



## Preservation and Perpetuation of Bhojpuri Folksongs: Challenges and Approaches

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**Abstract:** Bhojpuri folksongs, deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of eastern Uttar Pradesh, western Bihar, and parts of Jharkhand and Nepal, represent a vibrant oral tradition that reflects the collective identity, historical consciousness, and everyday experiences of the Bhojpuri-speaking people. These songs encompass various themes such as agrarian life, rituals, festivals, migration, love, and resistance, serving as both repositories and transmitters of indigenous knowledge and cultural values. However, in the face of rapid globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of mainstream media, Bhojpuri folksongs are confronting severe challenges. These include declining intergenerational transmission, commercialization and distortion of authentic forms, lack of formal documentation, and reduced interest among youth. The proliferation of vulgarized versions in contemporary Bhojpuri media has further tarnished the cultural integrity of this genre.

This paper explores the multifaceted challenges to the preservation and perpetuation of Bhojpuri folksongs and examines strategic interventions necessary for their revitalization. Drawing on ethnographic insights, interviews, and secondary literature, it underscores the role of community participation, academic engagement, and digital technology in safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage. Strategies such as audio-visual archiving, curriculum inclusion, folk festivals, and collaboration with local artists and institutions are discussed as vital tools for cultural preservation. The paper advocates for a culturally sensitive, community-driven approach that values authenticity and sustainability. By highlighting the importance of Bhojpuri folksongs as a living tradition, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the preservation of regional oral traditions in the context of cultural diversity and heritage conservation.

**Keywords:** Bhojpuri folksongs, oral traditions, cultural preservation, digital archiving,

### 1. Introduction

Culture represents a vibrant expression of artistic endeavours and beauty. These pursuits are the joint accomplishments of human intellectual thought and viewpoints shaped by our cultural heritage. So, culture defines a community and a State too and it helps to architect a sense of community with proper communication, feelings, and ideation. The culture of any society is a living system like an organism. It grows, matures, decays, and dies. If we look at our folk culture, particularly our folk songs, we can find traces of the older generation in modern civilization which serves as the bedrock of the cultural heritage of India. Folksongs have played a remarkable role in transmitting cultural values and knowledge from one generation to another.

Folksongs in their simplest and rustic form are the music of a layman. Folksongs are the natural expressions of simple hearts, God-fearing, believers in fate and destiny. The emotions and



sentiments of human life, joys, sorrows, vigor, pathos, hopes and aspirations, pangs of separation, pleasure, agony, peace, anger, and fear. These emotions are endowed with the quality of truth and righteousness and intensely impact minds and hearts. This is why these songs captivate our interest.

Since man is an emotional being, his fervent feelings are a direct appeal, and thus, folksongs serve as an emotional outpouring as they are not created or composed but emerge from the heart of a layman.

The Bhojpuri-speaking region—primarily spanning Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and parts of Jharkhand—is home to a rich oral tradition, with folksongs playing a vital role in preserving the lived experiences of the community. Bhojpuri folk songs are deeply rooted act as a powerful tools of expression. They narrate the joys and sorrows of festivals, harvests, weddings, and the monsoon, but they also touch upon social inequalities, caste oppression, domestic struggles, and migration. These folksongs (*lokgeet*) encapsulate emotions, rituals, and historical moments. From celebratory songs like *sohar*, *Kajri*, *gaari* to lamentations like *birha*, they function as cultural repositories (Pandey, 2014).

The influence of urbanization, migration and globalization has led to a shift in musical tastes. Young generations may prefer mainstream music over traditional forms, so these songs risk obsolescence. This paper explores the challenges to the preservation of Bhojpuri folksongs and evaluates potential strategies to ensure their perpetuation.

## 2. Cultural and Historical Significance

Bhojpuri folksongs occupy a foundational place in the cultural landscape of the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of northern India and the global diaspora, serving as vibrant expressions of communal identity and continuity. These songs encapsulate the collective memories, values, and lived experiences of the Bhojpuri community, making them essential vehicles for both cultural preservation and social cohesion.

Historically, Bhojpuri folksongs have been preserved through oral transmission, a dynamic process whereby songs are memorized, adapted, and passed down primarily within family and village contexts. This oral tradition reflects a deep-rooted connection between music, language, and everyday life, helping sustain cultural practices in the absence of widespread literacy or written records (Singh, 2011). The content and themes of these songs are closely tied to the cyclical nature of rural agrarian life, encompassing seasonal activities such as sowing, harvesting, and monsoon festivals, which themselves are embedded in local cosmologies and agricultural calendars.

Bhojpuri folksongs also serve as social texts that articulate caste identities and hierarchies. Different castes have their own distinct musical repertoires and performance practices, reinforcing community boundaries and social roles. These songs provide an audible map of social structure, reflecting both cohesion within groups and tensions between them (Beck, 2001).

Women have traditionally been the principal custodians of these oral traditions. In largely patriarchal social settings where women's public roles are limited, the domestic and communal spaces where they sing become arenas of cultural creativity and expression. Through their performance of folksongs, women transmit not only melodies and lyrics but also social norms, moral values, and historical narratives. Their singing fosters social bonding and solidarity among women, creating intergenerational connections that sustain the community's intangible heritage (Narayan, 1997).

The Bhojpuri diaspora—found in places such as the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and parts of Africa—has further enriched the cultural significance of these folksongs. For migrant



communities, these songs serve as cultural anchors, connecting them to their ancestral homelands while also evolving in new social contexts. In diaspora settings, folksongs have been adapted to reflect hybrid identities and new cultural experiences, yet they remain vital to community cohesion and cultural survival (Vertovec, 2000).

Ethnomusicologists like Regula Qureshi (1992) and Anna Morcom (2007) have highlighted how Bhojpuri folksongs function as both aesthetic and social phenomena. Their research emphasizes that these songs are not static relics but dynamic forms of oral culture that mediate between tradition and modernity, individual and community, and gender and power.

## 2.1 Representation of Everyday Life and Emotions

Bhojpuri folksongs are profoundly rooted in the rural experiences of agrarian life. They portray themes of love, longing, labor, sorrow, joy, separation (*biraha*), and devotion. For instance, the *kajari* and *chaita* songs are seasonal in nature and reflect the rhythms of agricultural life and the monsoon cycle. These songs are not merely performed for entertainment but are interwoven into daily routines, from working in the fields to household chores (Kumar, 2012). Songs such as *sohar* (birth songs) and *vivah geet* (wedding songs) are intrinsic to rites of passage, underscoring their ritualistic and emotional resonance.

## 2.2 Preservation of Traditions and Ritual Practices

These songs preserve a wealth of indigenous knowledge and ritual practices. Each stage of a person's life—from birth to death—is marked by a specific set of folksongs. During marriages, a vast repertoire of songs is performed, including *suhag*, *gaari*, *samdaun*, and *bidai*. These performances serve as oral scripts that guide ritual processes while simultaneously transmitting cultural values across generations (Tiwari, 1985). Their continuity over centuries underscores their importance as custodians of traditional knowledge.

## 2.3 Women's Voices and Gender Expression

A particularly striking feature of Bhojpuri folksongs is the central role played by women in their creation, transmission, and performance. In a socio-cultural landscape marked by patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and limited public visibility for women, these oral traditions serve as vital spaces for female self-expression and emotional release (Pandey, 1996). Through the folksong, women articulate lived experiences, forge collective memory, and negotiate their identities within the constraints of a male-dominated society.

Despite restrictions on female autonomy in traditional Bhojpuri society, folksongs offer a culturally sanctioned form of expression that is both powerful and subversive. Feminist anthropologists such as Sherry Ortner (1974) have argued that women in many cultures are symbolically associated with nature and domesticity, often relegated to the "private sphere." Bhojpuri folksongs complicate this dichotomy by allowing women to express their voices publicly within ritual and communal settings, especially during marriages, harvest festivals, and childbirth rituals.

For instance, *bidai* (bride's farewell) songs express profound sorrow and anxiety surrounding a woman's departure from her natal home to her in-laws' household. These are not just emotional performances but sites of cultural resistance, revealing the emotional cost of patrilocality and marital obligation. A typical *bidai* lyric might say:

"Kaise jiyab ae maai, sasura mein naya,  
Na bhai, na bahin, na koi apna."

This simple lyric underscores themes of alienation, emotional displacement, and the burden of adjusting to a new life. It exposes the patriarchal logic of uprooting women from their familial networks in the name of marriage.



Similarly, *gaari* songs—often performed by women in groups during weddings or domestic gatherings—are mockingly directed at husbands, brothers-in-law, or mothers-in-law. On the surface, they seem humorous or lighthearted, but they serve as coded critiques of male authority, inequality, or domestic injustice. In doing so, they function as what James C. Scott (1990) in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* terms the “hidden transcript”—a form of cultural expression that subordinates use to resist domination in veiled or indirect ways.

This aligns with **James C. Scott’s** idea of the “hidden transcript,” where subordinate groups express resistance through veiled cultural forms. In Bhojpuri weddings, the public laughter that follows such songs is not just amusement—it’s a shared moment of subversion, where women momentarily seize the symbolic upper hand.

In this context, Bhojpuri folksongs are not merely cultural artifacts but living texts of female agency. They form an **alternative feminist discourse**, rooted not in formal activism or literacy, but in everyday resistance and oral creativity. These songs demonstrate how women navigate, negotiate, and subtly challenge their positions within the family and society, using metaphor, irony, and shared experience as tools of empowerment.

## 2.4 Language, Identity, and Diaspora

In diaspora contexts, Bhojpuri folksongs are more than mere artistic expressions; they are powerful symbols of belonging and collective memory. Stripped from their original social and geographical settings, the songs have become vehicles through which displaced communities articulate continuity amidst cultural displacement. The oral transmission of these songs preserves the dialect’s phonetics, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, often serving as a linguistic lifeline that connects younger generations to their ancestral roots in India.

Despite the geographical and cultural distance, the folksongs have not remained static. Rather, they have undergone processes of evolution and localization, absorbing influences from the host societies’ languages, musical styles, and cultural practices. For example, in Suriname and Trinidad, Bhojpuri folksongs incorporate Caribbean rhythmic patterns and incorporate loanwords from Dutch, English, and Creole languages, while in Mauritius, the songs show traces of French and Creole idioms. These hybrid forms exemplify cultural adaptation and resilience, allowing diaspora communities to negotiate dual identities, remaining connected to their Bhojpuri heritage while embracing new cultural milieus..

## 3. Challenges to Preservation

### 3.1 Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization and migration pose significant challenges to preserving Bhojpuri folksongs, disrupting the traditional social structures and environments in which these songs have historically thrived. Bhojpuri folk traditions, particularly music, are deeply rooted in the rural, agrarian lifestyle of eastern Uttar Pradesh, western Bihar, and adjoining regions where oral transmission, communal rituals, and intimate social bonds sustained their continuity. However, as increasing numbers of people migrate to urban centres for education, employment, and improved living conditions, this organic cultural transmission is steadily eroded.

In urban settings, the communal life that once fostered the spontaneous performance of folksongs—during weddings, harvests, festivals, and domestic rituals—tends to be replaced by more individualistic, commercial, and digitized forms of entertainment. Nuclear families living in city apartments often lack the extended kinship networks where elders traditionally passed down folk knowledge through storytelling, singing, and participation in rituals. As a result, younger generations growing up in cities are frequently disconnected from their linguistic roots and musical heritage, opting instead for dominant languages (like Hindi, English) and globalized media content.





Moreover, the performative spaces for folksongs, such as *angan* (courtyards), village squares, or agricultural fields, are absent in urban environments, leading to a decline in community-based performances. Even when such songs are remembered, they are often removed from their cultural context and reduced to nostalgic or symbolic forms, rather than lived, evolving traditions.

The challenge is further compounded by inter-regional migration, both within India and abroad, where Bhojpuri speakers interact with speakers of other languages and are often pressured to assimilate linguistically and culturally. This can result in language shift and the gradual replacement of Bhojpuri with more "prestigious" languages in public and private domains. Children born into migrant families may grow up with limited or no exposure to Bhojpuri folksongs, even if their parents retain passive knowledge.

#### **4. Approaches for Preservation and Perpetuation**

Preserving Bhojpuri folk songs requires a multidimensional and collaborative approach that combines traditional oral transmission methods with modern documentation and outreach tools. Below are expanded approaches that can help safeguard this intangible cultural heritage:

##### **4.1 Systematic Documentation and Archiving**

A thorough effort to gather, record, transcribe, and digitize Bhojpuri folk songs is essential. Numerous traditional songs still exist in the memories of rural elders, temple priests, village women, and folk artists. This oral heritage must be safeguarded before it is lost with the older generation. Digital Repositories can create open-access digital libraries with organized collections of Bhojpuri folk songs (such as Sohar, Vivah Geet, Chhath songs), which will assist researchers, artists, and the public in accessing these resources. Field research by ethnomusicologists: Scholars should be motivated to perform field studies in Bhojpuri-speaking areas to capture songs with contextual details, such as the setting, purpose, and musical style. Transcription and Interpretation: Songs need to be transcribed in Devanagari script and translated into Hindi and English to ensure they are accessible to non-native speakers and communities abroad.

##### **4.2 Media Promotion and Digital Outreach**

The potential of radio, television, and online platforms can be utilized to elevate Bhojpuri folk music into mainstream consciousness. Community Radio Stations can initiate programs focused on folk music that feature live performances, discussions with folk artists, and narratives surrounding the songs. YouTube and Podcasts: Cultural groups or individuals can create channels dedicated to Bhojpuri folk music to present traditional songs in their original form, complete with subtitles and informative notes. Collaborations with Artists: Folk musicians can collaborate with modern artists to reinterpret songs while preserving their cultural significance, thus appealing to younger audiences.

##### **4.3 Engaging with the Bhojpuri Diaspora**

The Bhojpuri communities in Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad, Fiji, and other nations have maintained various folk traditions more authentically than those in India. Cultural exchanges between the diaspora and India would promote the exchange of folk artists and scholars between India and countries with a Bhojpuri diaspora. Digital Bhojpuri cultural networks will motivate diaspora groups to share recordings, conduct virtual workshops, and document their folk traditions for an international audience. Collaborative archival initiative efforts between institutions in India and diaspora countries can establish a comprehensive record of Bhojpuri folk traditions worldwide.

**4.4 Support from governmental and institutional sources** is crucial for ensuring long-term viability. Official recognition, like granting Bhojpuri status as a scheduled language in the



Indian Constitution, would create pathways for funding and research initiatives. Cultural Ministry Funding would help artists and NGOs engaged in Bhojpuri folk culture receive targeted grants and fellowships. Academic Partnerships with organizations such as Sahitya Akademi, IGNCA, and regional universities should proactively endorse Bhojpuri cultural initiatives, publications, and fellowships.

## Conclusion

In the last decade, we have witnessed a sea change in the production and presentation of folk songs due to the introduction of digital technologies based on the internet. Be it through YouTube or app-based communication networks, folk songs are now being perceived by communities in different parts of India. One of the important features of folk music in its presentation is its rigidity or semi-flexibility which is due to its use of culture-centric rhetoric. Folk media, usually community-based media, mainly reflects diversified vernacular expression. Now, in the digital era, it has been argued that the new media have the potential to disseminate the traditional form of vernacular culture through folk songs.

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