

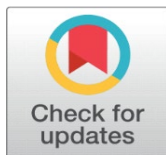
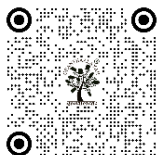
# VOICES OF THE TRADITION: RITUALS, RELIGION, AND PERFORMATIVITY THROUGH BHOJPURI MARRIAGE SONGS

Dr. Sanghmitra Bairagi <sup>1</sup>, Dr. Akash Kumar Rawat <sup>2</sup>, Dr. Priyanka Singh <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, History, Guru Kashi University, Punjab, India



Received 26 February 2026

Accepted 28 April 2026

Published 18 May 2026

## Corresponding Author

Dr. Sanghmitra Bairagi,  
[Sanghmitra.Bairagi@outlook.com](mailto:Sanghmitra.Bairagi@outlook.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i10s.2026.8189](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i10s.2026.8189)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The Bhojpuri speaking region occupies a very important position in the cultural landscape of Northern India. Bhojpuri is a language spoken in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western part of Bihar. The Bhojpuri marriage songs carry with itself a very rich and layered cultural traditions. It combines with itself ritual practice, religious symbolism, social memory, gendered expressions, and performatives aesthetics. These songs are sung during various stages of wedding ceremony. They are known by different names as per the ceremonies. The songs function not only as entertainment but as a repository of cultural values, community ethics, emotional experiences, and collective identity. This paper focuses on the importance of Bhojpuri marriage songs, which can be seen as a form of ritualized performance, it is deeply embedded in the ceremonial life of Bhojpuri region. Hence, the effort here is to explore the ritual, religion, their performance through the marriage songs. The paper also highlights that how these songs are also used as a social commentary on various issues faced by the region. Further, as these songs are sung by women, it makes them the custodians of the oral tradition and cultural continuity. The paper tries to create an understanding about how the Bhojpuri marriage songs constitute an important form of intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Bhojpuri Marriage Songs, Ritual Performance, Oral Heritage, Folk Tradition, Women's Voices

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bhojpuri speaking regions, occupy a very important position in the cultural landscape of northern India. Bhojpuri is a dialect of Hindi, which is spoken in eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, and western part of Bihar (there are even slight difference in dialect in different districts). The region is much popular for its vibrant folk traditions, oral narratives, seasonal festivals, devotional performances, and ceremonial songs for every occasion. Among these, wedding/marriage songs occupy a significant place. The wedding ceremony has various rituals, and these songs accompany every ritual. The songs are sung with respective performance as per the ceremony. They transform the wedding ceremonies into a

collective performance which binds together the family, communities, religion, memory, and emotion into a single cultural experience. In the Bhojpuri region, marriage is viewed as more than just a formal or intimate bond between two people. It is seen as a sacred social institution that is deeply-rooted in religious principles, ritual duties, community involvement, and ancestral traditions and blessings. As a result, the songs performed during marriage ceremonies are more than just works of art or entertainment. They are performative in nature that celebrate fertility and continuity, express social worries, maintain and transfer ancestral wisdom, and offer emotional release during that time of transition.

There are various rites performed, such as tilak (formal exchange of proposal at groom's house), haldi (turmeric celebration), matikor (digging out soil for ritual), mandap/mado (wedding area), kohbar (wedding chamber), vidai (farewell of bride), and grihapravesh (welcome of bride at groom's home), are part of traditional Bhojpuri marriage rituals, which take place one by one over 10-15 days. (Singh, 2025) There is a performance of songs, melodies, gestures, and the performative patterns are specific to each ritual. These songs are primarily sung by women, particularly married ladies in the home and older women. Women create spaces of friendly environment, humour, resistance, emotional expression, and memory through group singing.

Bhojpuri marriage songs have a strong religious and ritualistic connection. Numerous songs make reference to local village gods and goddesses as well as deities like Rama, Sita, Shiva, Parvati, Krishna, Radha, and Gauri. In order to sanctify the union and link the human marriage with divine patterns of marital bliss, mythological stories are weaved into wedding rites. The symbolic usage of turmeric, sacred fire, bamboo constructions in mandap/mado, rice, water, (sindoor) vermilion, and soil as fertility symbols reveals the religious aspects of these compositions. The home is converted into sacred cultural space through ritual singing and performances. Bhojpuri marriage songs can also be seen as significant living social document. Gender dynamics, caste hierarchies, economic conditions, experiences of migration, and shifting desires are all included in the songs along with their respective performances. Songs depict the changing role of the person getting married, the loneliness brought on by male migration, the emotional suffering of daughters leaving their birth place and families, the demands of dowries, and conflicts between in-laws and brides. A lot of songs have comedic or satirical aspects that gently question social standards and patriarchal power too, which are not commonly questioned in daily routine.

These songs are very much performative in nature. Songs are sung while performing the rituals in which bodily gestures, dance moves, rhythmic clapping, group participation, costume symbolism, and ritualized interactions between performers and listeners are all elements of singing during marriage rituals. Performers and listeners both include family members as well as community members. Marriage songs serve as living theatre that is incorporated into daily life in this way. They are endured mostly by oral transmission between generations, in contrast to classical literary writings. However, Bhojpuri marriage customs have changed significantly in the last couple of decades. Ritual performance has changed due to various reasons such as urbanization, migration, the commercialization of weddings, shifting gender roles, and the impact of electronic media. Film music and DJ culture are gradually displacing the traditional folk songs, due to which, a lot of oral traditions are either vanishing or simply remaining in fragments. (Hardy, 2015) This paper aims to analyse that how the Bhojpuri marriage songs are a significant point where ritual, religion, and performance unite. These songs are not just a part of folk entertainment, rather they should be viewed as an intricate cultural archive that retain social memory and handle shifting circumstances.

This study aims to explore the Bhojpuri culture and ceremonies through the marriage songs. It focuses on how Bhojpuri wedding customs, and rituals relate to religion and performance. It studies who are the people engaged, and how they are engaged in these ceremonies, how women play important role as performers and custodians of this oral heritage. It tries to create understanding how social realities like caste, kinship, patriarchy, and migration are reflected in marriage songs. It explores the symbolic implications found in wedding songs and customs. It also mentions how Bhojpuri marriage customs are getting affected by modernization and commercialization. The effort can be made to support scholarly research and the conservation of Bhojpuri's intangible cultural heritage.

## 2. EXPLORATIONS OF BHOJPURI FOLK CULTURE

There have been various studies on Indian folk traditions. Despite its cultural richness and social relevance, Bhojpuri marriage songs remained unexplored to larger extent. There are some studies on Bhojpuri folk culture which highlight the oral traditions, ritual practices, and regional identity through folk songs (not particularly marriage songs). Folk

culture is not just a regional culture, rather it is an expression of human sentiments which includes the lived and living realities of different societies. It preserves the history of that region, about the societies, religions practised and languages spoken in that region. These are expressed through folk songs. They are expression of people's daily life experiences, their joys, their sorrows. (Bronner, 2013).

Some scholars have focused on the issue of migration which are depicted through songs. The Bhojpuri region has its own limitation with references to the employment of masses. Hence, migration in the search of employment is very frequent (Shukla & Singh, 2024, pp. 45-67). Although migration is a significant theme but these songs put emphasis on the consequences of male migration. The young male members migrate. It has its own consequences on family members, power structure, more specifically on the wife of the migrated male member (Rai, 2022). Some studies have focused on Bhojpuri women folksongs, which highlight the gendered social realities of their life due to migration (Singh, 2021).

Indian folklorists who study women's songs have emphasized the significance of ceremonial songs as platforms for female expression. Ceremonial songs give women the chance to express their pain, criticize patriarchy, and navigate emotional interactions. Bhojpuri marriage songs, in which women frequently use symbolic language to convey sarcasm, grief, and resistance, can benefit from the application of their theoretical framework. Susan Wadley's research on village customs in northern India focused on the connection between social hierarchy and ritual performance. Rituals, according to her, are dynamic social performances that both support and occasionally undermine communal structures rather than being static religious activities (Wadley, 1977). Similar conflicts pertaining to caste, kinship, and gender are revealed in Bhojpuri marriage songs.

Bhojpuri folk songs have been collected and compiled by a number of local intellectuals. Many wedding songs connected to rites like sohar, kajri, jhumar, and vivaah geet have been preserved by works by Krishna Dev Upadhyaya, Uday Narayan Tiwari, and local Bhojpuri researchers. Many of these compilations lack critical interpretation in terms of gender politics, performance theory, and symbolism, despite being important historical materials. The commercialization and change of folk customs have been the focus of recent research. Scholars studying Bhojpuri popular culture have observed the growing influence of internet platforms, commercial music companies, and mass media. Film portrayals that often sexualize or oversimplify folk culture are replacing or changing traditional marriage songs. This shift raises important issues about authenticity, preservation, and cultural continuity. (Giri, 2025, pp. 158-159)

A large portion of the current literature either describes Bhojpuri songs in detail or treats them as collections of folklore. There is limited interdisciplinary engagement with marriage songs as sites where ritual, religion, gender, performance, and social change intersect. Few studies analyse how these songs function as emotional archives and performative negotiations of social identity. The specific field of Bhojpuri marriage songs has not been thoroughly studied, despite the fact that Bhojpuri folk traditions have drawn scholarly attention in the domains of linguistics and folklore. The majority of current research concentrates on song documentation rather than interpretive analysis. Lyrics are preserved in many collections without any discussion of their performative structure, social value, or ritual setting. In scholarly debate, the voices of female performers who are essential to these traditions are frequently ignored. Furthermore, there hasn't been enough research done on how Bhojpuri weddings are evolving in light of migration, globalization, and media influence. Understanding marriage songs as dynamic cultural archives as opposed to static folk relics represents another significant divide. Scholarship has not adequately addressed this dynamic character, despite the fact that these songs constantly change in response to social shifts. By examining Bhojpuri marriage songs as ritual acts that represent religion, social memory, emotional expression, and cultural negotiation.

### **3. BHOJPURI MARRIAGE TRADITIONS THROUGH SONGS**

Marriage represents a significant cultural celebration within society, with each community exhibiting distinct cultural frameworks. Weddings are typically community-centered events that involve participation from neighbors, caste groups, extended family networks, and, in rural areas, the entire village. (Vivah Samskara | Bhojpuri Wedding Rites & Folk Songs | Ethnographic Film, 2014) Bhojpuri wedding ceremonies integrate regional aesthetics, traditional beliefs, local customs, and Vedic rituals. Commonly, rituals such as sagai and tilak are performed initially, followed by matkor, haldi, mandap, kanyadaan, pheras, kohbar, vidai. At each stage, women collectively sing specific melodies, which ensures generational continuity and regulate the emotional atmosphere of the rituals. The Bhojpuri wedding encompasses dance, music, cuisine, adornment, storytelling, and ritual symbolism, extending beyond its function as a social contract.

Consequently, marriage songs constitute essential components of ceremonial life. A defining feature of Bhojpuri marriage songs is their strong connection to ritual symbolism. Each object and action within the wedding ceremony holds distinct cultural and religious significance.

**Haldi (Turmeric Ritual) Songs:** The haldi ritual symbolizes fertility, auspiciousness, and purification. Songs performed during this practice often invoke blessings from ancestors and deities. Turmeric is considered a sacred substance associated with prosperity and protection, beyond its cosmetic use. (Jassal, 2003) Women sing playful melodies that both seek divine favour and gently tease the bride and groom. This ceremony marks a transitional phase in which the couple experiences social and spiritual transformation.

**Matikor Songs:** Matikor rites in wedding ceremonies involve collecting soil from a sacred site. The accompanying songs emphasize the relationship between motherhood, fertility, and the environment. The earth is often personified as a nurturing female presence. These songs underscore Bhojpuri culture's deep ecological awareness, portraying nature as an active participant in ritual processes rather than as a separate entity. (Kumar & Kapoor, 2025, pp. 83-85)

**Kohbar Songs:** Kohbar songs represent a prominent genre within Bhojpuri marital music. They are performed in the decorated bridal chamber. These songs refer to fertility symbols such as mango trees, lotus blossoms, bamboo groves, parrots, snakes, and divine couples. The kohbar space signifies both societal expectations and sacred union. Humour and metaphor are frequently employed to express coded sexuality, allowing for the discussion of sexuality only within culturally accepted boundaries.

**Vidai Songs:** The Vidai songs mark one of the most emotionally charged moments in the wedding ceremony. Sung as the bride leaves her parental home, these songs express the pain of separation. Themes of uncertainty regarding marital life, maternal loss, and sibling affection are prevalent. The emotional intensity of Vidai songs demonstrates that marriage is perceived as both a celebration and a moment of profound transition. (Sinha, 2025, pp. 158-170).

A notable aspect of Bhojpuri wedding ceremonies is that nearly every ritual combines emotional gravity with communal entertainment. Rituals such as haldi, matikor, kohbar, and vidai evoke deep emotions while also fostering joy, laughter, and active participation. These ceremonies are memorable because each family member and relative assumes a culturally defined role. Relations including uncle, aunty (bua, fufa, mama, mami), siblings, parents, and extended kin are symbolically integrated into the wedding process, and their presence is considered essential for the completion of rituals. Through collective singing and performance, Bhojpuri marriage ceremonies strengthen kinship ties and promote community involvement. (Giri, 2025, pp. 158-170)

Religion occupies a central role in Bhojpuri marriage songs. Mythological frameworks that connect human experiences with divine narratives are frequently employed to interpret weddings. Songs invoking Sita and Rama are especially prevalent, with Sita representing marital integrity, sacrifice, devotion, and ideal womanhood. Grooms are often likened to Rama, while brides are compared to Sita. Similarly, songs referencing Shiva and Parvati emphasize cosmic connection, asceticism, and companionship. The aspiration for marital harmony modelled after divine couples is reflected in the Gauri puja performed before marriage. Rather than merely reflecting canonical traditions, religious symbolism in Bhojpuri songs also embodies folk Hinduism. Invocations of village deities, ancestors, local spirits, and protective goddesses are common. The syncretic nature of Bhojpuri culture is evident in the blending of Sanskritic and folk religious elements. Consequently, religious beliefs are localized and emotionally internalized through ritual music.

#### **4. PERFORMANCE AND COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION IN BHOJPURI MARRIAGE SONGS**

The significance of Bhojpuri marriage songs is revealed primarily through performance and cannot be fully understood as written verses alone. Elements such as rhythm, gesture, body language, facial expression, audience participation, and ritual timing are integral to the singing tradition. Performance fosters collective participation, as women gather in circles, respond to one another, improvise lyrics, and clap rhythmically. These group performances strengthen social ties and reinforce cultural identity. Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* is particularly relevant in this context, as ordinary social hierarchies are temporarily relaxed during wedding rituals, allowing participants to share a collective emotional experience. (Turner, 2012). Humorous exchanges between the families of the bride and groom generate amusement and introduce performative tension.

Teasing songs between familial groups become ritualized forms of negotiation. Furthermore, domestic spaces are transformed into theatrical settings through performance, with wedding pavilions, kitchens, and courtyards serving as venues for the enactment of cultural memory. Collective singing during village weddings creates an environment that is

sacred, joyful, interactive, and emotionally immersive. Teasing songs function as mechanisms for reducing social tension and fostering familiarity between families, and participants typically interpret these performances positively. The performative dimension of Bhojpuri marriage songs is as significant as their lyrical content, as gestures, rhythmic clapping, laughter, bodily expressions, and audience participation transform ceremonies into dynamic collective experiences. Thus, wedding songs should be understood not as passive musical performances but as participatory cultural acts involving both performers and audiences.

Bhojpuri marriage songs encompass a wide range of emotions, including joy, laughter, longing, grief, worry, dedication, and desire. These songs reflect the complex social circumstances surrounding marriage in traditional society. The transition often requires brides to leave familiar environments and enter new households, resulting in songs that express both happiness and apprehension. The emotional involvement of mothers and sisters, who must part with daughters after marriage, is a recurring theme. Collective singing serves as a means for communities to process emotional transitions. The profound emotional depth of Bhojpuri marriage songs challenges simplistic distinctions between ritual and emotion, transforming ritual performance into a deeply emotional experience.

The socio-economic structure of Bhojpuri society is reflected in its marriage songs. Caste and local customs significantly influence traditional wedding practices. Certain songs reinforce social conventions related to family honour, kinship boundaries, and caste purity, while others reveal tensions between financial limitations and social aspirations. Although lower-caste communities maintain distinct musical styles and regional customs, they have at times adopted wedding practices associated with upper-caste groups. These adaptations demonstrate the dynamic nature of folk culture. Songs addressing poverty, labour, and dowries underscore the economic disparities embedded within marriage customs. In some cases, women employ music to subtly criticize exploitation. Consequently, Bhojpuri marriage songs function both as platforms for expressing social tensions and as mechanisms for preserving social continuity.

## 5. WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF THIS ORAL TRADITION

The transmission and preservation of Bhojpuri marriage songs primarily rest with women. In rural households, elder women instruct younger generations in extensive repertoires of ceremonial songs memorized over time. The performative space of weddings enables women to articulate emotions and experiences that might otherwise remain suppressed within patriarchal social structures. Through collective singing, women promote cultural continuity and emotional solidarity. (Jassal, 2003, pp. 159-206) Many Bhojpuri marriage songs contain nuanced critiques of gender inequality, including commentary on dowry practices, satire of greedy in-laws, and depictions of the hardships associated with early marriage. Satire and humour often function as socially sanctioned forms of protest. Furthermore, these songs preserve memories of emotional labour, migration, and abandonment. Brides and wives frequently sing about loneliness and isolation, particularly in regions affected by male migration. (Bhagat, 2026) As oral traditions, these practices render women living repositories of cultural memory, preserving local dialects, metaphors, ceremonial knowledge, and historical experiences.

Married and elderly women remain the principal custodians of Bhojpuri marriage songs. Their responsibilities extend beyond performance, as these songs encapsulate the collective experiences of women within patriarchal social systems. Upon marriage, women traditionally relocate to unfamiliar households, encountering loneliness, emotional adaptation, familial conflicts, and ongoing social scrutiny. These experiences are documented and conveyed through marriage songs, transforming the oral tradition into a cultural archive of women's emotional and social histories. Additionally, many songs incorporate humour and satire, particularly in the context of familial relationships. Performers frequently adapt lyrics spontaneously to reflect the immediate social environment, ensuring the tradition remains dynamic and responsive.

While Bhojpuri marriage songs sometimes satire or subtly challenge patriarchal authority, the majority reinforce conventional gender roles. Women employ symbolic humour and emotional expression to navigate social realities, rather than directly opposing them. (Sinha, 2018) These songs encompass a wide emotional spectrum, including humour, longing, sorrow, devotion, joy, and communal celebration. Although themes of separation and longing are especially prominent, expressions of happiness and festivity are equally integral to wedding performances.

## 6. BHOJPURI MARRIAGE SONGS: INTERSECTION OF RITUAL, RELIGION, AND PERFORMANCE

Bhojpuri marriage songs represent a significant form of intangible cultural heritage, preserving oral history, local language, ceremonial knowledge, symbolic systems, and communal memory. UNESCO's framework on intangible cultural resources emphasizes the importance of safeguarding oral traditions, performing arts, and social behaviours, all of which are embodied in Bhojpuri marriage songs. Effective preservation strategies should include documentation, community engagement, educational initiatives, and cultural archiving. Cultural continuity may be further supported by translating songs, recording performances by elderly women singers, and integrating folk customs into academic curricula. However, preservation efforts should avoid reducing these customs to static museum artifacts. Instead, living traditions are sustained through active participation and adaptability.

Ritual, religion, and performance constitute fundamental dimensions of cultural life, as evidenced by the study of Bhojpuri marriage songs. These songs function as essential mechanisms that impart emotional depth and social significance to rituals, rather than serving as incidental additions to wedding ceremonies. From a ritual perspective, songs regulate transitions and structure ceremonial time, providing symbolic continuity and marking the progression between ceremonial stages. The songs connect participants to sacred narratives and exemplary figures, with mythological references offering moral frameworks that legitimize social actions.

From a performance perspective, songs facilitate embodied experience and collective participation, revealing meaning through voice, rhythm, gesture, and interaction. The gendered dimension of performance is particularly significant, as ritual singing enables women to articulate experiences often excluded from formal public discourse. Consequently, marriage songs act as alternative repositories for women's social and emotional histories. These songs also reflect contradictions within Bhojpuri society, simultaneously employing humour, sarcasm, and subtle resistance while often reinforcing patriarchal ideals of obedience and sacrifice. The evolution of wedding customs in contemporary contexts further illustrates the dynamic nature of culture, as many songs adapt to new circumstances without relinquishing their symbolic resonance. Ultimately, Bhojpuri marriage songs exemplify how folk traditions operate as dynamic cultural systems capable of both negotiating change and preserving collective memory.

The frequent invocation of divine couples such as Rama-Sita and Shiva-Parvati demonstrates their status as ideal marital archetypes within Bhojpuri society. These narratives embody values of ethical conduct, devotion, sacrifice, companionship, and social responsibility. However, performers often do not consciously engage with theological meanings in a formal religious context. Instead, religious symbolism operates as a cultural practice embedded in collective memory. Even in the absence of detailed theological knowledge, performers are familiar with widely recognized mythological narratives associated with ideal marital relationships. Likewise, ritual symbols such as turmeric, bamboo, soil, and designated sacred spaces are regarded as elements that establish purity and sanctity within the wedding context.

A comprehensive analysis of Bhojpuri marriage songs indicates that they should be interpreted not solely as ritualistic expressions but as social texts that convey complex meanings related to kinship, gender, morality, migration, and emotional transformation. These songs preserve experiential knowledge transmitted across generations. Their ongoing significance derives not only from ritual continuity but also from their capacity to articulate lived experiences in culturally resonant ways. Furthermore, the study suggests that mainstream portrayals frequently misrepresent Bhojpuri culture by reducing it to notions of vulgarity or backwardness. Such stereotypes fail to recognize the depth, complexity, emotional richness, and cultural sophistication inherent in Bhojpuri folk traditions.

The rapid expansion of the Bhojpuri film and popular music industries has significantly influenced traditional wedding songs. To satisfy market demands, commercial Bhojpuri music often appropriates indigenous melodies while altering their lyrical content. This process frequently distorts the cultural and ceremonial significance of traditional songs through vulgarization. Furthermore, the rise of DJ culture has reduced opportunities for women to participate in collective singing at weddings. Ceremonies that were once centred on oral performance are now frequently dominated by amplified recorded music. Digital platforms have introduced new possibilities for preservation, as folk musicians increasingly share traditional marriage songs on social media and YouTube to reach broader audiences. Consequently, the relationship between preservation and commercialization remains complex. While media exposure can enhance awareness, it also risks commercializing or oversimplifying traditional practices.

The emotional engagement of younger generations with traditional marriage songs is also undergoing gradual transformation. Individuals under the age of twenty-four generally exhibit weaker emotional ties to these traditions compared to older cohorts. This shift is partly attributable to changes in pre-marital social relationships. Advances in communication technologies have diminished unfamiliarity between brides, grooms, and their families. In the past, marriage often entailed entering an unfamiliar environment, whereas contemporary couples are frequently acquainted to each other's environment prior to marriage. Nevertheless, the emotional meanings embedded in traditional songs are often realized later through lived experience. Therefore, while the significance of these songs may persist, their emotional interpretation continues to evolve across generations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Bhojpuri marriage songs represent one of the most vibrant expressions of ceremonial culture in northern India. These songs embody complex interconnections among religion, performance, social structure, emotional experience, and cultural continuity. Rather than serving as merely decorative or entertaining elements of weddings, they function as living archives of collective memory and social meaning. This study demonstrates that ritual practices such as tilak, haldi, matikor, kohbar, vidai are closely associated with Bhojpuri marriage songs, transforming weddings into spiritually significant and emotionally resonant events through symbolic language and communal performance. References to divine spouses and folk deities connect individual marriages to broader cosmological and cultural systems. The analysis further underscores the central role of women in sustaining oral traditions. Female singers not only express emotions and navigate social relationships through song, but also transmit cultural knowledge across generations and, at times, challenge patriarchal norms. Hence it can be observed that marriage songs constitute vital repositories of women's voices and lived experiences.

These customs are undergoing rapid transformation due to urbanization, migration, commercialization, and media influence. While digital technologies provide opportunities for preservation, they also risk commodifying folk culture. The challenge lies in safeguarding these traditions without reducing them to static artifacts. As an integral part of India's intangible cultural heritage, Bhojpuri marriage songs warrant increased scholarly and institutional attention. Future research should include ethnographic fieldwork, comparative regional analyses, and systematic documentation of disappearing song traditions.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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