>2</sup> This observation regarding the Saran peasantry's preoccupation with tradition should not be mistaken for a total renuncia-

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1. For an explication of the notion of 'avoidance protest', see James C Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

2. Refer to Anand A. Yang, op. cit.

tion of their autonomy to think differently. If on the one hand the semantics of protest were rooted in tradition, the very fact that a new structure of this semantics came up in the form of *bidesia* ought to be recognised as an attempt by the peasant mind to 'protest' against the local systems of control.

In the peasant societies, "...The peasants' potential for revolting against oppression and injustice (which) often manifested itself in unorganised attempts for which religious ideology or some kind of millenarian dreams provided the immediate impulse."<sup>1</sup> Although, the articulation of the peasantry's woes could not have been radical (in the Marxian sense of 'scientific politics') but neither was it primordial. *Bidesia* is best seen as a thematic and formal synthesis between the older forms of cultural expression and the new reformist ideas gripping the emerging middle classes in the big cities like Calcutta.

The emergence of *Bidesia* can be looked at as having an analogical affinity with the Bengal renaissance. If the former was the product of the conflicts arising in the peasant mentality the latter was the outcome of a similar

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1. D.N. Dhanagare, Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, p.29.

conflict of values arising in the minds of the new educated Bengali middle class who struggled with the legacy of European Enlightenment while trying to stay true to the indigenous classical traditions of 'Hinduism'.

Initially for the Saran peasantry 'avoidance protest' was a flight from a high rent zamindari to a low-rent zamindari in the neighbouring region. This migration often than not permanent in nature left for such an exercise. But with little scope due to the saturation of opportunities in the neighbouring region and an option for seasonal migration (to Calcutta, for example) provided it with the scope to articulate its 'protest' through more symbolic acts. I call *Bidesia* genre as part of 'avoidance protest' in a different sense, meaning hereby, an act in the realm of culture that is not radical for it does constitute on a conscious effort which contests the local arrangement of power.

For a better understanding of the above formulation it is therefore necessary to take into account the history of outmigration of the Saran peasantry. "...when Robert Clive organized the first sepoy battalion in Bengal in the 1770's, a number of recruits were drawn from Bihar, probably including some from Saran. By the mid-nineteenth century, the

district had provided 10,000 sepoy...."<sup>1</sup> "By the late 19th century, the streams of migration toward Bengal were well-established flows.... the majority of the districts outmigrants went to the area they referred to as the East."<sup>2</sup> This official estimate puts this figure of migrants at 80,000 whereas liberal estimates put it as high as 200,000.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this massive exodus can be accounted in terms of an insignificant increase in the productivity of land over the years. "In fact, the population pressure on land had increased so much that food had to be imported in the district to the tune of 100,000 tons annually." "Between 1900 to 1911 the situation was so bad in the Saran district that there was only a marginal increase in demand on land revenue while the collection remained constant."<sup>4</sup> This relative stagnation was true for most of the North Bihar districts where "...in the first half of the (nineteenth century) agricultural development advanced with extraordinary rapidity. During the latter half it slowed

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1. Annual General Report - Patna Division (AGRPD), 1897-98, Bihar State Archives, Patna.
  2. Anand A. Yang, op. cit., pp.191-93.
  3. J.A. Bourdillon, Census of India, 1891, District Census Reports, Saran, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1898.
  4. Saran District Gazetteer, B Vol., Statistics, 1900-1901 to 1910-11, Government Press, Allahabad, 1914.

down."<sup>1</sup> "The relative scarcity of labour between 1870-1920 due to famine and death (epidemic) preceding this period was the main cause. Interestingly this led to cash wage increases since mid-1850s".<sup>2</sup> In Saran though the general trend of agricultural stagnation held true but it did not lead to wage increase as in other areas. This increase did not seem to have taken place in the northern districts of Bihar."<sup>3</sup> This in turn meant "pauperisation for the landless and the marginal peasants (existing below the subsistence level)<sup>4</sup> as there was 'increase in price of food'.<sup>5</sup> From a subsistence economy, the Saran region was moving towards a market-based agricultural production system. Though on the face of it, facts may seem to prove to the contrary: for example, the area under cash crop hardly increased in the Saran district. But the very fact that foodgrains fetched a higher price meant that availability of foodgrains for the poor decreased. Moreover "the payment in grain wages re-

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1. Dharma Kumar (ed.), The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.II, c.1757-c.1970, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984, p.303.

2. Ibid., p.170.

3. Ibid., p.171.

4. Marginal peasants were considered to be those whose land-holding were 2.5 acres or below.

5. Ibid., p.171.

mained largely undiminished in the Bhojpuri region."<sup>1</sup> This in turn meant that the employer got a higher return for his sale in the off season whereas he paid less to the agricultural labourer in the current season (when food grain was available in the market and generally fetched a lower price). As a conclusion, it can be said that the differential returns each section derived from its involvement in agriculture were determined by the size of landholding. In turn, the trend of migration from different social groups also conformed to a clear pattern. "Desertions usually came from the ranks of people who lived close to the marginal subsistence in normal agricultural years."<sup>2</sup> "Most of the faces in the crowd of deserters, however, were of people of low caste and economic position."<sup>3</sup>

Coming to the remuneration received from migrant labourers, in order to gauge the mediating effects of cash (money) between agrarian relations which otherwise would have proved volatile, are some facts enumerated below. One indication of the benefits that were reaped by moving east is the estimate by a 1903 report of "remittances made by

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1. Dharma Kumar (ed.), op. cit., p.171.
  2. Anand A. Yang, op. cit., p:182.
  3. Ibid., p.188.

Saran migrants.... The average value of the money orders cashed annually in Saran is 15 lakhs and much of this doubtless represents the earning of Saran cultivators in other districts. In famine years it rose to over 34 lakhs."<sup>1</sup> Most of this money went to moneylenders and to meet the wants of the family back home. It is quite interesting that at one point of time even tenants at will were so much indebted that they had to flee from their villages. In an observation by a British official of this flight of peasants. "The average holdings of the 27 raiyats who fled in 1894 was 5.3 bighas<sup>2</sup>, with individual holdings ranging in size from 0.3 to 15.4 bighas."<sup>3</sup> The big holders too were deeply in debt, due to increased rent. But this situation was taken control of after migration started to places outside the district either "from high rent parganas to low rent parganas"<sup>4</sup> or to places like Calcutta where the net savings in six months could range between Rs.40-60. Moreover the change in the land holding pattern of different caste groups show that the remuneration in cash from outside (through migration) meant a gradual demand by the peasant of paying

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1. Ibid., p.197.

2. Above the 2.5 acres holding standardised as sufficient for a family of 5 persons to survive.

3. Anand A. Yang, op. cit., p.183.

4. Dharma Kumar (ed.), op. cit., p.303.



rent in cash rather than in kind. "In context of the price level (of the foodgrains) in the later 19th century, a peasant paying rent in kind invariably surrendered a much larger portion of his income than a peasant paying rent in cash since increasing the cash rent was not an easy task for the zamindar."<sup>1</sup> After the migration acquired a constant flow, "the peasants started exercising their option (allowed by the Tenancy Act, 1885) and started getting the produce rent converted into cash rent."<sup>2</sup> Along with this the increase in the land holding of different caste groups between the last quarter of the 19th century and early 20th century shows that the erstwhile upper shudras (the Koeris and the Kurmis supposed to be the best cultivators, and the Ahirs, traditionally a pastoral caste) got economically stratified between the landless groups and the landed gentry. Their ability to retain land by asking for allowing of payment of rent in cash may not be only due to the fact that rent payment in kind was comparatively more than the rent payment in cash but may also be due to the fact that their remuneration from the 'East' could pay for their obligations towards

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1. B.B. Chaudhuri, "Land Market in Eastern India, 1793-1940", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.XII, Nos.1&2, New Delhi, 1975.
2. Nirmal Sen Gupta, Agrarian Change, Agrarian Tensions, Peasant Movements & Organisations in Bihar, (Report), National Labour Institute, New Delhi.

land holding (either to pay off debts or rent). Later on, the emergence of these 'upper shudras' as a land holding group and their increasing political clout - though they too were vulnerable to the colonial land revenue system - combined with feudal managerial skills this socio-economic group was able to steer through this structure and retain and, at times, even increase its land holding. This is enumerated by the data below.

According to land holding rights (1872-73) data, the so-called agricultural and lower castes accounted for 4% holdings.<sup>1</sup> This increased to 9.9 per cent, 4.8 per cent and 9.1 per cent for Ahir, Kurmi and Koeri caste peasants respectively, i.e. almost 24% of the total holdings according to the 1893-1901 Survey and Settlement Report.<sup>2</sup>

One reasonable pointer that emerges from this data is that the upper shudras as a caste group were better placed compared to the lower shudras and Scheduled Castes, though there were marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, among them too. While they had a distinct advantage over

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1. J.A. Bourdillon, Census of India, 1891, District Census Reports, Saran, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1898.
2. J.H. Kerr Sr., Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Saran District, 1893 to 1901, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1903.

the pauperized sections of the rural society, they certainly did not compare favourably with the big land holders. This put them, at least as regards their material conditions and interests, on the side of the most oppressed masses. Moreover, the new cultural form of expression *Bidesia*, which was mainly an outcome of the migrant's experience, was not alien to this middle stratum as well because they too had undergone the same experience in the past. Thus there was a substantive basis for cultural affinity between these caste groups as well. If on the other hand the lower classes in Saran owed their material well-being to the fact of migration and regular earnings from far off places, it was the emotional turmoil that this migration engendered which provided the space for a new cultural genre, *Bidesia*.

*Bidesia* in its essence was not only the assertion of the migrant's urge to reassert his identity in an alien world but it was also an effort at critically engaging with the 'old' order back home. In this context we can see a slight distinction between the content of *Birha*<sup>1</sup> and that of the *Bidesia*, a complete dance-drama from which chronologically follows *Birha*. *Bidesia*, historically, goes a step

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1. *Birha* is a particular form of singing with almost a similar theme, that of the husband's and wife's separation due to immigration.

further from Birha and belongs to a new genre because it engages with the subject of migration at a higher level and in a more complex way. The point being made here is that the formation of a new economic strata within the Saran peasantry enumerated socially as 'upper shudras', makes it more explicable as to why bidesia could not be a political genre but had to take on the form of a cultural genre of 'protest' unlike birha which was by and large exclusivist. This exclusivism gets affirmed by the fact that *birha* was a genre confined almost entirely to one caste group - the *ahir* (Yadav) caste - and its focus univocal - limited to the recurring theme of the separation from the beloved.

Unlike Saran, in other districts of Bihar - for example in Champaran - the middle peasant (not necessarily the middle castes) politically tried to lead the subaltern interest groups against colonial power. While "Peasants as a mass were mobilised into the movement by their immediate leaders, middle and rich peasants, and secondarily mahajans and Banias."<sup>1</sup> The middle peasants also played "intermediate roles between village turmoil and urban politics."<sup>2</sup> In

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1. Jacques Pouchepadass, "Local Leaders and Intelligentsia in the Champaran Satyagrah", Contributions to Indian Sociology (NS), Number 8, 1974, p.79.

2. Ibid., p.79.

Saran, large-scale migration over a long period of history, provided the lower castes the opportunities to develop their own form of cultural expression and politics. The first impression the people of this region gave to an outsider captures something of this spirit: "The Bhojpuri-speaking country is inhabited by a people curiously different from the others who speak Bihari dialects.... An alert and active nationality, with few scruples and considerable abilities, ...they have spread all over Aryan India, each man ready to carve his future out of any opportunity which may present itself to him."<sup>1</sup> In this sense migration for the peasantry of Saran was not only a mechanism to fulfill their physical needs but also affected their cultural being. But it ought to be kept in mind that, the entire society did not receive these cultural influences uniformly. People nearer to the scene of migration naturally were more affected. Bidesia had a differential impact on and differential involvement from different social groupings in Saran and in other areas where it consequently spread. Only this understanding can probably explain a number of questions regarding the emergence and sustenance of Bidesia as a form in the Bhojpuri speaking region. Further, only then can a plausi-

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✓ 1. Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.V, Part II, 1903, (Reprinted 1968).

ble explanation be found as to why *Bidesia* constituted an advance on preceding forms of cultural expression.

In Saran the carriers of *Bidesia* were a people from the lower orders of the peasantry. The middle class that was coming up in centres like Calcutta and contested the old order and stood for "women's education or widow remarriage (and were against) social evils like greed and hypocrisy of the priestly class among the city's elite [and] were [therefore] regarded as dangerous departures from the traditional mores",<sup>1</sup> on the other hand "The well-knit village society where the local elite - dominated by the brahmanical code of behaviour - was required to demonstrate and conform to the code which was still very much a part of the psyche of the migrants who came to Calcutta."<sup>2</sup> But the migrant's engagement with the new environ and which consequently led to *bidesia* becoming a new cultural genre is more complex as explicated above by Sumanta Banerjee, whose location is 19th century Bengal.

While keeping in mind that "The lower classes, historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-aware-

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1. Sumanta Banerjee, The Popular and the Streets, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1989, p.201.
2. Ibid., p.201.

ness via a series of negations"<sup>1</sup> it is also true that by the first quarter of the 20th century (the period when *Bidesia* came up as a new cultural genre) the values and perceptions of the lower orders had not remained static. The location of *Bidesia*, opened them to a dialogical interaction with the outside world on yet higher plane. Although *Bidesia* in some senses bore elements of a "'generic' hatred... [which was]... 'semi-feudal' rather than modern in character"<sup>2</sup> but unlike Gramsci's formulation on the Italian peasantry it it also embodied implicit elements of a 'political attitude' towards its surrounding. This also explains, in part, as to why in the Bhojpuri-speaking region, spoken language apart from using various denominations of particular words to refer to social hierarchies<sup>3</sup> does not follow semantic differences. This is quite unlike the "Maithili" language which is spoken differently by the twice borne castes and by the lower orders.

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1. Refer to Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, (translated and edited by Geoffery Nowell Smith and S. Hoare), Chap.II on 'State and Civil Society', International Publishers, New York, 1971, p.273.

2. Ibid.

3. In Bhojpuri language 'You' can be used differently denoting hierarchies, for example, *ten* (lower), *tu* (for contemporary), *raua* (elderly person).

By way of concluding this chapter, the following lines on the lower order's capacity to 'culturally' negotiate with their surroundings and voice their aspirations might be taken note of: "A unilinear interpretation that would hold nineteenth century... folk culture as totally feudal and conservative, or take the other extreme position of hailing it as the radical voice of the proletariat, would miss the complex, multilayered fabric that was made up by the thoughts and perceptions of the city's lowr orders at that time."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sumanta Banerjee, The Parlour and the Streets, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1989, p.202.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE TAMASHA OF BHIKHARI THAKUR ANALYSIS OF BHIKHARI THAKUR'S PLAYS

This chapter will primarily analyse the Tamasha<sup>1</sup> of Bhikhari Thakur. The sources used will be some theoretical conceptualisations on popular culture. But primarily this chapter will make use of the plays of Bhikhari Thakur available in their most recent form. This source, of analysing *Bidesia* therefore constitutes a primary source material.

The structure of this chapter will entail reading of the text and connecting it to the structures of the performance (this will rely on oral history) as I have watched it since my childhood and what I have heard from elders. And then from brief quotes from the plays and performance structure, I will go on to look at the underlying meanings and metaphor which are a reflection upon the (political) dynamics of the society with which these plays are intertwined. But given the limited primary sources and non-availability of any substantial secondary writing on *Bidesia*, there is no pretention to completeness or precision in my formulations to which I can lay claim.

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1. Bhikhari Thakur used to call his plays Tamasha.

At the outset, one important point has to be kept in mind while proceeding with analysis of Bhikhari Thakur's plays. As the editorial board writes in the foreword to the collection of *Bidesia* plays, various performing groups, in the life time of Bhikhari Thakur, with certain variations staged his plays according to '*Lok-ruchi*'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover the collection of plays in two volumes is a corrected version (grammatically) of the original plays. This was necessitated for, Bhikhari Thakur belongs to the oral tradition. Moreover, as he was illiterate he couldn't possibly have written down his own plays.

The plays in the two volumes collection according to the editors, was possible after going through all the material available with Bhikhari Thakur's kins, Shri Shilanath Thakur and Shri Gouri Shankar Thakur who hail from Kutubpur village in the then Chapra sub-division (called Saran now).

The very fact that different versions of Bhikhari Thakur's plays exist and were performed simultaneously by different groups confirm to the dialogical characteristic of popular tradition. More so when, oral tradition is character-

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1. This concept of *Lok-ruchi* represents the popular taste of a particular cultural setting. It may not necessarily overlap the definitive boundaries of popular culture.

rised as means of passing, from individual to individual and from individual to social group(s), it is in this context, about the meanings of a play that there is no scope for a monological movement left within the performance. This point becomes clear while traversing through Bhikhari's first play in the collection<sup>1</sup> called *Bidesia*.

### **BIDESIA**

This play starts with Guru Vandana in Sanskrit. Though it uses sanskrit language, the very tradition of guru Vandana is nowhere to be found in the sanskrit tradition. Contrary to the Sanskrit tradition, Guru Vandana is traceable to the concept of devotionalism which has its roots in the *bhakti* tradition and sufi mysticism. In the non-Sanskrit tradition it is only through the guru that a *Grahastha* (family man) can reach the *upasya* (the object of worship). Prior to this tradition the *gyan* of *Eshwar* was only for the *gyani* and the *dhyani*. So *birha* tradition is rooted in the belief system of the common people (lower castes) who though, borrowed texts from high culture, had their own generic tradition rooted in the *bhakti*. Another interesting element of *bhakti* is mysticism, which comes from the Upani-

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1. Henceforth referred to as Bhikhari Thakur Granthavali Parts 1 and 2.

shads. But with the coming of Islam in India and sufism becoming an acceptable *bhakti* form the element of 'manav prem' enters popular culture genre. This element too appears in Bhikhari Thakur's plays as well as the play *Bidesia* which we will analyse.

After the Sanskrit shloka (on guru *bhakti*) the play *Bidesia* has a *chaupai* which contains a stuti to Ram and also contains some introductory remarks that 'a tamasha is going to start, ...and in few words I have tried to explain an entire book.'<sup>1</sup> This *chaupai* tradition can be traced to Kalidas in whose plays the *nat-nati* use to come and introduce a play. But in Bhikhari Thakur it is the sutradhar who does it. The difference in introduction from the previous tradition, as structured in *Bidesia*, is two fold. One is the use of Ram as symbol of *Bhakti* as opposed to the cultural genre of the lower classes who use Krishna as a symbol. And form wise, another difference from traditional structures of play, is the use of a single narrator as opposed to Kalidasa's tradition of using *nat-nati*.<sup>2</sup>

The use of Krishna as a symbol by lower class cultural genre meant the dominance of a feeling of organic unity with

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1. 'Eh kitab ke sab bistari/thorhi me sab kahat Bhikhari.
2. A male and a female.

the superior (Krishna) who is the symbol of sakha (friend).<sup>1</sup> Contrary to this, Ram *bhakti* means a relationship of non-equivalence where Ram is the lord and the bhakta is a *das* (slave). The folk genre, prior to *Bidesia* in the Bhojpuri region, displaying agony and suffering, used Krishna as a symbol. This has already been mentioned in Chapter I, Section III through a song sung by paddy transplanting labour (women). The shift from Krishna to Ram *bhakti* in a tradition of popular culture genre is significant as it explains the relative uncertainty of two labouring classes placed in different worlds. The one with more certainty, which a traditional social structure provided, engages with *bhakti* as an organic link between the *upasak* and *upasya*. On the other hand, in a socially insecure milieu due to the political economy of migration this organic link between the subject and object of *bhakti* turns into a power relation. This in a way reflects upon the fetishism of social relations, whereby the concept of *master* and *servant*, under constrain (due to the intrusion of colonial economy), seeks a new form. The abstraction of power relation in 'this' world compensates for this loss by seeking a power relation in the 'other' world. Through this analysis we merely want

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1. Krishna *bhakti* is characterized by emphasis on companionship.

to stress the point that the fuzzy power-relation of 'this' world in turn means that a politics and rationality of existence, as a social idea, came into existence in the lower order of the bhojpuri speaking area among whom *Bidesia* tradition flourished.

A third feature of the introduction in *Bidesia* play is the use of '*rupak*' (allegory). This too has been borrowed from the sufi tradition. The text of the allegory in itself makes it clear that it has no connection with the story of the play. This in turn means that the play is open for interpretation by different people/social groups in different ways. Thus the narrator pronounces that 'There will be four characters in this *tamasa - bidesi, pyari sundari, batohi, rakhelin, or bidesi bramha, batohi dharm, rakhelin maya, pyari sundari jeev.*'<sup>1</sup>

Then the text says that, "as a husband leaves his wife and goes to *bides*, in the same way *parmatma* leaves the *atma* due to *rakhelin istri*, only through the mediation of the *batohi (dharm)* does *atma* meet *parmatma*."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part I, Jaidurga Press, Patna, 1979, p.10.

2. Ibid., p.10.

This process of de-canonization is one important break from high culture (which is rooted in narrating the past). The Ramlila tradition is an artistic genre subject to the pressures of canonization which means a process that blurs heteroglossia, that is, that facilitates a naive, single-voiced reading.<sup>1</sup> Epical constructs like Ramayan are nothing but heteroglossia. The fact that *Bidesia* blurred the Ramlila tradition in the bhojpuri speaking region points to its (*Bidesia*'s) complex confrontation with tradition and social conflict, the milieu where it was located. A further reading of the play *Bidesia* explicitly pronounces this underlying politics that got manifested in this particular genre.

An analysis of *Bidesia* play in particular shows, by comparing the allegory-cum-introduction and the content of the play that in practice all sacrosanct categories are prone to moral aberrations. Through various citations below, this point becomes clear. At the outset it too should be mentioned that this particular reading will prove the dialogical engagement of high culture and low culture enter into with each other. This further means that cultural politics is not what politics uses to define trends, i.e., 'homoge-

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1. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogical Imagination, University of Texas Press (Austin), Paperback, 1985, p.425.

nising' categories. Along with this it should also be mentioned that that no culture hegemonises the other, rather the zig-zag and at times uneven relationships they engage in, leaves the scope for such research to answer questions as to the historical limitations of culture as politics or the importance of culture as a form of politics even in our age of mass culture. Compartmentalisation of cultures (though the usage of popular and elite remains valid) means looking at culture being a direct derivative of the 'economic'. This quantifying approach falls through when social movements and other actions are to be probed by re-casting the past in a new mould.

In the play *Bidesia* the first scene is a confrontation between *pyari* (wife) and *bidesi* (husband). They are newly wed but the husband wants to go to Calcutta without having spent any time with his wife. The wife resists this proposition and weeps. Anyhow the husband goes away, giving her the slip.

The wife is lonely and anguished. She cries day and night. In the mean time the husband (*bidesi*) starts living with another woman in Calcutta (called *rakhelin* in the



allegory and characterised as *randi*<sup>1</sup> in the play). At the end of everyone starts living together -- *bidesi*, *pyari rakhelin* (called *parmatma*, *atma* and *maya* in the allegory) along with the son *bidesi* and *rakhelin* have, who is accepted as son by even *pyari*. The play ends on a dramatic note but there seems to be no drama if it is looked at from another angle.

The very fact that the political economy of migration forced people to have a split existence and in normal circumstances prepared ground for a sort of social existentialism (where no 'one' location seems to be 'the' location, rather there is a constant problem of locating the self); so both the existence (in the village and in *bides*) of *bidesi* are finally accepted. Now this is a break from the mooring of the old value system where location was traditionally defined in a way that the existential dilemma never came up as a problematic.

From the dialogue of *batochi* (*dharm*) it is clear that

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1. While writing about 'Malini' in Gopal Udey's 'Vidya-Sundar' Jatra, Sumanta Banerjee sketches the *randi*'s image thus: "For the contemporary audience, Malini's overtures echoed the immediacy of the familiar soliciting heard in the red-light areas of Calcutta in those days. There was also a 'double entendre' implied in the use of the word *randi*, which meant in contemporary parlance both a widow and a prostitute." Sumanta Banerjee, The Parlour and the Streets, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1989, p.142.

the traditional solution to *bidesi's* betrayal of *pyari* (wife) lies in his going back to his village by leaving behind *rakhelin* and her son.

Quote from the song-dialogue:

*Tani bola bidesi tu jaiba ke na?*

*Bahut dinan se kumati kamaila*

*Sumati ke supath chalaiba ke na?...*

*Dharam ka kund me nahaiba ke na?..."<sup>1</sup>*

(Hey! *bidesi*, would you go or not?)

Earned ill-mind for years,

Will you tread the path of right or not?

Will you bathe in the well of virtue or not?)

At the same time *batchi* offers to stay with *rakhelin* (keep her as his 'kept') which she refuses. Now this scene demands another probe. *Batchi* who represents *dharm* and who a while ago argued for *bidesi's* home-going (in the name of *dharm*), himself is susceptible to *adharm* which is contrary to the way the allegory tries to build up the structure of this play (*Bidesia*). This in turn means that either *dharm* is put in the allegory because it is there in society as a

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part I, Jai Durga Press, Patna, 1979, p.50.

value and therefore becomes usage of 'religion as language' rather than mere religion; or *dharm* becoming *adharm* means that *dharma* is 'false consciousness' and is not innate to day to day living. Contrary to the allegory it is the *rakhelin istri* who rebuffs *batohi's* offer of staying together. In a typical religious play (like Ramlila), the differentiation between good and evil is so clearly defined that such promiscuous interchangeability of the character's innate values (which they symbolically represent) is just not allowed, either by the play wright or the audience. In this sense *Bidesia* tradition as looked through the play *Bidesia* is the subaltern's subversion of high culture, where traditional meanings, defined by the brahmanical order, get inverted. In fact, the tension at the level of ideas in a subaltern mind, exists because "It is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourses and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. This indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence."<sup>1</sup> But here it ought to be

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1. P. de Man, Allegories of Reading, Yale Univ. Press, 1979, p.293.

remembered that this tension reflected in "cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations, that threaten to unravel the strategies of domination; 'consciousness' need not be essential to its constitution.<sup>1</sup>

Here I want to argue that the history of the subaltern groups can be called 'unconscious' only in a situation where there is no exterior intrusion which gives new ideas to the indigenous. While foreseeing this fact, it remains important to note that the simultaneity of political economy and extra economic existence are both important even for a political discourse that looks at semantics for signs of protest. Political intrusion in one of these above mentioned realms (economic or extra economic) does not necessarily mean automatically affecting the other.

#### **WOMEN AS THE LESSER HALF**

The affected sight of the subaltern classes is not able to come up with a politics that is revolutionary but is rebellious in nature. This can be seen in the peasant milieu of popular culture. So at the most popular culture can only be looked at as the politics of dominance and

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1. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), Contesting Power, OUP, Delhi, 1991, p.3.

protest. An analysis of the portrayal of women in *Bidesia* makes this point closer.

In *Bidesia* play there are four instances of confrontation between female and male characters. Allegorically defined, this confrontation is between *bidesi* (*parmatma*) and *sundari* (*atma*), between 'dost' (husband's friend) and *sundari*, between *batchi* (*dharm*) and *sundari* who addresses him as *baba* (an elderly person) and between *rakhelin* (*maya*) and *batchi*.

If this confrontation is looked at through the allegory, it surely is a sabotage of all social norms which are a bulwark of traditional values. But if this confrontation is interpreted as part of day to day living, it becomes problematic. Nevertheless both these states, of looking at these confrontational constructs as that between a man and a woman or between different values, means that 'as fictional discourse and as an empirical event' they constitute a defiance. Read differently, they also seem to constitute a vulgar fantacising of reality. This term I use, keeping in mind the promiscuous gender relation that existed in the lower orders of which there are generous examples even today in the villages and among migrants.

The confrontation between *pyari* and *dost* is as follows after *bidesi* has left for *purab*:

Dost: Do you have a cow?

Pyari: Yes.

Dost: Feed her so much that she gets constipated.

Pyari: O.K.

Dost: Hog as much as you can - rabri, malai and anarkali biscuit.

Pyari: Are you joking with me?<sup>1</sup>

Another dialogue between *batchi* and *rakhelin* (characterised as *randi* in the play) goes like this, after *bidesi*, pursued by *batchi*, leaves for his home (in the village) after many years; goes like this:

Batchi: You should save your skin from such *langu-luccha* (rouge). Alright, if he has left am I not there?

Batchi: As soon as I start earning, *khata-khat*. I will get a *chudidar kurta* and a *sengupta dhoti*. *Bhauji* will enjoy the same privileges as before. I will buy a sparkling yellow (*piyar dag-dag*) petticoat. And a black (*kariya kuch-*

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part I, Jai Durga Press, Patna, p.24.

*kuch) kurti. And a red (lal bhabhuka) sari.*<sup>1</sup>

A third confrontation is between *pyari* and *dost*, when *pyari* is weeping over her fate: (on the stage *bidesi's* friend comes as *devar*, brother-in-law).

Devar: Why are you weeping *bhauji*? Am I not there if *bhaiya* has gone away? I will give you every thing - money, jewellery, clothes, whatever you will ask for.<sup>2</sup>

Then there is a long interchange of song-dialogues in which the *devar* tries to intice *pyari* and she, time and again, wants her *piya* to come back. Finally, *devar* tries to molest her by force.

Devar: *Abahi hamra bus me a ja,*

*Tab dekha kaisan ba maja.*

(Come into my embrace,

And feel the forbidden taste.)

Pyari: *Maja Ram bhejawlan par,*

*Suni la devar baat hamar.*

(Jouissance mine has gone his way

oh, lurid *devar* stay away.)

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1. Ibid., p.52.

2. Ibid., pp.58-59.

Pyari: *He, gangaji rakha laj,*

*Hame ba apna piyu se kaj.*<sup>1</sup>

(Oh, ganges save my honour

I need my loved one sooner.)

Fortunately a neighbour comes asking for *Ag* (fire) and *pyari* saves her chastity.

In the above mentioned confrontation few points are notable. One is that a male will always try to overwhelm a female whenever she is without her husband. Secondly, a wife will always remain faithful to her husband's memory come what may. *Pyari* is faithful because she is married (by rituals) to *bidesi* and *rakhelin* because she has left everything - relatives and house - for *bidesi* and now can't go back to her old self.

And allegorically defined, the waywardness of *batohi* (*dharm*), when he offers to stay with *rakhelin* (*maya*) means that even *dharm* can get enchanted by the luring of the flesh.

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1. *Ibid.*, pp.58-59.



An interpretation of Bidesia play through such a reading gives us few notable points. One, that the worldly location of people is what becomes important and so waywardness is nothing unusual. But this everydayness is constantly contested, as manifested in the play, by *Samaji*,<sup>1</sup> and by the dramatic change of scenes whenever a crisis situation is faced by the women characters, for example, the coming of the neighbour asking for fire when *devar* is almost ready to pounce on *pyari* or *samaji* rebuking *batchi* when he makes the offer to *rakhelin*, to stay with her. Unlike an epical or mythical play where women characters are saved from alien males by godly interventions (Ram or Krishna as in Ramayana and Mahabharat), in Bidesia (popular culture performances) it is the play's structure (a conscious effort by the playwright) that avoids breaking down of, aspired, for social norms. This difference of structure in plays which are part of popular culture and high culture or epical/mythical constructs, in part, define a difference in engagement, they have with reality.

A secondary point which evolves from this reading is

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1. In bidesia plays, *samaji* is from amongst the musicians, symbolically representing the society.

that unlike high culture where women are defined as *dharm patni*, a 'kept' (*rakha'il*) or *Ma-Durga*; in popular culture this stereotypical image is not replicated in female characters. Here women are susceptible to all the wrongs and goods of a society, of which they constitute a part. In a way, therefore, in popular culture, an ideal situation is as much desirable as a real situation which the people face. This can also explain the use of *ulat basi* (double meaning), so visible in *Bidesia* tradition whereby a sentence can mean something sensible and simultaneously something jocular and profane.

#### THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

The *Bidesia* play has another instance where, characters confront each other in a similar zone. This common zone is the zone of truth/good. Through the utterances of the contending characters this zone is sought to be appropriated in a particular way by these characters. This common zone (for contending characters, namely *batochi* and *rakhelin*), in the play *Bidesia* is a man's real-existing relationship with a woman and the way it should be (the ideal). When having found *bidesi* in the company of *rakhelin*, *batochi* defines this zone by using religious idioms he is taking the help of tradition; on the other hand *rakhelin* tries to define this

zone (of relationship) by citing worldly concerns which *bidesi* should have for her. Few quotes from the play clarify the contending positions of *batohi* and *rakhelin* or looked at allegorically between, *dharma* and *maya*. Though *dharma* also argues on extra-religious grounds as well (worldly grounds), but overall his arguments boarder on duty/*dharma*.

The following text makes the above point clear.

Batohi (to *bidesi*):

*Suni la bidesi bat, kala tu bahut ghat*

*Abahu se cheta din-duniya bidesia.*

*Tor kulwanti nari, rowatari puka phari*

*Kati ke tu dali dihala kuan me bidesia.<sup>1</sup>*

(Listen to me oh emigre, you stab in the back

open your eyes and be wise oh emigre,

Your chaste wife, cries galore

Why you put her into the anonymity of yore.)

Batohi (to *bidesi*):

On meeting *bidesi* in company of gamblers

*Sunahu tat ek bat tum, juasar ko tyag*

*kahna man nahi ta, kul me lagi dag.<sup>2</sup>*

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part 1, Jai Durga Press, Patna, 1979, p.37.

2. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part I, Jai Durga Press, Patna, 1979, p.37.

(Few lines I have for you, don't you gamble away  
listen to my words lest you lose your familial sway  
*Chodi da adharam, mijaj ka ke naram tu*  
*Manva me kari lehu saram bidesia.*  
*Dharam ka nar par chadhi ke mauj kara*  
*Hara birahineya ke dukh ho bidesia.*<sup>1</sup>

(Leave the path of decadence, think with a cool mind  
You should feel ashamed of your kind  
A ride on the boat of dharam is a choice  
Once again let the agonised one rejoice.)

When *bidesi* introduces *batohi* to his new wife (called *randi* in the play) who addresses *bidesi*.

Randi: *Nis din prem ke pyasi rahti hun,*  
*Lalachat ankh bichara.*<sup>2</sup>  
(I long for love round the day  
waiting - eyes cannot look the other way.)

Randi: *Tohre suratiya main naina lagal piya,*  
*Akiyan ke more tarsaiha mati ho*  
*Hamra ke piya bisraiha mati ho.*<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.47.

2. Ibid., p.48.

3. Ibid., p.49.

(In your face my eyes have found that emmersed space  
Never keep my eyes waiting for this  
Never let my shadow be amiss.)

Randi: *Mata, Pita, Bhai, Bhaujai tohre karan raja  
Geh-neh sab sakhi jati-kul, tejlin sakal samaja.*<sup>1</sup>  
(For you I left Mother, Father, Brother, his wife, mine  
All friends and ties old, now no more chime.)

In *Bidesia* plays, reading of the text without understanding the context of such a construct can be misleading. The moments of its engagement with the audience, through profane dialogues, may represent *Bidesia* as merely an entertainment genre. There are numerous instances of such 'profane' engagements. To take an example from the play *Gabarghichor*, there are two people who lay claim to a child, one person is the man married to the child's mother and another is he who was her lover, when the husband had been absent over the years, earning money in *bides*. *Gadbadi* (the lover) in order to lay his claim on the child says before the *pancha* (village councillors),

Gadbai: *Hum rasta dhailey jat rahi, one se Larikwa ke  
matariya chal awat rahe. Humra se kuch galti ho gail.*

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1. Ibid., p.50.

(I was walking along the path, the boy's mother was coming from the other direction. And I committed a mistake.)

Pancha: *Rah mein galti ho jai te se beto ho jai? Kawno sabut ba?*<sup>1</sup>

(If a mistake is committed in the way, how can a child be born? Have you any proof?)

And then allegorically the script goes on to highlight the claims of both the husband and the lover on *gabarghichor* (the son). Finally, when the *Pancha* decides to get the son cut into three equal pieces, it is the mother who forfeits her claim to the son whereas these two males insist on an equal division of the boy. Finally the mother is given possession of her son, for only she feels for him.

In various other plays, the portrayal of women is supposedly negative but it ought to be remembered that it is also an empowerment of the female characters whereby their sexual promiscuity or their loyalty to their husbands is simultaneously, one of the various central images in different plays. Whether these images are negative or positive

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part II, Jai Durga Press, Patna, 1986, p.82.

can be gauged at only by looking at the society which not only gave rise to such images but also looked at them as a problematic. Only then can *Bidesia* genre be reconstructed, in its totality, of being reflective of an open endedness, while dealing with gender relations.

Till now, there does not seem to be any evidence of *Bidesia* being expressive of merely 'one' thing. As has already been asserted, *Bidesia's* reading itself is a complex process. And so has been its engagements with the social order. If in some plays the migrant's life comes up as the central theme, other plays pose this problem indirectly. A majority of the plays, however, challenge the disjuncture or disharmony in life viz. breaking up of traditional familial norms, relationships and even family, as a unit. But this challenge is not traditional, nor is it 'rational' in the modern sense of the term. *Bidesia's* themes constitute voice of 'protest' only because, thematically they are not a replication of the past. This conflict resolution may not seem as 'sacred', compared to a straightjacketed political formulation, partially because it is the product of a society and of classes which are not modern. But located in its own milieu (space and time), *Bidesia* has a dissonating voice against prevalent practices.

The very fact that *Bidesia* genre has the courage to address the underlying uneasiness of a society and at times comes out with explicit solutions give it a political edge.

#### EVIL ACTORS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In the play *Beti Biyoga*, a father sells away his daughter in marriage to an old, infirm groom. The daughter flees back to her mother's house. The husband comes to retrieve her. Finally she has to relent. But this narrative is not unproblematic. Different characters, in the play contest this arrangement. This contestation is argued differently by different people in this play, *Beti Biyoga*.

In a *chaupai* the *Motari* (mother) laments:

*Burha bar se sadi kaila*

*Gaon-ghar ke chit se gaila*<sup>1</sup>

(Gave my daughter to old bridegroom

left out in the cold by village heirloom.)

The daughter cryingly tells her father:

*Kei aisan jadu kail, pagal tohar mati bhail,*

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1. Bhikhari Thakur Granthawali, Part I, Jai Durga Press, Patna, 1979, p.111.



*Neti kati ke beti bhasiawla ho babuji.*<sup>1</sup>

(Who cast this evil spell, made my father insane  
Drowned the daughter and virtues in the whirlpool  
of pain.)

And the *Pancha* also add: "If we feel good at the sight of people having perfect pairs of bullocks or a pair of horses... why can't human beings be paired properly. A person who can't fix up the pair between his daughter and son-in-law, we should realise that today our efforts, in the past, of pairing everything else has gone waste."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it is through the daughter that the play passes the final verdict on an ideal marriage when the *beti* says:

*Dulha-dulhin chahi jog, jaise lavela sab log,  
tarkari dal me noon.*<sup>3</sup>

(Like people but salt in dishes, such should be  
the pairing of bride and groom.)

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1. Ibid., p.113.

2. Ibid., p.113.

3. Ibid., p.118.

The response that *Bidesia* got from various sections of the peasantry also reflects upon the politics of this cultural form. The performers in *Bidesia* came mostly from amongst the service castes. Bhikhari Thakur himself was a barber by caste. The audience comprised of the lower castes. It is only at a later stage, when *Bidesia* established itself that it got deceived by the upper-orders of the society.

## CONCLUSION

In order to sum up the entire discussion, we ought to once again look back at the problematised theme of the dissertation. This can be constituted in the following way, with hindsight, after going through all three chapters:

- (1) Was *Bidesia* the 'articulation of aspirations' of the subaltern classes?
- (2) What 'space' did the rural structure create for the subaltern classes, which made *Bidesia* representative of their aspirations?

To begin with, let us look at the second question.

"Traditional Indian discourse formed a structure, just as rationalist discourses did, and there was no simple incremental transition from one to the other."<sup>1</sup> Here, it should be clear from the outset that there is no effort at counterposing both these cognitive and normative methods. It is only to help understand the dynamics of a society which "unlike pre-modern European societies which seem to have had a symmetrical hierarchy, its [caste system in

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1. Sudipta Kaviraj, "State, Society and Discourse in India" in J. Manor (ed.), Rethinking Third World Politics, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1989, p.80.

India] internal principle of the organisation of inequality"<sup>1</sup> was more complex. It was complex to the extent that unlike Europe where there were constant peasant rebellions, Indian peasantry (after 1600) hardly ever bordered on any sort of open defiance of power. Various formulations have been put forward regarding this peculiar Indian phenomenon. Some social scientists in the West have gone to the extent of identifying the 'orient' through such images. In some senses, these illuminated images may be true. But even if this standpoint is contested through empirical evidence pointing to "the relative infrequency of lower order defiance in Indian history",<sup>2</sup> what nevertheless remains important is looking around for set of actually existing social relations which constituted this society. If these existing social relations, which in turn also mean power-relations in a given social order, don't explicate conflict then other nuances of this 'exchange' have to be looked for. It is precisely here that *Bidesia* genre in the Bhojpuri speaking region, comes up as a medium reflecting the everydayness of a society, not as a static entity but reflecting upon the social dynamics of the Saran peasant

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1. Ibid., p.40.

2. Ibid., p.74.

society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Writing about the large scale flight of peasants from high rent parganas to low rent parganas, Anand A. Yang in his Limited Raj describes this as 'avoidance protest'. In the realm of cultural expressiveness, formalised in the *Bidesia* genre too, 'avoidance protest' comes up as a proposition for the lower orders of Saran. But given the specificity of their socio-economic milieu, determined to a large extent by season migration, *Bidesia* for them was a weapon of 'culture protest' against the hegemonic order. In a minimal sense this picture was true for the entire Indian society as "the cultural space of Indian society was also divided in a different way, between the high and the subaltern cultures". [This difference, subaltern culture has to high culture is not] "merely 'failures' to copy correctly "[but]" they are different stories, in terms of structure, escaping censorship and punishment by keeping a tenuous formal semblance of identity." [Also the absence of high culture is] "the presence of a very different one [the subaltern culture] whose rules, codes, emphases and ironies are entirely different."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.81.

Along with the above mentioned mentalite differentiated as high and subaltern culture, another factor which essentialised Bidesia was the economic impact of colonialism on India especially after the failed revolt of 1857. "If there was one period when the pressures of the European capitalist system seemed most likely decisively to break into the agrarian power structure of north India, it was between 1860 and 1914."<sup>1</sup> To what extent, this succeeded has been a point of contention among historians but some patterns of economic dominance and oppression at the macro-level emerged. Subduing labour and land for commodity production in the interior was more tumultuous; it subordinated vast populations and territories to new economic powers....<sup>2</sup> The dissertation has looked through the political economy of migration from Saran and has come to the same conclusion as David Ludden quoted above. A further empirical elaboration on this line shows that "...the development of industrial centres [like] Bengal, [and other economic factors led to]... breaking down

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1. C.A. Bayly, "Indian Social Formations and the 'World System': North India since C.1700" in Sugata Bose (ed.), South Asia and World Capitalism, Delhi: OUP, 1990, p.131.
  2. David Ludden, "World Economy and Village India, 1600-1900: Exploring the Agrarian History of Capitalism", in Sugata Bose (ed.), South Asia and World Capitalism, Delhi: OUP, 1990, p.177.

particularist ties of locality and kin."<sup>1</sup> This proposition is a typical Nationalist historian's point of view on Indian economic and social historiography but it is partially correct. The impact of colonial economy did shake up the previous social and economic structure.

*Bidesia* found an operational space under such circumstances, where the economic arrangement of physical existence and social mode of being were changing. In the dissertation, this phase comes out as a transition from the 'old' to the 'new'. The inter-war period suddenly lay bare the trends of this transitory stage. The nuances *Bidesia* carries, as a popular genre, regarding the old order and its engagement with new developments (railways etc.) or the social reformism (as reflected in plays like *Beti-Biyog*), is a confirmation of the subaltern's engagement with real life, as active components of history. Here one can however add that, the subaltern being 'conscious' or 'unconscious', is historically, contextual. I believe that through *Bidesia*, given the particularised location of the Saran lower orders, external and internal factors - as mentioned in the dissertation - also allowed them to use cultural expressions as

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1. Gordon Johnson, "World Economy and Nationalism in India, 1880-1920" in Sugata Bose (ed.), South Asia and World Capitalism, Delhi: OUP, 1990, p.237.

some sort of politics, C.A. Bayly talks about this autonomy of "the 'under-groups'; small peasants, landless labourers, 'tribals' and tied village servants...[who]...were never wholly subordinate."<sup>1</sup>

At the end of this concluding note, one very fundamental misconceptualisation ought to be cleared.

The 'resistance' of the subaltern classes to the hegemonic ideology was <sup>o</sup>two pronged in the Bhojpuri speaking region. Constructed through *Bidesia*, this seems to be a complex effort at challenging the traditional brahmanical order and simultaneously, values of the city life. There were partial borrowings from both these sources, reflected in the usage of social-reformists ideas but using traditional symbols. A third important component, to help explain the popularity of *Bidesia*, is the portrayal of the subaltern's engagements and disengagements with his surrounding. In this sense too, *Bidesia* was a new form of identification for the subaltern classes in Saran. The acceptability of *Bidesia* genre by other social groups also speaks of its counter-hegemonic assertion against domination.

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1. C.A. Bayly, op. cit., p.116.



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