

Geet Gawai in Mauritius: A Reflection Through Performance Theory

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ABSTRACT

Geet Gawai, a Bhojpuri folk musical tradition recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016, is far more than a ritualistic and festive communal practice. Indeed, it serves as a vital repository of Bhojpuri-Mauritian history and identity. This study applies Richard Schechner's (2003, 2020) and other allied scholar's Performance Theory concepts, particularly those of "restored behaviour," "The Efficacy – Entertainment braid", "liminality" (Turner) and "participation," to explore how Geet Gawai operates as a complex social "performance sequence" and "theatrical" event through which Indo-Mauritians continuously construct, contest, and affirm cultural identity. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, audiovisual documentation, and desktop research, the paper offers a succinct overview of Geet Gawai's origin in Bhojpuri life-cycle practices, its migration and reconfiguration in Mauritius, and its contemporary presentation in domestic and public spaces. Data collected from these methods also assists in deconstructing Geet Gawai as a performative act. Findings indicate that Geet Gawai transcends the status of a mere cultural artefact and functions as a vital, sophisticated social performative engine for the Mauritian Bhojpuri community. It perpetually restores, adapts, and redefines itself through performances in a diasporic setting while asserting cultural continuity and dynamically negotiating its position within modern Mauritian multiculturalism. It functions simultaneously as a ritual practice, social pedagogy, entertainment, and cultural heritage—maintaining community cohesion even as aestheticisation introduces new layers of interpretation and spectatorship. The paper concludes that Schechner's performance theory offers a robust framework for analysing ritualistic musical traditions akin to Geet Gawai, providing profound insights into these phenomena not as fossilised traditions but as resilient, living, and adaptive practices vital to cultural sustainability, in which the past actively shapes the present and future.

Keywords: Geet Gawai, Bhojpuri Folk songs, *girmitiya*, Performance Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Contextualising Geet Gawai in Mauritius

Geet Gawai literally means "song-singing" in Bhojpuri. Basically, performed as part of the pre-wedding tradition in Indo-Mauritian Hindu families, Geet Gawai is a rich and vibrant multisensorial Bhojpuri folk musical ensemble that encompasses prayers, rituals, songs, dance, dance-drama and social interaction in its entirety. It is linked to the Bhojpuri-speaking North Indian cultural legacy of the *girmitiya-s* — Indian Indentured Immigrants (primarily women), specifically originating from the regions of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Hazareesingh, 1966; Ramdin, 1989; Boodhoo, 1999, 2023a; UNESCO, 2016; Dawosing, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Shubhangi, 2024; Bhautoo, 2025). Just as the Ramayana Chanting, and Holi Chawtaal, the Geet Gawai also developed through migration, plantation history, and cultural adaptation within the Indo-Mauritian culture (Boodhoo, 1999, 2016, 2023a; Shubhangi, 2024; Bhautoo, 2025a; National Heritage Fund, 2026). Characterised by its intricate repertoire of ritualistic and festive folk songs, expressive and energetic dance movements, and deeply participatory social interactions, this profoundly ingrained performative tradition among the Bhojpuri-Indian diaspora in Mauritius operates beyond its surface manifestation as ritual observances and artistic expressions. It is indeed a carrier of tradition, a living embodiment of cultural memory, social cohesion, and identity formation, particularly central to the auspicious occasions of life-cycle rituals, most notably, weddings.

Geet Gawai — An Overview of Its Historical Dimension, Its Structural Composition and Cultural Significance within the Indo-Mauritian Community

Following the abolition of slavery, between 1834 and 1920, around 450,000 Indians indentured labourers were transported to Mauritius to work on sugar plantations under harsh living conditions for years (Carter, 1995; Allen, 1999; Eisenlohr, 2006). These labourers brought with them a rich repertoire of Bhojpuri folk songs, folk narratives, and ritual practices rooted in Hindu traditions. In the face of brutal plantation labour, family separation, linguistic isolation, and the risk of cultural erasure, indentured Indians drew upon their cultural traditions as anchors of memory, expressions of resilience, and ways of maintaining cultural continuity; as Hugh Tinker (1974) noted in his book *A New System of Slavery*, “If the Indians were to survive as human beings, their survival depended largely on their own power of resilience. They devised their own pastimes, recreated some resemblance of the lost India in festivals and feasts.” Hence, the large-scale *girmitiya* migration enriched Indian Bhojpuri cultural production across the British colonies, particularly in folk traditions, and in Mauritius, many of these Bhojpuri folk songs gradually evolved into the Geet Gawai tradition (Boodhoo, 1999, 2023a; Shubhangi, 2024).

Rooted in the lives of the *Geetharines* - the elderly women custodian practitioners and tradition-bearers of Geet Gawai who preserved this oral tradition across generations, Geet Gawai originally began as a pre-wedding tradition centred around the singing of *Sanskaar Geet-s* (folk songs associated with specific rituals) (Boodhoo, 2023a). However, varied *Sanskaar Geet-s* are also performed during various rites of passage and wedding ceremonies. For example, *Lalna*, *Sohar*, and *Jhoomar* are sung during childbirth (birth rite), *Namkaran Sanskaar* (the prayer for naming a child), *Janeo* (thread-giving prayer), and *Mundan Sanskaar* (the ritual of a child’s head tonsuring). The folk songs associated with pre-wedding and wedding ceremonies are extensive, including *Tilak Ke Geet*, *Hardi Geet*, *Lagan Ke Geet*, *Neota Geet*, *Sumiran Geet*, *Sandhya Geet*, *Suhaag Geet*, *Dharti-Bandhaai Geet*, *Jhoomar*, *Parchhaawan Geet*, *Imli Ghontai Geet*, and *Saadi ke Geet*, to name a few. While other genres are sung to celebrate nature, seasons, family bonding, and Hindu religious festivals like Divali, Ganga Snaan, and Maha Shivratri, among others (Ramdin, 1989; Boodhoo, 2016, 2023a, 2023b; Dawosing, 2020a, 2020b; Bissedur- Doolooa, 2020; Shubhangi, 2024; Bhautoo, 2025b). Therefore, Geet Gawai can be described as an overarching term that encompasses a variety of Bhojpuri folk song genres, each emphasising a specific occasion, mood, or contextual purpose. Some performances emphasise devotional efficacy (songs intended to invoke spiritual blessings or the divine presence), while others prioritise entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, and many blend these elements.

The Geet Gawai songs vary in lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic structures. Normally, the performance is in a call-and-response (or leader-chorus) format, featuring a lead singer followed by a chorus of 10 to 12 singers who respond or sing in unison. The musicians play the Dholak (a two-headed hand drum), Lota (a copper pitcher hit with two spoons—one in each hand—for rhythm), Chimta (tongs with small brass jingles), Lakri Kartaal (hand cymbals made of wood and small discs or plates), and many other instruments that have been incorporated into the performance over time. These instruments are played in a very rowdy, energetic manner, with the zestful, spirited dancers showcasing their exceptional talents across the dance floor. It is also important to note that the audience plays an equally vital interactive role in this musical tradition.

Over the past two decades, the context of Geet Gawai performances has evolved from small, intimate domestic gatherings and festive song practice to large public spectacles, national and international stage performances, high-profile global events, and performances on broadcast media and other social media platforms. In fact, this transformation has drastically increased Geet Gawai’s visibility beyond the Hindu community. It has affirmed the tradition’s significance and helped secure institutional support for its preservation. Besides, undoubtedly, the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) has substantially increased Geet Gawai’s visibility and reach through numerous ongoing recorded and live programmes on Bhojpuri folk music, broadcast on its dedicated 24-hour Bhojpuri Television Channel since 2013.

Today, every village and town in Mauritius has at least one Geet Gawai specialised group, and, apart from the *Geetharines*, Geet Gawai singers include trained, semi-professional, amateur youngsters, male performers and even non-Bhojpuri-speaking performers (Dawosing, 2020b; Boodhoo, 2023a). Geet Gawai has now become an

important source of income for performers and musicians, which in turn sparks greater interest among more people in learning and practising the tradition while facilitating intergenerational transmission.

Remarkably, the preservation and perpetuation of Geet Gawai have been consistently supported by the Mauritius Bhojpuri Institute since its inception in 1982, under the leadership of Dr Sarita Boodhoo. This support was further strengthened through active initiatives by the Bhojpuri Speaking Union, founded in 2012 and again led by Dr Boodhoo, operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Arts and Culture. This organisation has led to the establishment of 52 non-formal Geet Gawai schools currently operational across Mauritius that transmit this valuable traditional Bhojpuri folk singing to younger women, with instruction from the elderly ‘*guruwaines*’ (experienced female custodian mentors) (Boodhoo, 2023a; Shubhangi, 2024). According to the interview with Mrs Dhundevi Poonith, the head of the Geet Gawai schools, 12 additional schools are expected to be operational soon.

Currently, courses on Bhojpuri Language and Culture are offered at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute through its Department of Bhojpuri Folklore and Oral Traditions, at the University of Mauritius, and in some primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, the National Heritage Fund, local Village and District Councils, several socio-cultural organisations, and certain NGO initiatives are actively engaged in preserving, protecting, and disseminating Geet Gawai through various approaches. These include continuous research, inventory exercises, documentation, organising cultural shows, national festivals, drama festivals, and intermittent national and regional Geet Gawai competitions (specifically featuring *Jhoomar* and *Lalna*), along with public performances across the island, as well as producing audiovisual content, CDs, among others (Dawosing, 2020b; Boodhoo, 2023a). In addition, UNESCO’s recognition in 2016 has undoubtedly boosted Geet Gawai’s visibility, acclaim, and pride, specifically in globalised and commercialised contexts.

Bhautoo (2025), on the other hand, contends, and rightly so, that the true, lived meanings of Geet Gawai remain rooted in the intimacy of Indo-Mauritian family gatherings rather than in its staged performances. The beauty of the tradition’s deeper layers — including women’s humour, wit, and mischief during playful and competitive song exchanges, coded social commentary, the spontaneous, improvised theatricality, and the emotional bonds forged through the rituals emerges naturally and effortlessly in the authentic settings. These elements are co-created through active audience participation. Hence, it is vital to grasp the tradition’s deeper inheritance and recognise the delicate nature of what still needs preservation and transmission.

Research Problem and Significance of Inquiry

While existing scholarship has adeptly explored Geet Gawai through ethnographic, ethnomusicological, anthropological and sociological lenses—documenting its musical repertoire, rituals, linguistic nuances, its socio-cultural functions, its historical roots, as well as its role in cultural preservation and maintaining diasporic identity—there remains a fertile ground for critically examining its intrinsic performative qualities, particularly through the specialised discourse of performance studies. This gap calls for a theoretical lens that can dissect the musical tradition as a lived process where the sacred and the social, the scripted and the spontaneous, are in constant, productive dialogue. The field of performance studies, particularly the foundational framework of performance theory established by Richard Schechner and other allied scholars, provides precisely such a lens, treating performance as a fundamental human activity that is distinct from yet intertwined with everyday life and offering a novel perspective. This approach is apt to analyse Geet Gawai as a performance that is at once solemn and festive, prescribed and improvised, while it also delves into examining the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of Geet Gawai’s enduring power and adaptability.

Therefore, this paper conducts a systematic examination of Geet Gawai as an integrated performance system and an evolving, structured ‘theatrical’ event in which behaviour is consciously framed, repeated, and imbued with meanings, thus providing researchers and students with a robust alternative theoretical framework for analysing cultural practices similar to the Mauritian Geet Gawai. Additionally, it advances diaspora scholarship and contemporary debates on cultural preservation in multicultural societies, while offering policymakers academic insights and strengthening the case for cultural preservation initiatives and well-informed policy decisions regarding intangible cultural heritage.

Research Question and Objectives

The central research question guiding this paper is:

How can Richard Schechner's and other allied scholars' Performance Theory illuminate the performative dynamics, cultural significance and the adaptive capacities of Geet Gawai within the Mauritian context?

In pursuit of this question, the paper aims to:

- (a) Analyse Geet Gawai through the lens of Performance Theory.
- (b) Examine how Geet Gawai functions as both ritual and performance, shaping communal identities and social structures.
- (c) Explore the adaptive nature of Geet Gawai in response to its specific socio-cultural context in Mauritius.
- (d) Contribute to a richer understanding of performance as a vital mechanism for cultural continuity and identity negotiation in diasporic communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Synthesis of Scholarly Perspectives on Geet Gawai

The Mauritian scholarship offers in-depth insights into the Geet Gawai tradition. Ethnographic, Ethnomusicological, anthropological, and sociological research studies have enriched this understanding. Scholars such as Ramdin (1989) and Boodhoo (1993, 1999, 2023a) have extensively and meticulously catalogued the Bhojpuri folk songs central to Geet Gawai, analysing their ritual significance, poetic themes, socio-cultural functions, and linguistic nuances. Moreover, Ramdin's albums *Swarna Chakra* and *Abhishek* showcase, through her captivating voice, a blend of cherished traditional Bhojpuri wedding songs. Boodhoo's book *Geet Gawai: Bhojpuri Folk Songs in Mauritius* (2023a) is an important contribution that honours the *Geetharines* of Mauritius for their remarkable efforts to preserve and promote Geet Gawai songs for over one and a half centuries, despite numerous challenges. The author elucidates the wide variety of Bhojpuri folk songs across different genres of Geet Gawai, related to varied occasions, moods, memories, stories, and myths.

The UNESCO nomination file (2016) serves as a foundational descriptive document, formally outlining the structure, symbolic elements, and the perceived value of Geet Gawai as a vehicle for transmitting languages, social values, and traditional knowledge across generations. This official documentation frames Geet Gawai as a key community-based practice of intangible heritage. While exploring the psychology of worship in Mauritian Bhojpuri folk songs, Dawosing (2019, 2020a, 2020b) has specifically analysed the ritual aspect of Geet Gawai. He has also conducted a sociological analysis of Jhoomar (a component of Geet Gawai) using Critical Discourse Analysis as his primary analytical approach, highlighting the cultural, social, and economic evolution of Mauritian Jhoomar over time. Additionally, he has detailed the various parts of Geet Gawai within a wedding context from beginning to end, advocating for its safeguarding as an element of intangible cultural heritage.

Along the same lines, Bhautoo (2025b) discusses Geet Gawai as a vast oceanic story and a diasporic echo across the oceans, connecting Mauritius to Trinidad, Suriname, Guyana, Fiji, South Africa, and beyond, where women carried culture across Indenture, and communities re-rooted themselves through repetition and ritual. The author states that despite geographical distance, these traditions form a single diasporic constellation where each community adapted the old North Indian forms to new soils, new social realities, and new cultural blends. Yet the fundamental structure — a woman's communal space where her voice, memory and emotional life could circulate freely, remains recognisable across oceans. Meanwhile, Bissessur – Doolooa (2020) discusses women and culture during the difficult days of Indenture in Mauritius and convincingly argues that, far from being subdued and weak, women have repeatedly demonstrated their role as pioneers of the present Indo-Mauritian population. The author highlights women's critical role as the primary transmitters and preservers of various Bhojpuri musical forms, including Geet Gawai, and as keepers of our valuable cultural legacy and identity. Additionally, insights from the books *Laal Pasina* by the renowned Mauritian writer Abhimanyu Annuth (1977)

and *Bhojpuri Lokgeetika* by Pahlad Ramsurrun (2001) have equally provided crucial historical contexts and folkloric documentation for understanding how cultural traditions like Geet Gawai survived and evolved in pre-independent Mauritius.

Regarding the international scholarship on the present topic, Professor Helen Myer's 1998 book *Music of Hindu Trinidad: Songs from the India Diaspora*, offers critical insights into the preservation and transformation of Indian musical traditions in the Caribbean. Her ethnomusicological research explores the detailed repertoire—covering structural, symbolic, aesthetic, and psychological elements—of Indian Hindu music in Felicity Village, Trinidad, which mainly features North Indian genres, including traditional Bhojpuri folk songs. In this context, the Indo-Trinidadian version of Geet Gawai, closely resembling the Mauritian Geet Gawai, is particularly relevant to this study.

While exploring the musical links between India and Mauritius, Indian author Shubhangi (2024), primarily drawing on Sarita Boodhoo's (2023a) influential work on Geet Gawai, offers interesting insights into the indentureship period, connecting it to Geet Gawai and other Bhojpuri folk music traditions in Mauritius. In contrast, Catherine Sevan Schreiber's (2011) paper provides significant perspectives on the adaptability of Bhojpuri folk songs in Mauritius, discussing musical exchanges between the "Indian worlds and the creole worlds". Her study shows how the migration of Indian indentured workers after the abolition of slavery led to the development of a typical 'Mauritian Chutney', reflecting African influences on Indian folk genres, thereby emphasising the adaptation of these genres to remain relevant and vibrant in modern Mauritian society. She also reveals the innovative glamourisation of Bhojpuri songs and choreography, with a focus on costumes and body movements. Indian writer Tomar (2024) explores Indo-Mauritian festivals and Bhojpuri folk music and dance as vital components of the diaspora's cultural identity, noting the growing fusion of Bhojpuri songs with local genres such as Sega, creating a unique blend that resonates with a broader Mauritian audience.

Performance Studies and Richard Schechner's Theoretical Paradigm

In his seminal work *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner (2003, 2020) explores performance studies as a discipline, fundamentally reconceptualising performance as an integral part of human experience that transcends conventional theatrical boundaries. He highlights several key concepts in performance, such as restored behaviour, liminality, participation, the efficacy-entertainment braid, and symbolisation, among others, which provide valuable insights into understanding 'performance' in its broadest sense—encompassing theatre, ritual, sports, everyday social performances, and cultural practices across contexts and historical periods. Importantly, Schechner argues that performance is not confined to artistic contexts but deeply permeates social life—including weddings, funerals, protests, and daily rituals—all of which constitute acts of performance. They involve many of the same elements one finds in theatre: people playing roles, repeating familiar patterns, and creating and conveying meanings through symbolic actions. Schechner defines two main realms of Performance Theory: "(1) looking at human behaviour- individual and social - as a genre of performance;(2) looking at performances- of theatre, dance, and other 'art forms' – as a kind of personal or social interaction" (Schechner, 1985, cited in Stewart & Strathern, 1997). Consequently, Schechner's expansive definition of 'performance' broadens the scope for analytical possibilities and positions Geet Gawai as a performance in its own right, while offering a solid foundation for examining it, and likely other similar traditions, through the analytical lens of performance studies.

Victor Turner and the Anthropology of Performance

While not the main framework of the paper, Victor Turner's (1982) contributions, borrowed by Schechner, deserve attention. Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "social drama" complement Schechner's work. Drawing from Turner, Schechner sees performance as a "liminal" space—a threshold of change or transformation that exists "between and betwixt" daily life. Performance creates liminal spaces where normal social hierarchies temporarily dissolve, allowing participants to experience alternative possibilities. Turner's analysis of 'ritual as social drama' proves particularly relevant for understanding how Geet Gawai creates liminal zones within Mauritian public space.

Therefore, while the above-mentioned scholarly discussions on Geet Gawai offer valuable insights into its socio-cultural, ritualistic, and anthropological aspects, the exploration of its embodied performative dimension, especially from a Performance Theory perspective, remains underplayed. Building on existing knowledge of the phenomenon, this paper addresses this gap and argues that theorist Richard Schechner's Performance Theory provides a productive analytical framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of Geet Gawai, particularly as a distinct form of embodied performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, analysing data gathered from desktop research, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audiovisual documentation, situating it through the lens of Richard Schechner's Performance Theory framework. The analysis mainly focuses on Schechner's key concepts of Performance Theory, most relevant to Geet Gawai (twice-behaved behaviour, the efficacy-entertainment braid, liminality, and participation), and applies them to explore the performative meanings and functions of Geet Gawai in Mauritius. Specific elements of Geet Gawai, such as particular songs, dance patterns, and interactional moments, have been examined to identify instances of "twice-behaved behaviour". The balance between the spiritual, cultural efficacy and aesthetic pleasure has been highlighted through the concept of "The Efficacy-Entertainment Braid." Parallels have been drawn between Geet Gawai and the concept of "liminality," which Schechner borrows from Turner's (1982) work on ritual, describing liminal spaces or zones as threshold states in which normal social structures temporarily dissolve, and participants experience heightened connection and transformation. Lastly, through the concept of "participation", the study evaluates Geet Gawai as a co-created performance by the performers and the audiences.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted during wedding ceremonies in different locations and at a few other celebrated occasions within Indo-Mauritian families where Geet Gawai was performed. This included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. A few interviews were conducted at the homes of the elderly *Geetharines*. Performances were observed in private homes and at specific wedding venues and halls, enabling direct interaction with the *Geetharines* and younger performers. Desktop research included documentation of scholarly articles, research papers, ethnographic accounts, and books specifically on Geet Gawai, Mauritian culture, and Richard Schechner's Performance Theory. Additionally, audiovisual analysis of video recordings of Geet Gawai from various groups across Mauritius was conducted, using resources available on the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation website and YouTube.

Analytical Framework

Richard Schechner's Pioneering Theoretical Framework

Performance Studies is an epistemological approach that explores how meaning is created through performance. This interdisciplinary field incorporates insights from anthropology, theatre studies, sociology, performance art, linguistics, social psychology, semiotics, cultural studies, and literary criticism (Lecusay, 2015). While Schechner's theory mainly emphasises theatre, his framework challenges narrow views of 'performance' as only theatrical or staged art, advocating instead for a broad spectrum of human activities. It includes the various roles people enact in everyday behaviours and in social interactions, through formal rituals, ceremonies, festivals, play, games, artistic expressions, sports, media, and staged events, all viewed as part of the same performance spectrum (Schechner, 2003, 2020).

In fact, Schechner has given a comprehensive definition of 'performance' as "the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance - the precinct where the theatre takes place - to the time the last spectator leaves" (Schechner, 1988). Theatre here is not restricted to any narrow definition but encompasses any context involving a relationship between performer and spectator. Hence, to Schechner, any action that is framed,

enacted, or displayed within a social setting can be analysed as ‘performance’, positioning it as an integral part of culture rather than solely as art. In this perspective, the performative nature of Geet Gawai, which combines rituals, community engagement, songs, rhythm, dance, instruments, and direct audience involvement, aligns closely with Schechner’s expanded definition of ‘performance’ as an embodied, interactive event. This idea also radically expands what scholars can examine as performance and situates Performance Theory across various fields of study, including folklore, performing arts, and ethnomusicology; hence, providing a foundation for cross-cultural analysis and methodological diversity in how performances can be studied and understood, while also offering a valuable analytical tool for examining the performative aspects of musical folk traditions such as Geet Gawai in Mauritius.

From a Schechnerian perspective, Geet Gawai in Mauritius is not merely a musical genre but a complex performance event that integrates sound, movement, space, ritual action, social roles, and collective memory. Schechner defines performance broadly through four interconnected aspects, which are “*Being, doing, showing doing, and explaining showing doing*” (Schechner, 2003, 2020), and Geet Gawai satisfies all these four dimensions:

- (a) Being: existence, that is, performers who inhabit culturally defined identities (devotees, *Geetharines*, lead singers, chorus singers, musicians, dancers).
- (b) Doing: engaging in activities or actions, for instance, singing, dancing, clapping hands, and playing musical instruments.
- (c) Showing doing: presenting those actions to others as performance, that is, the public performances of Geet Gawai in people’s houses on various occasions, in social spaces, villages, on stage and in broadcast events.
- (d) Explaining showing doing: the reflection/analysis and interpretation of performances. For example, post-event narration, ethnographic documentation, and academic analysis (such as this study).

Thus, Schechner’s framework highlights how ‘performance’ can be studied from lived experience to theoretical discourse. Moreover, Schechner identifies several functions that performances can serve in society. He outlines that performances can entertain, teach or persuade, shape identity, foster community solidarity, heal, engage with the sacred and create beauty. These functions show that performance is not just aesthetic but also plays social, cultural, and psychological roles, which, again, align with the phenomenon of Geet Gawai.

Therefore, to undertake this performative analysis, the present study critically employs the lens of Schechner’s four core concepts relevant in the context of Geet Gawai: “restored behaviour” (the re-enactment and transformation of learned actions), “The Efficacy- Entertainment Braid” (highlighting the intertwined dimensions of spiritual/social function and aesthetic experience), “liminality” (the creation of ‘liminal spaces’ where social norms are suspended and reconfigured), and “participation” (performance co-created by performers and audience), to unlock the layers of meanings in Geet Gawai and to illuminate its multifaceted nature.

ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Deconstructing Geet Gawai through the Lens of Schechner’s Performance Theory

Geet Gawai as “Restored Behaviour”: Performing Diasporic Continuity

Re-enactment of Tradition

Schechner defines “restored behaviour” as the “key process of performance,” arguing that performance consists of “not-for-the-first time”, “twice-behaved behaviour” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). He further describes “restored behaviour” as symbolic, reflexive and codified performance consisting of actions constructed from pre-existing behaviour patterns – gestures, words, songs, sequences, that have been consciously learned, rehearsed, repeated, re-enacted, often with modifications, and transmitted across generations, rather than as spontaneous, entirely new behaviours. He affirms that these behaviours are “recombined, rearranged, and reconstructed” for the present moment.

In Geet Gawai, this is immediately evident: the concept resonates strongly with the ritual re-enactment. In Geet Gawai, it is observed that restored behaviour operates on multiple levels. First, most of the songs themselves represent restored texts—especially the devotional lyrics transmitted orally by the *Geetharines* and in written forms across centuries. Second, the performance gestures, the staple folkloric genre, vocal techniques, and movement patterns are all “restored”—learned by younger performers from experienced practitioners. Third, the entire ritual structure (gathering, invocation, singing, social interaction) follows a restored pattern repeated in similar contexts across time and space. For example, in the pre-wedding and wedding contexts, every phase of Geet Gawai can be analysed as a suite of restored behaviours. As detailed in the work of Boodhoo (2023a) and also as per her interview, during the ritual part at the beginning of the Geet Gawai in a pre-wedding ceremony, the *Geetharines* ensure that before proceeding to the next steps, they must sing five *Sandhya Geets* (also called *Sanjha Geet*), five *Debi Debta ke Geets* (songs dedicated to Goddesses and Gods), and five *Mahadev Geets* (songs dedicated to Mahadev or Lord Shiva), all sung a cappella, without any musical accompaniment. Today, the performers strongly uphold this order as “the appropriate way”. These are not arbitrary choices, but deliberate restorations of material culture rooted in practices from the Bhojpuri homeland. They embody the weight of ancestral knowledge and cultural continuity. However, interviews reveal that sometimes certain family members, eagerly wanting to reach the dancing part of Geet Gawai sooner, ask the performers to cut down on ritual songs, a request that is rarely entertained. After this series of ritual songs, the *Dholak Puja* (also called *Mandar Puja*) is performed symbolically to pay respects to the instrument, which resonates throughout the auspicious occasion, sustaining a joyful atmosphere (Dawosing, 2020b; Boodhoo, 2023a). Subsequently, the *Sumiran*, *Sohaag Geet*, and *Dharti Bandhal Geet* all serve to invoke deities, goddesses, and sacred spirits. Prominently, these specific lyrical themes and melodic structures, centred on deities, matrimonial blessings, or mythological stories, are not invented anew but rather constitute a conscious symbolic restoration or re-enactment of long-sustained ancestral traditions passed down through generations within Bhojpuri community groups. In tandem with Schechner’s concept, this restoration is not mere replication; it is an adaptive process that asserts continuity while allowing the tradition to root itself in a new socio-geographic context (Schechner, 2003, 2020).

Highlighting the idea of “restored behaviour” in Geet Gawai at the broader diasporic level, Myers (1998) has eloquently discussed its Trinidadian counterpart. She identifies these Bhojpuri folk songs as part of the broader categories of *Byah ke geet* (wedding songs) and *Lachari* (amusing, teasing songs performed by women). *Byah ke geet*, steeped in ritual solemnity and emotional depth, resonates profoundly with certain Mauritian pre-wedding and wedding Geet Gawai songs, specifically *Saadi ke Geet*, while *Lachari*, the spirited, playful, energetic song, echoes the Mauritian Jhoomar. Brought by indentured workers from the Bhojpuri regions of India, preserved across generations through oral tradition, sung in a call-and-response format by groups of elderly women, spanning both ritual and entertainment spheres, and fostering social bonding and ethnic identity markers, the Indo-Trinidadian Bhojpuri folk wedding songs certainly have striking similarities to the Mauritian Geet Gawai. These parallels are not coincidental but genealogical, sharing the same cultural DNA. However, as the Mauritian Geet Gawai evolved through cultural hybridity, Myers (1998) clarifies that, while sharing roots with the Indian Bhojpuri traditions and preserving the core Bhojpuri musical structures, the Indo - Trinidadian Bhojpuri folk songs, also over time, shaped by the specific historical, social and cultural contexts of the Caribbean diaspora, adapted to Caribbean contexts and influences; thus developing distinctive Trinidadian characteristics. Specifically, the Indian musical structures got blended with Caribbean rhythmic sensibilities, focusing on a distinctive, energetic drumming ensemble featuring Dholak and Tassa. According to Professor Myers (1998), these Indo-Trinidadian *Byah ke geet* and *Lachari* show marked parallelism with Bhojpuri folk songs from Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, and Ballia regions of India, which are performed during Hindu wedding ceremonies, hence confirming “restored behaviour” from the tradition’s homeland.

In the same breath, Bhautoo (2025b) explains that despite the geographical distance, the tradition of Geet Gawai creates a unified diasporic network. It connects Mauritius with other Indian diasporas, where these Bhojpuri folk songs share common themes of devotion, wit, playful satire, and mischief, sustaining specific folkloric rhythmic patterns and melodic contours even as the language evolves. The author emphasises that although each community adapted the older North Indian forms to fit new environments, social realities, and cultural influences, the core structure— a woman’s communal space where her voice, memory, and emotional life could be expressed freely — remains identifiable across oceans. Hence, demonstrating how women transported culture during indenture, how songs travelled when almost nothing else could, and how the Hindu community re-rooted itself through restored behaviours and the re-enactment of traditions.

Prescriptive Elements

While improvisation exists, Geet Gawai is highly structured, symbolic, focused on efficacy, with its core structure and much of its contents being prescriptive, which are always presided over by a ritual specialist within the family or neighbourhood, or by a “*thakur*” who is often remunerated for his expertise and assistance in performing the rituals. Indeed, Geet Gawai serves a significant social and spiritual purpose within the broader wedding ritual. A vivid example of a prescriptive element in Geet Gawai, as in its *Dharti Bandhal Geet*, is that before starting to dance, the performers must necessarily touch the floor and seek Mother Earth’s permission and blessings to dance on it through a ritualistic song. The song, “*Gora tohar laagila dharti ho maiyya, Biti bhar jagahiya humro ke daan ge maaiyya...*”, emphasises this ritual, highlighting its importance in the tradition.

In fact, the whole performance guides participants through the stages of the rituals, ensuring that specific rites and blessings are observed in a prescribed manner. From the initial invocation to the main singing session, the analysis argues that the ritual artefacts and repeated gestures constitute significant prescriptive restored behaviours in which traditional acts are re-enacted to ensure social efficacy and the sustenance of cultural identity. Bhautoo (2025b) illustrates how Geet Gawai comprises a series of carefully crafted rituals in Mauritian weddings; for instance, at one point, a group of women encircles the bride and sings *sohar* and *lalna* in a gently teasing manner, invoking blessings to ensure fertility, prosperity, and a fruitful marriage. The author highlights that today, despite new social realities and cultural blends, Geet Gawai— which provided one of the few autonomous communal female spaces where women could speak, joke, critique, and console without surveillance, and where women’s voices, memories, and emotional lives could circulate freely— fortunately remains well preserved due to prescribed restored behaviours.

According to interviews with Dr Sarita Boodhoo and Mrs Dhundevi Poonith, during the wedding ceremony itself, notably, many Geet Gawai songs revolve around the episodes from the Ramayana epic, accompanied by illustrations. For instance, the groom is often depicted as embodying Lord Ram, and the bride is seen as Mother Sita, as illustrated in the *parchhawan Geet* after the Haldi ritual – “*Motiyana anjuri bharaayke apan Rama (or Sita) ke chumayya, dil bhar chumayya Amma, Mann bhar Chummayya...hirdaya se diyana Aashish ji, apan Rama (or Sita) ke chummayya*”. This is a typical prescriptive Bhojpuri folk song that is sung non-negotiably at almost all Hindu weddings involving this ritual.

Adaptation and Modification

Schechner highlights that restoration does not imply static preservation; it means adaptation. He views restored behaviour as “living behaviour” that can be treated like a “film director treats a strip of film” (2003, 2020), in which behaviours are rearranged and reconstructed, independent of their original context: “Because it is marked, framed, and separate, restored behaviour can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed.” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). He also emphasises that “the work of restoration is carried on in rehearsals and/or in the transmission of behaviour from master to novice” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). This is equally obvious in the Mauritian Geet Gawai, which has evolved beautifully and gained a distinctive Mauritian flavour over time. For example, when young Indo-Mauritians learn Geet Gawai from the elders and *Geetharines* through rehearsals and by observing repeated performances, they do not create the foundational expressions but instead acquire a culturally encoded yet, to some extent, deliberately and carefully reformed system of behaviour. In this process, this restored quality does not diminish the authenticity; rather, it ensures cultural transmission and collective identity.

Now, in their turn, the younger generations of Geet Gawai performers are exploring new approaches to enhance the tradition and adapt it to the evolving social and cultural contexts, while still retaining its core Bhojpuri roots. Just as Schechner depicts it – “Restored behaviour can be put on the way a mask or costume is. Its shape can be seen from the outside, and changed” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). The first notable change is that, traditionally, men were strictly forbidden from taking part in Geet Gawai, which was considered a private event exclusively for women. However, over the past two decades, societal shifts towards inclusivity, the rapid evolution of social media, globalisation, commercialisation and Geet Gawai’s status as a highly remunerative form of entertainment through its professionalisation have led to male performers, and even non-Bhojpuri speakers, participating as artists, cultural practitioners and musicians, particularly in the Jhoomar section (Dawosing, 2020a, 2020b;

Boodhoo, 2023a). Hence, what was once unpaid domestic practice now offers economic value through performance fees, teaching opportunities, and cultural tourism, incentivising skill development and artistic excellence. For example, the Krishna Geet Gawai Group of Barlow village currently comprises many male youngsters, with Mr Krishna Ramnauth himself as the lead singer and dancer. The group actively performs at multiple events across Mauritius. Interviews indicate that specifically stage performances and media presentations make Geet Gawai more appealing to younger generations who might perceive domestic rituals as “old-fashioned.” Indeed, the glamour of public spectacles and social media engagement attracts youth participation, making Geet Gawai gender-neutral and intergenerational, and ensuring the tradition’s continuity rather than risking its decline as elder practitioners pass away.

In fact, in Mauritius’s multicultural context, Geet Gawai’s adaptation carries additional significance. Findings show that today, extending beyond home settings to public, stage performance contexts, broadcast media, and various social media platforms, Geet-Gawai, through the Jhoomar style, incorporates influences and elements from other local musical genres, and languages while exploring both deliberate and spontaneous fusions into its repertoire (UNESCO, 2016; Dawosing, 2020a, 2020b; Boodhoo, 2023a). These components include musical instruments, singing and dancing styles, words from other languages and lyrics that feature other social, cultural, and even political contexts.

For instance, regarding its instrumentation, findings show that today Geet Gawai has significantly adapted to local tastes, availability, current musical trends, and performers’ preferences; that is, besides the traditional Dholak, lota, spoons, Chimta, and Lakri Kartaal, other instruments such as Djembe, Tambourine, Cajon, Ravanne, Bongo, Triangle (distinctive to the local Sega style), and Dhol have made their way into Geet Gawai and are increasingly visible. Geet Gawai’s dance movements, which previously featured only rustic folk steps, are now often blended with body movements from the local Sega style, Western dance forms, and Bollywood films, thereby changing the performance style in response to generational shifts and increased exposure to global media, specifically helping youth engage with the tradition. Additionally, in terms of singing style, prominent influences from the local Bhojpuri ‘Gamat style’, the ‘Mauritian Chutney’, and even Bollywood music to some extent are commonly seen in today’s Geet Gawai (Schreiber, 2011; Dawosing, 2020b; Boodhoo, 2023a). Indeed, a crucial dimension of adaptation in Geet Gawai’s restored behaviour operates at the linguistic level. While rooted in Bhojpuri, contemporary performances seamlessly incorporate some Mauritian Creole, French, and English words, creating linguistic hybridity and adapting their lyrics to reflect contemporary Mauritian life. Specific lyrics are often tailored to acknowledge and accommodate the families and guests involved in the events being celebrated.

However, interviews reveal that some purist practitioners of Geet Gawai pertinently critique these influences as a ‘dilution’ of the tradition. But from a different perspective, as argued by Servan-Schreiber (2011), “cohabitation with the Creole population” renders musical exchanges inevitable for Indo-Mauritians. When communities share the same streets, the same celebrations, the same soundscapes, their traditions naturally interpenetrate. Both are enriched through exposure to each other’s sonic vocabulary, rhythmic sensibilities, and performative aesthetics. This is not necessarily dilution — it signifies cultural vitality. Indeed, in Mauritius, this influence is evident in both directions. For instance, popular Mauritian Sega singers Claudio Veeraragoo and Alain Ramanisum are known for incorporating elements of the Mauritian Bhojpuri folk songs into their compositions. Though here, it is interesting to note that, compared with other two widely performed Mauritian folk traditions inherited from the Indian indentured ancestors - Ramayana Chanting and Holi Chawtaal, Geet Gawai has been the most influenced by ‘Creolisation’, a term that refers to “the African influence in musical genres, but also more generally to musical mutations stemming from contacts between distinct cultures” (Servan-Schreiber, 2011). One evident reason for this may be that the participatory nature of Geet Gawai’s Jhoomar segment, featuring dance and celebration, makes it more open to audience participation and co-creation, thus creating natural opportunities for cultural crosspollination. As community members from diverse backgrounds join in the dancing and celebration, they bring their own musical sensibilities, rhythmic patterns, and gestural vocabularies into the performance space. This organic inclusivity allows for the spontaneous integration of Creole musical elements—whether through modified rhythmic patterns, altered melodic embellishments, or the incorporation of dance movements rooted in African diasporic traditions.

In contrast, Ramayana Chanting and Holi Chawtaal, being more ritualistic and devotionally structured, tend to preserve their traditional forms with greater fidelity. Ramayana Chanting, as a sacred recitation of epic religious narratives, operates within established parameters of spiritual reverence that inherently resist drastic modification, making practitioners more cautious about introducing external elements that might compromise the performance's spiritual integrity. Similarly, Holi Chawtaal maintains a more ceremonial framework tied to specific religious observances and seasonal celebrations. Its structured call-and-response format and traditional instrumental accompaniment create a relatively closed performative space where innovation occurs more gradually and within accepted boundaries (Bauboolall Shibchurn, 2026).

Ultimately, through modification and adaptation, Geet Gawai's increased public visibility has garnered government and institutional backing for it, including funding for cultural centres, festivals, and educational programs. This support also provides resources for formal training, documentation, and innovation within the tradition. Hence, ensuring Geet Gawai remains relevant in a rapidly changing society while maintaining its core spiritual and cultural functions.

Currently, various groups in Mauritius, such as the Meera Dance Group led by Mrs Meera Denoo, incorporate adaptations and modifications into their Geet Gawai performances. This group consists entirely of young performers, including some active male members. Similarly, the Sanju Beeharry Dance Group from Terre Rouge features several male musicians and performers who introduce innovative elements, with Mr Sanju as the lead male singer. Other groups such as the Soodevi Dance Group of Chemin Grenier, the Geetanjali Group of Barlow, the Saat Saheli Geet Gawai Group of Terre Rouge, the Ishwaree Bhojpuri Geet Gawai Group of Suriname, and the Krishna Ramnauth Geet Gawai Group of Barlow among others, are the current Geet Gawai groups in Mauritius whose performances intertwine the members' individual creativity and innovation with the inherited ancestral cultural heritage, while still preserving the core theatrical, lyrical, musical, and symbolic structures. Thus, embodying 'restored behaviour' and demonstrating that cultural authenticity is not about static preservation but about deliberate, meaningful reconstruction of inherited patterns.

Detachable and Autonomous Existence

According to Schechner, being independent of the causal systems that brought them into existence, 'restored behaviours' have an existence of their own. They are detachable from their original historical context and can be rearranged, reconstructed, and reinserted into new contexts (Schechner, 2003, 2020). This description perfectly fits Geet Gawai's diasporic evolution. For example, findings indicate that today, Geet Gawai is performed equally at memorials and birthday celebrations of many elderly people across Mauritius, who enjoy celebrating their happiness through the music they organically connect with. It is also increasingly performed in secular cultural contexts such as national festivals and tourism-oriented events.

Besides, following the tradition's inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016, independent of its original contexts, Geet Gawai has rapidly developed a prominent global dimension. Singers from Mauritius have participated in several international programmes and high-profile global events. For instance, in 2018, a Mauritian Geet Gawai troupe travelled to India as part of a cultural exchange programme sponsored by the Mauritian Ministry of Arts and Culture. In October 2024, through global diaspora outreach, Mauritian students performed Geet Gawai at international university events in countries such as Malaysia (Mopay.com, 2024). Markedly, at Mauritius' 57th National Day celebrations in 2025, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, as the Chief Guest, was warmly welcomed with the traditional Indo-Mauritian Geet Gawai (DD News, 2025). In this instance, the Bhojpuri folk song was adapted into a new setting of welcoming a guest, separate from its original context; hence, in tandem with Schechner's concept.

Additionally, practitioners from the Bhojpuri Speaking Union (BSU) frequently represent Mauritius at international UNESCO forums, such as International Mother Language Day events. For example, scholar Sarita Boodhoo, a leading figure in the preservation of Geet Gawai, often represents the art form at international cultural forums, and indeed, she recently participated in a programme in Kolkata, India, in January 2026, celebrating the global significance of Geet Gawai (The Times of India, 2026). Finally, most recently, the Mauritian Geet Gawai was showcased at the Bihar Festival 2026, held from March 20 to 22 at the Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture in Phoenix, Mauritius. The three-day event highlighted Bhojpuri literature and diverse folk cultural

performances, including the fascinating Geet Gawai, for an international audience. The event served as a powerful tribute to Bihar’s enduring traditions and cultural wealth, celebrating the shared origins, history, and heritage that connect India and Mauritius (Govmu.org, 2026).

Therefore, findings indicate that most elements of Geet Gawai are quintessentially restored behaviours, all of which are learned, remembered, and reperformed. These acts of restoration are not merely mimicry and performance; they constitute a “living archive” of twice-behaved verbal and musical acts. They carry and transform historical memory into a contemporary identity. Through this collective restoration, participants and audiences do not simply remember the past; they re-embody it, re-live it, performing a tangible link to an ancestral India and asserting a distinct Bhojpuri-Mauritian identity in the present. Therefore, in line with Schechner’s concept of “restored behaviour”, Geet Gawai, while restoring a form of behaviour rooted in a communal oral practice (Schechner, 2003, 2020), also demonstrates that the continuous, subtle refashioning of inherited behaviours, adapted to contemporary socio-cultural realities, is key to their survival and relevance.

The Efficacy-Entertainment Braid – Balancing the Devotional Impact and Aesthetic Pleasure

Schechner argues that all performances exist on a continuum between the two fundamental poles of efficacy and entertainment: “efficacy and entertainment are not opposed to each other; rather, they form the poles of a continuum” (2003, 2020). He emphasises that “No performance, however, is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.” (2003, 2020). This reinforces the idea that all performances lie somewhere along the spectrum rather than at the extremes. These statements encapsulate Schechner’s central insight into this concept. That is, rather than being binary opposites, efficacy and entertainment exist along a fluid dynamic spectrum, allowing performances to subtly navigate between the poles and even embody elements of both simultaneously. In resonance with this concept, the power of Geet Gawai lies in how it effectively and seamlessly intertwines its efficacious (ritualistic) and entertaining dimensions, evident throughout its development. It fluidly blends both aspects across all the contexts it encompasses. Indeed, every song of Geet Gawai mentioned in the above sections, from *Lalna*, *Sohar*, *Jhoomar*, *Janeo Geet*, *Tilak ke Geet*, *Parchhawan Geet*, *Imli Ghontai Geet*, *Haldi Geet*, to *Saadi ke Geet* and others, each of them without exception, displays a rich blend of ritual and entertaining elements. Table 1 below presents a synthesis of the focal points of the braid:

Table 1- Efficacy vs Entertainment

Efficacy (ritual)	Entertainment
Goal: To effect change (e.g., healing, initiation, invoking divine presence, blessings, purification, devotional offering, community prayer, marking life transitions, social transformation, spiritual fulfilment)	Goal: Amusement and recreation, social enjoyment, festivity, aesthetic pleasure, musical enjoyment, expression of skill, artistic innovation, creativity, emotional expressions, and stylistic appeal
Focus: Result- oriented	Focus: Pleasure- oriented
Context: Sacred, ritual, functional	Context: Secular, artistic, aesthetic
Audience Role: Participants, believers	Audience Role: Participants, spectators and consumers

In this context, among the innumerable Geet Gawai songs, a particular compelling illustration of this ritual-entertainment synthesis, easily relatable to many people, is taken as an example here, the popular *Haldi Geet*: “*Pehele Haradiya more Bipra Charhaawelan, Paache Sajan saba log...*” This song exemplifies the moment when the ceremonial application of turmeric transforms into a vibrant communal celebration that balances sacred purpose with collective joy. The song’s lyrical structure – prioritising the Brahmin’s initial application of turmeric before the beloved and other community members participate reveals the hierarchical sanctification process inherent in traditional Hindu ceremonial practice. This sequencing ensures that the ritual maintains its prescribed efficacy while creating a structured framework for community involvement. Turmeric’s multifaceted significance underpins this ritual’s layered meaning. Its purificatory essence aligns with Hindu concepts of ritual cleansing, removing inauspiciousness and negative energies. Simultaneously, its beautifying properties—imparting a golden glow to the skin, enhancing the bride and groom’s appearances for the wedding ceremony, symbolically transforming them into their best form.

Yet while the practice maintains its ritual authenticity and spiritual potency, the performative dimension elevates it into a “social drama” (Turner, 1982) that engages and delights the gathered community, illustrating the sophisticated ways in which sacred and secular dimensions can coexist within a single ceremonial act. Ethnographic interviews reveal that community members experience this moment as a captivating visual spectacle, in which the accompanying Geet Gawai songs transform a utilitarian ritual into an artistic performance, making it both spiritually meaningful, aesthetically pleasing and socially enriching. As the *Geetharines* sing and guide relatives in applying turmeric to the bride or groom in a melodic, rhythmic sequence, the ritual transforms into a coordinated celebration filled with laughter, blessings, and musical expressions. The sticky, golden turmeric becomes a medium for playful interaction—used for smearing, adorning, and blessing—creating a seamless blend of sacred obligation and joyful festivity. Thus, this dual functionality of the Haldi songs demonstrates how traditional efficacy (turmeric’s power to purify, heal, and beautify) operates in harmony with communal entertainment (the visual and aural pleasure derived from watching and hearing the performance).

Another significant example of this ritual-entertainment braid emerges during the performance of the ceremonial song- “*Gai ke Gobar se Angna lipaaike, huwein pe hokhe la Dwaar Puja...*” (smearing the courtyard with cow dung, then proceeding to perform the doorway worship) that accompanies the ritualistic sacred act of applying some cow dung to demarcate and sanctify the ceremonial space (courtyard and entrance) during the ‘*Dwaar Puja*’ prior to proceeding with the wedding ceremony. This practice exemplifies how Puraanik (scriptural) ritual prescriptions seamlessly integrate with performative aesthetics within the wedding ceremony framework. The application of cow dung itself carries profound spiritual significance in the Hindu tradition- representing purity, fertility and auspiciousness, capable of sanctifying the domestic space and creating a sacred threshold for the impending matrimonial rites. Yet the execution of this ritual, along with the accompanying song, transcends mere religious obligation, becoming a sonic pleasure and a visual spectacle that entertains the attendees.

Ritual Efficacy and Symbolic Significance

In relation to ritual efficacy, this segment, in the same vein, explores another key concept in Schechner’s performance theory: “symbolisation”. Markedly, the ritual aspect of Geet Gawai in a pre-wedding context, according to the Puraanik ritual, also features several visual objects/ ceremonial items with specific symbolic significance. For example, the aesthetic arrangement of the ‘*Vedi*’ or ‘*Bedi*’ (wedding altar), the placement of a ‘*kalash*’ (sacred pot), crowned with a coconut symbolising Lord Ganesh, the lighting of a ‘*Chawmukhi Diya*’ (a four-faced lamp with four distinct points or wicks to illuminate multiple directions), and the placement of a ‘*Harish*’ (a small branch of a mango plant) together with a bamboo pole with leaves as a symbol of fertility on the ‘*Vedi*’ symbolising ‘the divine presence’ to bless the bride and bridegroom, thereby summoning auspiciousness. All these arrangements are accompanied by specific Bhojpuri ritual songs, in which the primary goals of these visual objects are to invoke divine blessings, remove obstacles, and sanctify the space, thereby bringing positive changes to the lives of the people for whom the rituals are performed. However, these objects, accompanied by the songs, also serve as a form of visual gratification. Findings from interviews yield a gratifying Bhojpuri folk song that simultaneously serves as a ritual song, a form of social commentary, and communal entertainment. It is sung during the placement of the ‘*Harish*’, ‘*Kalas*’ and ‘*Diya*’:

Dhaawa ho nawwa, ho dhaawa ho bariya,

Ayodhya mein dhaawal jaawa,

Ohi Ayodhya mein sone ke Hariswa,

Sone ke Hariswa lele aawa....

Sone ke Hariswa maanus kahan paybo?

Aam ke Hariswa daraay....

Sone ke Kalaswa lele aawa,

Sone ke Kalaswa maanus kahan paybo?

Maati ke Kalaswa rakkhaay....

Sone ke Diyarawa lele aawa,

Sone ke Diyarawa maanus kahan paybo?

Maati ke Diyarawa baraay...

Certainly, the song embodies an important ritual in which the mentioned sacred objects carry profound efficacy; however, it also unfolds as a layered dialogue of desire and resignation. The golden aspiration for each object reflects the ideal ceremonial standard prescribed by tradition, while the earthen substitutes demonstrate the adaptive resilience of ritual practice when constrained by material circumstances. Hence, encoded within a single ritual song is crystallised the entire emotional, spiritual and socioeconomic lived reality of the Indian indentured labourers.

The song’s opening invocation referencing Ayodhya, the sacred city of Lord Ram, immediately situates the wedding ritual within a divine cosmological framework, invoking celestial blessings. The lyrical progression of the song follows a consistent pattern:

The aspiration: “*sone ke Hariswa lele aawa*” (bring the golden Harish)

The reality check: “*Sone ke Hariswa Maanus kahan paybo*”? (How will a poor man afford a golden Harish?)

The substitution: “*Aam ke Hariswa daraay*” (the harish with mango leaves will do)

This tripartite structure repeats across all three sacred wedding objects as follows in Table 2 below:

Table 2 – Ritual Significance of Symbolic Ceremonial Items

The desired objects (gold)	The ritual purpose of symbolic objects	Natural substitute (Clay)
Sone ke Hariswa (golden Harish)	For divine blessing and auspiciousness	Aam ke Hariswa (Mango leaves)
Sone ke Kalaswa (golden pot)	Sacred vessel filled with holy water representing abundance, prosperity and cosmic completeness. Crowned with a coconut, it embodies the presence of divine energy (lord Ganesh) within the ceremony	Maati ke Kalaswa (Clay pot)
Sone ke Diyarawa (golden lamp)	Sacred flame representing knowledge, purity, and the divine light that dispels ignorance and inauspiciousness. Its illumination symbolically guides the couple into their new life together	Maati ke Diyarawa (Clay Lamp)

Indeed, in this context, the key insight of Schechner’s spectrum, in line with Geet Gawai, is that even the most sacred ritual can include entertaining elements (e.g., music, dance, spectacles), and even pure entertainment can have transformative effects (e.g., triggering reflection, shaping opinions, inspiring art), and the same performance can also shift along the continuum of efficacy and entertainment depending on the context. This analytical approach also reveals that what might appear as contradictions or compromises can actually be sophisticated adaptations that allow cultural practices to thrive in changing contexts- exactly what Schechner’s theory helps us appreciate about performance as a fundamental human capacity for both transformation and delight.

Therefore, the strength of Geet Gawai as a living tradition may lie precisely in its ability to skilfully braid devotional and spiritual purpose with artistic pleasure, cultural preservation with creative innovation, and ritual significance with social enjoyment.

Liminality and Social Drama: The Intricate Realm of Geet Gawai

Schechner's concept of "liminality", derived from the renowned anthropologist Victor Turner's ideas, provides an additional perspective on understanding the Mauritian Geet Gawai. "liminality", complemented by another significant concept put forth by Turner (1982) – "social drama", particularly assists in comprehending Geet Gawai's complexity and transformative power in Mauritius, where the performance establishes a zone separate from everyday life. In this liminal zone, the performers exist in a transitional "threshold space", "betwixt and between" (Schechner, 2003, 2020) established social structures, where the boundaries of normal social interactions, identities and hierarchies related to caste, class, age, status, and authority are temporarily set aside or dissolved and where participants enter a state of heightened collective consciousness and emotional engagement. The mundane concerns of daily life recede, replaced by a focus on the ritual, the sacredness of the occasion, and the communal celebration of the shared happiness.

Since Geet Gawai unfolds within a ritual-entertainment continuum in a pre-wedding event, the ritual acts dominate the opening, creating a sacred frame. Subsequently, the celebratory part, featuring lively singing, dancing, playful teasing, fun, and entertainment, takes over, particularly during the Jhoomar segment of Geet Gawai. This social looseness creates a 'liminal space' (a safe threshold) and allows for the temporary suspension of normal social restrictions and formalities. Within such liminal zones, community hierarchies are often temporarily inverted, with experienced and skilled singers, dancers and musicians gaining prestige regardless of caste or class background.

The word 'Jhoomar' apparently comes from the Hindi word 'Jhoomna', which means swaying joyfully in Hindi (Dawosing, 2020b), and it also bears resemblance to the Rajasthan 'Ghoomar', where the ladies dance in a circular motion (Boodhoo, 1993, 2023a; Dawosing, 2020a). The Jhoomar marks the climax of the evening's singing session, which may last even several hours, prominently showcasing the event's theatrical elements. It involves younger women teasing elders, and vice versa, through songs featuring teasing, hilarious, witty metaphors, erotic lyrics, social satire, marital advice, exaggerated gestures, playful interactions, mockery, communal dancing, and audience engagement. Often, some lady performers even disguise themselves as men wearing shirts, trousers, and men's hats and enact mock marriage rituals (Boodhoo, 2023a) to heighten the theatrical and entertaining aspects of the performances. In the past few years, even male performers have been dressing as women in sarees and performing hilarious, fun-packed dance dramas during Geet Gawai, adding a different layer of entertainment to the performance; however, at times, this has been observed to be of an exaggerated extent (Dawosing, 2020a, 2020b).

Turner's "social drama" posits that ritual performances unfold through four phases- breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration - during which social roles become malleable. The liminal zone created by the ceremonial space allows participants to experiment with alternative identities. In this context, the Jhoomar performance becomes a microcosm of social drama, in which the breach of everyday roles enables fluid identity shifts essential to communal catharsis and reintegration. Here, the enactment of community tensions fluidly surfaces through the theatrical performance of the songs. Themes like tensions between *saas* (mother-in-law) and *bahu* (daughter-in-law), clashes with *nanad* and *gotni* (sisters-in-law), expectations placed on brides, issues in couple life, gender expectations, and other concerns are performed safely within the licensed, playful frame of the Jhoomar. This allows for the release of repressed emotions, commentary, and the subtle negotiation of social realities without breaking the communal harmony. Thus, the "liminal space" for "social drama" created by tradition allows performers to delicately and jokingly address important social problems and question social structures through performance. Furthermore, the physical, informal settings of these performances, in private homes or wedding halls, basically among families and friends, usually enhance this sense of liminality, breaking down formal barriers and fostering a communal experience.

Findings from interviews reveal two well-known Jhoomar songs with distinctive playful teasing lyrics popularly sung during Geet Gawai performances across Mauritius, which are: "*Jahan Bhawji Looga dhowe, huwan dewar khel kare, howe lagal saabun ke maar, aho dewar sarmo na laage...*" and "*Natak baa, Cinema baa, kekar sange*

jaibo? Jaibo Soferwa ke Saath ta tohar mooh mein Karikha lagi...” Hence, this liminal space in Geet Gawai, through lively singing, dancing, fun, merry-making, and celebration, simultaneously becomes a site for social negotiation and the transformation of collective identities and shared meanings.

Now, in the context of a wedding ceremony, Geet Gawai again marks critical transition points in the event. While other wedding activities take place, Geet Gawai attracts significant attention, creating a clear temporal and energetic bubble within the broader celebration. With its blend of ritual songs already mentioned in the segment above, it literally accompanies the bride and groom’s journey from the beginning of the event, blesses the union, and even serves as a protective ritual shield until the end of the event. Indeed, the liminal space created by the Geet Gawai performances facilitates the symbolic shift from one social status (single) to another (married) for both the bride and groom.

Therefore, one can reasonably infer that Geet Gawai, in close alignment with Schechner’s view of ‘liminality’, transports participants into a “second reality” (Schechner, 2003), allowing Indo-Mauritian communities to reaffirm their collective identity, temporarily dissolve everyday economic or social pressures, and experience a profound sense of unity beyond hierarchy. This process reinforces intergenerational transmission, communal ownership of tradition, and the resilience of cultural memory. In fact, the heightened emotional resonance allows for catharsis and communal bonding that might not occur in ordinary interactions. Additionally, this liminal space emphasises that Geet Gawai’s strength lies in its performative resilience and in its sophisticated intertwining of sacred purpose and social pleasure.

Audience Participation and Co-creation

Schechner contends that performance is a collaborative process involving not just the artists but also audiences and contexts that influence its meaning and outcomes, in which “the audience is as much a performer as the actors” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). According to him, the blurred boundaries between performers and audiences foster what he terms “active spectatorship” (Schechner, 2003, 2020). He emphasises that the audience’s participatory structure plays a significant role in constructing and shaping meanings during performances, through their contributions as co-creators rather than passively receiving them as spectators.

In the Mauritian Geet Gawai, this dynamic is particularly evident because a key element of the genre is its intricate participatory nature, where family members and the audience are deliberately invited by the performers to join in. Indeed, Geet Gawai thrives on immediacy, interaction, participants’ responsiveness, their feedback, and the collective energy generated during the event. The audience sings refrains and the hook lines of the songs, claps, dances, provides percussion, engages emotionally with the performance, and responds vocally with laughter, at times with tears, cheers, shouts, or even verbal interjections, such as expressing witty, humorous comments, spontaneously improvised phrases or lines added to the lyrics, and also accompanying the dancers with their spontaneous, innovative, and often hilarious dance moves. As a result, they become active participants in the event. Currently, the audience also frequently records videos or livestreams their favourite Geet Gawai performances on social media, sharing their approval, appreciation, or disapproval. Therefore, the presence of the audience, both onsite and online, often plays a significant role in shaping the performances. Findings from interviews also highlight that, in Geet Gawai specifically, where audience participation is prominent, practitioners often spontaneously tailor their delivery to audience responses, adjusting their vocal tone, *laya* (speed), lyrics, and even their styles of singing and dancing to sustain engagement.

According to an interview with custodian *Geetharine*, Mrs Tatawantee Ramdany explains that the meaningful goals of Geet Gawai—such as invoking blessings for a successful marriage, ensuring fertility, and transmitting social norms are not achieved through austere didacticism but are seamlessly woven into the engaging, competitive, and joyful practice of collective singing, including both performers and audiences. The tradition’s transformative power is thus dependent on its entertainment value as well, ensuring community participation and intergenerational transmission. Thus, once again, underscoring the significance of audience engagement.

Role Playing and Identity Shifts

In this context, it is appropriate to relate to another important dimension of Performance Theory - the phenomenon of fluid “role playing” during performance. This concept finds robust theoretical grounding in

Victor Turner's (1982) "social drama" and Erving Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical analysis. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective complements Turner by conceptualising social life as theatre, in which individuals perform roles on specific "stages" and behave differently "frontstage" and "backstage". For instance, during the Jhoomar segment, the ceremonial space serves as a ritual stage where practitioners and audiences dynamically negotiate multiple identities by consciously shifting between roles, at the requirement of different performative competencies and social masks. Ethnographic observation reveals this fluidity in practice. For example, a *Geetharine* singing the Jhoomar refrain at one moment might, at another instance, seamlessly transition into an energetic dancer when the rhythm intensifies, later becoming an audience member clapping hands rhythmically, then perhaps taking up the Dholak or Lota and spoon as a confident musician. These shifts are not haphazard; rather, they are choreographed through communal cues- musical changes, spatial movements, lyrical content, and performers' forte in skills; hence creating a collective improvisation where individual agency operates within shared ceremonial structure. Similarly, this role-playing is also evident among the audience, where a spectator, at different points in time, navigates roles as an audience member, singer, dancer, musician, or actor in the theatrical dance drama. This role multiplicity demonstrates Goffman's (1956) principle that individuals maintain 'multiple selves', strategically deploying different personas according to contextual demands.

Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce that in the Mauritian context, the collaborative participation, the co-creation, the fluid role playing and the blurring of boundaries between performers and audiences are what truly animate the Geet Gawai performance, transforming it from a mere spectacle into an interactive social event, a shared experience rather than a one-way transmission. The meaning that emerges collectively, shaped by mood, occasion, and social composition, and the energy generated by this collective involvement, are the hallmarks of Geet Gawai.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Richard Schechner's Performance Theory provides a profound and nuanced analytical framework for understanding the Mauritian Geet Gawai tradition, moving beyond socio-cultural and ethnographic perspectives to dissect its multifaceted nature and emphasise its powerful performative characteristics. By analysing the phenomenon as "restored behaviour," the study illuminates how Geet Gawai functions as a conscious, repeatable performance of diasporic identity, in which specific lyrics, songs, gestures, song sequences, and dance are not spontaneous inventions but deliberate re-enactments of a cultural repertoire carried from the Bhojpuri homeland. The efficacy- entertainment braid helps explain how traditions adapt and survive by balancing preservation (efficacy- the core meanings) with relevance (entertainment), and Schechner's theory advocates that the ritual's transformation into a "visual spectacle" is not necessarily a dilution but rather a recontextualisation that allows traditional practices to survive and thrive in the complex contemporary society. The efficacy remains, but is wrapped in entertainment value that ensures its continued relevance and appeal.

Through the lens of "liminality," in tandem with "social drama", the study maps Geet Gawai's progression from the structured formality of rituals to the ludic and often cathartic social drama of the Jhoomar, clarifying how Geet Gawai creates a potent liminal space. Within this space, rigid social structures can be both affirmed and gently questioned, allowing for cultural continuity and subtle negotiation to coexist. Finally, the concept of "participation" illuminates how Geet Gawai is a co-created cultural practice, shaped by the collaborative efforts of performers and audiences alike through intricate "role playing", fostering intergenerational transmission and evolution through adaptation within its social environment; hence, showing that the concepts' mechanism is one of dynamic equilibrium. The stability provided by restored behaviour ensures continuity of identity, while the flexibility of the liminal zone and audience participation ensure contemporary relevance and engagement.

This paper thus argues that Geet Gawai is not a static cultural artefact preserved for heritage's sake or folk music for entertainment, but a living performative engine - dynamic, embodied, interactive, context-dependent and imbued with contemporary meaning, that sustains ritual meaning, community cohesion, cultural continuity and diasporic identity. Over time, it changes just enough to remain engaging while maintaining its core symbolic functions. In doing so, it demonstrates how intangible cultural heritage truly lives not in museums or documents alone, but in the vibrant, repeated, continuously shaped, and adaptive performances of a community.

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