Bhojpuri song traditions propagated by Indian slaves becomes UNESCO heritage

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris. (File | AFP)

BENGALURU: The descendants of Girmityas, besides renewing ties with the country of their ancestors India, are also working towards preserving their culture and heritage. Geet Gawai, a traditional music and dance of Bhojpuri-speaking communities in Mauritius found its way to UNESCO list of ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’.

The positive news for the descendants of the indentured labourers (now known has Girmitya), who were shipped from India by Britishers to work in Sugarcane farms in Mauritius has taken nearly two centuries to come by. It was 180 years after the first immigrants from the Bhojpuri belt of India set foot on ‘Apravasi Ghat’ in Mauritius that the heritage has found international recognition.

“The first batch of 36 indentured Indian labourers who arrived at Port Louis in 1834 were from Bihar, the Bhojpuri speaking belt. The number of Girmityiyas grew and today a whopping 54 per cent of the Indian Diaspora in Mauritius speaks Bhojpuri,” Chairperson of Mauritius Bhojpuri Speaking Union Sarita Boodhoo told the New Indian Express.

Geet-Gawai is part of pre-wedding ceremony and combines rituals, prayer, songs, music and dance through which their honour Hindu Gods and Goddesses. It is seen as an expression of the collective identity of the Girmityyas on the island, who have been struggling to preserve their languages; and is passed on within families, by community centres and academies.

As Geet Gawai was on the brink of extinction, the elders of the community, said Boodhoo, tried to "institutionalize" the oral traditions. “Soon the Bhojpuri Institute became an andolan and we started giving the singers, referred to as Geetharines, more importance. The Geetharines started performing in public and we invited the country's elite, especially those from other ethnic groups, to come and attend Geet Gawai sessions,” Boodhoo said elaborating the process, how the tradition was preserved.

The Girmityyas have a mixed heritage with Bhojpuri, Tamil, Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi being the languages of their forefathers. Mauritius has sought help from India in reviving these languages. Mauritian Art and Cultural Minister Prithivrajsing Roopun said that chairs were being set up in Universities and steps are being taken to impart the knowledge of language to the Girmityyas.

Mauritius has UNESCO two tangible heritage sites – Apravasi Ghat and le Morne Cultural landscape. While Apravasi Ghat has been the transit point for the Indian slaves indentured by the colonialists, le Morne Cultural Landscape represents slaves’ fight for freedom, their suffering and sacrifice as it was here in the inaccessible cliffs and isolated mountains the runaway slaves used to get shelter.