

Indian Epics of the Terai Conquest

The Story of a Migration

Catherine Servan-Schreiber

The very name of Bihar, a district in the eastern part of India, evokes images of anarchy, banditry, and disarray. Already traversed by distinct cultural zones – Bhojpuri, Mithila, Magadha, and the tribal zone of Jharkhand – Bihari society is characterized by bloody clan conflict over territorial rights. The doggedness with which the region's protagonists form militias¹ is a perpetual source of front-page news. Pitted against the Brahmans and Bhumihar Rajputs, the large landowners, are the herding and soldier castes such as the livestock-herding Yadavas, the farming Kurmis, and the former saltpeter miners, the Noniyas, whose economic, social, and political growth has given them real power. And although Magadha's rich Buddhist past attracts pilgrims and tourists, and Mithila's beautiful painted murals and villages draw art connoisseurs, Bihar ranks as one of the least safe regions of India. The rate of banditry and other crime reaches surprising levels.²

For any traveler on the roads of Bihar, an inescapable image comes to mind: that of a peasant who always keeps his wooden club or *lâthî* at hand, under no circumstances letting it out of his reach. The Biharis, who constitute a "martial race" in India similar to the Sikhs or the Pathans, in keeping with the role conceived by the British colonial administration, were a mother lode for Monghol and English army recruiters. Their independent fighting spirit, which has earned them a reputation for toughness, has been in evidence throughout their history. In modern times many have emigrated elsewhere in order to carry out their police or military functions. Along with the Sikhs, the Pathans, and the Gurkhas, Biharis are found in large Indian cities, where they are hired as guards for apartments and hotels. Many of them were

employed as soldiers in Burma; in Suriname, Mauritius and the Fiji Islands, they were hired on sugar plantations starting in the 1830s. Their taste for danger and adventure, at the root of their military vocation, was also the impetus behind a long tradition of Bihari migration.

Now impoverished, and considered the most disadvantaged State in India, Bihar was once the site of prosperous trade and abundant productivity. The products that created its wealth were cotton, indigo, opium, saltpetre, mustard oil, glazed pottery from Sivan, blankets from Shahabad, perfumes, tobacco from Mithila, cutlery and basketry from Muzaffarpur, silks, muslins, salt, iron, and the renowned rice from Patna.

The regions of Bihar where Bhojpuri and Maithili are spoken provide access to first-rate opportunities for trade in commodities from Iran, Transoxiana, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. As for products originating in Bihar itself, these are conveyed to the east, towards Bengal, and north, towards Nepal. A vast commercial network between Bihar and Nepal revolved around Terai from ancient times. Terai is the low-lying plain of marshland and forest straddling the border between India and Nepal, giving access to the first foothills of the Himalayas. After transporting merchandise across the Terai roads to Nepal and Tibet, traders brought back musk, saffron, honey, woolen goods, and rugs. The great markets of Bihar and the fairs – especially the major livestock fair at Sonapur, on the bank of the Ganges across from Patna – played a key role in this economy: there merchants sold elephants, camels, sheep, cattle, horses, and birds. These fairs were the departure point for caravans heading for Nepal or Bengal.³

Among the Indian merchants of the urban agglomerations of the Terai plain and the valley of Kathmandu, the best known are the Punjab Sikhs and the Rajasthan Marwaris. Far more modest, and less showy, the Biharis have nevertheless exploited their geographical location and their entrepreneurial spirit to shuttle back and forth between India and Nepal. There is a triangle linking Calcutta, Biratnagar, and Patna.

For years, the jute factories of Biratnagar, in Nepal, attracted numerous immigrants from Bihar. Even if the city is now rivalled by Birganj for trade with Calcutta, and by Dhankuta for adminis-

trative employment, it remains a major stop along the way for itinerant Bihari traders. As is often seen in Asia, several types of traders coexist in these Himalayan regions: there are the wealthy Baniyas or Telis, grain and oil traders, many of whom own two shops, one in India and another in Nepal, and who use long caravans to transport their merchandise; the itinerant trader who loads his goods onto his buffalo (*bhainsâha*); and the small peddler who walks the roads with his pouch of sundry goods: mirrors, combs, needles, handkerchiefs, costume jewelry, ribbons, and candles.

The Epics of the Commercial Conquest of the Terai

When the Rajput dynasties of medieval India had their bards, who were employed to trace or invent prestigious genealogies and to pass on oral accounts of their great deeds, the herding and trading castes, of lower rank and lesser fortune, had their own reciters of tales. And just as the Rajput migrations from West to East left a trail of epic texts that form an archive of western Indian history, likewise the herders' and traders' migrations gave rise to a form of *geste*, that of the Indian conquest of the Terai plain. These texts may be a far cry from the beauty and depth of the Nath epics with their mysterious, haunting language, which led Kabir to declare, "my language is of the East, and no one understands me." The style of these other epics is rough and prosaic, with no attempt to dazzle through the arts of paradox or metaphor. Instead of extolling self-denial, they value transgression, profit and audacity.

Hirni-Birni and Shobha Nayaka Banjara: The Migrations of the "Bhainsâha"

Of all the merchant castes involved in trade between India and Nepal, that of the *bhainsâha* traders is the subject of the most detailed description in the oral tradition. Although many trucks ply the Terai routes, and goods are also transported by train, there are still many steep paths where only a man can venture with no more than the load he carries on his back. The trader as a heroic

figure of literary tradition is not an isolated phenomenon. Medieval literature from Bengal, with the *Manasâ Mangalkāvya*, depicts the community of *gandhavanika* traders, who sell spices and perfume. But in the border regions of the Nepalese Terai, not only is the *bhainsâha* caste glorified by the voices of bards, but there exists a whole complex of independent imagery and a literature of chap-books reinforces its popularity.

The epics (*gâthâ*) that are associated with the Bihar trade cycle belong to the repertory of a class of bards descended from the Telis or the Netuas. The former, the oil pressers' caste, traditionally live a quiet, sedentary life; the latter, the Nat or Netua (from the Sanskrit *nata*, "to dance"), belong to the large flamboyant family of acrobats who wander the roads of Northern India seeking their fortune. It is hardly remarkable that the Telis, who are merchants by trade, are involved in the diffusion of this repertory; but that the nomadic Nats, virtually professional storytellers and performers, have assumed the role of bards for the trader castes may at first glance appear surprising.

Though originally oil pressers, the Telis were often reoriented to other forms of work. After selling oil and grains, activities that earned them a higher rank than the lowly job of pressing oil, they turned to selling newspapers and sometimes books. Among these Telis, there are some who do not engage in trade but rather serve as bards of the merchants' *geste*. The Netuas are specialized in training and selling animals such as deformed buffaloes, snakes, monkeys, sheep, or bears, and they sell talking birds that they take in cages from market to market. Many of them raise, sell, and produce birds for cockfights, a pastime that is very popular in the Terai region. They also perform balancing acts. Among their most lucrative activities are the manufacture and sale of strong ropes used for various purposes. The Nats always travel in couples, with men playing the *dholak* drum while their wives dance in front of them. The Netua women, or Natinis, are specialized in tattooing and the sale of talismans, work that affords them great freedom of movement; as they go from house to house they recite the epic tales known as *Hirni-Birni* or *Shobha Nayaka Banjara*. The status of this nomadic caste is considered to be very low, close to that of the beggar caste, and the Natinis are often classed with prostitutes.

If the Telis and the Netuas both play a role in the transmission of a common literature, it is because both groups enjoyed the patronage of the Rajputs and the great Baniyas during medieval times. The medieval epics attest to the presence of Telis and Nats in the Rajput armies, both as suppliers of weapons, ammunition, and rope, and as fighting forces. The celebrated epic *Alha-Udal* mentions "the Telis all dressed in black, feared in battle like a mortal wound." Moreover, the Telis, who were likely to possess large sums of money, often acted as money-lenders for the upkeep of weapons and for soldiers' pay. As for the Nats, their legendary bravery made them highly sought after as mercenaries accompanying convoys of trade goods to protect them from pillaging bandits. This proximity to the royal casts impelled them to perform their repertory as bards, even as other more prestigious and better-known castes of bards such as Ahirs, Noniyas, and Gorakhnathi, as well as Hindu or Moslem yogis, were the primary beneficiaries of Rajput patronage. The transmission of traders' epics assumed such a scale because it was linked not only to the sale of animals, wood, or rice from Patna, but also, and especially, to the transport and sale of weapons towards Bengal and the Terai plain. This flourishing trade was the source of Bihar's wealth for several centuries, during which saltpeter mining, the manufacture of powder, and the sale of weapons made for a vigorous economy that by now has completely disappeared from the province.

There are a variety of opportunities to hear the voices of Bihari bards, in public places as well as in private spaces such as the inner courtyards of the most prosperous merchants, where the women listen from the floor above, sheltered from view by a *zarokha*. Custom also has it that the bards are called upon to perform the epics on the occasion of Divali, the feast of the merchants (Vaishyas) and of Lakshmi, goddess of fortune, for which every shop must be washed and freshly painted. Among the merchants who are most attached to the symbolism of these epics, the Kanus must be mentioned. These makers and sellers of confections are the modern patrons of the oral tradition, from the mystical tales chanted in honor of Gorakhnath or the secular texts exalting the traders' nomadic travels.

Shobha Nayaka Banjara

The epic *Shobha Nayaka Banjara* exhibits all the features of medieval epic, but it is difficult to determine its date of composition. The oldest form now known was collected and edited by George Grierson, who offered it as a “specimen” of the Bhojpuri language. Grierson obtained this epic in 1885 from the mouth of a bard of Dom origin in the Shahabad district. The versions that are currently recited show the influence of modern times, with allusions to transporting goods by train. But the pattern of the plot and the archaic versified form of the language give the impression that the *Shobha Nayaka* cycle indeed belongs to the same literary movement as the great Bhojpuri tradition of the Middle Ages.

Although the *Shobha Nayaka* epic grew out of the merchant tradition, it is constructed like the Nath epics of the renouncer-kings, with episodes including the quest for a wife and the trials imposed on the hero on the way to accomplishing his mission. This tale shows the networks of alliance that formed between the Biharis of Bhojpuri territory and Mithila and the Morang district of Nepal, not only for the purpose of fostering trade, but also to help fight off the dangers encountered in their seasonal migrations.

The Terai plain is a locale known for a high risk of disease due to its unhealthy swamplands. Malaria is present, and Bihari merchants have always been confronted with this illness. Shobha Nayaka, the eponymous hero of the epic, is the son of a major merchant from Belupur in the Saran district. He leads a caravan of six hundred head of cattle and six hundred caravan drivers. His father sets out to marry him off to the daughter of a rich Mithila merchant.

The marriage is negotiated without great difficulty, but Shobha's calling requires him to leave his conjugal abode the very day of his wedding, as in the epics of renouncer-kings *Saranga-Sadabrij* or *Sorthi*. Following a far-flung itinerary,⁴ his caravans sell a variety of goods: jewels, turmeric, betel nuts, cloves, pepper, and cattle. Many trials await the *bhainsâha* trader along the route towards Nepal: customs police who impose lengthy halts in their *chauki*, exorbitant taxes levied by the Indian and Nepalese governments, highway

robbers lying in ambush to raid the caravan, requiring the leaders to hire armed soldiers for protection. These soldiers could be Netuas as well as ascetic warriors, such as Nagas or Naths.

While the first episode of the epic traces the caravan's itinerary through the dangers of the swampy plains of Terai, the second enacts life in the merchant community that is left behind without its family head for long months, with all the attending vicissitudes. The Biharis are known for being *bidesiyâ* or expatriates, determined to earn their living outside of Bihar as a result of the meager opportunities offered by their own State, but also because of their love of adventure, which has taken many of them far from Nepal, to Burma, Mauritius, and Fiji. The feeling of abandonment experienced by the hero's wife is thus one of the most frequently recurring themes in Bihari literature. Being a bold Bihari wife, Bari Jasumati sets out disguised in men's clothing to follow her husband over a large part of his itinerary. But other themes are evoked by the bard's voice: the birth of illegitimate children in the husband's absence, the cruel treatment of the abandoned wife by her in-laws, her adulterous attraction to her brothers-in-law, whether younger or older, and sometimes, her amorous involvement with each of them, pursued out of spite.

Bihar, which has the densest population of any region in India, has not succeeded in adapting its economy to the modern era. The ratio of Bihari emigrants, already quite high since medieval times, has become the highest in all of present-day India. The jute factories of Bengal, the tea plantations of Assam, employment as security guards in wealthy households and hotels in neighboring States, and more recently the opportunities offered by the Gulf, beckon Bihari men by the thousands. Reflecting this trend, the merchant epic extends far beyond the local community, reaching a broad audience of coolies, *rikshawwalas*, launderers, cooks, hotel workers, and others who have left to seek their fortune elsewhere and who return every two years for a brief home leave. Many of them buy and keep in their pocket or pouch small chapbooks, also sold in Bengal and Nepal, of the stories of *Hirni-Birni* or *Shobha Nayaka Banjara*.

The oral performance of the *Shobha Nayaka* can last from one to three nights. The custom, still practiced by wealthy merchant

castes today, of seeking the services of Teli or Nat bards to recite their commercial epic harks back to the Rajputs of medieval times, who kept singers and genealogists to glorify their great accomplishments and their lineage. The image of the Bihari merchant has not acquired the same renown in India as that of the Kashmiri or the Marwari; yet the Bihari commercial networks, while on a smaller scale, are nevertheless solidly rooted throughout the Terai region and the interior of Nepal, and the prestige of their community and the collective memory of their seasonal migration find their voice in the Teli and Netua singer-storytellers.

Hirni-Birni

In addition to the *Shobha Nayaka* epic, Teli and Netua bards also tell the story of two Bhojpuri heroines of the Netua caste, two bold sisters of dubious morals who are quick to pick a fight. The Natinis are also accustomed to plying their trade between Bihar and the Terai district, and they can be seen dancing while their husbands play the drum and sing; sometimes, they provide the musical accompaniment while their husbands, wearing women's skirts, with their thinning hair and bells on their ankles, dance or whip themselves with a rope. One of the Natinis' favorite and most lucrative activities is tattooing. But the population is wary of the Natinis' temerity in flouting caste prohibitions to freely enter houses, and of their reputation for lax morals. A Bhojpuri song caricatures them as follows:

Two Natinis in the city of Patna
Whose turn for a tattoo?
Patna trembles under the threat, Ballia is in a panic,
Bhojpur is frozen with fear.
They will tattoo all of Gangotri,⁵
where the god Shiva lives.
They will tattoo all of Sitamarhi,⁶ they will tattoo all of Janakpur.
They will tattoo all of Baidyanath Babadham,⁷
They will tattoo all of Jhariya, all of Dhanbad, and all of Bokaro,⁸
They will go where there are piles of precious stones and pearls,
They will tattoo Jagjivan Ram,⁹
They will tattoo Kunvar Singh,¹⁰ a martyr for his country,
They will tattoo Vidyapati, Bhikhari, and Mahendra,¹¹
They will engrave a sun or moon on their arms.

From the tops of their fine houses, the residents of Chapra will pass the word.
At Azamgarh, they are women of ill repute.

The Natinis, who accompany their husbands on the road, also help them in transporting animals, selling rope, and above all in training and presenting fighting cocks. The Nats' itinerary takes them much farther than the Telis. They say they come from Gujarat and, to offset their unsavory reputation, they claim to be connected to the Rajputs.

The epic of *Hirni-Birni* tells the story of two sisters, Hirni and Birni, who have an ox that they take with them from Bihar to Nepal, and who raise fighting cocks that they produce at every stage of their journey. Desperate to be married, the two sisters decide to visit the *akhara* or armories in search of a husband who is strong enough to subdue their ox and attach a rope to its nostrils: only the man capable of this feat will be worthy of marrying them. After numerous struggles in which the best fighters of Bihar are defeated, a Rajput warrior named Posan Singh manages to subdue the beast. He marries the two sisters, leaving his wife and parents. Then begins a long series of exploits along the Terai roads. Having lost his Rajput dignity and caste affiliation, Posan Singh moves from *akhara* to *akhara*, while the two sisters live off the income from their tattooing and thievery. Then, as the victor of a great tournament in a Terai town, Posan Singh strikes it rich. He can then set his wives up in luxury, enabling them to renounce their illicit activities and providing them with a more honorable status, in which they revel. While Posan Singh's first wife pines away in sorrow and shame over her husband's misalliance, the union of Hirni, Birni, and Posan Singh bears children. These magnificent children, educated by their father in the ways of battle and the finer arts, will regain the status Posan Singh had lost, by contracting prestigious matches with young Rajput girls of high lineage.

The choice of first names that so closely echo each other, on the principle of word doubling found in Indian languages, suggests a pejorative, or at least a comic, tone; the two sisters are portrayed as witchlike figures with magic powers. In the oral tradition of Bihar or Nepal, witches are often named "Hirni." Moreover, the possibility of a marriage between Rajputs and Nats is utterly

implausible in Indian society. But the heroines' effrontery, their temerity throughout their long journey, and the insouciance with which they and Posan Singh defy the rules of caste are deeply rooted models. Further, the epic *Hirni-Birni* accounts for the vitality and the economic role of the Nats, who are far less marginalized than is generally thought in commercial exchanges between Bihar and Nepal.

Epics of Pastoral Conquest

Alongside the commercial conquest of a geographical area that is difficult to access, dangerous, and quite isolated, a virtual policy advocating the annexation and the clearing of the Terai lands and the increase of pasturelands for livestock was carried out by the principal dynasties of Bihari Rajputs. But the epics that trace this history of a migration towards western lands pit the Rajputs against the pastoral and warrior castes that are their vassals, in a merciless contest for power.

The history of the struggle between landowners, great zamindars¹² and landless laborers, which to this day remains the lead story in Bihari newspapers, is of very long standing. The epics *Resma* and *Salhes-Cuharmal* attest to these deep roots. We know that among the Ahirs, Indian livestock herders and dairy producers, there is a strong tradition of sung tales, and bards attained unparalleled renown. But the Dusadh caste, who raise pigs, also has its celebrated bards. Unlike the Ahirs, the Dusadhs do not sing *a cappella*, but rather accompanied by a drum (*dholak*), cymbals, and small cymbals (*kartal*). The "impure" work of raising pigs confers a very low status upon the Dusadhs, who also perform other "polluting" tasks, such as preparing corpses or delivering bad news. Barred from access to the land and extremely oppressed by the landowning castes, the Dusadhs have developed a cult honoring bandits, virtually legitimizing banditry and criminality in a State that stands out as the most anarchic and violent in all of India. The Dusadh bards are not professionals, but organize evenings of epic song on such occasions as the feast of livestock, or for purely recreational ends.

Gauraiya, the Bihari Robin Hood

The Gauraiya character is a bandit of low caste who steals merchandise, loots the shops of wealthy traders, destroys their account books, redistributes the booty to the poor and oppressed, and hides in pigsties to elude his pursuers. He is as popular as the Italian character Musolino. The highway robber like Gauraiya, who, armed only with his club, pursues travelers, is a central figure in Terai epics. Some of these bandits have been deified, and small temples dedicated to them can be found in the Patna region, in Champaran, and in both the Indian and Nepalese parts of Mithila. The lower castes are not alone in worshiping these figures: the Brahmins also honor them in association with the worship of the dead.

Cuharmal, Revered Bandit and Livestock Rustler

While Gauraiya holds rich merchants or travelers for ransom, Cuharmal defies the large landowners by stealing their lands and livestock, contributing to the expansion of the Bihari conquest to the east. In many respects, the epic of Cuharmal is one of the most illuminating sources for reconstructing the history of a migration. It allows us to understand the role of the pastoral and warrior populations in claiming the lands of the Terai. Cuharmal, a Dusadh from the town of Mokama in Magadha who has no land of his own, is known for his bravado and is courted by Resma, the daughter of an important landowner. But their love is forbidden for many reasons. She is a Rajput, while Cuharmal is an untouchable; the two are "village siblings," and therefore subject to an incest prohibition; moreover, they studied under the same teacher, which strengthens the sibling bond and hence the incest taboo. As in all epics, the epic of Cuharmal begins with a transgression:

In the morning, Rama, Rani Resma awakens,
with the sweet song of the *koil* in her ear.
The sweet song of the *koil* interrupts her blessed sleep.
She gets up cursing.
After invoking the name of God,
Her favorite thought comes to mind,
Ah! the hard-hearted one, where is he, my beloved?

Resma is unwittingly courting death. Cuharmal scorns her for declaring her love like this, flouting the laws fearlessly. He is interested only in the lands and livestock of Azab Singh, the girl's father. His goal is to help the Dusadhs acquire the eastern lands that the Rajputs have appropriated. Not only is he opposed to his feudal masters but he aims to dispossess them and affirm the right to land of the oppressed. Though infringements of the right of pasturage are punished without mercy, Cuharmal does not hesitate to pasture his herd on his enemies' land, at night, thus incurring the supreme punishment. Not only does he deride and cut down the mercenaries serving the Rajput, but he also causes unfortunate Resma to die a horribly painful death, inciting her by his betrayal to immolate herself in flames. This barbaric streak does not shock the epic's audience, and the bards' memory retells the violence of a class conflict that has remained unresolved since medieval times. Cuharmal spares his rival in the end, however, and having taken over the latter's lands and livestock, he establishes Dusadh rule over the whole eastern part of Bihar and on the Terai borderlands.

Salhes, the Conqueror from Nepal

Cuharmal reappears in a second epic cycle, the *Salhes* cycle, which is among the material collected by George Grierson as a "specimen of the Maithili language." This version, sung by a bard of Dom origin, covers only the episode of the struggle between Salhes, king of Mithila, and Cuharmal, the Dusadh thief from Magadha. Other versions, sung by Dusadh bards, are far more elaborate. In his study on ritual songs of Mithila, Shingo Einoo collected a long version sung by a Dusadh bard from the Darbhanga region.¹³ A novel written by Manipadma, *Raja Salhes*, and a *mahakāvya* written by Matinath Mishra, *Jay Raja Salhes*, drew their inspiration from this epic. Modern or ancient, the versions of the *Salhes* cycle shed a useful light on the expansionist aims of medieval Mithila. Salhes is presented not as a simple Dusadh, but as the son of a Gurkha king and a Malla queen. His birth takes place at the end of the Maurya Empire, when banditry and corruption were at their height.

Salhes appears as the savior of the world. He is accompanied by a band of wild animals that he has tamed. He is markedly different from the Rajput heroes of Bhojpuri, who embody a violence that borders on the sadistic, and who are rarely educated. Salhes is both brave and tolerant, a protector of the arts and a literate man who can read Sanskrit. Under his rule, the vast and powerful kingdom of Mithila includes Bhutan, Sikkim, and the Nepalese district known as Morang.

In this land, there was a multitude of jungles
and mountainous hills.
The river Hethani wended its way.
The animals, left to themselves, wandered the land,
sowing terror among the people.

Mahotari was a celebrated town
where the fort of Mahisauth was found.
The Gurkha dynasty was pure and noble,
its members were unflinching defenders of the truth.
King Samdev, who worshipped Shiva, was moderate in his desires,
and he was kind to all his subjects.

The king's beloved wife was called Subgauri.
She was a girl born of the Malla line,
She was passionately devoted to serving the goddess Candi,
and she was virtue incarnate.

She brought a prince into the world
and he was called Jayavardhana,
but he had another name, Salhes.
He excelled at archery,
and he had a troop of young boys with him.
In this troop he included the poor of his kingdom,
and it was an army such as is rarely seen.

He ruled all of his subjects like a true leader,
and his acuteness was extreme.
His whole being was an rushing torrent.
He had fixed his territory once and for all,
and he marked it with his three weapons:
Shields, bows, and arrows were planted in the forest,
and he trod the hills fearlessly.

Lions, tigers, bears, boars, wolves,
hearing him speak, would draw near.
Once when he was in the forest,
the animals surrounded him.
But he feared nothing:
The traveler who is unafraid never looks back.

Thus he spent his childhood preparing himself for war
and training his steeds for battle,
working for the welfare of his people,
among the forest animals that followed him.

The principle theme of this epic is the account of battles mounted by Salhes against the people of the Indian Bhils tribe, then against the Nepalese Bhote and Kirant peoples. This Gurkha sovereign is credited with having introduced tantrism to Mithila.

The figure of Salhes is so important that a cult developed to worship him, with temples dedicated to him, known as *Salhes sthanas*, throughout Mithila, in India and Nepal alike. The force behind the popularity of this cult comes from the merchant castes, whose ideal is the Rajput model: they have adopted as their emblem a warrior king rather than a merchant.

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In India's vast epic corpus, the legends of renouncer-kings peddled by Nath Shivaite ascetics and the Rajputs' great cycles in the martial tradition are better known. Nevertheless, the migratory movement toward the East gave rise to other epic tales celebrating pastoral and commercial themes, which have traveled along the sandy plains of Bihar and crossed the border into Nepal. The *bhainsâha*, *bidesiyâ*, and Salhes gestes were exported as the merchants migrated. The Tharu people of Nepal who speak Bhojpuri know and sing these epics. In association with orally performed versions, a literature of chapbooks developed, diffused through published booklets. Printed in Benares, Calcutta, or Patna, these booklets are sold by traders on bicycles, or even by foot peddlars in Bihar who walk with their loaded sacks through the streets of Nepal villages, singing to attract customers. The covers of the books show Hirni and Birni harnessing their ox, attending a cock fight, or watching a wrestling match; or Shobha Nayaka leading his caravan and Cuharmal facing off with Azab Singh. Alongside these illustrations, a whole body of popular imagery revolves around the theme of the itinerant merchant.

The efforts of Ram Dayal Rakesh and Prafulla Singh Maun have brought to light the importance of this frontier culture in which Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Nepalese influences are interwoven.

Still, our knowledge of the history of Indian migration in this part of the Himalayas remains far from complete, and is even less well documented than that of the western region of Terai. The memory of the bards and the chapbook literature that bears its traces help us reconstruct this complex tapestry.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. A case in point is the tragic massacre of 1 December 1997, in which seventy villagers – men, women and children of low caste – were murdered in the middle of the night by a militia of large landholders. Many private militias, or *senas*, were already in existence in the Middle Ages, but they have shown a resurgence since being reorganized in the 1970s. Since then the militias have systematically and unremittingly engaged in endless reprisals and vendettas. This intransigent class struggle and the resultant anarchy have made Bihar the most dangerous, disorganized, and problematic region in India. For more on the *senas*, the reader is referred to Praveen JHA (1997).
2. See the following articles in the *Times of India*: “Crime on rise in Azamgarh” (6 February 1988) and “Daylight crimes the norm in Buxar, Bhojpur” (30 July 1993).
3. Research by Radhadrishna Chaudhary and Jagadish Narayan Sarkar make it possible to reconstruct the routes, itineraries, and networks, and to identify the principal modes of transport. Jahar Sen’s work on Indo-Nepalese trade in the nineteenth century shows the rivalry between Newar traders and their Indian neighbors.
4. The route takes the caravans from Benares to Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Bettiah, and Birganj, or alternatively from Ballia to Patna, Sonapur, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, and Janakpur.
5. The sources of the Ganges.
6. This city in the Indian portion of Mithila, the counterpart to Janakpur in the Nepalese part of Mithila, is a center for the worship of Sitâ and Ram, the heroes of the Râmâyana.
7. A famous destination for pilgrims, located in Deo-garh in Bihar, and dedicated to Shiva.
8. Dhanbad and Bokaro are very large industrial complexes in Bihar.
9. Jagjivan Ram, who belonged to the community of untouchables, was a prominent member of the Congress Party, serving as party president from 1969 to 1971. As a minister, he also protected the rights of the lowest castes.

10. Kunvar Singh was the famous Bhojpuri hero of the 1857 Cipayes Revolt or Mutiny; he lost his life in the struggle against the English.
11. Vidyapati was the celebrated Maithilia poet of the fifteenth century; Bhikhari Thakur was the celebrated playwright of the 1960s; and Mahendra Mishra was the Bhojpuri poet who composed songs of parting known as "purvi." This anachronistic fantasy constitutes a catalogue of those most beloved by the Biharis.
12. The zamindars were feudal officials who collected revenue from land cultivators.
13. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Einoo for his generous collaboration and for having provided me with numerous documents on the Salhes character and his cult.

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