

Oral Literary Worlds

Location, Transmission
and Circulation



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Cover image: Woman playing Nyatiti during School Cultural Day in Tanzania. Photo by Onesmo Daniel (22 September 2017), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:African_local_music_instrument_-Nyatiti_01.jpg

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4. Fluid Texts

Bhojpuri Songs and World Literature

Francesca Orsini

Introduction

In late 2020, the English translation of the 1977 Bhojpuri novel *Phoolsunghi* created a stir in the Indian press.¹ The rural Bhojpur region, straddling the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in northern India and the southern part of Nepal known as the Terai, is known for its wonderfully rich, old, and still vibrant tradition of orature. *Phoolsunghi*, written by veteran Bhojpuri literary activist Pandey Kapil and translated by Delhi academic Gautam Choubey, himself the grandson of a major Bhojpuri novelist, revolves around the famous Bhojpuri poet and songwriter Mahendar Missir (1866-1946), the singer-courtesan Dhelabai (d. 1931), and their patron, in the late colonial period.² Reviewers praised the elegant translation for ‘open[ing] up the local culture and tradition to a larger audience’, and noted that although ‘Bhojpuri culture has generated

1 I humbly dedicate this chapter to the late scholar Catherine Servan-Schreiber, who dedicated her life to the study of Bhojpuri orature and who sadly passed away prematurely in November 2021. This chapter would not have been possible without her brilliant and extensive scholarship, particularly her two books: *Chanteurs itinérants en Inde du Nord: la tradition orale Bhojpuri* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999) and *Histoire d’une musique métisse à l’île Maurice: chutney indien et séga Bollywood* (Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2010).

2 Kapil Pandey edited the Bhojpuri magazine *Bhojpuri Sammelan Patrika* and established the first All India Association of Bhojpuri Writers, the Akhil Bharatiya Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan.

sociological and scholarly interest, its literary merit hasn't travelled as deeply into the Anglophone world'.³

In colonial times, the Bhojpur region, which had long been a centre of saltpetre and other trade, became a centre of opium and sugarcane cultivation as well as of large scale labour migration.⁴ Bhojpuri traders and labourers travelled not just to the Calcutta jute mills and the tea plantations in Assam, but also across the Black Water, or *Kala Pani*, as indentured labourers or *girmitiya* to colonial plantations in Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Natal in South Africa, Fiji, Malay and so on. Indeed, a decade before the English translation of *Phoolsunghi*, two lines from a Bhojpuri women's folk song in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2009) accompany Diti on the boat trip that will eventually take her to Mauritius—the first tranche of the opium trilogy that successfully shows the entanglements of global trade, the British empire, and oceanic geographies, between the Bhojpur region, Bengal and Bombay in India, China, and the plantation islands/coolie colonies.⁵

But does Bhojpuri orature really need to enter a novel in English in order to become visible and part of world literature? Or can we use the world of Bhojpuri orature itself, a world encompassing epics, songs, theatre, live performances and printed chapbooks, and more recently cinema, TV channels, and digital music videos and circulating, thanks to the Bhojpuri diaspora, across a vast part of the world, to prise open the restrictive definition of literature in world literature as that which is 'read as literature', in David Damrosch's formulation?⁶

At one end, Bhojpuri orature is part of world literature through its rich tradition of oral epics (*gathas*), living repositories of cultural memory narrated by specialists but also printed in chapbook and book form

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- 3 Aarushi Agrawal, 'The World of Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi*: Gautam Choubey on Translating the Novel, Bhojpuri Literary Culture', *Firstpost*, 23 December 2020; Somak Ghoshal, '*Phoolsunghi*: a Bhojpuri Classic Revived in English', *mintlounge*, 20 November 2020. The Jaipur Literature Festival dedicated an (online) panel to the translation; see 'Phoolsunghi: The Scent of a Text| Jaipur Literature Festival 2021'.
 - 4 The bibliography is vast; see e.g. Badri Narayan, *Culture and Emotional Economy of Migration* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2016).
 - 5 Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Picador, 2009).
 - 6 David Damrosch, *What is World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 6.

from the early twentieth century.⁷ These are among the many regional and caste oral epics attested throughout South Asia, themselves part of a tapestry of oral epics that have already been accepted into world literature, though usually oral epics are studied by anthropologists or students of folklore rather than of literature.⁸ Song, as artistic and expressive forms, both are and are not acknowledged as literature.⁹ On the one hand, songs are poems set to music that draw upon the same pool of referents, images, tropes, and characters as poetry. On the other hand, text is only one element in a song alongside melody, rhythm, and voice. Indeed, many songs seem to work with the briefest textual hints: instead of whole texts, we have resonant phrases, words (*dulhin* or bride, *roti* or bread, *chulha* or hearth, *kudari* or spade, etc.), instruments and melodies. Wendy Doniger made a distinction between ‘fluid texts’, which are texts that can be and are changed in transmission, and ‘fixed texts’ that cannot.¹⁰ Ratnakar Tripathy, who has studied contemporary musical culture in Bihar, speaks of ‘soft texts’ and even looser evocations of text in song lyrics:

The idea of the text I feel remains as indispensable as ever through its oral, printed and digital incarnations. By ‘text’ I mean here an original frame of meaning as a point of reference even if it’s imaginary/imagined/posited. With various degrees of fluidity, portability and replicability, it is possible to place and indeed classify literary outputs in a continuum, and fixed labels are perhaps avoidable to retain a greater loyalty to the empirical and the existential. I feel the phrases ‘hard text’ and ‘soft text’ should do for the interim with several in-betweens of course.

The text remains important and melody/rhythm alone are never enough even for the grossest songs. The vulgarest songs are often the richest in

7 See Servan-Schreiber, *Chanteurs Itinerants*.

8 See Martin Puchner, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Wiebke Denecke, Barbara Fuchs, Caroline Levine, Pericles Lewis, and Emily R. Wilson, eds, *The Norton anthology of world literature* (London and New York: WW Norton, 2018). Exceptions in South Asia include David Shulman, V. Narayana Rao and Rich Freeman; see *Oral Epics in India*, ed. by Stuart H. Blackburn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

9 For a recent discussion, based largely on English texts, see Jahan Ramazani, ‘Poetry and Song’, *Poetry and Its Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 184–238.

10 Wendy Doniger, ‘Fluid and Fixed Texts in India’ in *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. by J. Burkhalter Flueckiger and L. J. Sears (The University of Michigan: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), pp. 31–42.

metaphors – an irony not unlike the ‘filthiest abuses’. But my ethnographic work in 2010 startled me for the great anxiety the lowliest singers expressed over the quality of their lyrics, many of them dreaming of a muse-lyricist who would write songs for them. They were surprisingly aware of the low quality of their words and their heavy dependence on melody, timbre and rhythmic extravagance. [...] Incantatory lyrics sung loudly and danced with cut both ways – they drown the words but also highlight selected text.¹¹

Such a formulation of text is very far from our usual literary understanding of a literary text as something that you cannot say in any other way.¹² But, as this chapter argues, resonant phrases and words characterize the worldly circulation of Bhojpuri songs across space and time, their resilience and adaptation as well as their compressed historicity. For this reason, this chapter does not focus on *Phoolsunghi* and its English translation, or on *A Sea of Poppies*, but rather on Bhojpuri songs, and takes Trinidadian singer Sundar Popo’s 1970s mixed-language hit ‘Phulourie Bina Chutney Kaise Bani’ (How can you have *phulouri* without chutney?), recently revived in the Hindi blockbuster film *Dabangg 2* (Fearless 2, 2012, dir. Arbaz Khan), as an unlikely, and consciously provocative, example.

Bhojpuri Orature

As already mentioned, Bhojpuri is spoken across two states in colonial and independent India (eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar) and southern Nepal, as well as among the Bhojpuri diaspora. Despite its very rich oral literature including oral epics (*gathas*) and songs (*git*), and its large number of speakers (50 million declared it as their mother tongue in the 2011 Indian Census, with many more second language speakers and a further two million speakers across the world), Bhojpuri has struggled for recognition.¹³ Despite movements agitating for its recognition in the 1960s and 1970s, it is yet to be recognized as an official

11 Ratnakar Tripathy, Personal communication, November 2019.

12 Karin Barber at ‘Roundtable on Contemporary African Oral Traditions’, SOAS, 20 November 2019.

13 See ‘List of languages by number of native speakers in India’, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers_in_India.

language by the Indian Constitution. It has largely remained an oral and unofficial language, regionally and culturally important but giving way to Hindi in formal contexts. In fact, whether in India or in the former plantation colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean, linguistically Bhojpuri has always co-existed with other languages, whether Hindi, Creole, and French or English.

Further, in the case of Bhojpuri even literature revolves around orature. While there are Bhojpuri book publishers and literary institutions that bring out bulletins and magazines, they often celebrate orature and commemorate its vastly more popular creators, like the humbly born playwright and impresario Bhikhari Thakur (1887–1971), known as the ‘Bhojpuri Shakespeare’, or Mahendar Missir, as in the novel *Phoolsunghi* already mentioned.¹⁴

Bhojpuri society is mainly constituted of martial/warrior, mercantile, and pastoral castes; it is divided by inter-caste conflict between landowners, cattle herders, and agriculturalists, and is strongly patriarchal. Bhojpuri oral epics typically revolve around forbidden inter-caste or inter-clan romances, or around migrant heroes. They are associated with particular castes (like Ahir pastoralists, or Musahar labourers) and are typically recited and/or sung by men with the accompaniment of a drum (*dholak*) and string-instrument (*sarang*). Songs, by contrast, are typically sung by women as part of everyday work or on ritual and festive occasions and cover a wide range of genres—there are grinding songs, wedding songs, spring, monsoon, and festival songs (*kajri*), and so on. As in other regions of South Asia, while music and singing are considered auspicious, indeed necessary for auspicious events like weddings and births, professional singers, particularly itinerant ones, are considered impure and are often low-caste: celebrated during the performance for their artistry, they are nonetheless socially ‘liminal’.¹⁵ Singing, and especially dancing, was and to some extent still is considered a profession for women of ill repute.¹⁶

14 Bhikhari Thakur is the hero of the recent Hindi novel *Sutradhar* by Sanjeev (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2016).

15 See Servan-Schreiber, *Chanteurs itinerants*; also *Histoire*, p. 41; see also Katherine Butler Brown (Schofield), ‘The Social Liminality of Musicians: Case Studies from Mughal India and Beyond’, *twentieth-century music*, 3.1 (2007), 13–49.

16 See Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (London: Hurst & Co., 2013) for the stigma associated with women from traditional

There was already a widespread culture of internal and external (often seasonal) migration from Bhojpur to Nepal, Assam, Calcutta, Burma, and Bombay as an avenue to upward mobility, even before indenture brought men and (a smaller but still a substantial number of) women from the region to the sugarcane colonies of Mauritius (since 1830), Trinidad and Guyana (1845), Natal in South Africa (1860), and Fiji (1879) after the abolition of slavery in 1833.¹⁷ The historiography of coolie migration has emphasized the deep trauma of oceanic migration and the quasi-slavery conditions of labourers, who left pushed by extreme poverty.¹⁸ Servan-Schreiber has partly questioned this narrative and argued instead that pull factors and habits of migration (which shifted 'from river to sea') should be taken more into account.¹⁹ Sugarcane was already established by the British in the Bhojpur region, and a number of castes traded saltpetre and other local products along networks that were both mercantile and religious.²⁰ The mattock or curved spade for digging (*kudari*) features in several indenture songs, as we shall see.²¹

Even before indenture there was a strong tradition of Bhojpuri songs about exile and separation, with the wife singing about her suffering (*biraha*) while her husband is away (*bides*), fighting or working.²² (As Camille Buat has noted, women in Bhojpuri orature are always imagined as sedentary and confined while men are mobile, whereas from the beginning one third of Bhojpuri migrants in Calcutta were women.)²³ Sitting on the rooftop, the woman 'looks at the road' (i.e. waits) and suffers because of loneliness, unfulfilled sexual desire, humiliation

communities of performers, including the Bhojpur region.

17 Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

18 E.g. *Ibid.*

19 Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, Ch. 3.

20 Shahid Amin, *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, pp. 32–35.

21 See G. A. Grierson, *Bihar Peasant Life* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat, 1885), pp. 5–6.

22 Usually in Hindi one distinguishes between *videsh* (*videś*, abroad), and *pardes* (*pardēs*, in a different region but within the same country), but the Bhojpuri songs do not distinguish between the two, and the husband who leaves for Calcutta, or Burma, or Assam can be called *Pardesi* or *Bidesi*. The *batohi* (traveller) also travels abroad for work, but in the songs and in the *Bidesia* plays he acts as the messenger carrying the wife's letter and admonishing the errant husband.

23 Camille Buat, presentation for 'Orature, Literature and History: Exploring Northern Indian Popular Culture (19c-20c)', SOAS, University of London, 29–31 May 2018.

at the hands of her mother- and sisters-in-law, because without her husband she cannot fully participate in the pleasures of the seasons and in seasonal festivities, and because she is jealous and worries that he has been enticed by a rival wife (*sautin*, *pardesiya*) abroad. These topoi and 'structure of feeling' recur across a range of song genres (*purbi*, *kajli*, *barahmasa*, *biraha*), and single words like *biraha*, *sautin*, *bides* are enough to evoke the whole structure. Songs direct attention to the aching youthful body of the woman to express sexual tension, others point to fruit, vegetables, food items and birds to voice desire and signal the pleasures that the wife cannot have:

*Pardesiya balam se yari lagal pardesiya
jano jevenli puri kachauri
jano ke jevena men barphi bhari pardesiya
jano piyeli bhar bhar ke madhuva*

My husband has fallen for a woman abroad (*pardesiya*),
his lover scoffs *puris* and *kachauris*,
his lover eats her full of *barfis*,
his lover drinks her full of honey,
she keeps a bottle (*ged'ua*) full of perfume, that foreign/stranger woman.
He makes her sleep on the top floor,
on a bed with a fringed bedspread.
She can roam the city and the bazaar
my husband has fallen for a woman abroad.²⁴

In the early twentieth century, folk playwright Bhikhari Thakur dramatized this dynamic and created a new form of musical theatre, which he called *Bidesia* (Foreigner), around the historical and socio-emotional experience of migration. His most famous play, also called *Bidesiya*, features a restless husband (Bidesi) who is itching to leave the village and his newly-wedded bride, the bride (Pyari Sundari) who tries in vain to stop him, and an elderly traveller (Batohi) who agrees to take her message to Bidesi, who is enjoying himself in Calcutta with his mistress (Randi, lit. prostitute). Prose dialogue includes several comedic exchanges, but the bulk of the text consists of songs, Batohi's songs which call upon the errant husband to leave his mistress and return home, and Pyari Sundari's songs of waiting and longing. Interestingly,

24 Krishna Dev Upadhyay, *Bhojpuri lokgit*, 2 vols. (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1954 and 1956), quoted in Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 51.

the songs do not advance the play's narrative but repeat and elaborate, using different styles, the characters' main message. Thakur achieved enormous renown in the Bhojpur area and among the Bhojpuri diaspora in India and Burma.²⁵

Another song genre that achieved considerable creativity, success, and circulation in performance (with competing 'parties') is the *birha* (< *biraha*), a composition associated with cattle-herders and milk producers or Ahirs, who perform it with powerful voice projection (*uthan*). Some *birhas* deal with topical events or current activities, and there have been political and nationalist *birhas* in both India and in Mauritius, or *birhas* about famous dacoits. Songs of migration spoke of the oceanic crossing as deception.²⁶ For example, a *birha* that became very popular in Mauritius in the 1920s laments the hard labour and 'mirage' that Mauritius had proved to be for labourers (*marich* means mirage in Hindi):

<i>idhar udhar kan planté</i>	Here, there we planted cane
<i>bich men makai</i>	and corn in the middle.
<i>ek dari golmal to kiya</i>	You mess up a single row
<i>to mila chamkai</i>	you get a good shining!
<i>desh chhore bhaiya</i>	We left the country, brother,
<i>ai ai Mirichiya</i>	and came to Marichiya
<i>mar kudari, nich pachhari</i>	dig the spade, turn it round,
<i>chal agari</i>	move ahead
<i>yebi Mirichya ke rit</i>	these are the ways of Marichiya ²⁷

Note the (slight) use of Creole (*kan planté*) and the mention of the curved spade as the labourer's tool, which we will find again in the 'Phulouri' song.

Beginning in the 1880s, Bhojpuri music genres also 'generated a veritable market economy' of printed booklets, which circulated widely at least until the end of the twentieth century thanks to a vast network of itinerant peddlers.²⁸ This is significant, because it points to the importance of chapbooks as textual aids, supporting the consumption

25 See Badri Narayan, *Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Fold Culture* (Allahabad: North Central Cultural Centre, 2005).

26 E.g. 'Sunike nam ham Marich ke dipva ho' in *Lal Pasina*, quoted in Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 101.

27 Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 100.

28 Servan-Schreiber, *Chanteurs itinerants*; also *Histoire*, p. 55.

and circulation of orature, and also as a parallel circuit to that of books, usually the only circuit considered in world literature studies.²⁹ Instead, like the *literatura de cordel* in Brazil, Bhojpuri chapbooks illuminate a system of reproduction of oral texts and of production of new texts along similar lines for an eager, often semiliterate reading public.³⁰

Though this is only a brief introduction, it shows how Bhojpuri songs have existed and circulated on a growing number of platforms (see also Vierke, Chapter 1 in this volume): in intimate or community settings, sung by women or by itinerant male singers; in print as chapbooks; as part of Bidesia and other folk theatrical performances, or as competitions between ‘singing parties’. More recently, Bhojpuri songs have been part of an economy of live performances (‘concerts’) and audio cassettes in 1980s, and of VCDs since the 2000s, with professional singers performing and recording devotional and/or ribald songs.³¹ The large Bhojpuri diaspora also arguably sustained the development of a Bhojpuri film industry in Bombay, which seems to have peaked in the 1990s, and a vibrant subculture of Bhojpuri YouTube music channels—what Ratnakar Tripathy has called a ‘Music Mania’.³²

Otherwise, Bhojpuri songs regularly appear as part of Hindi films, where they tend to signify a subaltern sexual energy, often played on a stage by a professional dancer or ‘item number’, or else homely tradition. The song ‘Phulouri Bina Chutney’ in *Dabangg 2* exemplifies the former, as we shall see, while ‘Pag pag mohe liye jaun tori balaiya’ (‘My prayers

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- 29 For texts as aids to oral performance, see Christian L., Novetzke, ‘Note to Self: What Marathi Kirtankars’ Notebooks Suggest about Literacy, Performance, and the Travelling Performer in Pre-Colonial Maharashtra’ in *Tellings and Texts*, ed. by F. Orsini and K. Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 169–184, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0062>
- 30 See Marco Haurélio, *Literatura de cordel: do sertão à sala de aula* (Pia Sociedade de São Paulo-Editora Paulus, 2014). In one of her lectures at SOAS in May 2018, Catherine Servan-Schreiber outlined a possible comparative approach to chapbook literature through the theme of revenge.
- 31 See Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular music and technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Ratnakar Tripathy, ‘Music Mania in Small-town Bihar: Emergence of Vernacular Identities’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47.22 (2 June 2012), pp. 58–66; Akshaya Kumar, ‘The Insurrectionary Lateral-ness of Bhojpuri Media’ in *Hinglish Live: Language Mixing Across Media*, ed. by F. Orsini and Ravikant (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021), pp. 223–258.
- 32 Tripathy, ‘Music Mania’. See Avjit Ghosh, *Cinema Bhojpuri* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2010), and Akshaya Kumar, *Bhojpuri Cinema in the Comparative Media Crucible* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021).

will protect you at every step'), in the late 1980s superhit film *Mainne Pyar Kiya* (I've Loved, dir. Sooraj Barjatiya, 1989), signifies tradition. Sung in a deep, 'rustic' voice—a far cry from the usual shrill voice of female playback singers from Lata Mageshkar onwards—by celebrated middle-class 'folk singer' Sharda Sinha, who Ratnakar Tripathy calls 'exaggeratedly respectable middle-class housewife-like', the song is accompanied by 'traditional' drumming and the auspicious sound of the Indian oboe or *shehnai*, associated with weddings. The bashful heroine sings of her love and devotion to her boyfriend while performing quasi-marital gestures: she prepares *chai* and knits a sweater for him, appears shyly before him surrounded by her friends, massages his tired legs and rests her head on his feet while he sleeps, and fasts as married women do. Text, voice, instruments, rhythm—all scream 'tradition' here.³³

Bhojpuri Songs in the Diaspora

'there is no Bhojpuri music without songs'

(Catherine Servan-Schreiber)

'la seule façon de garder notre langue vivante, c'est par la musique'

(Ravin Sowamber, told to C. Servan-Schreiber)

'you must have a tune and a story'

(Sundar Popo)

33 'Let me tell you, my beloved,
 at every step my prayers will protect you. REFRAIN
 I'll fall like the rain,
 gather monsoon clouds.
 My heart longs
 to take you in my arms but
 my wretched shyness
 stops my feet. REFRAIN
 I know not the ways of the world,
 to me you are vermillion
 in my hair's parting
 you the bangles
 on my wrists. REFRAIN
 I love all your colours,
 the sad and happy moments.
 I'll stay with my beloved,
 we'll share our troubles
 and spend our life together';
 Sharda Sinha, Padmashri, 'Kahe tose sajna', lyrics by Asad Bhopali.

As in other plantation colonies, already in the 1860s indentured workers in Mauritius founded villages and started buying up plots of land after their contracts expired. By 1920, 45% of the cultivated land belonged to Indian families.³⁴ Bhojpuri became a lingua franca in the countryside (as opposed to the coastal areas and towns), so widely spoken that even Chinese traders learnt it. The *baithaka* or ‘sitting’ was an important social and cultural institution in Mauritian villages where much music was played and songs were sung, while women sang wedding songs at women-only *soirées* called *gamat* or *git gawai*.³⁵

Paradoxically, in Mauritius Bhojpuri has enjoyed more official recognition than in India, though its fortunes have waxed and waned over time and with the passing of generations. Bhojpuri found some early support as a language of primary education—with Sir Arthur Phayre in 1878 and Basdeo Bissoondoyal’s Jan Andolan or People’s Movement in 1930–1946. In the 1980s it replaced Hindi as one of the languages of TV news. As Servan-Schreiber puts it: ‘The parallel between the status of Bhojpuri in India itself and in Mauritius is astonishing. Its role as ancestral language in Mauritius is weakened by the fact that it is looked down upon in India, where despite the efforts of local leaders it is still to be recognized as a scheduled language in the Constitution’.³⁶

In the 1930s, though, Creole gained ground while Bhojpuri was devalued as a rural dialect. In fact, Bhojpuri lost ground to Creole in everyday speech, and to standard Hindi in education and religion.³⁷ Writers like Abhimanyu Unnuth (1937–2018), the most renowned Mauritian Indian writer, chose Hindi for their poems, plays, and fiction, and all his works were published in India. His historical novel *Lal Pasina* (Red Sweat, 1980), which claims to present the ‘authentic history’ of indentured labourers, the ‘little men’, in opposition to the official history

34 Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 71.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97, carefully parses which genres of Bhojpuri remained current in Mauritius: she notes that the professionally specialised repertoire became a collective heritage, that oral epics like *Alha* were parcellised into songs, and that some of the women’s seasonal songs lost their natural referents in the new climate.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

37 A Hindi Pracharini Sabha or Society for the Propagation of Hindi was established in 1924, and in the 1950s it was Hindi, alongside Urdu and Gujarati, that was taught in school as an ‘Oriental language’, whereas Bhojpuri remained only a spoken language (*Ibid.*, p. 81). Hindi, however, remains only a literary, written language.

of the island, is dotted with Bhojpuri songs, which work as authenticifiers.³⁸ In fact, partly because of the needs of democratic politics on the road to independence (in 1968), partly thanks to the organization Sewa Shivar (Service Camp) that revived Bhojpuri songs as 'heritage' and campaigned for the preservation of popular culture, and partly because of the revaluation of ties with India after independence, Bhojpuri in Mauritius regained value.³⁹ In the 1980s, Chutney music acted as a catalyser for the revival of Bhojpuri. As Servan-Schreiber puts it, 'The history of Mauritian Chutney music is linked to a great extent to the evolution of the status of the language [Bhojpuri]. The relationship then reversed itself, and the status of the language came to depend in turn upon the success of the music'.⁴⁰

By comparison, Trinidad was further away from India, migration was more diversified, and there was greater language loss to Creole and English: 'by the end of the 1960s, [even] Hindi was no longer a strong marker of difference, because most Indians communicated with each other in English'.⁴¹ Only songs and religious practices (like recitations of Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, the sixteenth-century version of the Ramayana written in an idiom close to Bhojpuri) preserved the language. Moreover, in Trinidad Indians came to the foreground in national consciousness only in the 1990s with Basdeo Panday's successful campaign for Prime Minister. In fact, ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel views the emergence of Chutney and Chutney Soca music in Trinidad as both 'a concerted revival and assertion of Indian identity' and a 'new spirit of creolization and syncreticism'.⁴²

38 A point made by Alena Rettová with regard to Swahili novels at the Roundtable on Contemporary African Oral Traditions held at SOAS, 20 November 2019. In the novel *Lal Pasina*, the first leader of the labourers, Kisan Singh, himself writes songs and a kind of play in Bhojpuri.

39 As Servan-Schreiber (*Histoire*, p. 165) notes, this included also the many booklets of new songs written from the 1960s by Roodraduth Pokhun, the 'Tenor with the golden voice' who also founded a music school; several of these songs were on new themes like 'progress' (*pragati*), 'family planning', Hindi, and Mauritius ('*morisva dil mohela*', 'Mauritius enchanted our hearts', see below); see Roodraduth Pokhun, *Bhojpuri git* (Port Louis: Nalanda Press, 1972).

40 Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 78.

41 Aisha Mohamed, 'Love and Anxiety: Gender Negotiations in Chutney-Soca Lyrics in Trinidad', *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 1 (April 2007), 1–42 (p. 4).

42 Peter Manuel, *East Indian Music in the West Indies: Tān-singing, Chutney, and the Making of Indo-Caribbean Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 168; also Mohamed, 'Love and Anxiety', p. 3.

The resilience and circulation of Bhojpuri songs in both Mauritius and Trinidad was closely linked to this process of adaptation. In both cases, scholars have spoken of a movement from the ‘wedding tent’ to the performance stage of the fête or the local talent competition. In the process, music was creolised through local encounters with Soca in Trinidad and Séga in Mauritius—both closer to African styles—in order to create danceable music, spawning various sub-styles, from Chutney-Soca to Séga-Bollywood. In the repertoire of female songs sung in the context of women-only wedding soirées, songs were often very ribald and full of sexual innuendoes; these were now reinvented as dance music, with more instruments, professional male and a few female singers, and a ‘new body language’ of dance in gender-mixed environments, giving rise to occasional tensions.⁴³

In terms of the song texts, Bhojpuri lines and topoi were combined with either Creole in Mauritius, or English in Trinidad. New topics were added to the older ‘structures of feeling’ linked to love, marriage, family, and migration; these involved tensions between city and rural life, jobs and unemployment, and a more localized and shared identity as Mauritians, signalled by local toponyms.

So Anilsingh Ramessur sang of a wife who now looked for her husband not in Calcutta but in Rose-Hill and Curepipe.⁴⁴ Migration, Roodraduth Pokhun suggests, was over: the *Pardesi* had arrived and had no desire to return:

Morisva dil mohela
hind maha sagar ke, tara morisva,
sab ke, dil mohela, hā hā dil mohela. [...]
man ke rijhaveola, pamplemus bagiya.
acharaj samarel ke, sat rangi matiya.
hīya ake pardeshi laute na khojela.
*morisva sabke dil mohela.*⁴⁵

43 See Mohamed, ‘Love and Axiety’ and Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*.

44 ‘Rozil me kojli
 Curepip me kojli
 Kone kone khojab Saiyan tohar suratiya
 Suna suna lagela dilwa’. Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 217.
 I searched Rose-Hill,
 I searched Curepipe,
 I looked for your dear face in every corner,
 My heart feels so so empty

45 Pokhun, ‘Morisva dil mohela’, *Bhojpuri git*, p. 8.

Mauritius enchants the heart

Mauritius, the star of the Indian Ocean,
enchants every heart, yes, yes. [...]
The garden of *Pamplemousses* delights the heart,
the seven-colour earth of *Chamarel* astounds.
Once here the *Pardesi* seeks no return,
Mauritius enchants every heart.

Another band, the Bhojpuri Boys, instead sang of travels ('*Dadi gail Angleterre, Angleterre ghume, la France ghume*', Grandma went to England, toured England, toured France) and new migrations ('*Naya sirey*', Once Again, 2003).⁴⁶ We find the *bazariya* again, this time not as the site of the heroine's rival but of the dressed up ('*saj dhaj ke*') heroine herself:

Lutayi gayo bhauji bich bazariya
bich bazariyam bich bazariya
Khube saj dhaj ke ham gaili bazariya
koi khinch choli aur khinch lahanga
*Lutayo gayo bhauji.*⁴⁷

Bhauji (sister-in-law), I was harassed
right in the middle of the bazaar.
I went all dressed up, to the bazaar,
One pulled my blouse, one pinched my skirt,
I was harassed, *Bhauji*.

If in some songs the *bazariya* is still a dangerous place where one gets molested (one's virtue is 'looted'), elsewhere the city and its modern conveyances, or the Fancy-Fair, become sites of excitement and romance:

Bus ke soferwa
Bus ke soferwa paink painkoo karela
Ham lapareille hath mein leke karat katila
Kahan jaiba? Kahan ootarba? Sabse poochila
Ham lapareille hath mein leke karat Katila
Pari niyar chokri ghanta bhajawela
Ham chhatake hali se kanwati kholila
*Bus ke soferwa...*⁴⁸

The bus driver [*soferwa*, chauffer] hoots, hoots,

46 See Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, pp. 224–225.

47 Anerood Boyjonauth, 'Bhauji'; *Ibid.*, p. 209.

48 'Master' Vinod Sewduth, 'Bus ke soferwa'; *Ibid.*, p. 196.

I grab the instrument and punch the tickets.
 Where are you going? Where do you get off? I ask everyone,
 I grab the instrument and punch the tickets.
 A girl pretty like a fairy rings the bell,
 I whizz past her to open the door,
 the bus driver.

Fantifair

Fantifair mein gaili mama, dholl-puri bechatani
Ego chokri hamko dekhlan, dholl-puri bechal hogal
*Mama bole mama – Hamro shaadi karadge na...*⁴⁹
Fancy-Fair

I went to the Fancy-Fair, mama, to sell *dholl-puri*,
 A girl looked at me, and all my snacks were sold.
 I told mama – Do set my marriage up...

‘Music is the only way we can keep our language alive’, Catherine Servan-Schreiber was told in Mauritius.⁵⁰ And indeed, whereas formal literary *writing* by Mauritian and Fijian Indians has largely been in Hindi, songs have been in Bhojpuri, Creole, or a mixture of the two. Keeping Bhojpuri alive, even as a marker of tradition, has involved, unsurprisingly, processes of adaptation to new media platforms and new subjects, and of musical and linguistic creolisation, as Catherine Servan-Schreiber has shown. As a result, Bhojpuri texts have become ‘softer’ and ‘looser’, evoking familiar elements while registering historical, cultural, and linguistic change.

How Can you Have Phulouri without Chutney?

It is in this context of adaptation and creolisation that we need to read Trinidadian singer-songwriter Sundar Popo’s 1970s ‘How can you have phulouri [a falafel-like fried snack made with pulse flour] without chutney?’ (*Phulouri Bina Chutney Kaise Bani?*), one of the first hit Chutney songs.

As already mentioned, in Trinidad in the late 1960s Bhojpuri music ‘spilled over from the wedding tent onto the stage of the chutney fete’ and the carnival. With Chutney music, English became the primary

49 Roodranuth Pokhun, ‘Fantifair’; *Ibid.*, p. 171.

50 Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire*, p. 225.

language, and the music added *soca* rhythms and instruments.⁵¹ Professional male singers like Sundar Popo (1943–2000) and female singers like Drupati Ramgunai became famous, and not just locally. As Tina Ramnarine recounts, ‘after a deal between Rohit Records in US and Moean Mohammed of Windsor Records in Trinidad, Sundar Popo became a household name in countries such as Holland, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Mauritius and India’.⁵²

The refrain of the song is in Bhojpuri and probably ‘traditional’. But it is only a fragment anchoring a song that positively delights in mixing references and languages. ‘At that time’, writes Aisha Mohammed, ‘it was not conceivable how Indian music, and the Indian community, could retain “Indianness” without an Indian language. Songs like Popo’s “Nana and Nani” or “Phulourie bin chutney”, offered a solution, though it was not recognized at the time. The use of familiar folk melodies, and Indian-style enunciation [...] gave the songs an “Indian” sound while widening their appeal to non-Hindi speakers’.⁵³

Kaise bani
Phulourie bina chutney kaise bani

I went Sangre Grande to meet Lal Beharry
I pull out meh kudari and shave off te darhi⁵⁴
Phulourie bina chutney kaise bani

Me and meh darling was flying in a plane
The plane catch a fire and we fall inside the cane
Kaise bani, kaise bani
Phulourie bina chutney kaise bani

51 ‘A number of changes occurred as chutney spilled over from the wedding tent onto the stage of the chutney fete [in Trinidad]. English became the primary language, artistes began incorporating soca beats and other elements, and male artistes came to dominate the scene. In the private space of the Hindu wedding, chutney enabled women to express their ideas on a range of topics from sexuality, to husbands, to marriage. In the public sphere of chutney, the participation of men made it an important area in which Indian men and women could renegotiate gendered identities. As chutney evolved into chutney-soca, this process of negotiation was influenced by Black and North American sex/gender belief systems’; Mohamed, ‘Love and Anxiety’, p. 39.

52 Tina Ramnarine, *Creating Their Own Space: The Development of an Indian-Caribbean Musical Tradition* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press Jamaica). See also Mohamed, ‘Love and Anxiety’.

53 Mohamed, ‘Love and Anxiety’, p. 5.

I beating meh drum and ah singing meh song
 The only thing ah missing is meh bottle ah rum
 Kaise bani...

Jack and Jill went up ah hill
 to fetch ah pale of water
 Jack fell down and broke 'is thumb
 and Jill came tumbling after
 Little Jack Horner sit in a corner
 Eating his Christmas pie
 He put his thumb and pull out a plum
 And said what a good boy am I
 Kaise bani...

When asked about the text ('In your song, "Phoulourie Bina Chutney", you have these nursery rhymes, "Jack and Jill went up the hill" and "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner", and then something about the cane fields. What's the meaning of that song?'), Sundar Popo downplayed it as nonsense:

Well, it's just a chutney song. It don't carry great meaning. It's rhyme: 'Me and my darling was flying in a plane, the plane catch a fire and we fall inside the cane.' It brings many meanings and it's how you will interpret it.⁵⁵

Yet, as indeed others have already noted, the nonsensical text is not that random at all: it contains familiar references to food (*phulouri* and *chutney*), which in Bhojpuri songs often carry sexual innuendoes; another reference to plantation labour through the sugarcane field and the labourer's tool, the spade (*kudari*); a local toponym (Sangre

54 As sung by Sundar Popo ('Kaise Bani'), this line is a little unclear; this is what I made of it after listening several times (meaning, 'I went [to] Sangre Grande to meet Lal Bihari, I took out my spade and shaved off his beard'); as covered in the Bhojpuri film 'Bhaiya Dooj' (1985, dir. Qamar Narvi) by a female playback singer (I could not confirm the name) and played on stage by a duo of performers with sexually suggestive thrusting and grinding gestures, at this point the female performer clearly threatens the man with an imaginary weapon ('Kaise Bani'). In the version sung by Kanchan available on YouTube, she changes it to 'and say about Shridhari'; the author is also disingenuously elided by declaring it an 'Indian Folk Song' (Kanchan Babla, 'Kaise Bani'). Another song lyrics website gives it as 'I pull out meh coudharry and take out te dharry' ('Kaise Bani (1980s) Lyrics, YouTube link no longer available).

55 In Ramnarine, *Creating their own Space*, p. 169.

Grande); some images of migration/mobility (the plane); a stereotype of Trinidadian songs (meh bottle ah rhum); and nursery rhymes that speak of a basic, oral contact with formal English. In other words, in its combination of evocative textual fragments, the song expresses—in a compressed and imaginative way—the historical experience of Indian migrant labourers, in a musical language that is both familiar but also understandable beyond the community.

Sundar Popo sang the song simply, to a traditional rhythm and accompanied by a shehnai-sounding clarinet and *dholak* and *tabla* drums (his father was an accomplished drummer in *tassa* ensembles). But when the Indian early pop husband-and-wife duo Babla and Kanchan—who pioneered disco accompaniment to other traditional forms like ‘disco dandiyā’ and toured performing for the Indian diaspora in the 1980s—took up the song, they made it more upbeat and danceable. They added a synthesiser, and Kanchan sang it in the high-pitched voice of Indian playback singers. Interestingly, following the treads of comments on the YouTube versions it becomes clear that these once novelty songs have themselves become ‘collective memory’ and evoke in many listeners memories of family parties, festivities, and old records.

The song became a hit once more in the Bollywood blockbuster *Dabangg 2*, in which Salman Khan (the once tender hero of *Maine Pyar Kiya*) is a small-town police officer of unorthodox means. When he finds himself surrounded by notables who are really criminals at a wedding celebration, he suddenly hears the song and starts twisting to the beat, and the next thing we know he is dancing and singing on stage alongside the sexy female performer.⁵⁶ In *Dabangg 2* the song text is drastically curtailed and partly changed—the local Trinidadian toponym of Sangre Grande or the spade, *kudari*, of the plantation labourer are no longer there. Nor even sugarcane. Instead, the couple falls from the airplane on fire onto a... train, a more familiar reference in India?⁵⁷ Performed in an Indian context, the Bhojपुरi text becomes even more of an anchor, while

56 The singers are Mamta Sharma and Wajid (‘Kaise Bani Kaise Bani—The Chatni Song, *Dabangg 2*’)

57 ‘Me and my darling were travelling on a plane, The plane catch fire and we fall inside a train’ (‘Kaise Bani Kaise Bani—The Chatni song, *Dabangg 2*’).

the English lines fall within the category of funny code-mixing familiar from many Bhojpuri songs.⁵⁸

Let me end here with a provocation. How can this song, however important it may be as a cultural memory, and however wide its circulation within and outside the regime of copyright, be 'read as world literature'?! Surely the older Bhojpuri folk songs are more easily included as part of world folklore, maybe even the political *birhas* as expressions of a postcolonial consciousness, but this contemporary dance number?

Here is where the arguments offered by Liz Gunner and Ratnakar Tripathy are instructive. Instead of whole texts, we have resonant phrases, even single words (*phulouri, kudari*), instruments and melodies, what with Tripathy we may call 'soft texts' or even looser evocations of texts. We also have elements recomposed to suit new circumstances: in India and in the diaspora, Bhojpuri songs are *both* folklore and heritage (manifested in community singing and printed song collections) *and* mixed-language songs-and-dance numbers, performed at concerts, inserted into films, and now available on YouTube. Again, Tripathy's observations on how new song texts are created through reiteration and familiarity are useful here: 'The text, whether inherited, partly borrowed, re-assembled or based on templates of text/melody/rhythm, *appeals to familiarity*. [...] I wish to emphasize the reiterative/referential part, whether textual, melodic, or more rarely perhaps as rhythm'. Enterprising artists mine 'more and more from the traditional stocks' 'for new stuff'. He concludes, 'Yes, some forms do get left behind though it's difficult to claim that they will always remain so due to their inherent limitations (as music can easily break away from its traditional context a bit like griot)'.⁵⁹

The usual criteria for inclusion in world literature are circulation, recognition/consecration, and artistry. But if we want to acknowledge orature, with its resilience and circulation, as part of world literature, other criteria are needed. 'How then do we begin to rethink orality, in order to bring about a model of world literature which is truer to

58 Examples include 'Banal ba *mood* dehiya bhail ba *powerful*' ('I'm in the mood, my body has become powerful'), or 'Hamra marad chahi *horn* dabawe wala ho' ('I need a man who will press my horn'); Kumar, 'The Lateralness', p. 134.

59 Tripathy, personal communication, November 2019.

the broad spectrum of verbal arts?', Liz Gunner asks. She frames the obstacles clearly:

Orality is often seen as existing outside the confines of world literature, excluded largely because the heavy weight of print pushes it aside: words spoken, sung, or performed as aesthetic events are considered to be external to the domain of print, and thus to the modes of circulation conventionally associated with the term 'world literature'. Even if we keep to the term 'oral literature' we confine orality to a zone so peripheral that its points of connectivity, its potential links to 'world literature', are virtually erased.⁶⁰

Instead, Gunner suggests that we consider the different modes of production and circulation (ritual, live performance, radio, booklet, YouTube, etc.) among audiences 'within different spheres or ecologies of literary practice' as '*co-existing* rather than *successive*' (see also Vierke, Chapter 1 in this volume).⁶¹ Following Gunner, I have argued that the Bhojpuri song 'exists through multiple practices, each of which sustains its presence in the modern world'.⁶² Instead of the (almost exclusive) centrality of print and the written text, I have pointed to the relay of multiple platforms and institutions—*baithkas*, *matikoor*, *git gawai* and *gamat* wedding sessions, carnivals, fêtes, competitions, radio, YouTube, record and film companies, lyricists, musicians, studios, etc.—needed in order to make song texts like these circulate 'worldwide'. This is not a unified system, but rather a relay of institutions and agents catering to different publics, in which print may, or may not, be involved. In the process, texts necessarily change and adapt, sometimes dramatically. They get chopped up and partly replaced but, as Ratnakar Tripathy argues, the text, or its evocation, is still there—a soft text. But even these soft texts matter, and mean, a lot to their audiences, and even a nonsense song like 'Kaise Bani' can be 'read as world literature' in terms of a testament to the resilience and transformation that orature must undergo in order to survive and thrive, finding new audiences and

60 Liz Gunner, 'Ecologies of Orality' in *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by B. Etherington and J. Zimbler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 116–129.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 126.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 122. Or, as Catherine Servan-Schreiber puts it, 'the variety/pop song (*chanson de variété*) is as relevant to the artistic and anthropological debate as the traditional styles it traverses' (*Histoire*, p. 27).

new platforms over time. 'Kaise Bani' by itself may not be recognizable as world literature but, as I have tried to argue, read in the context of Bhojpuri orature, its history and transformations both in India, in the diaspora, and in the 'significant geography' formed by the enduring connections between the two, even the 'soft text' of this song and its music reveal traces of this history and the many actors involved.

For a resilient orature like that of Bhojpuri, a language that displays what Ratnakar Tripathy calls 'persistent orality' and seems to resist print, it may be futile/self-defeating to look for literary consecration through printed literature and its system of translation and distribution, whatever the success of the English translation of *Phoolsunghi* may be. Rather, the textual and technological dynamics around songs like 'Kaise Bani' point us towards how we can recognize Bhojpuri orature as world literature without it necessarily having to go through the 'stage' of print.

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