

Cultural Heritage of Bihar: Historical Roots and Contemporary Expressions

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Abstract

Bihar, one of India's well known cultural regions, has played a major role in shaping the civilization and spiritual heritage of it. From the times of the Mauryas and Guptas to the present day, Bihar has been known for its rich traditions, languages, art forms, festivals, and folk literature. The culture of Bihar represents a blend of ancient wisdom and living folk traditions. It carries influences from different religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, creating a unique cultural blend. Folk songs, local theatre, crafts, and religious festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm in both rural and urban areas. The contribution of writers from Bihar, and various artists has also enriched Indian cultural identity. This paper studies Bihar's culture through its historical roots, literature, festivals, art forms, and highlights how these elements together create a vibrant identity of the same.

Keywords: Regional Literature, Cultural Study, Rituals, Translation Studies

“Culture derives from ‘cultura’ and ‘colere’, meaning ‘to cultivate’. It also meant ‘to honour’ and ‘protect’. By the nineteenth century in Europe, it meant the habits, customs, and tastes of the upper classes (also known as the elite)” (Nayar 4). Bihar is a state situated in the eastern part of India. It is known for its rich history, religious heritage, culture and traditions. The word basically “originates from the Sanskrit term *Vihara*, meaning a monastery or abode, which refers to the Buddhist monastic centers that once flourished here.”¹ The state is known for its civilization, education, and culture since ancient times. However, things have changed now because of various interferences. The state Bihar that is known to have given birth to identities like Buddhism, and Jainism, continues to hold cultural importance even today. Its culture reflects a balance between continuity and change while preserving the old and adapting to the new. Bihari literature is known basically for its emphasis on folk. It is known for a variety of genres like folk plays, poetry, idioms, short stories, and novels. Some of the well-known writers who have nourished Bihari literature through using different languages are Vidyapati, Rahul Sankrityayan, Harimohan Jha, Bhikhari Thakur, Ramnath Pandey, Pandey Kapil, Jayanath Pati etc. The writers have focused much on the popular culture, traditions, rituals, festivals, and artforms for the creation of their literary works.

The cultural history of Bihar dates back to the times of the *Mahajanapadas* (6th century BCE). The kingdoms of *Magadha*, *Vajji*, and *Mithila* were the main centers of political and

¹ <https://statesofsouthasia.com/country/india/state/bihar/>

cultural activity. The Mauryan Empire, founded by Chandragupta Maurya and strengthened by Emperor Ashoka, made Pataliputra one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. The Gupta Empire also had its roots in this state. From the ancient period itself, the culture of the state has been flourishing rapidly. People celebrate their culture and tradition rooted in festivals with great zeal.

Ramnath Pandey, the very first Bhojpuri novelist, has written about the richness of the Bhojpuri culture. Through Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi and Angika literature, the readers get to know much about the popular cultures of Bihar. Writers related to the Magahi, Angika, Maithili, and Bajjika literature have also written about their respective cultures. The literary works also mention customary rituals surrounding marriage, festivals, etc. In his Angika short story, Aniruddha Prasad talks about certain rituals and the superstitious beliefs of the people of the village.

Bihar is the birthplace of two religions: Buddhism and Jainism. Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, while Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, was born in Vaishali. Both these religions have contributed a lot to the moral and philosophical culture of Bihar. They have been promoting non-violence, truth, and spiritual enlightenment.

During the medieval period, Bihar experienced the influence of Islamic rulers, which led to the emergence of Indo-Islamic art and culture. The entry of Sufi saints created an environment of harmony and brotherhood. During modern times, Bihar became a place of the Indian freedom struggle, led by personalities like Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Jayaprakash Narayan. Mahatma Gandhi also visited the state a lot for the execution of his freedom movement. Bihar's culture today reflects a mix of its old roots and modern aspirations.

The state is home to several languages and dialects like Hindi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Magahi. Maithili has a rich literary history and was recognized as one of the official languages of India in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The other languages like Bhojpuri, Magahi, and Angika, also have their own literature, folk songs, idioms, and oral traditions, adding to Bihar's cultural richness. The region of Mithila produced many Sanskrit scholars, poets, and philosophers. *Vidyapati*, a 14th-century poet, is often regarded as the father of Maithili literature. His devotional and romantic poems dedicated to Lord Shiva and Radha-Krishna are sung even today.

During the medieval period, the Bhakti movement flourished in Bihar. Saints like *Kabir Das* and *Shri Narhari Das* spread messages of unity, devotion, and equality through their verses. Their works reflect the moral and social consciousness of the time. Modern Bihar writers have contributed significantly to Hindi and regional literature. Writers like *Phanishwar Nath Renu*, *Ramdhari Singh Dinkar*, and *Bhikhari Thakur* brought the rural life and folk traditions of Bihar into literary expression. Renu's *Maila Anchal* vividly depicts village life in North Bihar. Dinkar, often called the "national poet," combined patriotism with philosophical depth, while Bhikhari Thakur, known as the "Shakespeare of Bhojpuri," enriched the performance and folk theatre traditions of the region. In R.K. Narayan's *Guide*, Indian English has been used thoroughly. Indian culture and its elements may be seen through the words used by the Narayan. In the line "he could walk across, catch a bus somewhere, and be off to the city, where they would not

bother too much about him- just another bearded sadhu about, that was all” (125), the word ‘sadhu’ straightforwardly indicates towards the Indian culture, as a saint is called ‘sadhu’ in the northern part of India. In Mulk Raj Anand’s *Sword and the Sickle* (1955), local Hindi words have been used extensively. The words like *Acha* (7), *Ram Ram Sri! Sri!* (9), *Zemindar* (9), *Kismet* (19), etc., are examples depicting the language-culture relationship. All these words are used (primarily) by the people of north India belonging to a diverse cultural background.

Festivals and Religious traditions also are very important. The most important festival of Bihar is Chhath Puja, dedicated to the Sun and his sister *Chhathi Maiya*. Celebrated six days after Diwali, this festival is marked by strict fasting, purity, and devotion. Devotees offer *Arghya* to the setting and rising sun at riverbanks, symbolizing gratitude and faith in nature’s power. Apart from this, festivals like Diwali, Holi, Durga Puja, Ram Navami, and Makar Sankranti are celebrated with enthusiasm. Sama-Chakeva and Jitiya are regional festivals associated with women and sisterhood, reflecting the emotional bonds within families. *Sonepur Mela*, one of Asia’s largest cattle fairs, combines religious devotion with rural commerce and entertainment. Pandey Kapil’s Bhojpuri novel *Phoolsunghi* has a segment where the festival is holi is being celebrated by the people with great zeal. Mahender Misir’s *Poorvi* songs, and other folk songs sung on various occasions are talked about throughout this novel.

The state’s culture has always been inclusive. Sufi and Hindu traditions coexist there. Other celebrations at Sufi shrines and Hindu fairs like *Pitrapaksha Mela* in Gaya show the spirit of unity beyond religious boundaries. Gaya Ji is a religious place that holds an important place. Over time it has become a well-known tourist destination. People visit this place from across the globe to honour their deceased ancestors. All these places, rituals, cultures & traditions have been discussed a lot in the regional literature of Bihar. One of the most famous art forms of Bihar is Madhubani painting, which originated in the Mithila region of Bihar. Districts like Madhubani and Darbhanga are known for Madhubani art forms. Such paintings are usually used for decoration on various occasions. The English translation of Harimohan Jha’s Maithili novel *Kanyadan* has also its cover page decorated with beautiful Madhubani art. It was traditionally done by women on the walls of their homes, this art form uses natural colors and symbolic motifs like peacocks, fishes, and the sun. It represents love, fertility, and harmony with nature. Today, Madhubani painting is internationally recognized and supports the livelihood of many rural artists. Bihar’s artisans are skilled in Sikki craft, Lac bangles, Madhubani textiles, and Tarkashi. The *Bhagalpuri silk*, known for its fine texture and natural dyes, is famous across India. These crafts are not only sources of income but also living examples of Bihar’s creative spirit.

The folk theatre forms like Bidesiya and Launda Naach reflect social issues, humor, and everyday life. Bhikhari Thakur’s plays addressed migration, poverty, and women’s struggles while maintaining entertainment value. Folk music, such as *Sohar*, which is sung during childbirth, *Kajri* a well-known monsoon song, and *Birha*, songs are of separation, express the emotional depth of rural life. Bihari food is simple yet rich in flavor. The most famous dish is Litti-Chokha, made of roasted wheat balls stuffed with sattv or roasted gram flour and served with mashed potatoes or eggplant. Other popular dishes include *Khaja*, *Thekua*, *Dal Pitha*, and *Chura-Dahi*. These foods are linked to local festivals, agriculture and climate, showing the state’s deep connection with the land. Thekua is prepared especially during the Chhath Puja.

Despite modernization, rural life in Bihar retains its traditional values. Villages are known for their community bonds, folk songs, and collective celebrations. Urban centers like Patna are growing rapidly, but they still maintain cultural ties through local festivals, theatre, and literature. Bihar has historically been a land of learning. Ancient universities like Nalanda and Vikramshila attracted students from all over Asia. Nalanda, founded in the 5th century CE, was a center for Buddhist studies, philosophy, and mathematics. Its ruins are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the modern era, institutions like Patna University, Bihar Museum, and Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library continue this intellectual tradition. These centers preserve manuscripts, art, and cultural archives, keeping Bihar's heritage alive for future generations.

Women have been central to Bihar's cultural expressions. From Madhubani paintings to folk songs, women artists have preserved oral and visual traditions for centuries. The rituals of *Chhath Puja*, *Sama-Chakeva*, and *Jitiya* show their devotion, creativity, and social participation. Folk songs sung during weddings or harvests are full of emotion, humor, and wisdom, reflecting the inner strength of Bihari women.

In recent years, Bihar's culture has seen significant changes due to urbanization, education, and migration. Bhikhari Thakur's folkplay *Bidesiya* is about the migrants who travel to different places in search of livelihood. Many Biharis living in other parts of India or abroad continue to celebrate their cultural festivals, creating a global Bihari identity. Cinema, television, and digital media have also helped in spreading awareness about Bihar's folk culture and literature. Yet, the challenge remains to preserve traditional arts in the face of modernization. Bihari culture is one of the most ancient and living heritages of our country. From the times of Buddha and Ashoka to the age of Vidyapati, Bhikhari Thakur, and other modern artists, Bihar has nurtured spirituality, creativity, and social consciousness. Its festivals bring people together, its languages carry wisdom, and its arts express beauty in simplicity. Despite facing economic and social challenges, Bihar continues to stand as a symbol of resilience and cultural pride. The spirit of Bihar lies in its people, in their songs, crafts, stories, and enduring belief in life's harmony.

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