NO.1 READING SOUTH-ASIA OCTOBER 2026

WELCOME TO OUR

Monthly Newsletter

BEYOND THE WRITTEN ARCHIVE: A LISTENER'S ENCOUNTER WITH *BIDESIYA*

Sanandita Chakraborty

"We see everything rural as uncivilized, whereas to me this shamanic quality with which someone who has no knowledge of the history of art or music embodies the spirit of the present, has something to do with the heart. And things which come from the heart is somehow felt by all other hearts."
– Anusheh Anadil

To call a research method 'creative' is to already enter a contested terrain. It is to question what counts as knowledge, who has the authority to (re)produce it, and by what means we come close(r) to knowing it. While Helen Kara's *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (2015) is a thoughtful and radical invitation for rethinking methodology, it is also a text that, in its most generous moments, invites us to ask whether there is a '*knowing otherwise'*. In this light, to call a poem data, or a painting analysis, is to disrupt the positivist assumption that knowing must always emerge through a reduction of abstraction. Feminist studies have long argued that what we call objectivity is essentially fiction. For it is constructed through the exclusion of the gordian, the embodied, and the affective. Fully embracing creativity then would mean moving beyond its easy associations with superficial novelty, and recognising it as a vital site of epistemic possibility.

The piece that follows, emerges from this incorporation of the affective, combining creative research methods in its wake, to develop an inquiry that challenges what counts as a source. By doing so, it aims to liberate knowledge from the confines of the 'textbook', while welcoming more cultural, affective and embodied forms of knowing. In South Asia, this epistemic shift naturally highlights a rich tapestry of folk performances (a focus which admittedly stems from my own orientation as a musician).

Here, I focus specifically on *Bidesiya* (literally 'the one who goes to a foreign land'), the Bhojpuri tradition of song and folk theater. Historically sung by the Bhojpuri[1] womenfolk to chronicle the large-scale migration of Purvanchal[2] men into distant lands, I propose looking at these songs as a necessary alternative to official colonial state records of labour mobility that catalog the logistics of migration(s), but erase its emotional undercurrents. Sung for those who leave and by those who are left behind, I conceptualise *Bidesiya* as a gendered archive, centering the emotional economies of the wives (mothers and children), who are otherwise reduced to obscure footnotes in the historiography of labour mobility and global capital. More intimately, I ask whether *Bidesiya* allows us to read longing and fractured kinships as a meaningful self-archival of women's interior lives.

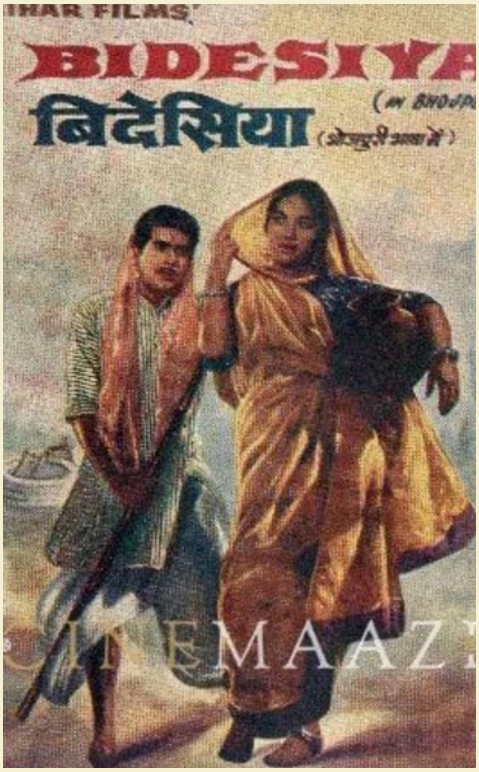
Using the 1963 Bhojpuri film *Bidesiya* as a primary source, (which is a celluloid interpretation of the tradition itself), I approach these songs as audio-visual histories, enacted through the soma and the eros[3], rather than as disembodied literary artefacts. In doing so, I try to reclaim the sexual, the performative, and the kitsch as an essential, unruly archive of human mobility.

[1] An Indo-Aryan ethnolinguistic group native to the Bhojpur-Purvanchal region of north-central India primarily western Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and the Terai region of Nepal, of which diasporas exist in Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana and Suriname.

[2] A geographic and cultural region in northern India comprising the eastern portions of Uttar Pradesh and parts of western Bihar.

[3] The intersection of the living, sentient body (soma) and the vital, creative, and life-affirming energy of desire (eros).

For this, I use three songs that map distinct yet entangled registers of migration. These three songs in their temporal progression tell a story of their own.



Source: Cinemaazi

In one of the opening scenes, following the protagonist's departure, close shots of a weeping Kumari Naaz, show her yearning for her husband's return in '*Dinwa Ginat Mori*'. The song captures,

दिवना गिनत मोरी *(Counting the days)*
घिसली उंगरिया की *(My fingers have worn thin)*
रहिया तकत नैना *(My eyes keep watching the road)*
दूरय रे बिदेशिया *(O for you who are in a faraway land)*

In this, migration is effectively felt in duration. It is time that is accumulated in a body that waits; a solitary, somatic toll of absence.
Yet, this individual isolation soon transitions into a shared experience in the narrative chronology of *Bidesiya*. The private grief of the *virahini* (anguished lover/woman yearning for her partner) mutates into a subaltern chorus, transforming lonely endurance into a communal expression. Through a playful score against the *khartal*, longing is re-channeled into pleasure in '*Neek Saiyaan Bin*', as the village women gather in the *aangan* (courtyard), subverting unfulfilled desires into a tongue-in-cheek celebration of solidarity:

धरती की तो प्यास बुझ गई, माई प्यासी की प्यासी रे... *(The monsoons have quenched the earth's thirst, while I remain still as parched)*
नीक साइयां बिन भवनवा नाहीं लागे सखियां' *(Friends, this house feels incomplete without my succulent lover)*

While the women here sing in jocular, desirous, flirtatious and even vulnerable subtones of emotional longing, the narrative, yet again, confronts the claustrophobic reality of patriarchal surveillance governing the woman who has been left behind. In a striking *Nautanki*[4] sequence, Helen in all her sensuous nautch-girl glory, personifies the *virahini's* home, and how it transforms into a site of domestic subjugation. Accompanied by traditional percussions she laments:

सासु के बतियाँ सही ना और ऊपर से ननदी के भइली गुलाम ... *(I cannot bear the stinging words of your mother, and on top of that, I have become a slave to your sister)*
हम्मे दुनिया करैला बदनाम, बलमवा तोहरी बेगैर *(The world indignifies me in your absence, my beloved)*

Even when the lyrics describe humiliation, the score is layered with a syncopated and earthy *dholak*[5] rhythm. The music itself holds contradictory affects, where though upbeat, it is fundamentally a grievance rooted in social fragility. The husband's absence, while granting the wife nominal autonomy, ultimately invites public suspicion of infidelity and familial policing into her life, revealing that the true cost of migration is paid in the currency of female subjugation and fractured domestic peace. Through *Bidesiya* then, we see how migration destabilises the traditional moral economy of the natal village, trapping the waiting wife, the absent husband and the skeptical in-laws in a triangle of anxiety.

Yet within this strain, the *Devar* appears as a surrogate protector – a playful, flirtatious companion to the wife. Full of this mischievous, charged intimacy, *Bidesiya* then becomes a space where the trauma of mass departure rubs against a vibrant, sometimes transgressive celebration of non-normative register of subaltern desire. Carrying half-flirtation, half-dare, these songs offer a resilient counterpoint, even as they emerge from the very conditions of migration-induced patriarchy.

[4] A folk tradition of musical recitations combining high-pitched, robust, and satirical dialogue with classical and folk ragas. Historically dismissed by elite colonial observers as 'vulgar' or 'lowbrow' spectacle due to its sensuous dance sequences and subaltern humour, the genre functions as an essential public sphere for staging social critique, community histories and gendered realities, inviting direct crowd interaction, running from dusk till dawn in open-air village sqaures.

[5] A double-headed, barrel-shaped hand drum central to folk, wedding, and devotional music across the Indian subcontinent.

Tracing this trajectory further, engagement with vernacular 'texts' (including ritual practices, lived realities, historic events, and in this case, music), reveals how South Asian ideas circulate through transformation. They acquire authority in the places they travel to, rather than remaining confined to the places of their origin. By this mechanism then, *Bidesya* becomes directly connected to Assam – where I'm from. In the 1800s when the migrant labourers (pastoralists who were victims of a colonially augmented displacement and ethnogenesis) moved from the heartland of northern and central-eastern belts (primarily Chhotanagpur region) to Assam under British indenture, they brought their music with them. Called *Jhumoor* (derived from the *Jhum* cultivation) these songs evolved from agrarian expressions into raw chronicles of familial sexual intimacy, mirroring a similar emotional landscape of *Bidesiya*. My own familiarity with *Jhumoor* songs makes the connection feel like an encounter between repertoires shaped by overlapping histories of labour, displacement and movement.

A *Jhumoor* rendition by Papon I grew up listening to goes,

"Nono diyai baandhi delai Hiloki diloki khopa haai re (The Nanad has tied the bride's hair into a beautiful, mystical bun/Khopa)
Deura tor nozori lagai (For the devar is staring at her oh so lovingly)
Brindabon roso lagai" (It's as if he's acting out an entire raas[6] of Vrindavan through his eyes alone)

Such intimate scenes of desire remind us that a ledger-like history of migration remains blind to the interior landscapes carried through songs, and that music (functioning here as a wet archive)[7] actively produces forms of historical understanding that conventional archives cannot achieve alone. In a more phenomenological sense, my own access to *Bidesiya* was mediated by cinema. Here, my eyes and ears become a living archive in and of themselves, demonstrating how feelings and sensations become vital modes of historical encounter. To listen to *Bidesiya*, then, is to encounter migration through more than departure. It is to learn how to hold the tradition's pain, alongside its wit, humour, desire and pleasure. In the end, if the institutional archive determines what we recognise as knowledge, then maybe listening to these vernacular forms becomes a way of questioning its authority. And perhaps to 'know otherwise', more than a creative or methodological choice, becomes a political act of listening - when the subaltern sings.







Source: Bidesiya (1963)

[6] A traditional genre of folk dance and musical theater, rooted in the pastoral landscapes of Vraja and Western India that dramatizes the cosmic, erotic, and playful love between Krishna and his gopis (cowherd maidens).

[7] Introduced by scholars like Sohini Datta (in Porn Studies) wet methodology examines bodily fluidity, female ejaculation, leakage and non-penetrative pleasure, while reading wetness as a refusal to normative Western scripts.

READING OF THE MONTH:

‘Migration and Music’ by Martin Stokes

Reference: Stokes, Martin. 2020. “Migration and Music.” Music Research Annual 1: 1–24.

Stokes reflects on the development of academic literature around the study of the relationship between the phenomenon of migration and music, as well as the music that emerges from the deeply conflicting and contested processes within it. It discusses the paradigm shifts in this field which were earlier rooted in a normative, state-centric approach, while also exploring the different spaces occupied by the creativity of the newer generation of migrants in staunch defiance of their displacement. A significant part of this text reflects on how contemporary thinkers have upended the notion of what entails a ‘migration’, building on a rich body of existing scholarship. This reading sits at the intersection of Migration Studies and Ethnomusicology and acts as an entry point into the larger discussions pertaining to a viability and significance of classifying music as an archive, which highlights to a perpetual crisis shaping migrant mobility and their sense of belonging.

THE SONGS OF THE UTTARAKHAND STATEHOOD MOVEMENT

Aryan Kanyal



Source: Uttarakhand.org



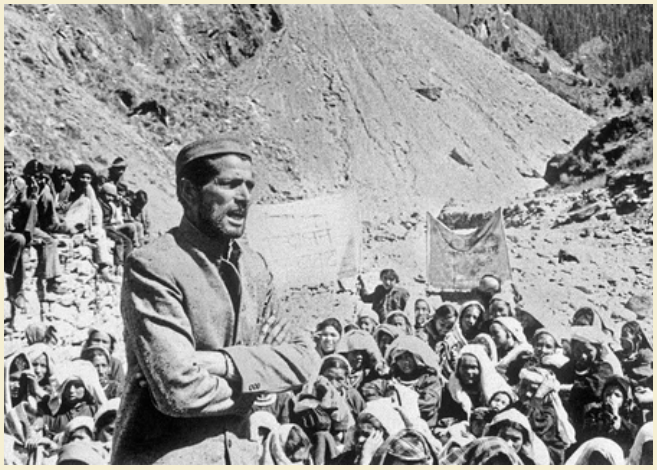
उत्तराखण्ड आन्दोलन में (1994) अल्मोड़ा में हुड़का बजाते हुए गिर्दा

Source: PAHAR

Music has long been the heartbeat of rebellion in Uttarakhand, and the people have had a rich history of using music to galvanise such sentiments. Although demands for a separate state of Uttarakhand emerged amongst elite interest groups as early as 1917 and resurfaced during the post-independence reorganisation of states (1956), it was not until the early 1990s that their fragmented dissent developed into a mass movement[1]. This mobilisation was driven, in part, by the perception that the Uttar Pradesh government, based in the plains, was contributing to the economic and cultural decline of the hill districts—thereby reiterating the ‘hill-plain’ binary orchestrated and (deeply entrenched in popular consciousness) by the divisive colonial rule.

During the fierce *Uttarakhand Rajya Andolan* (Demand for Statehood Movement), the region’s poets, artists and singers stepped onto the front lines, shaping and strengthening the mass movement via their songs and various expressions of creativity. Among these cultural icons stood Narendra Singh Negi. Through his stirring album *Uttarakhand Andolan Maa*, Negi captured the massive scale of participation in the movement, that immortalised the people’s collective fight:

[1] Stefan Fiol, "Articulating Regionalism through Popular Music: The Case of 'Nauchami Narayana' in the Uttarakhand Himalayas," The Journal of Asian Studies 71, no. 2 (2012): 453.



Source: Uttarakhand's Statehood movement Journal



Source: Third Pole

भेजी, खख जाणा छ तुम लोग, उत्तराखंड आंदोलन मां। *(brothers where are you going, to the statehood movement)*
दिदी, खख जाणा छ तुम लोग, उत्तराखंड आंदोलन मां। *(sisters where are you going, to the statehood movement)*
भुला, खख जाणा छ तुम लोग, उत्तराखंड आंदोलन मां। *(children where are you going, to the statehood movement)*

Such lyrics paint vivid images of people from diverse social echelons, irrespective of age or gender, participating in the agitations in their respective capacities, united by their collective resolve to demand for a separate state of Uttarakhand. In another song, *Sou Uthola Ekattha Hola*, Negi highlights the collective spirit of the movement by portraying *Kumaunis* and *Garhwalis*, the region's two principal ethnocultural communities, coming together in a march towards Delhi to demand statehood. He further calls upon the region's residents to transcend caste barriers and unite in their pursuit of self-determination.

Through albums such as *Uttha Jaga, 1994* (Rise Up!) Negi proliferated songs that throw light on the indispensable role of women in the movement, portraying them as active agents of change while encouraging continued participation. His songs also foregrounded the demands of unemployed youth for employment opportunities, regional development programmes, and a promising future for the younger generation.

While rooted in the region's diverse folk traditions, emerging artists continue to reshape musical expression to reflect contemporary sociopolitics of Uttarakhand. This new wave of *Uttarakhandi* music goes beyond evoking nostalgia. It has become a tool for critique, a call for reform, and a reaffirmation of ethnocultural pride. It draws on the legacy of musicians such as Negi and can be read as a distinct language of internal critique that is constructive instead of being vitriolic.

‘IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY’: A SPARK FOR SOMETHING GREATER

Saukarya Samad





The students of the Department of History, University of Delhi—both past and present, convened for a public meeting at the Faculty of Social Sciences (North Campus) premises on the 9th of October—to protest against the draconian deletion of select papers from the MA History syllabus. A panel of distinguished speakers featuring Prof. Prabhu Mohapatra, the former Head of the Department and Dean of Social Sciences, Dr Ratan Lal (Hindu College) and Dr Maya John (Jesus and Mary College) amongst others deliberated on the pitfalls of concerted ideological restructuring of the curriculum and how that bears upon the disciplinary training of young students. They were joined by postgraduate students and doctoral scholars like Aman and Raj Sahu who articulated how removing key modules on the ‘Delhi Sultanate’, ‘Women, Family and Everyday Life in Colonial India’ and the ‘History of Labour and Labouring Poor’ —which exposed students to diverse reading lists and fundamental frameworks—would be disastrous. Abhilash Chetia Wanniang talked about the paper on ‘Colonial Northeastern India’ in particular, to showcase why regional histories are essential to the understanding of broader patterns and help interested students carve out their niche for specialised research.

The event was attended in large numbers by people from various departments and paved the way towards future collective action. Notwithstanding the urgency for public demonstrations like this, it is the need of the hour to organise targeted sessions on specific papers and discuss them in detail with the current batches, to ensure that they do not miss out on indispensable historiographies—which would render them stunted in terms of theoretical refinement. The relentless perversion of the episteme of ‘History’ can be most effectively countered inside a ‘classroom’. This meeting, aptly titled ‘In Defence of History’ reiterated why Historians, irrespective of their fractured loyalties must resist the infringement of this cherished space in unison.

Editorial Team:
Ananya Verma
Debopriya Chatterjee
Sanandita Chakraborty