



## Interface between Society and Literature

**Sandeep Rai**

Research Scholar, Department of sociology, DDU Gorakhpur, university  
Gorakhpur (U.P.), India

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**Abstract:** *In proposed research paper, I wish to explore the relationship between society and literature, particularly through the plays and songs of Bhikhari Thakur a popular Bhojpuri1 writer of 20th century. His work has often been seen as revolutionary and resistant towards the ideologies of the dominant class.*

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

**Key Words:** Bhojpuri region, cultural, transcends, political, comprises, western, reaches .

The proposed paper would deal with the very understanding of the terms 'politics' and aesthetics. Politics according to Jacques Ranciere (2005) is the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the established order. Politics he argues itself is not the exercise of power or struggle for power. It is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects roused as 'common' and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and discuss about them. Politics first is thus the conflict about the very existence of that sphere of experience. I see literature as both a matter of art and taste and also fundamentally a matter of time and space. It deals with time and space as forms of configuration of our 'place' in society. A discussion on the relationship between literature and society is multifaceted and has been discussed by literary scholars and sociologists alike. Broadly four characterizations of this relationship can be found: 1) that literature reflects society, i.e. it adheres to or gets generated through the dominant norms of society, 2) that literature influences society or it does not adhere to the prevalent norms and is seen as

radical within the existing society. These are often known as resistance literature. Resistance literature is considered as an important factor in the development of political consciousness among subjugated people, 3) that literature functions to maintain or justify the social order, and in effect exerts social control. It often falls in the realm of propaganda art and 4) literature negotiates its way between the three and in the process gains popularity and mass appeal. All four notions ultimately emphasize upon the reciprocal interaction between literature and society.

There have been several other commonly identified schools which have existed in the form of for instance, cultural studies, formalism, post-colonialism, gender studies. Michael Pickering in his book research methods for cultural studies (1988), talks about the use of the discipline history as topic and tool for cultural research. Along the same lines, we can look at the work of Ranajit Guha in rule of property for Bengal (1963) to contextualise Bhikhari thakur's literature in the socio-historical context put forth by Ranajit Guha. Rule of property for Bengal is classic work on the history of colonial India. It is an essential text in



the areas of colonial and postcolonial studies. In this book, Guha examines the British establishment of permanent settlement of Bengal- the first major administrative intervention by the British in the region an effort to impose a western notion of private property on the Bengal country side. Guha's study of the dynamics of colonialism and reflects on the lasting effect of the dynamic following the formal determination of colonial rule. By pro claiming the permanent settlement in 1793, the British hoped to promote a prosperous capitalist agriculture of the kind that had developed in England. The act renounced for all time the state's right to raise the assessment already made upon landowners and thus sought to establish a system of property that was, in the British view, necessary for the creation of a stable government. Guha traces the origins of the permanent settlement to the anti-feudal ideas of Philip Francis and the critique of Feudalism provided by the physiocratic thought, the precursor of political economy. The central question of the book asks is how the permanent settlement, founded in anti-feudalism and grafted on to India by the most advanced capitalist power of the day. Looking at history as topic and tool, there is an attempt to view the impact of permanent settlement in socio-historical context under which, land was divided using Ricardian physiocratic principle. revenue was fixed pre-harvest. In order to pay the revenue amount, peasants had to mortgage their piece of land in lieu of money. A new class of urban money lenders emerged. Money lenders advanced cash to peasants on a very high rate of interest. Peasants failing to pay revenue to the land-lords borrowed money from urban money-lenders and failing to pay the exorbitant rate of interest further mortgaged the same piece of land. this equation pushed peasants into the vicious circle of indebtedness. The ramifications of lord Cornwallis's permanent settlement of 1793 are as under:

1. Depeasantization
2. Rural poverty
3. sub-infeudation and indebtedness (guha, 1963).

Talking about research methods in cultural studies, Michael Pickering approaches history as topic and tool a broad set of sources for studying everyday cultures in the past and broad set of techniques for thinking about historical experience and representation in the present.

Based on the above argument, one can look at the argument put forth by Ranajit Guha in his book *Rule of property for Bengal* (1963) based on Subaltern historiography, and see how subaltern theory fits into the literature produced by Bhikhari thakur in the background of colonial agrarian setting. According to Pickering, there has been a reluctance to bring any explicit discussion of methods and methodology in cultural studies. Cultural studies have preferred to borrow techniques and methods from established disciplines without subscribing to any disciplinary credentials itself. Empirical enquiry has been treated with suspicion or regarded as woefully insufficient in itself, primarily because of the emphasis in cultural studies on fully conceptualizing a topic of inquiry locating it within a more general theoretical problematic. Along with a heavy reliance on the textual analysis of one kind or another, applying techniques of close reading to a broad range of cultural phenomena, cultural studies has been distinguished as a field of study by the ways it has engaged with theory and sought to apply it, rather than by its adoption or development of practical methods. The influence of theoretical issues and preoccupations has gone hand in hand with an inclination to ask critical questions about the rules of asking questions, with codified procedures and prescription of set methods seeming to inhibit the freeplay of critique. (Pickering, 1988: pp 2).

In this attempt, I take the case of Bhojpuri literature, specifically in the plays and songs of Bhikhari Thakur. We see that in the works of Thakur, the themes of resistance, aesthetics, propaganda and societal structures get reflected. Thakur, who was immensely popular as a ballad singer in Bihar and the Bhojpuri-speaking region



of Uttar Pradesh of this past century, wrote about themes ranging from patriotism to social issues. He also attempted to awaken anti-colonial feelings among the masses during the British Raj. Known for his play i.e. 'Bidesiya' (The migrant).

An analysis of Thakur's work shows that his plays gained popularity only with a certain section of the population, specifically the dis-privileged classes.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to analyse some of the literature produced in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar by Bhikhari Thakur. Thakur's well known works are mainly in the form of plays. He has also written some songs in bhojpuri. His famous song 'ae sajni re' from the film 'Hazaaron khwaishein aisi' is a good example (Directed by Sudhir Mishra, 2005). The aim of this paper is to contextualize his works of literature in their social contexts.

Thakur's plays lead us through the many layers of India's rural society, giving an insight into their plight, philosophy towards life and difficult circumstances under whose mounting pressure Thakur became a writer and a theatre person. He belonged to the lower section of the society and given his caste status, this very fact forms the basis from which all his creative writings took off (Upadhyay, 1972). Under such conditions, he managed to do some theatre in his day-to-day activities and thus proved to be defiant enough to launch a drive against the existing circumstances in the society, which was inflicted with feudalism and casteism. The times of Bhikari Thakur were full of political, social, economic turmoil. In the turbulent period of India's struggle for freedom, he took up the cause of the neglected and agonized women of rural India. This proved to be the starting point in his long journey of creative writing. For Thakur, the liberation of India as a country had an equal and parallel meaning in the liberation of the rural women from their miseries. He fought relentlessly for the cause of women abandoned by their husbands in search of a livelihood to bigger cities and towns and the brutal

practice of selling young girls to older men on the pretext of marriage (Singh, 2005). In spite of underprivileged circumstances Thakur managed to become a famous playwright (Singh, 2005).

#### **Brief Background to Thakur's Works-**

Thakur was very influenced by the social movements of Bengal. He minutely analyzed the dichotomies persistent in his own society after coming back from Calcutta (present day Kolkata). He decided to problematise the issues around economy, religion, caste and gender based exploitation through folk theatre and folk songs. He wrote many plays around these issues between 1919 to 1965 and with his theatre troupe, travelled and performed them to spread the message of awareness in the Bhojpuri speaking belt. He received a lot of admiration from the poor, discriminated and uneducated Bhojpuri public.

**Thakur's work and Like Bidesia Folk Tradition in Bhojpuri-** Bidesia was the affectionate form of address given to the migrants by their loved ones who were left behind in their homeland, and so lent its name to the new folk culture that emerged out of this migration, namely, the hideosia folk culture. This folk culture is represented in many forms such as nautanki (musical theatre), drama, folk songs and folk paintings. During this migration period, a form of folk theatre, also called hideosia emerged in the Bhojpuri region. Bidesia theatre drew huge audiences especially when performed by Bhikhari Thakur and his acting troupe. Thakur composed many popular bidesia plays which were filled with songs based on folk tunes such as lorihayan, jantsari, sorthi, birha, barahmasa, chaupayi etc. Thakur's first play known as Bidesia, is one of the most famous plays in Eastern UP and Bihar. Bhikhari's immense popularity in this region makes him a minor legend. (Bhikhari Thakur Rachnavali, 2005). There are hundreds of natak companies in Eastern UP and Bihar who call themselves as 'Bidesia style natak companies' and they are very popular in the area (Upadhyay, 1972). Thakur's play Bidesia brought





him instant fame and popularity. His other play *Beti Bechwa* is about the plight of young girls married to older men. The feudal set up is not amused by his activities and notices the impact of his popularity. That is how Bhikhari Thakur becomes a legend in his own life time (Sulabh, 2006).

The popularity of all his plays was due to the narration of common events and experiences, related to the pain of migration, a theme that touched a common chord in the Bhojpuri audience. The combination of comic relief and satire on the existing system also established bidesia theatre as an extremely popular form of folk art and culture. These plays were also a statement on the existing social dichotomies like exploitation based on class, caste, gender and process of displacements of the Bhojpuri migrants (Tiwari, 2005).

**The Literature of Bhikhari Thakur: Gender-** Thakur, through his plays analyzed the lives of women, their social condition and psychology in the existing rural setting. He attempted to elucidate many aspects of women's lives for instance, by looking at the life of a young girl in the plays *Beti Viyog* (The separated daughter) and *Nand Bhojai*. He looked at the lives of married women, in his plays, *Bhai Virodh*, *Ganga Snan*, *Putra Vadh*, and women with migrant husbands in the plays *Bidesia*, *Vidhwa Vilap*, *Gahar Ghichor* and *Kalyug Prem*. In these latter plays, Thakur shows how the women take care of the household and livelihood of the children. The heroine of the play *Kalyug Prem* takes care of the family and bears the hardships as her husband is an alcoholic. Thakur also addresses the issues of chastity of women left behind by their husbands during migration. The problem of dowry and the exploitation of women by men are clearly depicted in the play *Beti Viyog* where the greedy father sells his daughter *Akhjo* to a rich old man who dies soon after the marriage, while *Akhjo* spends the rest of her life as a widow. In the play *Vidhwa Vilap*, the same *Akhjo* has to face physical exploitation and economic miseries at the hands of her affinal kin.

**The Literature of Bhikhari Thakur: Dalits and the Caste system-** Thakur was himself born in a backward caste family of barbers. In the existing feudal society, barbers, apart from their caste services had to render their duties in all the rituals of the upper caste. They were very much part of the *Jajmani* System and depended economically and socially upon their patrons (higher castes). They were often paid in kind for their services according to the laws of the *Jajmani* System. Apart from this, they were subject to exploitation by the feudal lords and the dominants of the village quite often. Thakur himself had experienced all these hardships. So it was the same *Nai* (Barber), uneducated and classified society that he had in mind when he wrote his plays. The subject matter of his plays therefore showed the day-to-day challenges of this class. Perhaps, the most important aim of his plays was to create an awareness about these contradictions in the lives of the underclass and also suggest ways to get rid of these miseries.

The key issues that he dealt with were child-marriage, uneven marriages (young girl married to an old man), selling off daughters for wealth, families getting nuclear in a lust of wealth and property, crime, addiction, theft, gambling etc. The result of these plays was felt very soon and selling of daughters for wealth was criticised and looked down upon by everyone. Widow remarriage was promoted and incidentally, during the same period, child marriage was banned by the government (Singh, 2005).

The names of the characters in his plays also came from the Dalit and other lower caste communities, e.g. *Updar Udwas*, *Jhatul*, *Chitru* etc. as during this time, Dalits and other lower castes usually did not have names like other upper caste names. The other important fact here is that, most of his actors belonged to the lower castes. Therefore, it can be said here that, Thakur took all encouraging steps through his work and made every affirmative endeavour for the development and appraisal of the Dalit and lower caste communities (Tiwari, 2005).



Bhikhari Thakur through his work reflects the system of various ideas on which the contemporary society was organized. Sometimes he conforms to the societal values and norms of the feudal, patriarchal society, especially in his plays *Bidesia* and *Kalyug Prem*, where he argues that a woman should be chaste to her husband and take care of the family, household and children. Thus Thakur also keeps falling back to the same kind of false consciousness that he constantly tried to break away from.

But at the same time he also fights for the freedom of women and their sexual rights in the play *Gabarghichor*. The positive aspect of the play *Bidesia*, at the same time is that, in this play he talks about prostitution as a social problem. If we bring in the base and superstructure model here, then we can see that this kind of work is a result of the economic base. Since Bhikhari came from a backward caste family, he was too poor to lead his life in a normal way. The social and economic circumstances compelled him to migrate and earn his living (Singh, 2005). So, he had lived through all these miseries and exploitation caused by the dominant classes and produced a work, which in a way, is viewed against the contemporary social practices. Since all his plays directly talk about the dalits and the underclass. His theatre troop was also mainly comprised of dalits and lower caste people (Bhikhari Thakur Rachnavali). The names of the characters in his plays are also dalit and lower caste names. According to Macherey, literature gives support to ideological communications. Bhikhari's works, along the same line, has definitely provided some kind of ideological communication. The selling of daughters for wealth was considered to be a matter of low prestige and crime. The Government of India also banned child marriages during the same period (Singh, 2005). The subject matter of Thakur's work was influenced by the social practices and he wanted others to become aware of their miseries. He wanted to propagate a kind of consciousness among people through his writings which comes close to what Luckacs meant when he

talked about socialist realism as a perfect form of creativity, where the writer gets first hand information, lives it, and produces authentic arguments.

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