



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed Journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-23

**Title: Migration, Marriage, and Motherhood - A Close Reading of
Bhikhari Thakur's Selected Plays**

Author(s): Shubhangi

DOI: <https://doi.org/.....>

Yr. 11, Issue 17-22, 2023

Autumn Edition
September-October



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THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
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Migration, Marriage, and Motherhood - A Close Reading of Bhikhari Thakur's Selected Plays

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Abstract

Acclaimed as the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri literature, Bhikhari Thakur (1888-1971) was a playwright, singer, poet, and actor. Despite being denied a formal education, as he belonged to the 'nai' (barber) caste, his innate brilliance elevated Thakur to prominence through his groundbreaking plays, including *Bidesiya*, *Beti Viyog*, *Gabarghichor*, and *Ganga Snaan*, among others.

Thakur's theatrical oeuvre integrates the elements of 'naach' (a kind of musical theatre performance from Bihar) and 'geet' (songs, couplets, et cetera), with traditional musical instruments, a harmonious and interactive chorus, razor-sharp, witty dialogues, and an honest but inconsistent adherence to *Natyashastra*.

The characters of wives, mistresses, mothers, and mothers-in-law, et cetera, are essential storytelling part in Thakur's plays. Moreover, the cross-dressed performances of the female characters by male actors (*naach*) add depth and complexity to Thakur's storytelling, providing a unique perspective to the critique of the patriarchal society.

This paper, hence, aims to study two of Thakur's seminal works — namely, *Bidesiya*, and *Gabarghichor* — and explore the characters of the 'wife', the 'mistress', and the 'mother'. The overarching themes of migration, marriage, motherhood, and familial and societal patriarchy will also be addressed and adequately discussed.

Article History

Received **21 Dec. 2023**

Revised **22 May 2024**

Accepted **03 June 2024**

Keywords

Bhikhari Thakur,
Bhojpuri folk theatre,
Naach, *Bidesiya*, Female
Characters



‘Bidesiya’ is a popular folk performance from Bihar and the eastern regions of Uttar Pradesh in India. It shares similarities with other popular theatre genres like Bengal’s *jatra*, Uttar Pradesh’s *nautanki* and encompasses various elements such as dance, drama, music, and other performing arts. Bidesiya is often called ‘*naach*’ (or *launda-nach*) because of the significant presence of *launda* actors who impersonate females in these plays. Bidesiya, as a cultural phenomenon, therefore holds cultural significance, as it emerged as a response to the colonial-era migration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to adjacent cities (of Bihar, UP) and faraway countries (Fiji, Mauritius, etc.), thus serving as a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by those left behind and a testament to the tribulations of those who were forcibly displaced to *bidesh* (foreign lands). As an independent word, ‘Bidesiya’ is reported to have been used for the first time in a folksong composed by Pandit Beni Madhav Ram (a resident of Kashi), to address a person who had departed.

Bhikhari Thakur, renowned as the ‘Shakespeare’ of Bhojpuri drama, is credited for the establishment of bidesiya as a dominant form of folk theatre. Born in 1887, Thakur was inspired by political upheavals, social discrimination, female suffering, including other social vices. His folk theatre, moreover, is acknowledged for having brought forth several progressive changes in the concerned status quo. Thakur is noted to have written innumerable bhajans, many folksongs, and 12 folk plays during his lifetime. The most culturally influential folk play by Thakur has been *Bidesiya* - with an entire genre of folk theatre named after its title.

Discussing how the theatre of Bhikhari Thakur came to be known as *bidesiya*, eminent scholar Taiyyab Hussain Peedit notes that in his plays “Bhikhari mixed the familial



problems of his contemporary villages with the Bhojpuri language, which is similar to Hindi, and gave them such immense popularity, that the performances of theatrical troupes that fell in the similar category, started being recognized by the same name as Bhikhari's celebrated play, *Bidesiya*" (50).

Following the existing theatrical practice, *Bidesiya* can be translated as the theatre of the migrants or the theatre of the indentured laborers. Thakur borrowed from existing performance genres ranging from folk dances, folksongs, and devotional songs. Scholars like Susan Seizer (2005) and S. Chatterjee (2008) prefer to call such theatre the 'hybrid theatre'.

In Thakur's folk theatre, as Gyan Prakash Choubey notes, underprivileged farmers and labourers were "separated from the mainstream of the society. [...] The zamindari system, social inequality, political corruption, as well as (classist and casteist) religious practices were making life difficult" (137). Delivering thought-provoking messages was, thus, a necessity more than an ambition. To achieve so, the strategy of provocative dialogues, dances, and lyrics was adopted, where "the aim [was] not to sexually attract the audience but to charge the environment erotically" (Dost 4), and use this shift in energies to induce revolutionary opinions. Superficially, the goal of such theatre seems entertainment, but latently, it is subversive politics, aiming towards interrogating the status quo.

Inspired and following the tradition of Tulsidas and Kabir, Thakur places himself in his plays as the godly and wise voice, religiously guiding his characters towards the right path. His presence in the play is both spatially and temporally inconsistent with the overall context. Some examples (from his play *Bidesiya*) are as follows -



“Bhikhari says, my kingdom will be deserted...” (Thakur 55)

“Bhikhari says, my lord, forgive me from your heart, keep your pity on me.” (71)

“Bhikhari says, remove worries from your mind, Lord Mahesh will show grace.” (62)

Intimately connected with the sensibility of the ‘folk’. Thakur’s theatre paid more attention to characterization than staging, props, or lights. Rooted in the ‘folk’, the characters represent the people in the audience, dress up, and speak the rural idiom, giving prevalence to characters, such as plotting mother-in-law, wicked daughter-in-law, ignorant husband, quarrelsome father-in-law, naive daughter, et cetera.

Moreover, participation of the ‘folk’ is an essential element. Thakur allowed the breakdown of the fourth wall, accepted verbal reactions from the audience, and motivated women and children to participate in such interactions as well. To resonate well with the chord of the ‘folk’, Thakur included several folksongs in his plays, based on the tunes of *jatsaari*, *sorthi*, *birha*, *barahmasa*, *purbi*, *kunvar*, *chaupai*, *nirgun*, and more. Since folksongs are an area expertized majorly by women, the “women in the audience [take] more interest in this performance piece (Bidesiya plays), because of their sense of identification with it” (Prakash 14). Smita Tewari Jassal, in her book *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India*, suggests that female melancholia sees more expression because “emotions are socially and culturally produced”, allowing women, as the stereotypical ‘emotionally vulnerable’ gender to be more expressive than men, and highlighting how “emotions are manipulated in power hierarchies” (135).



Thakur, similarly, demonstrated his deep concern for the plight of women through the folksongs in his plays (as a wife whose husband has migrated, or a daughter who is sold off by her father to a rich elderly man, as an old mother abandoned by her son, et cetera). Discussing the ‘women’ in Thakur’s plays, Choubey acknowledges that Thakur understood how “any society’s real condition and status is determined by the living standard of the women living within it” (134), and how the “influence of industrialization, modernity and development of communication facilities [...] was not enough to improve their (women’s) social and economic status” (137).

Thakur’s most renowned play, *Bidesiya*, is about a woman, Pyaari Sundari, whose husband, (referred to in the play as Bidesi), leaves for Calcutta hardly a day after their marriage. In one of the songs included in the play, Sundari sings -

“I am dying thinking about my emigrant husband.

I don’t relish the taste of food and water; I never eat to my heart’s content.

I have never even missed *Chhath*¹ or *Etavar*², and weakened my body with these austerities. [...]" (Thakur 47)

Here, Sundari laments not as a wife, but as a woman whose fantasies of marital bliss have been shattered, despite her fulfilling all the duties traditionally assigned to a wife. She attempts to reason with Bidesi, by suggesting that she “may deviate from the path of faithfulness under the spell of her youth” (Thakur 55) if he leaves, but his decision to leave for Calcutta remains unshakable. She promises to tend to his whims and wishes, but Bidesi leaves, giving her a false promise of returning during the festivals.



Sundari's primary response to her husband's departure is self-reproach since she does not understand why he abandoned her immediately after their marriage. In a *nirgun*, she sings,

"I will cease putting on Tikuli (spangle) and Senur (sindur, i.e. vermillion), and always chant the name of my husband, after getting my hair shaved.

I will break all my gold and silver jewelry into pieces with stones, and live in unkempt clothes, lost in the thought of my husband." (Thakur 48)

As observed in these lines, it is easier for Sundari to live like a widow (being removed from vanity and beauty) than an abandoned wife, because as a woman, she is aware that her husband's departure has put her honor³ in jeopardy.

But to Bidesi, Sundari's womanly constraints are invisible. He exploits his position as the family's patriarch and orders her to "concentrate on lord Ram" (Thakur, *Bidesiya*) instead. Here, 'lord Ram' represents the reverence towards culture, deliberately imposed on women, to separate them from the public or outside (hence, masculine) business. By ordering Sundari to live under Ram's name, and wait for her husband's return, Bidesi establishes the limits of her agency as his wife, while also rendering Sundari aware of new and complex patriarchal arrangements in her marital life. Immediately learning from Bidesi's strategy, Sundari remarks that her husband is her 'lord', and she cannot live 'lordless' in her new house. But Bidesi's determination is unflinching, and he deceptively leaves for Calcutta.

Bidesi's sudden, entirely impulsive decision to leave for Calcutta emphasizes the lack of proper male accountability. As a man with adequate resources (as suggested by the



granaries and cows he owns), Bidesi enjoys the privilege of leaving his home without any weight of responsibility or monetary danger weighing his whimsical passion down.

But Sundari is demented after Bidesi leaves for Calcutta. In one of the *vilaap-geet* (mourning song), the *samaaji* (chorus) sings articulating her condition,

“Whenever the thought of her husband’s departure comes to her mind, breathing in seems as if an arrow has been shot from a bow.

She started wailing, beating her breast; she had little sense of knowing day and night.”

(Thakur 73)

In another *jhoomar*⁴, she sings -

“My youth will pass. I don’t know when he will come.

In a short time, my hair will be white.” (Thakur 98)

As exhibited in the above lines, Sundari is aware that her husband will not appreciate her as his wife if she loses her youthful body and innocent beauty. Therefore, the few years in her favor are the ones in which Bidesi has decided to leave her to her lonesome. She does not wish for material gains as well, and is eager to renounce her “body, wealth, and home [because] these are the burdens of the world” (Thakur 157). Stating her concerns over the unfulfillment of her marital desires, Sundari sings in another song -

“When will I put garland around his neck?

When will I talk to my master (her husband)?



When will I quench my thirsty eyes?

Bhikhari says, when will I get the fruits of life?" (Thakur 172)

Unlike Bidesi, who can leave without consequences, Sundari's solitude invites danger, in the form of unsolicited sexual advances from her younger brother-in-law. The fear of 'losing' her honor distresses her and is expressed in lyrics such as,

"O God of Truth! I pray to you to protect my honor.

O Shankar⁵! Please have mercy on me during this trouble.

Bhikhari says, O Goddess Bhagwati! Help me by uniting me with my husband." (Thakur 74)

and,

"Now protect my honor, O God!

Just after our *gavana*⁶, my husband departed for the east, leaving me alone." (Thakur 89)

A woman's 'honor', hence, is often only a subject of interrogation when a man is also in the equation, endangering her safety. In the play, the second female character, i.e. the mistress, with whom Bidesi has two children, also suffers a similar fate, when Bidesi decides to return to his wife, after Batohi, an old traveler narrates Sundari's ordeal to him. The mistress (referred to in the play as a prostitute⁷) threatens Bidesi that she will "end [her] life by hanging with a rope around the neck" (Thakur 124) if he leaves her and their children in Calcutta. As observed in the case of Sundari earlier, the mistress' threat is also a desperate



attempt to secure her ‘honor’ in case Bidesi leaves her, especially because she is not his ‘legal’ wife, and has even had ‘illegitimate’ children with him.

Her relationship with Bidesi erases the social identity she owned before, which substantiates Luce Irigaray’s statement that “women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another”, since “exchange without identifiable terms of trade, without accounts, without end...” (108) is not possible to take place among women themselves, as long as society is organized patriarchally.

In a *purbi*⁸ song from the play, the mistress similarly sings,

“I am a daughter of respectable parents but my pride has tightened a noose around my neck; don’t go away, leaving me behind” (Thakur 130)

Resultantly, the mistress is vilified for her relationship with a married man and is shamed by Batohi (the old traveler who delivers Sundari’s ordeal to Bidesi), the *samaaji* (chorus), and consequently, the audience as well.

But Bidesi is portrayed to have not faced consequential public or personal embarrassment. Even when he returns to his first wife, his actions are shown to have negligible ramifications for his social status. Yet, Bidesi’s disregard towards the women in his life is not shown as *entirely* inconsequential. His friend referred to in the play as ‘dost’, reprimands him by reminding him,

“You have brought your wife home after the *gavana* hardly a few days ago, and today, you have arranged your travel. One can’t find a person as foolish as you anywhere indeed.”



(Thakur 68)

Later in the play, Batohi also disapproves of Bidesi's incautious life decisions, and sings,

“O Bidesi! Listen to my advice. You have committed a big betrayal. [...]

Your wife is wailing. And you are responsible for her pangs of separation [...]” (Thakur 104)

Being the voice of ‘wisdom’ in the play, Batohi then addresses Bidesi as well as the audience and narrates the duties of a husband towards his wife by singing a song in the tune of *Lorikayan*⁹ -

“If you came to Calcutta, you could have sent letters frequently, one after another.

You could have sent her money, and the entire village would have praised you.

[...]

With the tears she sheds, her saree gets completely drenched.

Bhikhari says, I request you to be careful and conscious from now onwards.” (Thakur 107)

After all the mistakes done and lessons learned, *Bidesiya* ends with the reconciliation between Bidesi and Pyaari Sundari, as well as the conciliation between the mistress and Pyaari Sundari. The play's conclusion, however, establishes Bidesi as the ultimate patriarch, whose extramarital deeds do not bear long-term complications in his marital, as well as socio-economic life. But the two women, directly affected by Bidesi's actions, have to acclimate to



each other's presence because not doing so is bound to instigate more trouble. Hence, the decision of both women to accept Bidesi as their common husband/lover emerges more from the need for survival than a feeling of love. The impact of migration, in the play, is consequently suffered by the migrant less, and the kin more.

Similarly, in *Gabarghichor* (another play by Bhikhari Thakur), the theme of 'migration' is explored, but the emphasis is instead on the effect of migration on motherhood, whereas *Bidesiya*'s is on marriage. *Gabarghichor* is a play about Galiz (the migrator), Galiz's wife, Gadbad, and Gabarghichor (the 'illegitimate' son of Galiz's wife and Gadbad). As circumstances arise, the story becomes a battle between Galiz, Galiz's wife, and Gadbad for the parental rights of Gabarghichor. Eventually, the mother, i.e. Galiz's wife proves herself as the deserving parent of her son, and the village's *Panch*¹⁰ rewards her with her son's sole custody.

Galiz, similar to Bidesi, migrated to distant lands, and "no longer desired his wife, and swung like an intoxicated elephant" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 3). His character is summarized by the Panch in the play as follows: "He is Galiz. He confined his wife to the four walls of the house and went to a foreign country in search of a job. He never sent a letter to her or any news or even money" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 4). Meanwhile, seeing her husband return home after a long time, Galiz's wife "washed his feet in a deep platter and considered herself lucky" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 3). Her enthusiasm and ceaseless faith in her husband's obedience are reminiscent of Pyaari Sundari (from *Bidesiya*). But Galiz does not reciprocate his wife's adoration and impassively tells her that "there is no need for all this bothering. Where is the boy (Gabarghichor)? Tell me quickly." (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 3).



For Galiz, the boy (his stepson) is just a means of labor, hence an additional source of income. Similarly yet quite differently, for Gadbadi (the biological father of Gabarghichor), the boy is a means of extending his patriarchal lineage and also laying claim on Galiz's wife. Gadbadi is equally absent as Galiz is in the boy's upbringing, yet both men unabashedly claim Gabarghichor as their rightful son.

The Panch, however, questions the legitimacy of both men as Gabarghichor's father. To Gadbadi, he asks, "Did you get married to her (Galiz's wife) by decorating the ceremonial altar? With pomp and pageantry? By giving out invitations? [...] Then how has Ghichor become your son, silly?" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 4). When Galiz attempts to gain control over the conversation and manipulate the panch into handing Gabarghichor's parental rights to him, the latter interrogates his intentions as well, "Tell me, how old is your son, and after how many years have you suddenly come back home from foreign lands?" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 5). To convince the Panch of her legitimacy as her son's parent, Galiz's wife presents her testimony with an elaborate example of the 'curdling of milk'. When the Panch asks her to provide 'proof', she explains by singing a song,

"Please be seated, I will provide you the proof.

There were five liters of milk in my house,

Somebody gave a bit of curd to curdle this milk

But there is no reason for debate

As the ghee is rightfully mine." (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 8)



In folk theatre, since male actors are also playing the role of female characters, such dialogues are spoken in a way that elicits laughter while simultaneously reverberating the intended message to the audience. In the above lines, likewise, a double-entendre is employed. Outwardly, the intention might be humor, but figuratively, the play suggests that the foremost right to a child should belong to the mother since she reproduces it from her body. Yet, the traditional parental laws govern a child's lineage as per the patriarchal structure. By providing this example, Thakur appears to be questioning the irony of human cognition and how it is capable of lucidly understanding the laws of belongingness in the context of milk, curd, and ghee but fails to recognize a mother's monumental contribution to the creation of a child.

In the play itself, the mother's, i.e., Galiz's wife's rightful claim over her son is dismissed, when Gadbadi, exercising his patriarchal insight, compares her to the 'spare cash' in a 'money wallet' owned previously by someone (Galiz), and eventually found and used by someone else (Gadbadi). Misusing the power of money, both Galiz and Gadbadi bribe the Panch by offering him two hundred rupees and five hundred rupees, respectively. The panch accepts the more ludicrous bribe and orders Gabarghichor to go with Galiz. As a mother, Galiz's wife rebels and rejects Panch's decision. Poignantly, she tells him,

"Why should I not get angry? You jump to award my son to this man and then to that man. He is *my* son but you have not even asked me once." (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 7)

Galiz's wife's rebellion against the conventions is in complete contrast with Sundari and the mistress (from Bidesiya). She is not ashamed of her son, despite the men around her



shaming her for birthing an ‘illegitimate’ child. Instead, she shames her husband for abandoning her and failing to be present in her and her son’s life, as observed in the following couplet,

“Now when the son is thirteen years old, the father has come looking for his son

Everybody is laughing, but he stands unashamed.” (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 6)

Reminiscing the tribulations of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, she then sings to persuade the Panch -

“He is my son, as I have given birth to him

They cannot digest this truth

[...]

After his birth, I gave up all culinary tastes

For the sake of my son

[...]

And now I am being exploited

Surrounded by conmen and robbers

[...]

None of them have any right over my son



You can ask the barber or midwife

I nurtured him in my womb for nine months

[...]

I experienced excruciating pain at the time of his birth

[...]

O Panch! Give me justice!" (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 10)

To appeal to her son, who might consider leaving her in his naive greed for money or freedom, she further sings,

"Being your (the son's) bearer I forgot that you belong to someone else too

I bore you for nine months

[...]

My gait became unsteady

At the time of morning sickness

There was no one to take care of me,

O, my son! What I am telling you

Is nothing compared to what I have suffered



[...]

I oiled and scrubbed your body

O son! Please consider the time of your birth

And do not abandon me” (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 11)

After listening to the mother’s ordeal as well as the men’s attempt at bribery, the Panch is befuddled to make the final judgment. Thus, he orders to cut Gabarghichor’s body into three equal parts and be distributed among the three claimers of his custody. The two ‘fathers’ are satisfied with the decision, but the mother is appalled and outraged. Horrified, she exclaims, “Baba, give him to either of the two but let him live. Please do not cut him into pieces” (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 14). Revisiting his judgment upon seeing the honest intentions of Galiz’s bahu as Gabarghichor’s mother, he declares, “Gadbadi says that the boy should be cut in two pieces and Galiz says the same thing as well. How can a person who is not concerned about the welfare of his son be worthy of being his father? Only the mother loves her son. Only she has right over him. Take him away, woman” (Thakur, *Gabarghichor* 14).

To understand why it is sincerely remarkable for Galiz’s wife to remain assertive of her truth, and not surrender to the dominant hegemony, it is essential to carefully consider the social, political, and cultural context of the play. As a woman belonging to a ‘lower’ caste, a mother of an ‘illegitimate’ son, and a woman who has already been previously wedded to another man and allegedly abandoned by him; Galiz’s wife, in the real world, would have been socially ostracized, or potentially killed for disturbing the status quo. Renowned



Bhojpuri critic N.P Singh, in his paper, “Bhojpuri Loknatak Gabarghichor ke Vaachan”, likewise observes that “such pregnancies are mostly terminated; but sometimes when it so happens that the birth takes place, the child is thrown away” (19). But in *Gabarghichor*, Thakur fictionalizes such a woman’s story and deliberately portrays her as the most sensible among all other ‘male’ characters. Despite standing alone in a fight against two overbearing men and a vain village head (also a man), she is not ashamed of her truth and fights for what she deserves, until she receives the needed justice. As the play proceeds, she is ultimately absolved of the societal stigma, and her position as the ‘mother’ is established as the wielder of most power, removed from prevalent patriarchal standards.

Conclusion

Both *Bidesiya* and *Gabarghichor* recreate the lingering effect of migration on marriage and motherhood, particularly in Bihar, Jharkhand, and eastern Uttar Pradesh. This is why *Naach*, specifically, *Bidesiya* has continued to be an important component of the cultural baggage of all ancestors, who had to migrate to foreign lands as well as the pain endured by the women who were left behind. The preservation of oral folk traditions in the Bidesiya tradition has remained important, as it has aided in preserving the intangible social and political heritage of countless generations of migrant and indentured laborers.

For this reason, in both the plays, *Bidesiya* and *Gabarghichor*, Thakur’s aim as a folk dramatist is to realistically recreate societal, cultural, and political sensibilities and instill reformist opinions among the folk. Although not as prominent as yesteryears, Bhikhari Thakur’s theatre form is revered and dramatized even today, by local *naach* groups in



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An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

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villages and/or theatrical troupes of Bihar (Patna, et cetera).



End Notes

¹ *Chhath* is a festival, primarily celebrated in Bihar and Jharkhand, to venerate the Sun god.

² *Etavar* translates to 'Sunday', and is used here to refer to the fasting women undergo every Sunday for their family's prosperity.

³ Here, the word 'honor' represents the traditional belief that a woman's sexual assault is linked directly to the degradation of her 'honor'

⁴ *Jhoomar* is sung mostly by women. The female protagonists in the jhoomar songs articulate their husband's/son's migration. Jhoomar is sung especially during marriage ceremonies.

⁵ *Shankar*, here, refers to Lord Shiva of Hindu mythology.

⁶ *Gavana* is the day a new woman arrives at her in-laws' house after marriage.

⁷ The play uses the word 'randi' to address the character of the mistress throughout the play, which translates to 'prostitute' in English. The usage of this word, along with several other double entendres in Thakur's plays, is because of the social and cultural language from where these plays take inspiration, i.e. the lower middle-class population.

⁸ *Purbi* is sung from the perspective of a loving wife whose husband has migrated to 'purab' (east), leaving her behind.

⁹ *Lorikayan* refers to the style of singing particularly used to narrate the folk tale of a hero named, Lorik. The tale follows the story of his life and adventures.

¹⁰ Leader of the village council (*panchayat*)



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