In the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, the abolition of slavery progressed around the world. European colonies found themselves in a great need of manpower for their plantations. India, meanwhile, was suffering from an economic depression, due to both the decline of the weaving industry caused by the Industrial Revolution in England, and the extreme population pressure on agriculture and cultivable lands. This pressure on the resources of the country, combined with the colonial masters’ demand for cheap and abundant labour, led to the migration of a large number of migrant labourers from the Bhojpur region.

The Bhojpur region is a cultural entity that transcends political borders. This area comprises the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh and the western part of Bihar in India. In the north, it reaches across the river Ganges and past the Nepal frontier, up to the lower ranges of the Himalayas, from Chapman to Basti. In the south, it crosses the Sone River and covers the great plateau of Chotanagpur, where it finds itself in contact with the Bengali of Mambhum, the Oriya of Singhbhum, and the scattered tribal languages of the Chotanagpur plateau. The area covered by Bhojpur is some fifty thousand square miles; more than 15 per cent of the total Indian population speaks Bhojpuri.

Bhojpuri culture can boast national and even international spread, due to the large-scale migration from this region. The descendants of those migrants, who have now integrated into the societies of the countries to which their ancestors were originally taken, also use this language. Bhojpur is mainly spoken in Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, British Guyana, and Uganda, as well as in some parts of Burma and Nepal. The people of Indian descent in various regions across the world can thus claim a common cultural heritage based on the historical reality of the migration from the Bhojpur region.

### Culture, change, and migration

Migration is usually considered an economic phenomenon, but it also creates a cultural phenomenon in both the homeland and the land of destination. For the Bhojpuri people, this migration was first and foremost a heavy emotionally and psychologically laden loss. Many relationships were torn apart – wives torn from husbands, fathers torn from their old-age support, and mothers from the ‘apples of their eyes’. All were leaving for foreign shores and there was no way to hold them back. The social, economic, political, and historical manifestations of colonial imperialism were drawing them to this migration, which was more of a forced migration for the Bhojpuri. This economic compulsion is expressed in the folk tradition of the people of the Bhojpur region of India, and the following folk song clearly expresses the pain and suffering that they feel:

Raiiliya na bairi je jaha jawa na bairi se paisawa bairi na
mor saiyun ke bhoom se paissua bairi na
(flt is neither the train nor the ship that is our enemy but rather the money that compels our husbands to migrate to other lands)

In spite of the best efforts of the Bhojpuri people, the migration did not stop. As a result, both externally and internally, the pain of loss and separation became an important aspect of Bhojpuri society. This pain gave birth to a distinct folklore, which emerged as an expression of the pain and anguish of the migrants’ separation from their families.

### Bidesia folk tradition

Bidesia was the affectionate form of address given to the migrants by loved ones who were left behind in the homeland, and so lends its name to the new folk culture that emerged out of this migration, bidesia folk culture. This folk culture is represented in many forms such as nautanki (musical theatre), dramas, folk songs, and folk paintings. It is a complete folk culture, or holistic folktradition, which developed as an outcome of the vacuum caused by the departure of the migrant Bhojpuris. In this project, the term bidesia will be studied, not only in its nautanki form only but also in its role as a metaphor for cultural tradition that emerged in and around the migration of Bhojpuri people.

In bidesia folk culture, the migrants are referred to as bidesia, pardesi, batriya, and other terms, which contain elements of both affection and complaint for leaving the loved ones behind. These three terms of address represent three different kinds of folk tradition: firstly, in bidesia culture, the chances of returns of these migrants were slim. When leaving his an muluki, or native place, the migrant broke all ties with his loved ones. Secondly, in the pardesi culture, the migrant is forced to leave his native place in order to earn a living, but still maintains communication ties with his family. The pain of this semi-permanent migration still remains however, and is represented in the Bhojpuri folk songs. A pardesi may be called bidesia in complaining tones, but a bidesia is very seldom called pardesi. Finally, in batriya culture, the bidesia comes back as a traveller to his native place and resumes normal communication ties.

It seems that the use of the word bidesia for migrant labourers in Bhojpur folk songs began after the year 1877, when migration from the region began. Since very little folk tradition is difficult to fix the exact time period. From what is documented, little as it may be, it can be said that in 1850 Kesodas, a Sadhu following Kabir’s ideology in one of his nautanki compositions, used the term bidesi – referring to overseas migration – instead of pardesi – referring to internal migration:

Bhare naaakim mohe bhawan
Ho Ram, videsh gavan
(I don’t care for palaces, Hey Ram, my beloved has gone to a foreign land)

In 1884, Pandit Benti Madhav Ram, a resident of Kashipur, composed a folk song in which the word bidesia was used for the first time to address a person who had departed:

Kahe mori saudi kararai re bidesia
Tarh karthi din rain gaupe re
Kahe mori napha lagnai re bidesia
(Why did you make me lose my consciousness, O bidesia? I am suffering constantly day and night. Why did you lock your eyes with mine, O bidesia?)

The composition of bidesia folk songs also began in this time period, and later formed the basis for the bidesia folk culture. In these songs as well, as can be seen in the previous stanza, the word bidesia, instead of pardesi, was used as the first time as a tek, or repetitive ending to a song line. Scholars believe that this was the special feature of bidesia folk tradition.

In this time period, a form of folk theatre also called bidesia theatre emerged in the Bhojpur region. Bidesia theatre drew huge audiences, especially when performed by Bhikhari Thakur and his acting troupe – Bhikhari Thakur himself composed many popular bidesia plays. Each play was filled with bidesia songs, which were written as ‘nautan’, or ‘naat’, or ‘jatra’, or ‘chhap’, or ‘kavita’, or ‘nautanki’.

### Documenting oral memories of migration

Sadly, bidesia folk culture, which is mainly an oral tradition, is in danger of extinction today. It is thus of paramount importance to collect, document, and analyse these traditions, as one could then develop the story of Bhojpur overseas migration by relating the traditions to other archival and secondary sources. Notably, this folk tradition is popular not only in the homeland of the migrants but also in other destinations of both affection and complaint. These oral traditions were also a statement on the existing social dichotomies and the process of displacement of the Bhojpuri migrants.

Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Folk Culture

The ‘Bidesia: Migration, Change, and Folk Culture’ project deals with the memory of migration, which flows in various cultural forms in the homeland as well as in destinations of migrants. The historical reality of international migration provides a basis of common cultural heritage for people of Indian descent in the various regions in the world, though each region has an interesting cultural story in itself. The joint experiences of these migrants, however, make it clear that common cultural heritage is not only fixed in places and things, like fortresses, shipwrecks, archives, and arts, but also travels around the world in the minds of men and women who, as migrants with their own culture as baggage, are either obliged or choose, to face new futures in foreign countries.