

**“PLAY, DEFIANCE AND IMAGINATION AS FORMS  
OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION”: EXAMINING  
*BIDESIYA* AS FOLK THEATRE AND ITS  
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN CLASSROOMS  
OF LITERATURE**

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### ***Abstract***

India houses a number of folk theatrical forms that are simple and closer to the rural milieu. After the decline of Sanskrit classical drama in India, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, folk theatre emerged in myriads of rural languages. These theatrical forms can be categorised under two broad genres, viz., “Ritual Theatre” that was religious in nature, and the “Theatre of Entertainment,” which was more secular in mood. One such example of the secular form is *Bidesiya*, the dynamic and popular theatre of Bihar. *Bidesiya*, like the name suggests, revolves around the “bides” / “pardes,” i.e., foreign land / homeland dichotomy. *Bidesiya* emerged and was given shape by Bhikhari Thakur, the highly-acclaimed poet, playwright, and actor, and aimed at disseminating some kind of social message through the plays. *Bidesiya* also makes use of a plethora of folk songs that are rooted in Bihar’s soil, and these plays were primarily performed by actors belonging to lower-caste communities. The most crucial aspect of *Bidesiya* is that this folk theatrical form is fundamentally radical and fluid in terms of how it deals with gender. *Bidesiya* showcases *Launda naach* — or the dance native to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that is performed by female impersonators — as a powerful theatrical technique. The present paper seeks to scrutinise *Bidesiya* as a gender-fluid folk theatrical form of India, and further explores the manner in which *Bidesiya* problematises the essentialist notion of fixed gender identity. The paper, therefore, begins with an elaborate discussion on the origin of *Bidesiya*, and moves on to study its various aspects, including the structure of the plays and the performers’ troupes, the “men’s” and “women’s” folk songs which are associated with the genre, and the underpinnings of the staged performances. The paper then investigates the obfuscation of gender by the actors, visible in *Launda Naach* — the central element of *Bidesiya* plays — and the presentation of the songs, written from feminine perspective, by men. The concluding section of the paper highlights the pedagogical implications of *Bidesiya* and its relevance in classrooms, with a special emphasis on how gender is revealed as performative in the plays. Introducing *Bidesiya* in classroom education resists didacticism by promoting hands-on learning, creates a space for the students to locate themselves within the broad spectrum of gender identities, and also indulges imaginative voyages, as this paper will show.

***Keywords:*** folk theatre, gender, Bidesiya, drag, pedagogy.

**“Play, Defiance, and Imagination as Forms of Knowledge Production”: Examining Bidesiya as Folk Theatre and its Pedagogical Implications in Classrooms of Literature.<sup>1</sup>**

“The stage is a magic circle where only the most real things happen, a neutral territory outside the jurisdiction of Fate where stars may be crossed with impunity. A truer and more real place does not exist in all the universe.”

— P. S. Baber, *Cassie Draws the Universe* (2010, p. 204).

Post the decline of Sanskrit drama in India, folk theatre emerged and developed in numerous regional languages, spanning from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While classical theatre was more sophisticated and urban-oriented in nature, the folk theatre was less complex, and closer to the rural milieu. Certain conventions and stock characters — for instance, stage preliminaries, the opening prayer song, the *sutradhara* (the one who weaves the story), the *vidushaka* (the jester) — were drawn in from classical drama during the development of the folk theatrical forms, and they coalesced with lavish dance, music, exaggerated make-up, masks, drumming, and the singing chorus. The South Indian folk theatrical forms emphasised on dance, whereas the North Indian forms placed a great deal of importance on music.<sup>2</sup> Indian folk theatre can be divided into two broad categories — “Ritual Theatre,” which is religious in character, and “Theatre of Entertainment,” or the secular theatrical forms.<sup>3</sup> However, both categories exercised influence on each other. Even though, in the initial stages, folk theatre was wholly religious in character, later, secular themes of love, valour, heroism, politics, etc. were incorporated, all the while maintaining its local flavour. In the post-Independence period, folk theatrical forms were explicitly used to spread messages on pressing matters such as health, adult education, family planning, child marriage, etc. The folk theatre forms made use of the tradition of orality, i.e., many of them are song and recitation-based, devoid of gestural complexities of traditional drama.<sup>4</sup> Folk theatre is performed in the open, and the stage may be square, round, rectangular, or multiple-set. *Bhavai*, the folk theatrical form of Rajasthan, uses a circular stage, for instance, whereas *Jatra* of West Bengal uses a five-metre square platform. The actors of folk theatre are mostly hereditary performers, who learn from their elders throughout childhood. The actors in folk theatre are predominantly male, with the exception of *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, and, occasionally, *Jatra*.

One such example of an indigenous folk theatrical tradition is *Bidesiya*, the popular and vibrant art form of Bihar. As the name suggests, these plays revolved around the theme of separation — the separation of a wife from her husband leaving for work at a foreign country.

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “play, defiance, and imagination as forms of knowledge production” has been taken from Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess’ article “Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood” (2021, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> *Kathakali* and *Krishattam* of Kerala are, at times, considered as dance dramas. On the other hand, *Khyal* of Rajasthan, *Swang* of Punjab, and *Maach* of Madhya Pradesh are highly musical.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of Ritual Theatre may be *Ankia Naat*, the traditional one-act drama of Assam, *Ramlila* of Uttar Pradesh, *Raslila* of Gujarat and some other regions of North India, *Ramman* of Uttarakhand’s Gahrwal area, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, etc. Examples of Theatre of Entertainment are *Bhavai* of Rajasthan, *Jatra* of Bengal, *Daskathia* of Odissa, *Nautanki* of Uttar Pradesh, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, etc.

<sup>4</sup> “Ramlila,” “Raslila,” “Bhand,” “Nautanki,” and “Wang” are some of the folk theatre forms that are purely based on singing and recitation.

or *bides*. *Bidesiya* was conceptualised, and given shape to, by Bhikhari Thakur, the renowned Bhojpuri poet, playwright, and actor, and it is from his famous play *Bidesia* (1912) that the said form of folk theatre derived its name. The performances of *Bidesiya* always revolve around the dissemination of some kind of social message. Some of the popular themes of *Bidesiya*, apart from the underlying theme of migration, are casteism, violence against women, widow-shaming, prevention of child marriage, et al. What is most interesting is that, in these plays, both the male and female roles are played by men. *Bidesiya* uses *Launda Naach*, a famous dance style of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where men dress up in traditionally feminine attire to perform at weddings and other ceremonies. For the purpose of this paper, *Bidesiya* will be looked at as a popular folk theatre form, and its impact on classroom teaching will be subsequently examined.

### ***Bidesiya*: The Folk Theatre from U.P and Bihar:**

“At midnight, the nightingale calls,  
The pretty women start, arises, and stands near the bed.  
The mango has blossomed, the *mahua* tree has flowered.  
The sleep of the lady separated from her lover has been broken.  
The breeze blows over her body.  
The door to memories begins to open.  
The flowers have blossomed; the bee hovers nearby.  
Why has her beloved not come home?”  
— A *Bidesiya* song, “Adhi Adhi Ratiya.”<sup>5</sup>

The history of *Bidesiya* is marked by colonial violence of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and forced bonded labour. *Bidesiya* presumably had its origins in the Kutubpur village of Uttar Pradesh. The word “bidesi” essentially referred to the husband who had to migrate to a foreign city, or *bides*, for work, and therefore had to leave a longing wife behind. During the colonial period, many people from eastern India were kidnapped, economically constrained, or forcefully migrated to work as indentured labourers in sugarcane plantations in Caribbean countries. Therefore, the theme of migration permeates all theatrical productions. *Bidesiya* is a way of remembering all those who forcefully emigrated to foreign lands when the colonial fathers were leaving the country. Brahma Prakash notes in the paper “Performing ‘Bidesiya’ in Bihar: Strategy for Survival, Strategies for Performance” (2016),

<sup>5</sup> The song has been cited from Brahma Prakash’s article, “Performing ‘Bidesiya’ in Bihar: Strategy for Survival, Strategies for Performance.” For more see Prakash (2016, p.62).

Though the term [“*bidesiya*”] primarily referred to the indentured laborers of Caribbean and other British colonies, it was and is also widely used for the internal economic migrants from the region with their long-term separation from loved ones and constant longing for *desh* (homeland). In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, *bidesiyā* stands for the migrants, the culture of the migrants, a folk song genre, and a theme of folk painting. (Prakash, p. 58, emphasis in original)

*Bidesiya* also gained its name from Bhikhari Thakur’s highly successful play of the same name. The term *bidesi* can also be traced back to North Indian Bhakti tradition’s *nirgun* singing’s metaphor of death and departure. Another existing anecdote is that of a prostitute named Sundari who used the term *bides* to refer to other cultural and geographical locations. Kesodas (1553-1653), in a narrative, also used the term *bidesi* to refer to overseas migration.<sup>6</sup>

*Bidesiya* merges the *desh* (homeland) and the *bides* (foreign land), the hopefulness and the hopelessness. The songs were made up by the labourers to make sense of the uprootedness of their being. *Bidesiya* signifies an incompleteness of journey, where certain parts of the labourer’s being were left behind, violently, in the process of migrating. As a folk theatrical form, then, *Bidesiya* is used by the community for reconciliation and regeneration of hope. Jacques Ranciere referred to this display of a collective sense of trauma as “the aesthetic community” attempting to find a sense of solidarity in “being together apart” (Prakash, p. 63). The most prominent theme in these plays in the *desh / pades* narrative. The plays, additionally, deal with social issues of casteism, violence against women, religious fanaticism, and the like. Initially, the plays began with religious stories, but later on adapted a more secular character.

The person responsible for the emergence and immense popularity of *Bidesiya* is Kutubpur’s (or Qutabpur) Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971), who himself had the experience of migrating to West Bengal from Bihar in search of work. Known as the “Shakespeare of Bhojpur,” Thakur had to migrate from Kharagpur to Puri to Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) in search of work as a barber when he was 27. Later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he returned to his village, and formed a repertoire to enact the *Ramayana*. Since Thakur belonged to a lower-caste community, his attempt to enact tales from a Hindu epic was deemed to be blasphemous by the upper-caste villagers, and he was prohibited from organising such allegedly sacrilegious theatrical performances. Thakur, then, joined the already existing culture of female impersonation, namely *launda naach*. His troupe drew material from *Mahabharata*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Bhakti* songs, labour songs, women’s songs, and caste songs, and his *Bidesiya* was an amalgamation of a plethora of genres.

Thakur was illiterate, but taught himself to read Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*, and made use of *Doha* and *Chaupai* in his compositions. He was also heavily influenced by the *Ramayana*, *kirtan*, *sumarni*, *prabhati*, and *Ram bhajan*.<sup>7</sup> The intellectual currents of Bengal, and the casteism, social ills and prejudices of post-independence Nehruvian India also left an indelible impact on Thakur’s creative mind. Therefore, despite the underlying theme of migration and labour, Thakur’s plays dealt with issues like casteism, poverty, child marriage, women exploitation, the turmoil of widows, mismatched marriage between old men and

<sup>6</sup> I came across many of these anecdotes pertaining to the naming of the concerned folk theatrical tradition in Brahma Prakash’s paper, “Performing ‘Bidesiya’ in Bihar: Strategy for Survival, Strategies for Performance” (2016). For more see Prakash (p. 60).

<sup>7</sup> A *Doha* is a self-contained rhyming couplet composed in a set metre. *Chaupai* is a form of medieval Indian poetry that uses a metre of four syllables. *Kirtan* is a song or poem written in praise of some form of divinity, typically Radha, Krishna, Sita, or Rama. *Sumarni* potentially derives its name from chanting the name of divinity. *Prabhati* is a song of faith sung early morning, primarily by elderly people. *Ram Bhajan* refers to the devotional song sung in the praise of lord Rama.

young women, et al. His most well-known play, *Bidesia* (1917), explored the problem of migration, and the effect it had on the women who are left behind. *Beti Biyog* dealt with the practice of marrying young women to old men in exchange for money. *Vidhva-Vilap* is about the abject condition of widows in their families. *Gabarghichor* revolved around the theme of adultery, where the left-behind wife of a migrant labourer conceives a child with another man from the village. The performances were flexible; they lacked a rigid script, frequent improvisations were made by the actors, and the texts were constantly rewritten.

The structure of *Bidesiya* troupes was also quite flexible. It involved eighteen members, usually, of which four were master-musician singers (the *gurus*) playing *dholak*, *nagara*, *jhal* (cymbals), and Casio piano, one is an assistant, one was the *mahani* or *ustad* who heads the party, contacts artists, decides on the script, and the party's name is based on the name of the *ustad*. The remaining thirteen are actors, six of them usually playing female roles. The actors have to be flexible vis-à-vis their roles, since one actor sometimes has to play both the male and the female roles, during the course of one play. For dance, popular songs are also used nowadays apart from traditional folk songs, and the plays involve live musical performances. Sometimes small satirical plays are also organised by these troupes. Most of the dancers/actors belong to extremely lower-caste, highly stigmatised backgrounds. Brahma Prakash (2016), after conducting a survey in the Mankaura village of Uttar Pradesh — a village inhabited mostly by *Bidesiya* actors — found out that three hundred and ten households two hundred and eighty-five were inhabited by Dalits, Kahars, Kumhars, and other extremely backward classes, whereas only twenty-five households belonged to the upper-caste Rajputs.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, out of the fear of getting attacked, the *Bidesiya* troupes make use of patrons. The patron is usually an upper-caste man, or a man belonging to a lower-caste comparatively held in higher regard than others.

The songs in *Bidesiya* are set to the tune of folk rhythms. The songs are typically written from the perspective of the deserted wife of the migrant labourer, and the composers are called *kavi jee*. In this regard, what is interesting is that, even though, in traditional *Bidesiya* theatre of U.P and Bihar, all the roles are acted, and all the songs are sung by men, all the songs used in *Bidesiya* are written from the point-of-view of women.<sup>9</sup> The gender issue is truly made complex in *Bidesiya*, since the songs that are written in first person feminine are sung by men. Mahendar Misir, a renowned folk-singer-cum-composer of colonial Bihar composed their songs from a feminine perspective, and performed them with his male voice. The men's folk song genres are *Purbi*, *Chaita*, *Nirgun*, *Gond*, and *Kaharwa*, while the women's folk song genres are *Jatsaari* and *Jhoomar*. While the men's folk songs are meant to be performed in front of an audience, the women's songs are more domestic in nature, and are sung in private.

*Purbi* songs, which were popularised by Mahendar Misir of Chhapra district of Bihar, speak of longing and separation between two lovers. *Chaita*, sung in the month of April and May (*Chaitra* month), are performed by rural men who, mostly in the evenings, gather in groups. Bulakidas from Ballia district of Uttar Pradesh is a popular *Chaita* singer. Even though the content of *Chaita* has nothing to do with the *Ramayana*, the songs begin with “ho Rama,” or “aho Rama.” *Nirgun* is a philosophical genre that, despite its spiritual underpinnings, revolves around the separation of the migrant husband from his wife.

<sup>8</sup> For more see Prakash (2016, p. 70).

<sup>9</sup> Asha Singh notes in their paper “Of Women, by Men: Understanding the ‘First Person Feminine’ in Bhojpuri Folksongs” that the songs were not written to be performed by women. They were written to be performed by men. The cause of this was actually not the lack of visibility of women on the public stage, but was rather a voluntary phenomenon. For more see Singh (2015, pp. 171-172).

Unlike the aforementioned three genres which are usually performed by upper-caste men, *Gond* and *Kaharwa* are performed by lower-caste men. *Gond* songs are sung by men from Gond caste who, alongside being involved in the profession of “grain parching,” sing and dance professionally to earn a livelihood. Similarly, *Kaharwa* songs are performed by men from Kahar’s caste who work as palanquin bearers and water carriers for upper-caste households. *Jatsaari*, also known as the “grind mill songs,” are women’s work songs that they sing during grinding grains using the grinding stone (the *jaata*). These songs were sung by women to break the monotony of the said laborious task. *Jhoomar* songs are happy songs sung by women on occasions such as marriage.

What is significant is that in the men’s songs, women’s sexual desires are constantly mitigated, and they are relegated to the position of a helplessly pining lover who accepts her husband’s extramarital affairs and negligence quietly, whereas the women’s songs problematise the public-private binary. The women have a substantial amount of autonomy in the women’s genres, where they speak of the financial crisis at home as a result of the husband’s absence, the husband’s extramarital conquests, and the torture that she endures at her in-law’s house because of her status as a left-behind wife. Their sexual desires, which are at times actualised with their brother-in-law or other men of the village, are also more prominent in their songs. Unlike the men’s genres, in the women’s genres, the man does not appear as a God-like figure.<sup>10</sup> This can be exemplified by the undermentioned *Jatsaari* song —

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[Left-behind wife]

“May your vessel sink in the sea, may your bulls be stolen by thieves

O my lord, may you be killed by bandits, you left your wife alone to suffer.”

[Migrant husband]

“My dark-skinned wife, my boat will row on the river side and my bulls will

also get across

O my wife, I will sell you and will marry again.<sup>11</sup>

Thakur also imbibed some of the principles of classical Sanskrit drama. Every *Bidesiya* play begins with *mangalacharan*, which is an auspicious introduction in the form of prayer at the beginning of undertaking any work. The part of *sutradhar*, or the one who weaves the tale, was many a time played by Bhikhari Thakur, himself. The *sutradhar* invokes the gods with *Bhajans* and songs, after which the theme of the

<sup>10</sup> It must be mentioned that the phenomenon of women getting robbed of their agency is a concern in upper-caste men’s genres. In the lower-caste men’s genres, i.e., *Gond* and *Kaharwa*, women are not subjected to such a process of relegation, at least not in such a grand scale. In the lower-caste communities, women have much more mobility than in the upper-caste communities. For a detailed discussion on the same, see Singh (2015, pp. 173-175).

<sup>11</sup> The song has been taken from Asha Singh’s previously mentioned article. In the song, the reality of the nature of the husband is revealed. The woman curses, expresses her grievances, and gets angry at her uncaring husband — she is depicted as a human being of flesh and blood, and is not dehumanised. For more see Singh (2015, p. 178).

play is introduced, borrowing examples and parallels from Hindu mythology, the most common story being that of Ram. The prologue deals with the abject condition of the wife, whose predicament post-separation from the husband and woes are depicted sensitively, and in detail.<sup>12</sup>

*Launda naach*, or the dance of the female impersonators, is the central element of *Bidesiya* performances. The term *Launda naach* was used by the upper-caste people in a derogatory fashion to refer to the female impersonators in the *Bidesiya* performances. When Bhikhari Thakur was writing his plays, unlike the upper-caste people, Thakur's lower-caste audience could not afford to hire *baijis* or courtesans. So, the men started playing women's roles as well. U.P. and Bihar are known for the dance of the *kothis*, or the female impersonators, who perform at *lagaans* or various festivals. *Launda naach* is not synonymous with *Bidesiya*, but is rather deployed as a theatrical technique in the concerned form of folk theatre. These dancers are highly stigmatised and shamed, because they dare to cross the threshold of gender binaries every time they perform, and also because they come from lower-caste families. *Bidesiya*, then, is extremely politically charged, and facilitates the mobilisation of queer, lower-caste, tabooed bodies on stage. However, their depiction of femininity on stage is not aimed at mocking femininity, but rather pays homage to womanhood by incorporating her agency in the performance, and simultaneously revealing the performative nature of gender identities. While the upper-caste characters remain relatively in a state of stasis on stage, the women, the jester, and the lower-caste characters remain mobile to serve the upper caste. Brahma Prakash (2016) theorises the gyration of women to the upper caste's incapability to wholly subjugate and restrain non-male, non-normative bodies, which ends up actualising "subaltern agency" (Prakash, p. 74).<sup>13</sup> Singh (2015) even imagines the songs of *Bidesiya*, written in first person feminine voice, which are performed by men to be an outlet for the repressed emotions of the migrating men, since men explicitly expressing their emotions is a highly tabooed domain.<sup>14</sup>

Ramcharan Manjhi (1925-2022), who recently passed away on September 7, 2022, following Bhikhari Thakur's steps was extremely successful in keeping *Bidesiya* alive, even at the onslaught of televisions and commercial theatrical forms. After Thakur's death, Manjhi worked under the leadership of Gaurishankar Thakur, Shatrughan Thakur, Dinkar Thakur, Ramdas Rahi, and Prabhunath Thakur. Manjhi, who belonged to Bihar's Champa district, throughout his life, struggled with financial constraints, casteism, and sexual stigma. However, his zeal to spread social awareness kept him from giving up on his profession:

I was always clear that my first duty was to the village audience that can't access or enjoy the more effete forms of entertainment. Our ticket prices have not gone up beyond a point, if a show is scheduled at a village and a richer man offers more money on the same day, I refuse. We travel hundreds of kilometres, going village to village, but we often choose to walk than make our poorer patrons pay for travel costs. (Jha & Yashee, 2021, para. 6)

According to Dr. Jainendra Kumar Dost, the touch of erotica in the *Bidesiya* performances is actually a technique that is used to keep the audience engaged from the beginning to the end, since the performances

<sup>12</sup> The *nandi* in classical Sanskrit drama becomes *mangalacharan* in *Bidesiya*.

<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the defiance of the subaltern bodies, see Prakash (2016, p. 74).

<sup>14</sup> For more see Singh (2015, p. 189).



tend to go on all night.<sup>15</sup> The stigma attached to female impersonation was absent in pre-colonial times; it is after the development of fundamentalist politics that the cross-dressing performers were flung to boundless shaming. The 2021 recipient of the Padma Shri, in an interview with *The Indian Express*, talked about effeminacy being used by many as a means to insult others; he stated:

Well, I do wear saaris and make-up, so why should I mind if I am called effeminate? Over the years, we have learnt how to deal with these things — we know when to diffuse a situation with a smile, or when to turn stern . . . (Jha and Yashee, 2021, para. 10).

Art has the power to transform lives, and it is this transformative power that enables Majhi to remain unbothered by mockery, as he reveals in a conversation with Gopi Karelia:

The more I performed, the more I loved it. I felt like a magician with all eyes on me. Seeing their mesmerised faces, I thought I had the power to make them feel different emotions. The highlight of my performances would be people falling in the well or from a tree. That was our yardstick to know it was a full house. . . . In my career spanning eight-decades [*sic*], several men have come up to me and assured me that they will respect their wives, sisters and daughters more. Some even shed tears while I am performing. This is the power of any art form; it can undo years of customs and perceptions. (Karelia, 2021, para 23)

### **The Pedagogical Implications of *Bidesiya*:**

“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.”  
— Oscar Wilde.<sup>16</sup>

The roots of the concept of a “teacher” can be found in ancient Greece, with Socrates in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as the cornerstone to what now qualifies as modern education. Pedagogy can be defined as the relationship shared by an educator and the learners, with regard to the techniques and culture that are utilised for effective teaching. In Greek, “paidos” refers to “child,” and “agogos” signifies a “leader.” According to the Greeks, “paidagogos” were slaves entrusted with the task of taking boys to and back from school, teaching, and tutoring them. Pedagogy then alludes to “the art of teaching children.” The entire domain of creative and performing arts has long been considered to be an effective tool for imparting knowledge. In a classroom setting, it encourages what John Dewey refers to as “learning by doing,” i.e., effective learning resulting from activity-based learning that engages the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.<sup>17</sup> India houses a number of folk theatrical forms. The various kinds of folk theatre of India merge spectacle, dance, and drama with stylised speech. The folk theatrical forms of India are especially instrumental in exploring the socio-political realities of the times in which the

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Dost as cited in *The Better India* article “They Taunted Him for His ‘Naach.’ 84 Years Later, India Awarded Him the Padma Shri” (2021).

<sup>16</sup> This quote has been cited from *Goodreads*.

<sup>17</sup> For a lucid discussion on John Dewey’s theory of “learning by doing,” I have referred to Hayne W. Reese’s work, “The Learning-by-Doing Principle” (2011). For more see Reese (pp. 1-2).

play is set. Since the stories of folk theatre are rooted in nativity, they also convey to the audience the rich cultural nuances of India.

Coming to the discourse on the incorporation of dramatic arts in classroom teaching, theatre can inculcate and develop myriads of constructive qualities in young learners. Folk theatre is even more beneficial in this regard since it is inextricably connected to diverse cultural expressions that become particularly pertinent in the case of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic classrooms. Even though a few plays — written both by Indian and non-Indian playwrights — are included in the school curriculum of various education boards in India, students are rarely exposed to the magnificence of Indian folk theatre. As a result, school-going youngsters grow up without any knowledge of the rich culture of the country that they inhabit. *Bidesiya* is not simply an example of Indian folk theatre; it is extremely fluid and politically charged in temperament that can have a far-reaching effect on young minds.

Since the plays of *Bidesiya* deal with social issues, students can become aware of the evils present in the society. As a subject, literature speaks about various social phenomena. Therefore, *Bidesiya*, being a regional theatre, can make students aware of the social evils that plague U.P. and Bihar. This stands true for all kinds of folk theatre, for instance, *Jatra* can make students aware of the problems of West Bengal, *Lavani* can spread awareness of Maharashtra's social conditions, and the like. The dominant theme in *Bidesiya* is migration. The subject of migration engages multiple disciplines like history, geography, political science, et cetera. While introducing any piece of a literary text, it is essential that the educator introduces their students to the cultural and socio-political backdrop of the text concerned. Knowing about migration and migrant labourers of U.P. and Bihar can, therefore, help the students relate the concept of migration with other texts having a similar thematic thrust. Folk theatre tends to have dialogues written in vernacular language. *Bidesiya* plays' dialogues are written and performed in Bhojpuri. Therefore, these plays can help students learn and understand vernacular languages and dialects, and their importance in colloquial conversation, since language is an important part of English as a subject. Moreover, *Bidesiya* critiques casteism and religious bigotry. In a diverse classroom, students from various backgrounds sit together to acquire knowledge. So, students from minority backgrounds can see themselves represented in these plays, on one hand, and non-minority students can become aware of the issues that plague some of their peers. Such plays enhance problem-solving skills. So, if the students are faced with a similar situation, they can learn how to counter it.

*Bidesiya* plays engage with women-centric issues, as well. The *Bidesiya* songs, especially those belonging to the women's genre, openly discuss the subjugation of women in the hands of patriarchy. They talk of the desertion of the wife by the migrant husband, the existence of a mistress or a second wife in the household, the harassment of a deserted wife in the hands of the in-laws, child marriage, widowhood, etc. The curriculum of various schools in India does not include an introduction to feminist theory and its praxis. Even though there are one or two stories or poems that speak of impactful female figures, there is little to no engagement with the actual problems that women face on a regular basis. Hence, *Bidesiya* plays can spread awareness regarding women-centric issues in classrooms. This can prompt students to have discussions on the said subject, and, additionally, female students can initiate conversations about these issues with the rest of the population of the class.

*Bidesiya* also uses scores of folk musical forms to enhance the process of narration, as mentioned in the previous section of this paper. Music, particularly the rhythms and tone of the music, has been adapted by many disciplines in multiple ways. For instance, the numerical tables of mathematics are read aloud maintaining a particular rhythm, the poems and poetic plays follow a particular metre, rhyme, and form, and so on and so forth. The incorporation of music in education aids the process of memorisation. This is particularly advantageous for students with physical and cognitive disabilities,

for music can contribute to enhancing their concentration and movement.

The central element of *Bidesiya* is its use of drag. The *Launda* dancers, with their exaggerated body movements and loud music, represent the women across Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. At times, an actor has to act out both a male role and a female role in one play. The songs that these actors sing are composed from the vantage point of a woman. All of this point to the amazingly fluid nature of *Bidesiya*, which enables the bodies to reach another plane of existence which does not compel them to adhere to their biological reality. It reveals the constructed nature of gender categories.<sup>18</sup> Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess have talked about the pedagogy of drag, and the impact of introducing drag in classrooms in their paper “Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood” (2020). Although the paper is primarily about the Drag Queen Story Hour, an initiative started in many Western countries, where drag queens are invited to classrooms to read stories and engage in various activities with students, the discussion can be extended to accommodate the introduction of queer theatre in classrooms. Presentation of drag in classrooms can educate the children on the existence of more than two genders. It gives them an idea about the negative impact of harbouring a parochial temperament. For children going through a gender-related identity crisis, these performances can provide a sense of representation, relatability, and validation. And for the cis-gender students, they can impart a lesson on empathy (for the non-binary classmates) and inclusivity. Drag discourages homophobia and transphobia, and creates a safe space for gender transgression. Since drag encourages vivid imagination, such plays can stimulate the imaginative side of students. So, the introduction of drag in the classroom creates a space for telling queer stories to make comprehensible the queer ways of being and relating.

### ***Bidesiya* — The Theatre of Protest:<sup>19</sup>**

Theatre has long been used as a political weapon by artists across the world. Because of its utilisation of visual or/and auditory performances, it has the capability to draw in a large audience. Folk theatre succeeds in doing the same even more effectively because of its simplicity. Pushpa Sundar (1989) defines “protest theatre” as a theatrical form that:

raises certain issues, explores certain problems and asks certain questions; at other times, it may attempt to change the beliefs and opinions of the spectators, ultimately seeking political and social action based on these changes. But the essence of protest theatre is that it is directed towards the power of an authority—political, religious, or social. (Sundar, p. 123)

It is a form of art that “is largely performed by the middle- or lower-class intellectuals, for the middle class or for the oppressed” (Sundar, p. 134). Sundar further notes that after independence, Indian scholars’ venture to take a look into the Indian past led to a scrutiny of the oppressive nature of the caste system, alongside the inequalities handed out to women. This prompted a transformation of theatrical performances, from being simply entertaining to becoming a tool for throwing light on the innumerable

<sup>18</sup> Here, I refer to the concept of performative as theorised by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), and later on developed by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

<sup>19</sup> For this concluding section of the paper, I frequently refer to Pushpa Sundar’s article “Protest Through Theatre: The Indian Experience.” For a detailed discussion on the same see Sundar (1989).

social malpractices that plagued Indian society. In light of the aforesaid discussion on *Bidesiya* and its various facets, *Bidesiya* may be rightly identified as a specimen of the theatre of protest. In the post-Independence period in India, folk theatre, especially, became a significant technique of disseminating societal wisdom and awareness in addition to providing entertainment to the audience. Such a method becomes even more consequential for the effective circulation of knowledge among the masses lacking in literacy. Hence, the *Bidesiya* performances are planned out keeping the instructional element in mind. The artists hope to open the door for social change through their work. The distance between the audience and the actors disappears during the live performances, and the ideas, images, and characters represented in the play end up having life breathed into them. *Bidesiya* even meets the two prerequisites that Sundar (1989) lists for a theatrical form to qualify as protest theatre, i.e., “the presence of important political and social issues which agitate society at any given time or place and which call forth protests from thoughtful individuals” (Sundar, p. 136), and that such a theatrical form should be born in those “regions where political and economic conditions are the worst and change most desperately needed” (Sundar, p. 136). As mentioned before, the social milieu of Bihar was marked by caste-based discrimination and heteropatriarchal hegemony that served as the driving force behind the surfacing of the radical performances of the *Bidesiya* troupes.

*Bidesiya* and pedagogy, therefore, go hand-in-hand. The bright colours of the costumes, the art and the music involved, the imaginative play, and the gender-bending performances of the transvestites motivate one to break the rules of orthodoxy, and challenge the status quo. Folk theatre in classroom education resists didacticism by encouraging hands-on learning, and connects one to the essence of their soil. It leads to a transformative education that enables the students to locate themselves within the broad spectrum of identity categories. It engages students’ curiosity about social norms, by countering questions (about drag deviating from normativity) with counter-questions (about why shouldn’t one deviate from normativity!). It also destigmatises shame. The importance of introducing theatre — or, broadly arts — in education, becomes glaringly palpable in Dana Gioia’s words: “The purpose of arts education is not to produce more artists, though that is a byproduct [*sic*]. The real purpose of arts education is to create complete human beings capable of leading successful and productive lives in a free society” (Smith, 2015).<sup>20</sup>

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