

The Ship of Theseus: Sailing or Sinking?: Tracing Bidesia from Folk to Proscenium

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Abstract

The Ship of Theseus paradox can be explained as follows: if Ship A undergoes repairs over time and all its original parts are gradually replaced, does it remain the same ship, or does it then become a new ship, i.e. Ship B? This paper applies this philosophical paradox to understand the evolution of the folk theatre form of Bidesia—from Bhikhari Thakur’s folk settings to Hrishikesh Sulabh’s proscenium adaptations. Thakur’s Bidesia is presented as Ship A, and a delineation of its theatrical ‘parts’ is traced with reference to the social, political and economic conditions relevant to Thakur’s times. Sulabh’s revision of Bidesia for the proscenium stage is presented as Ship B, and the replacements subjected to Ship A by him are closely analysed, to reach the ultimate conclusion: is the Ship of Bidesia sailing or sinking?

Keywords: Bidesia, Ship of Theseus, folk theatre, proscenium theatre, Bhikhari Thakur, Hrishikesh Sulabh

Formulating the Theory of Forms, Plato famously claimed that “everything in the world was only a copy of a perfect form existing in the realm attainable to us through contemplation” (Dutta, 2021, p. 30). Plato’s philosophy ultimately questions the notion of identity, which raises the quandary: is there one ‘original’ specimen from which all that exists are branches? The paradox of the Ship of Theseus poses a similar dilemma, often inviting arguments but always eluding answers. The premise goes as follows: if Ship A has to undergo repairs after decades of wear and tear, and all the original parts of the ship are replaced

with new ones, is Ship A now a new ship and may be termed Ship B? Furthermore, if each part of the ship is replaced, bit by bit, over a course of several years, at what point, if any, does Ship A cease to be the 'original'?

Folk literature, including folk theatre, folk songs, folk dances, folk art, draws inspiration from a variety of factors—social realities, political upheavals, personal and interpersonal relations. As these factors change and evolve, folk traditions and their expressions evolve as well. This paper attempts to study the emergence of Bidesia, a vibrant folk theatre tradition from Bihar, and its eventual transformation under the influence of new practitioners and contemporary conditions. Bidesia, pioneered by the 'Shakespeare' of Bhojpuri literature, Bhikhari Thakur, will be examined as a folk theatre form that has been subjected to a variety of alterations. Apart from Thakur, the Bidesia style of Hrishikesh Sulabh will be studied to understand if it is sinking under the weight of Thakur's folk theatre style, or it has been given fresh steam under Sulabh's evolved idiom for the proscenium.

Ship A: Delineating the Origins of Bidesia

After the Battle of Buxar (1764), the British East India Company gained control over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Undivided Bihar, being rich in mineral resources, especially coal, mica, iron ore, copper, and bauxite, was an extremely profitable source of profit for the Company.¹ However, once the centre of colonial power shifted to Calcutta, the Company extracted resources but invested very little in the state, leading to an economic and administrative downfall. Migration to Calcutta became common among the people, especially men, in search of better jobs, resulting in the 'bidesia' phenomenon. 'Bidesia', as a word, translates to 'foreigner', and refers to a person who has left his native land to work in a 'foreign' place. The Bidesia folk form of expression emerged from within the existing folk forms of Bihar, in the form of folk theatre, folk songs, folk dances, and folk tales, in which the 'bidesi's' experience as a migrant, the separation of families, and the lament of the migrant's wife were narrated. Till the 1820s, Bidesia songs addressed 'Calcutta' as the 'foreign land'. However, migration patterns in Bihar began to shift in the 1830s because of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. European colonial powers sought to replace enslaved African labour with indentured labourers from Asia, particularly India and China. People who could

work under harsh conditions on sugar, jute, coffee, and other plantations, often for wages well below the minimum standard, were targeted. By the 1920s, approximately 1.3 to 1.5 million Indians had migrated under the indenture system to countries like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago. Due to its economic backwardness, large numbers of migrant labourers from Bihar went to these countries, and Bihar became one of the most severely affected states under indenture. Gradually, the reference to 'bides' in Bidesia folk productions shifted from pointing to Calcutta to alluding to distant indenture colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, and Trinidad.

Bhikhari Thakur, born in 1887, witnessed the hardships of migration firsthand, and "the consequent separation from his wife deeply influenced him to write his most renowned play, *Bidesiya*."² (Dwivedi, 2000, p. 38). Thakur, belonging to the *nai* (barber) caste, would travel to several villages and towns for wedding and childbirth celebrations.³ As a result, his fluency in singing and performing folk forms was unmatched. Inspired by the Ramlila, Raslila, Jatra, Tamasha, Nautanki, and Naach folk traditions, Thakur decided to render his own migratory experiences through similar folk performances, incorporating elements from the above-mentioned traditions of folk theatre in his performances.

First performed in 1912, Thakur's play, *Bidesiya* became so influential that it came to define an entire genre of folk production (songs, dance, plays, and poems) centered on the themes of migration. The plot of Thakur's play revolves around the Bidesi (the migrant), Pyaari Sundari (the migrant's wife), Batohi (the traveller who carries Sundari's grieving letter to her husband in Calcutta), and Mistress (Bidesi's mistress). One of the prominent reasons behind the play's revolutionary legacy is the focus provided to the wife, i.e., Sundari and her grievances instead of to the migrant himself. Thakur's theatre often put female agony, desire, and oppression to the fore, which also became a defining characteristic of the Bidesia genre. Other plays in the genre, including *Beti Viyog* (Daughter's Separation), *Ganga Snan* (A Bath in Ganges), and *Gabarghichor* focus on similar issues.

Ship A, i.e., Thakur's Bidesia, is built and supported by several parts: Naach being one of the most significant. Naach is a performance tradition where men wear women's clothing and make-up to dance. Other important parts of the Bidesia genre include the costumes, which

are not fancy, but everyday clothes, similar to what people wear in day-to-day life; folk songs that are rooted in the cultural fabric of the people; musical instruments such as the dholak and the manjira, which are commonly used in folk songs; stock characters readily identifiable by the villagers, and a story with a broad message; bidesiya bhav, i.e., emotions emerging from the experience of migration. Audience engagement was also an important part of Thakur's theatre as it motivated audiences to break the fourth wall, engage enthusiastically with the plays, and become collectively immersed in the story being performed on stage.

The aesthetics of Bidesia is rooted in the careful configuration of the various parts discussed above, along with the politics of the play, to create a spectacle that is visually striking, appeals to the masses, while successfully communicating the intended message. Aesthetics, in literary studies, can be understood as the politics of beauty and the function it serves, not just within a given text, but outside it as well. While textual features can be said to include the structure, style, or content of a text, aesthetics refers to a "constellation of textual features" (Olsen, 1981, p. 4), i.e., how these features interact, adhere, and most significantly, configure in an intended manner, to generate meaning and ideological impact. They constitute, in essence, the 'politics' of the text. Some major political issues addressed by Bidesia include economic oppression, caste-based discrimination and gender disparity. Alongside, the sorrow of separation due to migration, the humour of everyday rural life, and the joy of reunion are also included. Ship A, therefore, is a product of the circumstances of its time, and is subject to change as the times change. The following section will focus on decoding its transformation into Ship B, i.e., Hrishikesh Sulabh's version of Bidesia.

Ship B: Hrishikesh Sulabh and Bidesia in Proscenium

After Thakur, there were hardly any playwrights who carried forward the legacy of Bidesia as a folk theatre tradition. The challenge of reviving it was taken up by a group of theatre enthusiasts in Bihar in the latter half of the twentieth century, Hrishikesh Sulabh being one of them. Born in the Siwan district of Bihar, Sulabh is a Sangeet Natak Akademi award winning playwright, novelist, and theatre critic. Instead of restaging Thakur's plays like most others had done, Sulabh attempted to adapt the folk theatre form to the proscenium theatre. He began writing new plays that addressed issues similar to Thakur's Bidesia plays, but not

before replacing certain parts of Ship A to suit more contemporary audiences and times. Several components such as the thematic concerns, Naach, the setting of the plays, the folk songs and folk music, as well as the characters of the Sutradhaar (narrator) and Labar (joker/jester) were retained, but with some alterations. Some of the other parts were replaced for better manoeuvring in the now different waters.

Whenever folk performances are converted for a proscenium presentation, the very concept of the term 'folk' is significantly altered. Renowned American folklorist, Alan Dundes (1965), describes folk as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (p. 2). Under the ambit of this definition, it can be safely suggested that the audience in the village makeshift theatre as well as the proscenium is 'folk'. However, there are several limitations to this understanding of what truly qualifies as folk or being a part of it: foremost being the evidently clear divide of caste and class between the village theatre folk and the audience that the proscenium theatres cater to. Bidesia, as folk theatre as well as its overall genre of folk cultural production, emerged from the margins of society, Thakur being a Dalit himself. From the actors to the audience, playwright to the characters, the consciousness of the marginalised suffused the entirety of Thakur's Bidesia. The performance of Bidesia in the proscenium becomes a passive consumption, since people from various backgrounds, including those who do not have firsthand experience of migration, or of Bihari culture and language, came to watch the plays. On the contrary, in folk plays that originate from within the rural culture, the audience usually comprises people who are closely associated with the happenings in the play, tethered through shared experiences, knowledge of folk songs, close relations with the performers, and a crucially personal awareness of the politics of the plays. As a result, when the switch from 'rural' folk to 'urban' folk happens, as Bidesia shifts from village settings to the proscenium, several other parts that have been instrumental in substantiating Bidesia as a lively folk theatrical tradition undergo replacement as well.

Language is often the first element that is affected whenever the transition happens from one mode of human expression to the other. Often, the change of language is effected to promote accessibility, but historically, the replacement of local languages and dialects has carried grave ramifications, such as the marginalisation of communities, systemic oppression, and their erasure from the political discourse. In the

proscenium adaptation of Bidesia, Sulabh's attempt was to amalgamate Bhojpuri with the commonly spoken Hindustani of the North Indian states, to render his plays and the overall Bidesia theatre, more relevant to the audience. Here is an excerpt from Sulabh's play, *Amali*:

अमली : हम रोटी ले आते हैं खाके चले जाओ।

रमेसर : हम न जाएँगे।

अमली : बचना की बात मान गए और हमरी कवनो बिसात न हैं?

रमेसर : सुन। अब सोच लिए हैं कि ई साले लूटेरों की गुलामी न करेंगे। हफ्ता-दस दिन की बात है। रुपिया-पइसा के जुगाड़ में लगे हैं। रेलगाड़ी का भाड़ा भर जुट जाए फिर तो भागेगा दवन, तो पकड़ेगा कवन? सीधे कलकाता। अपने गाँव-जवार के बहुत लोग हैं, सो जहिया तक काम-धंधा न मिलता है खुराकी की फिकर न है। कवनो काम-धंधा मिल जाए, फिर तो हर महीने डाक बाबू से सौ टकिया नोट छुड़ाया करना।”

Amali: I'll bring you some roti eat it and go.

Ramesar: I'm not going.

Amali: Bachna's words are imporant for you but mine carry no weight?

Ramesar: Listen. I've made up my mind—I won't be a slave to these damned looters anymore. It's just a matter of seven to ten days. I'm trying to arrange for some money. Once I have enough for the train fare then who can catch me if I run? Straight to Calcutta. Many people from our village have already gone there, so even if I don't find work right away, at least I won't starve. If I land some job or work, I'll send a hundred-rupee note home every month through the postman.

(*Amali*, 2010a, p. 37; translation ours)

Here, the dialogue is not entirely in Bhojpuri, but uses a mixed language which foregrounds the cultural background of the characters, while remaining intelligible to a non-Bhojpuri-speaking audience. Changing the language of a folk form like Bidesia, irrespective of how unintentionally, unfortunately still perpetuates the same bias against Bhojpuri that has been peddled in the past few decades by and through popular media. As evident from the aforementioned excerpt, the language spoken by the characters in *Amali* is an attenuated version of Bhojpuri. This, thus, risks the 'bastardisation' of language, minimising its impact and endangering its existence. Bhojpuri has faced severe socio-political disregard as a result of the economic neglect inflicted on the state of Bihar since colonial times. Therefore, despite being a language with a distinctive grammar, vocabulary, and literature, Bhojpuri has been subsumed under

the umbrella of the Hindi language, and given the status of a dialect. Sulabh's usage of Hindustani-infused Bhojpuri, as a result, limits the use of the original language to the rural folk, and the urban folk are served a 'sanitised' version of it. The 'obscenity' in the language, which is a characteristic component of Thakur's Bidesia, is also removed for the proscenium staging. According to Taiyyab Hussain Peedit, a renowned scholar of Bhikhari Thakur's works, the aim behind such 'obscenity' was to "humanise rather than hypnotise the audience with his plays" (Peedit, 2018, p. 14). Its sanitisation for the proscenium, therefore, leads to an unintentional but certainly problematic perpetuation of biases against the language and its people, which is ultimately rooted in colonial standards of what qualifies as 'civilised' and what does not.

Another excerpt from *Amali*, offers an insight into the inclusion of folk songs in the play:

पिया के टूटि गईल आस,
लागल गर्दन फाँस।
केहू नाहिं पुछनिहार एहि गँउवा में।
भइल अमली लाचार,
गइल बाबू के दुआर। केहु
पहिले गारी से बतियवले
तब पइसा धरवले। केहु
सभे जन-बनिहार,
रोवे-रोवे जार-जार। केहु ”

The hope of reuniting with my beloved is gone
It feels like there is a noose round my neck.
Nobody asks after me in this village.
Amali is now helpless,
She went to plead with the Babu. Nobody
First he spoke to her in abuses
Then he handed her some money. Nobody
All kin and relative,
weep and have no solace. Nobody

(*Amali*, 2010b, p. 57; translation ours)

The genre of this folk song is 'Kajri Jhoomar'—a fusion of 'Kajri'⁴ and 'Jhoomer'⁵. As can be discerned from the verse, and was further

substantiated by the performance of *Amali* at the National School of Drama (2006), the folk songs in the play, unlike the dialogues, retain the original language, i.e., Bhojpuri. The tunes of the folk songs are also similar to the original versions. However, the live music provided by skilled musical instrument players in folk theatre is replaced with pre-recorded background music. This has to be done because proscenium plays have a much reduced runtime (approximately 1-2 hours) as compared to rural folk plays, which usually run throughout the night. Moreover, in the proscenium, the budget provided for the staging of folk plays is significantly greater than what is available to rural players so that the costumes are more defined, unlike the make-shift costumes worn by rural folk actors during their performances. The characters in proscenium productions are more rounded, unlike the stock characters observed in Thakur's plays. The presentation of political issues is also more nuanced in plays such as *Amali*, thus being in sync with the 'elite' audience of the proscenium. The fourth wall is often not disturbed in the proscenium performances of *Bidesia*, unlike in Thakur's *Bidesia*, where audience members are encouraged to participate. As a result, there is less room for improvisation and addition of topically relevant material during the performance.

Another fundamentally crucial part of Thakur's *Bidesia* is *Naach*, which has historically been a part of the performance tradition of *Bidesia*. But as Ship A evolved into Ship B, with the replacements demanded by contemporary requirements, this part of the tradition was also altered. *Naach* belongs to the folk performance tradition where men take on female roles and impersonate femininity while dancing to songs and music. In recent decades, *Naach* has come under severe scrutiny over its vulgarisation, and the exploitative employment of young, even underage boys, who are made to perform for rowdy crowds of intoxicated men. However, *Naach*, as incorporated by Thakur differs from such misuse of the form as Thakur performed his plays with men who were part of his theatrical troupe. Replacing *Naach* performers with female actors in the proscenium, thus, becomes a contested domain: from the lens of feminism, this development is celebratory, since women have been historically excluded from the performing arts. It is noteworthy that giving space to women promotes inclusion. Simultaneously, however, this also leads to folklorisation, i.e., "the re-stylisation of traditional expressions so that they become less complex aesthetically and

semantically” (Seitel, 2001, p. 7). Professor and writer, Wolfgang Mieder, defines folklorisation as: “The innovative and often commercial use of folk materials such as costumes, folk songs, folktales, proverbs, and so forth, outside their traditional contexts” (1989, p. 163).

Improper make-up, as done by rural Bidesia performers, is an integral part of the tradition. Apart from being representative of the lack of refined resources and adequate theatre settings in their performance spaces, improper make-up safeguards the Naach performers from the ire of its audience. A major reason why Naach has degraded into Launda Naach is largely because the young Naach performers wear ‘proper’ feminine clothes and make-up, which makes the crowd (composed mostly of inebriated men) more excitable and unruly, ultimately endangering the sexual safety of the performers. In contrast, traditional Bidesia performances feature older men in ‘improper’ feminine clothes and exaggerated, crude make-up, an aesthetic that aligns with Bakhtin’s concept of ‘grotesque realism’, where the “grotesque body is integrated into the rest of the world with its opposing, incomplete, outgrowing and transgressive characteristics” (Şensoy & Ayan, 2022, p. 863), thus subverting social norms. This exaggeration creates an amusing, carnivalesque spectacle rather than a sensual one.

Ship of Bidesia: Sailing or Sinking?

The only reason behind subjecting the Ship of Theseus to undergo replacements is to ultimately prevent it from sinking and drowning. In the process, Ship A can transform into Ship B, and still continue to serve the same or similar purpose. This conclusion can also be applied to the transformation of Bidesia from folk theatre to proscenium theatre. Both Thakur’s and Sulabh’s ships are built using similar, yet varying parts, but the eventual aim remains the same: highlighting the experiences of the migrants and their families. Tradition, in the end, is nothing but “a reconstruction: the rediscovery of the past by the present as desired” (Singh & Trivedi, 1992, p. 11). Thakur’s Bidesia as a folk theatre tradition also stands on the shoulders of several antecedent traditions, borrowing form, style, and techniques for better staging and engagement. Sulabh’s Bidesia follows a similar trajectory, as it has helped the folk theatre form to reach a wider audience, be included in literary discussions, and be a part of major theatre festivals. As a result, Bhikhari Thakur’s Bidesia has also reached audiences outside the rural hinterland of

Bihar. This has also been made possible because the ownership of idioms and ideas moves with more abandon within folk forms. Literary discourse, however, follows an entirely different approach, where such boundaries are more restricted. For instance, it is far easier to answer the question, 'Why is *Macbeth* not Theatre of the Absurd?' than it is to answer, 'Is *Amali Bidesia*?' This is because the former functions within an established critical framework, supported by clear definitions and rules. Folk literature, however, lacks formal documentation of theories and writers, thus making the task of foregrounding distinctions more challenging. The answer to what makes Thakur's *Bidesia* 'Bidesia', and Sulabh's *Bidesia* also 'Bidesia', lies not in clearly demarcated definitions, but in the enduring essence of the 'folk' that animates both. Hence, despite the replacements and consequent transformation, the Ship of *Bidesia* continues its steady sail.

Notes

1. Undivided Bihar included traditions originating from present-day Jharkhand, and some regions in present-day Nepal.
2. This paper uses 'Bidesia' to refer to the folk theatre form, and 'Bidesiya' to refer to the play written by Bhikhari Thakur.
3. According to the upper-caste Hindu rituals of weddings and childbirth ceremonies, a barber is called to perform some rituals during the festivities. This ritual is rooted in the caste-based occupations pervasive in India.
4. A Bhojpuri folk song genre traditionally sung by women during the monsoon season. These songs can have varying themes, including hope for good crop yield, wishing reunion with migrant husbands, etc.
5. A folk song genre, usually performed during festivals, weddings, or childbirth ceremonies, along with folk dance and acting. Common themes include celebration, seeking divine blessings, etc.

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