

Watching without Seeing: Vulgarly, Obscenity, and the Politics of *Launda Naach*

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Abstract: *Launda Naach*, a cross-dressing performance tradition from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar, dances at the threshold of queer and culture in the caste-patriarchal social order of the region. Tracing the genealogy of the tradition through Bhikari Thakur's repertoire and *Naach* traditions of the Mughal courts, the paper argues that the vulgarity charges levelled against the performance are a function of caste hegemony. The historically stigmatised body of the performer is made invisible outside the performance space. Drawing from Kerstin Mey's theory of obscenity and Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the paper tries to demonstrate how the feudal structures operate to render the feminised *launda* body physically accessible to violence rather than legibility. The harassment of *Launda Naach* performers is thus understood not as incidental transgression but as a systematic extension of caste violence into the domain of cultural production.

Keywords: Launda Naach, Cross-Dressing, Vulgarity, Caste, Masculinity

Introduction

Cross-dressing is a practice of wearing clothes culturally ascribed to a gender other than one's own. Though prevalent, its practice varies in terms of the occasions in which it is performed. The practice varies in terms of occasions and functions, often resisting a single interpretive framework. The practice is predominantly met with censure within Indian social structures as these structures are characterised by a rigid insistence on normative gendered identities, prescribing that (heterosexual) bodies conform strictly to gender-specific dress codes. Such prescriptions extend beyond the domain of everyday dress into the performative sphere, where the act of cross-dressing is perceived as a potential disruption of normative gendered identity. Consequently, cross-dressing and its performative expressions have come to be regarded as the exclusive province of bodies that exist outside the normative social order: namely, transgender, *Hijra*, and other non-binary communities.

Launda Naach performers, however, do not exist outside the normative social order. They very much follow the norms of the heteronormative social order in their daily lives; as such, it is difficult to ascertain their identity within or outside it. These performances are traced to a location deeply embedded within the socio-cultural fabric itself, spaces where the participating bodies are neither outside social structure nor follow the normative gender binary. *Launda Naach* thus becomes a site for complexity and complication. The performers, in many respects, are firmly integrated within the social structure. The themes they engage with are all intrinsic to Bihar's broader cultural milieu. It is also important to note that they do not always identify with non-binary gender/gender dysphoria. It is precisely this embeddedness within the cultural context that destabilises the mechanisms through which normative, upper-caste communities have historically maintained their detachment. Confronted with this rupture, upper-caste communities resort to strategies of vilification and stigmatization as a means of reasserting their social and cultural authority. Following this debate, this paper traces the contours of this contestation, how *Launda Naach* performers assert a distinct lower-caste cultural identity, and how upper-caste observers have, in turn, read that same practice as debased or shameful.

Launda Naach is a cross-dressing performance tradition from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar and its adjacent areas. The tradition is unified at its core by the figure of a cross-dressed male body, who performs female subjectivities through his transformed embodiment, although certain variations can be found. The historical evolution of the tradition remains difficult to trace, owing largely to the scarcity of sustained scholarly attention to the subject. The tradition may, however, be broadly categorized into two strands, distinguished by their respective sources of inspiration and the emphases that follow from them. The first strand locates the earliest and most prominent articulation of *Launda Naach* within the theatrical oeuvre of Bhikhari Thakur (1887–1971). A seminal Bhojpuri playwright and theatre practitioner, Thakur authored several plays centered on the themes and settings of male migration. *Bidesiya*, according to Brahma Prakash, is about the "culture of migrants" (Prakash 137). It is about the trauma of indentured labourers who were tricked into migrating to Caribbean countries

from the regions of Bihar in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Bidesiya* (the play), first staged in 1912 and subsequently published in 1917, gained such widespread recognition that the centrality of the *Launda* figure within it caused a conflation of labels, resulting in Thakur's broader theatrical output being referred to as *Bidesiya* or *Launda Naach*. This became a defining feature of his theatrical practice: the deployment of a cross-dressed male performer in the role of female characters, a figure whose function encompassed not only narrative dialogue but also dance in the musical sequences of the plays.

The second strand, by contrast, traces its genealogy to the *Naach* or *Nautch* tradition, which was prevalent during the time in the North Indian region. Performed in the enclosed, semi-private spaces of court or *Mehfil* by trained female dancers commonly called *Tawaifs* for the aristocratic elites of the Mughal Empire and the feudal elites of the region. The contents of these performances have largely remained outside the domain of public record. Very few accounts of these performances have survived; however, the surviving accounts document their structural constitution as dance sequences rendered to sung compositions, accompanied by troupes of singers and musicians.

The prevailing patriarchal norms combined with the absence of female performers willing or permitted to occupy the public performance space must have compelled the substitution of the female body with that of a cross-dressed male. We also see this substitution in the Marathi middle-class theatre of the 1920s, where cross-dressed male actors like Bal Gandharva start to represent the epitome of feminine beauty. It is within this broader context of restricted access and aristocratic patronage that the subaltern communities of the region appear to have developed their own parallel performative traditions. In the Bhojpuri-speaking region, a pre-existing culture of singing was formalized through the systematic incorporation of dance, producing a performance tradition that bore a functional resemblance to the *tawaif-centered mehfil* culture. *Launda Naach* must have gone through multiple reinventions within the mediating frameworks of mass media platforms while also cultivating a widely distributed spectatorship. Bhikhari Thakur's corpus of cross-dressed performances remained rooted in theatrical narratives, but later performances suggest that dance sequences were emphasised more as the central unit of performance; a distinction that is crucial in understanding the complexities that might arise from the conflation of the two.

Bidesiya and *Launda Naach* are best understood as performances that share theatrical components – the feminised male body, the Bhojpuri folk musical vocabulary – without being the same performance. In Thakur's plays, the cross-dressed *launda* functions more as a subtext. He is not the central concern of the performance. These characters were used to further the story rather than being the story itself. The conflation of labels becomes even more contentious when examined in the purview of the vulgarity charge levelled against *Launda Naach*. This charge becomes critically unsustainable when examined against *Beti-Bechwa*, a play by Thakur that directly confronted child marriage and the selling of daughters by lower-caste families within

the feudal-patriarchal order. "According to a popular anecdote, this play emerged as a movement against such heinous practices. The family members who came to watch the play took a collective vow that they would not sell their daughters. Beyond its entertainment value, theatre made a direct intervention in the socio-cultural problems of the society" (Prakash 124-125). If the presence of the *launda* body is sufficient grounds for the charge of vulgarity, it is difficult to sustain that charge against a performance that is, at its core, about the selling of daughters. The charge, then, reveals itself as directed not at the content of the performance but at the body through which it is delivered.

Liminal Body of the *Launda Naach* Performer

The performance of *Launda Naach* occupies a distinctly liminal space, suspended at the threshold between 'queer' and 'culture'. The existing scholarship emphasises the 'queer' component, tracing the performance as an extension of *Kothi* performers and thus limiting it alongside (promiscuous) sexuality. The feminised-male body of the *Launda Naach* performer is doubly marginalised by the rigid boundaries that confine its existence strictly within the performative domain. The sanctioned space of performance provides the body legitimacy. Outside it, the body is transformed into a site of vulnerability. It ceases to be legible within the normative social order; instead, it becomes an aberration, an excess that heteronormative society refuses to accommodate. The *launda*, outside the performance space, becomes a subject of ridicule, harassment, and systematic humiliation by a social structure that both demands the performance but also disavows the feminised male body. The consumption of the performance as spectacle, by the social order, within the performance arena while rejecting it beyond those limits reveals the contradictory logic of heteronormativity – permitting transgression only when it is contained, temporary, and in service of dominant cultural scripts. As the gender non-normativity contained within the boundaries of performance space seeps into the broader social milieu, the performing body does not remain an aesthetic or theatrical instrument. It becomes a legible marker of social castration: a body denied full subjecthood, condemned to inhabit the precarious threshold between cultural visibility and social erasure. This disjunction exposes the contradictory attitudes of heteronormative society towards queerness: permitting visibility but only as exotic or folkloric performance while continuing to pathologise and marginalise it in the lived social reality.

The Vulgar and the Obscene

Naach, as Jainendra Kumar Dost writes, "produces an erotic ambience that will keep the audience hooked to the entire performance" (Dost 108). The erotic movements, exaggerated hip thrusts, and double-meaning dialogues are all theatrical elements through which the spectator is invited into the performative realm. As Dost further elaborates, the role of the performer is "not to sexually attract the audience but to charge the environment erotically" (Dost 108). Through carefully crafted movements and actions, the performer constructs a theatrical environment in which the audience is not merely passive but is incorporated into the fabric of the performative space itself.

The charge of vulgarity levelled against performative excess because of the employment of overtly sensual or lewd movements loses considerable critical traction when repositioned within the framework of theatrical strategy. To watch a *launda* performer roll his hips, throw a loaded glance at the crowd and walk away, calling it cheap, is to have watched without seeing. The lewdness, if we must call it that, is a deliberate technique. The exaggerated femininity, the provocative gesture, is not an accidental excess. It is a technique honed to pull the audience out of the comfortable role of passive watcher and into something far more uncomfortable and alive. The performance does not happen on the stage alone. It also happens in the charged space between the dancer's body and the crowd's response. This reciprocity is crucial. The audience's response, in the form of whistles and claps that come back, the collective loosening of men who came to watch and find themselves, suddenly, participating. Once the audience is implicated, their hooting and swaying and pressing forward becomes part of the event itself; you can no longer separate the 'indecent' performance from the crowd that is completing it. What looks like transgression from the outside is, from within the performance's own logic, simply the mechanism by which it functions. The 'lewdness,' then, is not an aberration; it is an invitation, and the audience's answering behaviour, its willingness to be drawn in and respond, becomes the completion of the performative act. The upper caste sections of the society, as Jainendra Kumar Dost points out, "are oblivious to this strategy and incapable of decoding it as anything but vulgar and cheap" (Dost 108).

The problem lies not with the charges of obscenity put forth against *Launda Naach* but with the objectified body of the *launda* performers. Kerstin Mey "defines 'obscenity' as a cultural category 'applied to denote indecent and vulgar, dirty and lewd, gross and vile and thus morally corrupting and potentially illicit character'. Obscenity has a meaning, which is 'broader than simply the sexually explicit and alluring representations of flesh'" (Mey 5). Obscenity, Mey argues, has always been closely associated with the segregation between high and low culture. In the Indian context, obscenity has been systemically mobilised against the cultural practices of Dalits and marginalised communities to stigmatize their production.

This dynamic can be seen in the very act of renaming the performance tradition. The derogatory prefixing of *launda* to *Naach*, as Jainendra Kumar Dost alludes to, is a hegemonic gesture of othering. This prefixing is also deeply feudal in its origins. The term was strategically imposed by hegemonic caste and class structures upon a folk performance tradition that did not belong to them. This act of renaming, however, is not only discursive. The feudal reclaim continues through the enactment of caste masculinity upon the bodies of the performers in the performance space. This consolidation of caste masculinity is not limited to the dominant caste; the men who form the audience (many of whom are subordinated by caste themselves) replicate their feudal lords by groping the *laundas* in front of them. This act of groping is done not just to derive pleasure from the act but also to perform their masculine authority by exercising claim over the feminised *launda* body. The touching, the grabbing, the assertion – all become part of a performance – an enactment of hegemonic-caste

masculinity from which they have been excluded in other domains. The abject *launda* body becomes the surface on which feudal power writes its hierarchies.

Caste Violence and Performance Space

Bihar's feudal-agrarian landscape preserves the status quo of caste order not through the persuasive authority of religious texts or consensual internalisation of ritual hierarchy but through sustained, organised, deliberate, and largely unpunished violence. The violence is the system's primary enforcement mechanism. Caste has been used as an effective system by the upper and landowning groups to exploit the labour force from lower and landless caste groups. This logic of enforcement, integral to the agrarian field and the site of labour extraction, does not remain confined to it. It extends structurally into the domain of cultural production. The harassment visited upon *Launda Naach* performers must therefore be understood not as incidental or aberrant, but as continuous with the broader apparatus of caste violence that organises social life in Bihar.

The feudal arrangement is not just limited to the act of naming alone – it extends into the very physical organisation of the performance space. The seating arrangement makes the caste hierarchy hyper-visible, with upper-caste men often given chairs and placed close to the stage to watch the performance, while others are made to sit on the ground. Brahma Prakash, in *Cultural Labour: Conceptualising the 'Folk Performance' in India*, describes the seating arrangement at one such event: "Upper caste viewers, as well as other 'special' members of the audience, have their chairs in a perimeter, close to the stage. All the others sit on the ground. The seating arrangements, while segregating the audience based on gender, castes, villages, age groups, and so on, also provide a comfortable zone where aesthetic separation is enjoyed" (Prakash 141).

Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, is a theatrical technique designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play. "The Alienation effect was achieved in the German epic theatre not only by the actor, but also by the music and the setting. It was principally designed to historicize the incidents portrayed" (Brecht 96). Brecht's aim was to evoke a critical distance in the spectators, in order to arouse them to act. Direct audience address, use of songs to interrupt the linear flow of the plot, stage designs that did not represent any locality, and actors' demonstrative rather than identificatory relationship to the character were some of the techniques employed by him to interrupt the audience's passive absorption. *Launda Naach*, through the makeshift platforms as stage, musicians in sight of the spectators, presented a formal structure that superficially resembled this apparatus, yet inverted its political function entirely. The performance structurally refuses theatrical illusion. The audience is always in the know (the performers are cross-dressed male figures). This condition of transparent, knowing theatricality invites comparison with Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. The formal resemblance, however, conceals a fundamental inversion of political function. In Brecht's Epic theatre, the exposed apparatus is directed against audience complicity. The spatial arrangement of the *Launda Naach* performance produces a collective, participatory social event within which the performer's body is made physically accessible. This shared theatricality allows the

sexual violence on the *launda's* body to occur. *Laundas* are touched and groped without consent; audiences treat them as sexually available precisely because they are dressed in female attire. The audience is not deceived by the costume. They know it is attire. The female costume does not confuse identity; it designates social position – signalling, within the caste-patriarchal economy of the performance event, that this body has been rendered available. The Brechtian inversion shows that the mechanisms of caste and gender normativity do not simply suppress *Launda Naach* but actively use its own theatrical logic against the performing body. The costume that signals transgression is the same costume that marks availability.

Conclusion

Launda Naach's existence within the normative social order reveals that it is not dictated by a logic of exclusion, but by one of absorption, containment, and exploitation. The performer's body consolidates multiple axes of transgression simultaneously – of caste, of gender performance, of lower-caste cultural assertion, and it is precisely this density of transgression that draws violence toward it. The transgressive *launda* body is not expelled from the social fabric but managed within it through stigmatisation and objectification. The harassment of the performer is not just an act of sexual aggression; it is also an assertion of upper-caste authority over bodies that have exceeded their socially prescribed position. The exposed theatricality that should produce critical distance instead produces physical access and violence. It is the logic of caste-patriarchal culture operating through the aesthetic form itself. I argue that *Launda Naach* does not simply reflect the contradictions of caste-patriarchal Bihar but makes them actively visible. The violence directed at its performers then is essentially social order's attempt to suppress that visibility.

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