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# **Provincialising Bollywood: Bhojpuri Cinema and the Vernacularisation of North Indian Media**

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# Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the explosive growth of Bhojpuri cinema alongside the vernacularisation of north Indian media in the last decade. As these developments take place under the shadow of Bollywood, the thesis also studies the aesthetic, political, and infrastructural nature of the relationship between vernacular media industries – Bhojpuri in particular – and Bollywood. The thesis then argues that Bhojpuri cinema, even as it provincialises Bollywood, aspires to sit *beside* it instead of *displacing* it. The outrightly confrontational readings notwithstanding, the thesis grapples with the ways in which the vernacular departs from its corresponding cosmopolitan form and how it negotiates cultural representation as an industry.

The two chapters in Part I provide a narrative account of the discourses and media-texts that saturate the Bhojpuri public sphere. The prevailing discourses and the dominant texts, the thesis argues, resonate with each other, but also delimit the destiny of Bhojpuri film and media. The tug of war between the cultural and economic valuations of the Bhojpuri commodity, as between enchantment and discontent with its representative prowess, as also between ‘traditional’ values and reformist ‘modernity’, leaves us within an uncomfortable zone. The thesis shows how aspirations to male stardom consolidate this territory and become the logic by which the industry output keeps growing, in spite of a failing media economy.

Each of the three chapters in Part II traces the historical trajectory of language, gendered use of public space, and piracy, respectively. In this part, the thesis establishes the analytical provenance for the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema in particular, and vernacular media in general. While Bhojpuri media allows Bhojpuri to seek its autonomy from state-supported Hindi, it also occupied the fringe economy of rundown theatres as Bollywood sought to move towards the multiplexes. If the advent of audiocassettes led to the emergence of Bhojpuri media *sanskar*, the availability of the single-screen economy after the arrival of multiplexes cleared the space for the theatrical exhibition of Bhojpuri cinema. The suboptimal transactions of counterfeit media commodities, on the other hand, regulate the legal counterpart and widen the net of distribution beyond the film theatre. I argue that the suboptimal practices are embedded within the unstable meanwhile. As an occupant of this meanwhile temporality, Bhojpuri film and media, whether in rundown theatres or on cheap mobile phones, grow via contingent and strategic coalitions.

This thesis, then, argues that cinema as a form makes it possible for Bhojpuri speaking society to confront, and reconcile with, its own corporeality – the aural and visual footprints, the discursive and ideological blind spots, and the aspiration to break free. On account of the media economy and its power to ratify a new order of hierarchy via celebrity, Bhojpuri media threatens to transform the social order, yet remains open to the possibility of manipulation by which the old order could rechristen itself as new.

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# Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Akshaya Kumar

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis is about Bhojpuri cinema, the vernacular cinema with the most visible presence across India in the last decade. Bhojpuri, here, is primarily a reference to the language, but also to the region where it is spoken. The language takes its name after the Bhojpur region – now an administrative unit in western Bihar – but is spoken in a much wider geographical area around it. Bhojpuri is considered by many to be one of the many dialects of Hindi, the language spoken by nearly forty per cent of north India. In the Census of India, Bhojpuri is still categorised as a ‘mother tongue’; however, Bhojpuri cinema, like other regional cinemas of India, has an autonomous existence and a very significant number of Bhojpuri films are made every year. The Bhojpuri language is spoken in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and western part of the state of Bihar, apart from some parts of Jharkhand<sup>1</sup>. But more importantly, through a very high number of working class migrants who work across the country as construction labourers, porters, rickshaw-wallahs and taxi drivers, Bhojpuri finds its presence much more widely. This also means that the hierarchical relationship between Hindi and Bhojpuri – mutually intelligible in a limited capacity – is mirrored by the relationship across the audiences who patronise respective language cinemas<sup>2</sup>. What complicates this further is that Bhojpuri cinema finds almost no favours with the female audience. While women strictly avoid the theatrical exhibition of Bhojpuri films, the films are also considered indecent or too vulgar for the family audience otherwise. Therefore, the appeal of Bhojpuri cinema may cut across distributive technologies such as video compact disks, digital video-disks (VCDs/DVDs), and cheap mobile phones, yet they do not quite cross the gender barrier.

Why is Bhojpuri cinema an important research subject? It is because it sits on the cusp of multiple fault lines of the social universe – language, gender, class and technology to name the most significant. The hierarchies embedded within each of these structures create a space and orientation of rebellion – a hint of protest without any specific sense of direction. Together, they have enabled a phenomenon that needs to be investigated to assess the

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<sup>1</sup> See the Linguistic map of South Asia at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00maplinks/overview/languages/himal1992max.jpg> (accessed 1 April, 2015). Particularly, the Bhojpuri speaking region situated between Awadhi and Maithi speaking regions of north India.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 4 provides a detailed account of the relationship between Hindi and Bhojpuri. However, it may be added here that a reference to standard textbook Hindi endorsed by the Indian state is, historically speaking, derived from Khari Boli of western UP.

destiny of Bhojpuri media and society. But the historical progression out of which it emerges also needs to be elaborated in relation to its various antecedents. The bulk of attention in this thesis is given to the ‘third phase’ (2004 onwards) of Bhojpuri cinema, following the periodisation suggested by Avijit Ghosh (2010). The history of Bhojpuri cinema however, goes as far back as 1963. Through the first two phases, film production lost steam after a few years, before attention was reverted to it. But the phase that began in 2004 has not merely been the most ‘visible’, it has also defied the earlier two phases of Bhojpuri cinema. Therefore, the terms on which the revival and reconfiguration took place also demand an inquiry.

Bhojpuri cinema also links the Hindi film industry with the regional and sub-regional industries. Even as most of the regional cinemas of the north have had a long but intermittent history in the shadow of Hindi cinema, the arrival of multiplexes since 1997 reoriented the Hindi film economy, further aided by the entry of corporate capital. It is in this phase that several vernacular cinemas gradually began to flourish via the digital technology, low-budget films and targeted language-specific audience. Of these, only Bhojpuri cinema has had a substantial theatrical presence; for nearly six years at least, it completely took over the infrastructure of the Hindi film industry within the Bhojpuri speaking region (BSR). There is a need, therefore, to investigate the contestations staged by the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema. The earliest of challenges for Hindi cinema were to narratively consolidate an audience segregated by a long list of social indices. The emergence of Bhojpuri cinema via a wave of vernacularisation across north India – Chhatisgarhi, Jharkhandi, Garhwali, Haryanavi, Marwari, Laddakhi, Oriya, Santhali and Khari boli to only name a few – alerts us to the formation of much smaller units of language-specific publics.

It is to engage with these complexities that I wish to research Bhojpuri cinema. However, let me share upfront my own relationship with the BSR, the language and the films. While growing up, my father, a public servant with the UP state department of Health, was posted in Ballia, a district in eastern UP. During those five years, I grew up among Bhojpuri speakers and became acquainted with its rhythms and rhetoric. However, I went to schools where I was taught the standard textbook Hindi, of which Bhojpuri was considered a *ganwai* (rural) variant. While I understood Bhojpuri, I did not speak it and saw no need to learn it as a child as there was smooth mutual intelligibility between the two languages. My return to Bhojpuri came nearly two decades later, when as a student at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, I responded to the presence of Bhojpuri cinema in

half-torn film posters on pillars and walls across the cities I frequented the most – Lucknow and Delhi. In the last four years, starting early 2011, I have studied Bhojpuri films and music to construct a rich descriptive and analytical account – what comprises this media industry, why it thrives where it does, what we can infer from its emergence, and from the aspirations it produces in the realm of narrative, audio-visual address and beyond.

We may also note in the emergence of Bhojpuri media a delayed fragmentation of the national promise. While the most significant historical provenance for the nation we recognise as India today came from the route of colonial processes, the forging together of Indian polity through a shared constitution took extraordinary efforts. To identify three of the most significant – the partition in 1947, the controversial integration of numerous princely states ending in the formation of the republic in 1950, and the linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956 – meant that the Indian polity did not emerge very smoothly. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his party – Indian National Congress – were prominent in the terms of consolidation that produced the modern Indian nation-state. Yet, early cracks had emerged by the 1970s, when regional political parties had become dominant in many states. Under the Prime Ministership of Indira Gandhi, political insecurity was on the rise. Paul Brass assesses her rule as ‘highly personalized and centralized’ which ‘involved unprecedented assertions of executive power in the Indian political system’ (1994: 40). He argues that ‘Gandhi’s particular brand of leadership transformed the character of center-state governmental relations... Gandhi removed every chief minister who had an independent base in a state and replaced each with chief ministers who, lacking an independent base, were completely loyal to her (ibid.). Her political interventions were crucial in not letting different regions of India develop their political autonomy to any significant end (see Kaviraj 1986). As she started television broadcasting on the state-owned *Doordarshan*, the pedagogic impulse was absorbed by the Hindi and English programming. This mode of address stayed intact till the mid-1990s for the most of Indians.

However, since the 1980s, the urban middle class could circumvent the statist monopoly via certain small-scale illegal cable television networks. They broadcasted programming drawn from handmade productions as well as commercially pirated and foreign-sourced videocassettes (Kohli-Khandekar 2006: 68-70, Athique 2012: 54). This unofficial television culture was formalised by satellite television later in the 1990s and connected the metropolitan centres to global media geography. Simultaneously, the Hindi language ‘newspaper revolution’ across north India took place after the liberalisation of the Indian

economy (Jeffrey 2000). By the late 1990s, foreign direct investment (FDI) in media economy started the massive expansion of satellite television, which then made rapid inroads into the regional and sub-regional media market. The 1990s also witnessed a distinct rise of the regional parties and coalitional politics. It led to the most unstable and short-lived coalition governments throughout the decade; alliances across regional parties with no common agenda or vision ran the show in New Delhi. This, however, was also the time during which most Indian metropolises began attracting large capital investment leading to rapid changes in the metropolitan architecture. The simultaneous rise of global capital investment, heavy-duty migration, urban reconfiguration and the rise of the new middle class with high dispensable incomes, made it appear as if the regions were soon to liquidate their cultural autonomy. Instead, through the race for FDI and major national projects, the regions emerged as intensely competing units. The deregulation of television also opened the way for an explosion of networks all across the country in regional languages, led by Hindi in north India. This creation of regional markets set in motion new local consolidations of media and politics (Athique 2012: 58-63). The regional belongings instead of being liquidated, have intensified further via an often-regionalist mode of address. The vernacular languages of north India, however, have not found many favours on television. Their emergent media footprint runs parallel to the regional languages whose cultural autonomy overlaps with the political autonomy of the region, represented by states. Bhojpuri cinema's rise also needs to be investigated within this shift towards localisms, via different media addressing different demographics. Vital here is the possibility of being able to articulate one's place in the world via the technologies available for the self-fashioning of one's affective community. This study grapples with the *place* of Bhojpuri media industry: the co-ordinates lying at the intersection of the affective and material belonging they resonate with. In other words, this is an attempt to locate the province where the Bhojpuri self is constituted via a dialogue with its desirable others.

In his call to provincialise the idea of Europe, Dipesh Chakrabarty urges us to decentre the temporality that follows the European order (2000). Chakrabarty challenges the idea of European history and thought, both of which are disseminated and imbibed across places, particularly in postcolonial contexts. This relation between historical time and ideas, as reflected across postcolonial historiography, is the terrain he invites us to reconfigure by provincialising – connecting the provinces to their own histories and ideas. The place of contemporary Bhojpuri cinema too, is not merely an autonomous sphere of cultural exploration but emerges in response to the hegemonic idea and history of Bollywood. With its relatively marginal and modest claims, Bhojpuri cinema too struggles to locate itself

within the history and geography of Indian cinema. I attend to its various continuities and departures, searching for the intersection of historical time with other temporalities that deliver the contemporary moment. Indeed, I could have worked with Bhojpuri cinema alone, analysing its texts and tracing its historical trajectory; but I do not believe it sufficient to do so. My position here is informed by Valentina Vitali who argues that the ‘point of retracing how specific cinematic forms developed out of the apparatus's encounter with preexisting cultural practices is, in the end, to understand how, exactly, films function as terrains in which the push and pull of history are played out... A film is always simultaneously a cluster of forms arranged according to cultural categories and a commodity that is produced and circulates within economic circuits’ (2010: 141). She further adds,

The reconceptualization of “context” as a force field within which historically specific, contradictory forces are at work enables us to examine a film as an unstable object, the forms of which are contended over by such forces. Far from being “outside,” these forces are the very determinants which orchestrate the functioning of the film’s forms as they struggle to ascribe them semantic value. The analysis of a film’s modes of address remains the best way to examine those movements, provided that the textual analysis is informed by knowledge of the historically specific forces at work in the film (ibid.: 144).

Vitali alerts us against the ‘conceptualization of a national formation as homogeneous and the idea that texts and contexts are discrete spheres (though they may “reflect” each other)’ (146), and invites us to consider more fundamental questions regarding the forms modernisation takes in terms of a public sphere, the distinctions between identity and subjectivity, and the ways in which subjectivities are shaped by discursive or narrative models. Richard Maltby, introducing New Cinema History, also argues

From the perspective of historical geography, social history, economics, anthropology or population studies, the observation that cinemas are sites of social and cultural significance has as much to do with the patterns of employment, urban development, transport systems and leisure practices that shape cinema’s global diffusion, as it does with what happens in the evanescent encounter between an individual audience member and a film print... New cinema history offers an account that complements and is informed by many aspects of film history, particularly by investigations of global conditions of production, of technical innovation and craft and of the multiple and interconnected organisational cultures that characterise the film production industry. To these it adds knowledge of the historical operations of distribution and exhibition businesses worldwide, and of ways in which these interconnected networks of global corporate interests, local franchises and other small businesses have together managed the flow of cinema product around the world’s theatres and non-theatrical venues (2011: 8-9).

The cultural, economic, historical and aesthetic registers have to be fused together in a narrative to signify the Indian film history as a force field within which Bhojpuri cinema interacts with time, place and the subject. There is no stable theory of subject that we can propound here; only contradictory processes of subjectivation. The state, the market and various cultural orders remain unstable anchors within a heady cacophony of new horizons as well as threats of dislocation from attributes with which the subject may or may not have a cognitive belonging. It may be asked, however, why it is important to situate the cinema as a regime of subjectivation. As an arbiter between the modern self and the realm of the symbolic, as a province in itself, and as a capital-intensive technological form, the media has rapidly expanded through portable technological formats as well as pirate modernities (Sundaram 2010) cutting across social hierarchies. Making sense of this highly unregulated and much heightened media activity, and finding the place of Bhojpuri cinema in it, is the focus of my research. My hypothesis is that the political, linguistic, spatial, gendered and mediated subjectivities closely interact in a complex unregulated province. My attempt in this study is to draw out the meaning, impact and wider implications of Bhojpuri cinema from that plane of interaction. This is indeed congruous with what Annette Kuhn writes in *Screen's* Anniversary issue, recounting the journal's role in screen theorising:

What is theorizing for? Basically, theorizing ought to equip us with tools for thinking about, understanding and explaining the objects with which a body of knowledge concerns itself. Ideally, theorizing should also take on board any shifts or changes in those objects. In screen studies, what we are seeking to explain or understand, very broadly speaking, are the moving image screen or screens, what is displayed on these screens, and the nature of our encounter with them. In thinking about these things, we may focus variously on the screen itself, on our mental processes, on our bodies, or on the heterogeneous 'surround'... The current conventional wisdom in screen studies has it that today's rapidly changing technologies of moving image delivery and sites and modes of consumption of moving image screens must entail a shift in our disciplinary objects. While a certain scepticism on the latter point is advisable, it is certainly the case that in any field of knowledge disciplinary objects are never fixed for all time. If the object changes, then, what happens to the theorizing? To what extent, per contra, might the activity of theorizing alter or reframe a discipline's objects? In screen studies, to what extent do shifts in the screenscape enjoin us to devise new theoretical frameworks, force us to ask new questions of old ones, or even invent new ways of theorizing? (2009: 5-6)

My research questions, therefore, would be the following. First, must we concede that Bhojpuri cinema and music thrives on vulgarity and represents nothing short of an outright vulgar public sphere? Second, is the relation between Bhojpuri cinema and Hindi cinema analogous to, even a mirror image of, that between Bhojpuri and Hindi? Even if Bhojpuri



cinema exceeds its linguistic subordinacy, to what extent, historically and otherwise, does it operate in the shadow of the politics of language in north-India? Third, as a cinema that has found no presence in the multiplexes, and has indeed emerged in response to their arrival, what can the reorganisation of the exhibition sector in the post-multiplex economy tell us about Bhojpuri cinema? Fourth, as a film industry that is entirely indifferent to the female audience, Bhojpuri cinema sits within a long lineage of Indian films, which never found any favours with women. What can this alert us to, and what strand of film history must we then situate Bhojpuri cinema within? Fifth, what is the role of VCDs/DVDs and pirate transactions in the growth of Bhojpuri media outside mainstream film distribution? By aggregating answers to these questions, I would like to assess what really is, if anything, Bhojpuri about Bhojpuri media.

## Methodology and Literature Review

Apart from the literature available within film history and theory, particularly on Indian cinema, I need to consider the scholarship on the development of language-based public spheres, the arrival of the multiplex economy, and ethnographic accounts of contemporary media. A first-hand ethnographic account of the Bhojpuri media industry would also be necessary. Even though most films are available in the VCD/DVD format and on *Youtube*, the bulk of industrial activity remains unreported. In spite of some news reports available on certain websites, a misleading unevenness remains. In such a scenario, researching the industry and its internal dynamics makes it imperative that ethnographic research is conducted to get a sense of ‘how things work’ on the ground. Not only that, given that this cultural channel is the subject of intense disdain, we need a closer examination of the discursive rationales – ‘things people say’ and why – that are mobilised to substantiate subjective positions. These rationales and the purchase they command within the public sphere play a crucial generative role towards the cultural and narrative configuration of the Bhojpuri media, and also towards the shaping of the public sphere that Bhojpuri media co-constitutes.

My attempt here is to generate a qualitative sense of the underpinnings of the Bhojpuri film and media industry. It may be added however that by ‘industry’ I only mean the broad confines of a vastly unregulated and diverse set of practices that are still marked by certain key tendencies. Like other profit-oriented ventures, the commerce of distribution plays a dominant role in the relative coherence that emerges across the industrial output and renders it a distinctive identity. Within media industries, these tendencies – of narrative

packaging, star iconography, genre mixing, publicity material, audiovisual practices etc. – mark the ideological, discursive, economic and political boundaries of the force-field that could be identified as an industry. By engaging with the causations as to why dubious information is generated and circulated within, and how, I could grapple with the key gaps that would escape conventional film analysis. To convey the gap through a simple example: if the audience turnout has been dwindling, why and how do they continue to distribute and theatrically release 60-odd films every year? The media reports would suggest that in the last five years, Bhojpuri film industry has produced very few commercially successful films. An alert ethnography would help assess how the films are seen and received in the theatres of urban and rural Bihar, Delhi and Mumbai. The variance of the reception practices, as distinct from the multiplex audience, needs to be established. The materiality of habitation, including violation of ‘civil’ behaviour, needs to be observed within the theatres. How the theatre staff treats the audience, and at what point interruptions become productive towards the texture of reception, are things to be considered via participation. Instead of direct interrogation in the form of interviews and surveys, I privilege participant observation. My method is consistent with the interpretative social sciences: long term ethnographic observation at particular sites (cinema halls), loosely structured, informal interviewing (i.e. chatting over a cup of tea) as well as using artefacts (newspapers, magazines, advertisements etc.). Conducted amidst large public gatherings, such observations aim for an analytical account of the totality that is fragmented within direct formal questions<sup>3</sup>.

While I attempt to draw out the aggregated universe that contains conflicting viewpoints embedded within social hierarchies and varied vantage points, this aggregated universe is not directly inhabited by those who traverse different quarters of it. The testimonies and claims, judgements and facts, offered by the key respondents often do not account for ‘others’, except in a distorted way. We cannot depend on finding unadulterated factual accounts. The messy hierarchies that segregate individuals and communities also segregate and consolidate their vantage points. The task I believe is not to seek absolutely truthful and reliable accounts – whether quantitative or qualitative – but to critically engage with the entire spectrum of positions and perceptions on offer, so we could aggregate the horizons accessible only to interpretative labour. Methodologically, the approach more popular in the humanities side of Film Studies has been textual analysis. Yet, other

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<sup>3</sup> This ethnographic work was conducted in perfect agreement with the ethical practices suggested by The Ethics Committee of the College of Arts, University of Glasgow, UK. Consent forms have been signed by all the interviewees identified in this thesis.

approaches have also alerted us to variously rich possibilities, to the extent that some approaches have become nearly autonomous sub-disciplines studying the cinematic enterprise. My approach in this study shall draw significantly upon two of those – media anthropology and media industries. Three stellar texts of media anthropology key to this study are: Tejaswini Ganti's *Producing Bollywood* (2012) – a long term ethnography of the transformation of 'Bombay Cinema' into Bollywood – Brian Larkin's *Signal and Noise* (2008) – a ground breaking history and ethnography of media infrastructure and urban culture in Nigeria – and Lotte Hoek's *Cut-Pieces* (2013) – a 360 degree ethnography of Bangladeshi action films carrying sexually explicit cut-pieces.

Media Anthropology provides empirically-grounded theoretical perspectives on the media (Askew and Wilk 2002), and attempts to integrate the study of mass media into our analyses of the 'total social fact' of modern life (Spitulnik 1993: 293). But as Hoek reminds us, we also need to be attentive to examining the 'complexity of their processes of mediation' without resorting to technological determinism (2013: 7). By staying conceptually open to the media, we stand to learn how they are productive of new forms of cultural life (Axel 2005). More crucially for Film Studies, she argues that 'expanding horizontally across the different regions... suggests that the diversity... lies within different languages and local histories of production and consumption. What such an approach misses is the significant *vertical* heterogeneity of this field, across hierarchies of value and quality. The significant differences are not necessarily distributed only horizontally across geographic space and language; they may also expand vertically, across hierarchies of production value and practices of consumption' (2013: 9). Hoek invites us to not be 'gentrified' or 'bollywoodized' ourselves but pay attention to the lesser texts and practices that mark the field of study 'cracking open the category of "popular" cinema' (ibid.). While acknowledging that Film Studies asks different questions than Media Anthropology does, she points out that it has 'its eyes often fixed on *the* screen rather than a multiplicity of empirical screens and all the extraordinarily less than ideal practices around them' (11).

For a media industries approach, I draw upon *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method* (2009) by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, who argue that Film and Television Studies have offered industry analysis 'far more than merely an object of study or a disciplinary residence from which to work'; in fact, they have 'produced, developed, taught, and promoted a great deal of the research and work on media industries in the academy' (10). Even if the central site of analysis for Film Studies has remained the text, 'many foundational studies have examined the intersection between industrial/economic

factors and *style*...A defining study for film historiography at large and media industry studies in particular was Allen and Gomery's 1985 book, *Film History: Theory and Practice*. This book proposed an interdisciplinary approach to studying the medium, offering a model that encouraged scholars to integrate textual analysis with sociocultural, technological, and industrial/economic analysis of films' (ibid.). Additionally, the media industries approach, as Hilmes (2009) argues, 'points directly to those aspects of cultural production in the twentieth century and beyond that most trouble the humanities-oriented categories of coherence and analysis so central to our understanding of culture itself: the author, the text, the reader' (21).

The very concept of *industry* 'implies the coming together of a host of interests and efforts around the production of goods or services; it also indicates commercial purposes, meaning the distribution of goods or services in a marketplace for accumulation of profit, though this is sometimes more figurative than literal. In Media Studies, to nominate the industry as our focus of study indicates a concern for the creative forces of production behind the range of communicative texts and objects that comprise our field of analysis, a place held in more traditional humanistic studies by the author' (ibid.: 22). One of the paradigmatic questions to linger, then, is: *what is the media object?* Hilmes adds that

[the objects] we have designated as technologically determined separate spheres always have converged, and in fact it is academic paradigms that have kept them separate far longer than any logics of production or industrial framework could justify. Further, the separation of these forms of mediated expression from their counterparts in "non-industrialized" spheres such as literature, drama, performance, and documentary remains arbitrary in the extreme, the product more of hierarchical value structures than any inherent or logical distinction...The advent of digital technology just has begun to shake apart the structures and distinctions with which we have become comfortable, requiring a rethinking of our approach to the object of study as well as our historiographic methods (27-28) [emphasis added].

The inaugural issue of a recently-launched journal *Media Industries* is also an effort to convert what 'was once an area largely characterised by historical, management, quantitative, and political economic studies' into 'a burgeoning and fully articulated subfield that transcends disciplines and academic societies' and 'welcomes discursive, ethnographic, and conjunctural analysis along with investigations of labour practices, networks of production, urban and economic geography, genealogies of media policy and ownership, and the politics of difference in institutional settings and sites of circulation' (The Editorial Collective 2014). Ganti, in her article about the value of ethnography in this issue, blends the two approaches together and argues that,

Ethnography grounds the study of media in a specific time and space and offers insights into the processes, possibilities, and constraints of media production that are not apparent from close readings of media texts or analysis of macro-level data about media institutions and commercial outcomes. A focus on the processes and practices of production allows us to look beyond the instances of “success”—those films or shows that do get completed and distributed in some manner—since many films or television shows do not progress beyond a conceptualization or pilot stage, and some are abandoned halfway. Such “failures” also add to our knowledge, offering productive insights and possibilities for theorizing about cinema and other media forms. Additionally, in contexts of financial secrecy and the willful absence of record keeping, ethnography offers insights into the production process that exhortations to simply “follow the money,” i.e., to trace the broad contours of capital investment and ownership, could not achieve (2014).

Informed as I am of these methodological insights toward my own object of study, I am also confronted by an entire history of the discipline of Film Studies in India. The enterprise of cinema, as one among the dominant modern institutions, modulates audience subjectivity in relation to itself – a regime of pleasure and belonging. It offers an intimate province where new affinities could be built around sensory and vicarious pleasures. When Indian scholars ventured out to make sense of what made profound affinities between people and cinema possible, they had to account for the coarse, underdeveloped, ‘not-yet-cinema’ (Prasad 1998) inviting an obsessive investment of subaltern masses. The early result was extremely dismissive analysis labelling it an infantile and vulgar cinema. Chidananda Dasgupta (1981, 1991) and Satyajit Ray (1976) were notably embarrassed about the Hindi films, while Thomas (1985, 1995) too was not impressed with the deeply moral structure of many Bombay cinema classics. The scholarship that responded to this strand paid close attention to the distinct formal practices of Indian cinema, but also discovered the various continuities that carried over into cinema – such as Parsi theatre, photographic reproductions and Raja Ravi Varma’s paintings (A. Kapur 1993; G. Kapur 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993; Rajadhyaksha 1986, 1987, 1993; Vasudevan 1989, 1991, 1993). One of the foremost scholars to have led this shift – others being M. Madhava Prasad and Ashish Rajadhyaksha – Ravi Vasudevan sums up the emergence of the academic field of Film Studies in India as part of a broader postcolonial agenda.

This involved exploring how traditions of iconography and representation, of performance and audience cultures came together with new technologies of mechanical reproduction and new capacities to generate audiences. Subsequently, art historical and visual studies and anthropological research have demonstrated the wide range of interrelated transformations taking place in the aesthetic sphere under colonialism, challenging hermetic approaches to film history. Along with the new skills associated with the camera, it was recognized that a host of others, in visual figuration, melodic articulation, set

design, and so on, arose from a complex matrix of traditions that left their imprint on a range of media, from radio and gramophone to popular print culture and cinema (Vasudevan 2010b: 135-36).

A range of articles published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* working towards an understanding of how technologies and art forms, which arrived in India through the colonial route, were calibrated and deployed for a revised mode of address provided a fine precursor to the 'Roja debate' hosted by the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) in 1994 – considered to be the originary moment of Indian Film Studies. The many questions opened up in the debate were then rendered a substantive analytical ground by Prasad's *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998). In Prasad's narrative, political structure and cultural form communicate to stage an indirect conversation between the state and the citizens. Coherent subject position, capitalist reorganisation of the social order, cinema's reinforcement of the emancipatory project of the nation-state, and its eventual disaggregation into populist and middle class orders – all use the schematic correspondence of cinema with the state to articulate the ideology of the Hindi film culture as symptomatic of post-colonial conditions of possibility. The state and cinema, Prasad illustrates through insightful textual and analytical interpretation, enter a compromise in order to bypass the restructuring of the social relations. The state intervenes in the cinematic ensemble by soft instructive means, but in the process also makes possible the reading of figures and narrative contours betraying the political ground of their plausibility.

Among the many achievements of the book was the separation of myth from ideology. The uninterrupted mythical structure of popular imaginary – originating all the way back in *Rasa* theory and *Natyashastra* – had been the routine explanation for a 'cultural need' of the masses, also exemplifying the difference of the 'Indian psyche' (Kakar 1989; Nandy 1995, 1998). In Prasad's formulation, though, it was ideology that sustained the above rhetoric within a capitalist organisation of film, and to explain it in terms of the mythical was buying wholesale its branding strategy. Cultural production in Hindi cinema sits at a nexus between economic, ideological and political forces, he established. While other works have found it difficult to emulate the complexity of Prasad's analysis of Hindi cinema for a long time, a range of scholarship, before or after him, discovered economic, aesthetic and political anchors across the shifting terrain of the film industry, and mounted upon them the melodramatic form, mode of production, narrative contours, and fan activity (Chakravarty 1993; Vasudevan 1989, 1991, 1993, 1999; Rajadhyaksha 1993, 1998; Srinivas 2000, 2003, 2006).

Broadly, in Hindi cinema, the following phases were recognised: early cinema (the material of which is almost entirely lost), reformist nationalism of the 1950s, disenchantment and realignments of the 1970s-80s, a consumerist turn beginning in the mid-1990s, followed by the new multiplex economy. An enormous body of literature surveyed the transition from one phase to another as well as film-texts residing within these phases. Reformist state socialism, family melodramas, epic structures, Islamicate socials, vigilante disenchantment, courtesan films, apart from avant-garde and social realist responses, generated a range of writings specific to generic arrangement or cultural, political and aesthetic classification (Gopalan 2002; Mishra 2002; Viridi 2003; Bhaskar and Allen 2009). Pendakur (2003, 2012) could perhaps be singled out for his sustained interest in the trade organisation of the film industry. Accounts of social and cultural history, textual interpenetration of art forms, and political and economic landmarks shaping the Hindi film industry, thus dominated the Indian film scholarship. Lately though, transnational, global and diasporic focus has gained significant ground to map the contemporary as well as the historical outgrowth of Indian films (Eleftheriotis and Iordanova 2006; Kaur and Sinha 2005; Gopal and Moorti 2008; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008; Dudrah 2006, 2012; Gera Roy 2012).

While the pages of the *Journal of the Moving Image* (JMI) saw some of the finest theoretical research articles emerge on Indian – Tamil, Telugu and Bengali alongside Hindi – cinema, the archival research gradually published in the journal posed a new problematic: as a particular historiography informs theory, theoretical writing also consolidates and freezes the historical imagination that anchors it. In other words, theory and history, unless routinely revised and challenged in relation to each other, may collaborate to blunt the critical apparatus through mutual reinforcement. Led by the pioneering *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (1999), edited by Rajadhyaksha in collaboration with Paul Willemen, the work of Kaushik Bhaumik (2001, 2008) and Stephen Hughes (2000, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2010) – on early cinema in Bombay and Madras respectively – precipitated an historical turn that sought to establish a more nuanced understanding of film history across South Asia. This is a project now formidably supported by the new journal *Bioscope*. The collective output problematises Indian cinema's *difference* premised upon the 'postcolonial superego' (Prasad 2011) and acknowledges i) the dominance of Hollywood before the coming of sound, and ii) an overwhelming presence of fantasy and adventure films before the 1950s, but also, crucially, shows that iii) linguistic solidarities emerged only after the advent of sound, for

films travelled across boundaries far more fluidly before (Joseph 2013, Bhaumik 2011, Prasad 2011).

Also, moving away from the broader questions of film form and its aesthetic alterity, the current body of work – published in both *JMI* and *Bioscope* – is more concerned with the flows of industry personnel, themes and references across regions, generic distribution within the ‘social’, organisation of studio system, the cultural antecedents of the ‘social’, untold life stories, and absences within the archive (Vasudevan 2010). Some new work has also recounted the invisible history of women’s work (Mukherjee 2013), marginal genres like Ramsay horrors (Nair 2012), the consumerism of the 1960s (Mazumdar 2011) and the histories of the film song (Jhingan 2011, 2013). This cumulative output fuses the speculative, discursive, archival and the interpretative. It seeks to anticipate gaps within film history in India so as to generate a deeper sense of the various forces at work through time and space. Vitali’s *Hindi Action Cinema* (2008) also brings to the fore the unacknowledged prominence of action films, starting from the female stars of early cinema well into the 1970s, led by Amitabh Bachchan. The last few years have also seen a distinctly growing interest in the cinematic enterprise located in other parts of India. MK Raghvendra’s *Bipolar Identity* (2011) on Kannada language film industry, SV Srinivas’ *Megastar* (2009) and *Politics as Performance* (2013) on Telugu language film industry, and Sharmishtha Gooptu’s *Bengali Cinema* (2010) on Bengali film industry, have all charted out the histories of different language cinemas of India. My work does indeed tie up with this body of scholarship to account for yet another regional/sub-regional film industry. Yet, I would like to draw our attention to an emphatic cautionary note raised by Srinivas (2013):

Over the past few years there has been a "historical turn" in research on the Indian cinemas, including Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu. Researchers have unearthed a substantial body of fascinating archival material that allows comparisons to be made across the diverse film industries and cultures of India. We now know a great deal more about the early sound era, Indian film magazines, studio, stars, and technicians than ever before. The exceptions apart, such research – regardless of the richness of the material – tends to reconfirm what we already know about the time and place studied, as well as about categories such as nation, region, gender, and caste. There is in fact a real danger of film history emerging as a specialization within Film Studies, a second order historiography (8).

Following from Srinivas, it would be too simplistic to reduce his caution to a problem of division of labour. The vital concern is that much of this historical turn suffers from the purpose of filling the descriptive gaps instead of analytical ones. Sure enough, analytical



points may often be drawn out of the new material thus discovered. But I agree with Srinivas on his reservations about Film Studies getting saturated with the archive based compulsions of history, instead of producing knowledge that is not structurally weighed down by, even though in resonance with, the temporal progression of events. In this study, even as I draw upon a vast body of historical work, I stay away from suffocating the social event of film viewing, and ignoring the dimensions that are orthogonal to the historical progression. Films resonate with orientations and aspirations that are not entirely outside history, but often resistant to the totalitarian prowess of historical time. The province of cinema, to a limited extent, makes possible the suspension of historical time. My thesis is then an effort to not merely append to film history, but to also pay close attention to the historical geography in which cinema operates.

Before I elaborate upon what this would entail, it is important to point out that it is primarily a matter of re-orientation. In relation to the organisation of practices and affects that cut across time as well as space, history and geography only attempt to orient their own narratives in distinct ways. There is much that we can draw out from the available historical narratives by attending to the unevenness of spatial affinities and practices. A notable mention with respect to this, as well as a landmark for film scholarship in India, was the May 2003 issue of *Seminar*, which brought out an elaborately worked out problem statement of the research object (Singh 2003). Singh suggested a shift from cinema's 'conception as a purely textual object' towards a 'socially embedded set of practices'. He invited us to look at cinema 'as a form on the terrain of life, labour and language' (ibid.). In an insightful move, he asked,

Clearly, there is some indication here between locality and the everyday into which cinema enters as a space and form of public congregation. How do these relationships shift over time? How do different junctures create particular modes of reception, delineate identifiable (or imagined) "audiences" and constitutively shape notions of public culture? (ibid.)

Thinking of cinema in India as 'the crucial node of the "popular" imagination', Singh brought to the fore the concern with the ways in which people speak of and live with cinema (ibid.). SV Srinivas' large body of work (2000, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2013) has consistently assessed fan behaviour and discourse, eclectic distribution of foreign films in the Telugu speaking region, and the capacity of cinema to shape, even alter, the political existence of communities. At the centre of his analytical apparatus sits the cinema hall, the place where different regimes encounter one another and amplify the projected frequencies that discover a recursive afterlife thereafter. Ranjani Mazumdar's *Bombay Cinema* (2007)

remarkably captures the urban geography of ruins and decay, as well as the commodity space articulating itself through the advertising aesthetic. Ganti's *Producing Bollywood* (2012) renders the space of Bollywood production a sense of place by mapping it discursively within the industry. Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity* (2010) opens up admirably, the geography of circulation through Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place in Delhi, and explores the production of pirate networks in the new urban ecology, without succumbing to burden it with an easy politics. Adrian Athique's *The Multiplex in India* (2010) (written with Douglas Hill) not only locates the geography of the multiplex, but also situates it in discursive and visceral terms, and through it, the very idea of a new kind of urban leisure overwriting barren geographies. Lakshmi Srinivas (2002; 2010a; 2010b) has also narrated the diverse practices of cinemagoing within or outside the cinema hall and how the film form and practice accommodates them, even as the audience negotiate the city and its gendered vocabulary. Hoek's (2013) ethnographic account of Bangladeshi action cinema, from across the eastern border, informs us how the geographical distance is used creatively to introduce instability into standard celluloid products, something not very uncommon within ramshackle urban and semi-urban quarters of India.

The initiatives by Sarai at the Centre for Studies in Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, archive a number of research projects about subterranean and material trajectories of film personnel, filmic sites and film data. They re-map the cultural geography of Indian cinema by reconfiguring the units of assessment, by making space for narratives and practices that often operated below the journalistic or academic radar. Based on the ethnographic research the *Public and Private Histories of the Present* (PPHP) archive exceeds the mandate of the conventional archive and captures the locally distinctive characters that are geographically distributed. There is also a rapidly growing body of documentary films, which capture the cinematic mutations residing within the marginal geographies of the territorial nation. While *Kumar Talkies* (1999) inaugurated this trend long ago, it is only recently that several notable documentaries have followed the cue: *Videokaaran* (2011), *Supermen of Malegaon* (2008), *Out of Thin Air* (2009), *Anna, Sound Please!* (2010), *Bidesiya in Bambai* (2013), *Bharatmata ki Jai* (2012), *The Bioscopewallah* (2006) and many more. Together, these films show us how the distortive capacity of cinema is crossed with the lived cosmos of urban slums, poor small-town neighbourhoods, and edges of the national boundary – collectively articulating a vocabulary of subcinematic transactions. The question of technology in these cases is not as much a matter of reading into the frame, as that of circulation. But even more importantly, these efforts deal with a channel of cinematic pleasure that escapes out of the archival hold. The films demonstrate the

meaning that fragments, broadly identifiable as cinematic, come to acquire when mere simulations of practices are reframed as whole. Also, in the case of films circulating entirely on VCDs, the relative evenness across similar production centres and circuits of exhibition collapses further and the geography of the archive stands squeezed outside historical time.

With respect to Bhojpuri cinema itself, Ratnakar Tripathy (2007) inaugurated the scholarly interest while, Ghosh's *Cinema Bhojpuri* (2010) accounted for the overall history of Bhojpuri cinema. Ghosh marks out three distinct phases that cut through this history, of which the third begins with the massive and sudden success of *Sasura Bada Paiswala* (2004). After a decade of relative inactivity, the success of the film infused new life into the decrepit theatres that were resisting closure. Tripathy (2007) also credits the phenomenal success of *Saiyyan Hamaar* (2001) but notes that the success of *Sasura Bada Paiswala*, 'which earned about 50 times its production budget of Rs 4.5 million, made the several decades of irreversible coma seem like a preparatory nap before a bout of action' (149). Trade analyst Taran Adarsh observed, 'Most Bhojpuri films are made [on] small budgets, usually Rs 20-30 lakh (\$50,000), and they fetch Rs 1-2 crore (\$ 200,000–400,000). Several of these films are grossing 10 times their production costs. A good film can even make a profit of Rs 10–12 crore' (as cited in *ibid.*). While I would later question the veracity of such claims, it is important to understand that these are the terms on which the growth of Bhojpuri cinema was articulated. Tripathy's later work (2012, 2013) has rendered to this sketch of trade analysts, a certain degree of theoretical as well as empirical depth. He marks out migration, caste, illiteracy, shifts within Hindi cinema, and the language politics of the region, as key sites of contestation towards the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema.

The earliest mapping of Bhojpuri music, however, goes back to Peter Manuel's *Cassette Culture* (1993) where the boom in vernacular media production was elaborated upon in relation to the advent of cassette technology. Not only has Tripathy (2012) rendered it further detail and depth, even Manuel (2012) has updated his account with respect to the VCD and Bhojpuri music. Rawlley (2007) has however provided the most in-depth account of the shifts within Bhojpuri music – from cassettes to VCDs, from rural nostalgia to aspirations of symbolic modernity, from amorous desires to more complex structures of desire, best manifested in album covers. In a rather fascinating survey, he notes the malleable quality of the folk tradition and its rabid sexualisation. My task in this study is to consolidate the logical connections across these strands of scholarship because instead of

the cinema and music industry being wedged apart, they have a decent degree of interpenetration. Additionally, Bhojpuri cinema, in association with a range of vernacular cinemas, brings forth the following points worth a mention here: i) once we think of cinema in geographical terms, that is, in terms of the shared horizon between cinema and the province, we may learn how to situate the newly emergent industries as resultant effects of the geographical unevenness that floods into the texts of representation; ii) the multiplicative displacement caused by the aspirational regime of media industries and work-related migration renders unstable one's relation to one's present as well as the past. In this study, I attempt to analyse how the deterritorialised province comes to bear the burden of representation and consolidate its own location in narrative.

Having said that, the elusiveness of the object of Bhojpuri cinema needs to be highlighted. The 'financial secrecy and wilful absence of record keeping' that Ganti (2014) mentions further complicates my research object. Signs and maps do not always help one inhabit the territory as an intimate observer. Very often, they work as techniques of alienation. They produce an objective veil of familiarity by erasing the unevenness of the terrain, reordering the geographies in an artificial horizontality. In order to engage with the world behind the media-texts – which are indeed mere signs – one needs to find a way to inhabit the terms on which the Bhojpuri media enterprise finds its province. Like that of those who share the social plane I inhabit, my familiarity with the realm of Bhojpuri cinema – the rundown theatres, the subaltern bodies, the film posters saturated with blood and flesh, etc. – then works as an obstruction, unless I work towards acknowledging my unfamiliarity with 'the familiar' and then seek to go past it. My effort in this thesis has been to not merely analyse from the outside, but first inhabit the realm and its own terms of habituation before applying the analytical toolkit to dissect it. This study then foregrounds the distance between the analyst and the habitus which is my research object; it takes its alienation as its point of departure. Therefore, I cut through several layers of the unfamiliar, documenting its finer details but also the coarse terms of evaluation, before engaging critically with Bhojpuri cinema in particular, and its broader force-field in general – music industry, live concerts, linguistic history, modes of circulation, architectural habitus, etc. The account I wish to offer is not merely an aggregation of the contextual details, however, but a critical theoretical vantage point from which the contemporary moment, the Bhojpuri cinema and the vernacularising process, could be understood better.

## Provincialising

What space there is for the ‘provincial’ in ‘provincialising’ is a question worth asking. Provincialising is a reference here to the ongoing process of vernacularisation that I seek to analytically trace. The province as an idealisation refers to the intersection of territoriality, social relations and material practices, particularly linguistic difference, all reinforced through a historical stability. But it comes into being through the mere projection of all of these – a multiplicative projection process which dialectically renders spatial as well as temporal depth to the idea of the province. To provincialise, therefore, is not merely to reduce an idea to its provincially specific component, but the very process by which something is made sense of, thus *translated* in relation to incumbent geographies. It is then a *technique of place construction* as well as that of making sense of the place within the world around it. David Harvey, challenging the reduction of geography to its metaphorical usage – as in the expression ‘anaemic geographies’ (Sparke 2005) – writes,

It is, I must emphasize, the dialectical movement across and through the different dimensionalities of space-time (absolute, relative and relational) and the intersecting moments (of technologies, social relations, processes in nature, mental conceptions, production [labour] processes, and everyday life) entailed in environmental transformations that really count in the theory of place construction (Harvey 2009: 282).

Cinema, as a regime of projections, renders itself as a mediating agent through which the self travels from its private confines into the public realm but public pleasures also travel inwards. Provincialising, thus, facilitates a connection between *here* and *elsewhere*, and renders vital continuities to the self through a dialogue with the projected other. When the process of provincializing takes place not merely in reception but through a creative industry, the command is instituted within the province; it is no longer a passive receptor. To provincialise is not to merely produce a mirror image of the hegemonic object within the province. As a creative process, it alters the relation between the provincial self and hegemonic object into the provincialised object. The command of the province also does not merely put *itself* on the screen, instead it ventures towards offsetting the reigning vantage points, decentring them to make space for itself. Provincialising, then, is to think in terms of the province, through ways of belonging, in relation to the world as an embodied space. Geographically speaking, it would mean thinking in terms of spatial distribution of practices and existing contiguous landscapes, not merely scattered singularities.

What, then, do I mean by vernacularisation and how does it relate to the vernacular in Miriam Hansen's theory of 'vernacular modernism' (1999)? The reference to vernacularisation here is drawn from Sheldon Pollock's theory of the 'Cosmopolitan Vernacular' in which he traces the shift away from the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis.' Pollock observes that vernacular literary cultures were initiated by 'the conscious decisions of writers to reshape the boundaries of their cultural universe. They renounced the larger world for the smaller place, and they did so in full awareness of the significance of their decision. New, local ways of making culture ... new ways of ordering society and polity came into being, replacing the older translocalism' (2000: 592, see also Pollock 1998). The phenomenon of various sub-regional media industries emerging across north India, including among the tribal people, is also a conscious decision to reshape the boundaries of respective cultural universes. Hansen's landmark intervention, on the other hand, produces a sophisticated argument for classical Hollywood *as* vernacular modernism (1999). For her, classical Hollywood comes to establish itself as a variant of modernism by translating high modernism into an 'international modernist idiom on a mass basis' (68). Hollywood, in her argument, becomes a 'global sensory vernacular' by crossing the 'high' with the 'low', both contributing to a shared fantasy (ibid.). It may be concluded therefore that the classical Hollywood is simultaneously the vernacular as well as the cosmopolitan; its fantastic vernacularity provides the provenance for its aggregated cosmopolitanism.

In the case of my research object however, the vernacular is a break *away* from the cosmopolitan form – Hindi cinema – which itself started undergoing a transmutation into Bollywood. Here, the vernacular is firmly in command and instead of becoming mesmerised by a cosmopolitan form to surrender its autonomy, to allow it to occupy the vernacular slot, the vernacular marks a willful departure to establish its vernacularity in relation to its provinciality. However, across a range of historical scholarship the label vernacular is also used to refer to the *bhashas* – languages apart from English, Sanskrit and Persian – including Hindi and Urdu. My usage of the vernacular, confined as it is to the contemporary moment, makes a distinction between the vernacular 'dialects' – acknowledged as 'mother tongues' by the Indian Constitution – and the official languages that include Hindi and Urdu. Having said that, my usage of vernacularity as a relative term also broadly suggests a particular – earthy, rustic, oral, subversive – relative sensibility with a deep provincial lineage, as explored in Chapter 4. The process of vernacularisation, therefore, is a result of the authority of the province expressed in the act of provincialising the now cosmopolitan form – Bollywood. But what is Bollywood?

## **Bollywood**

What could a restaurant named ‘Bollywood Spice’ in Glasgow be a reference to? Does Bollywood mean everything that is simultaneously entertaining as well as Indian? Or does it mean a certain jubilant mode of consumption rendering itself to an Indian as well as global signification? Even Prasad, who termed it as an empty signifier, thought that ‘it can be applied to any set of signifieds within the realm of Indian cinema’ (2003) – a realm it seems to have exceeded. Indeed, much reflection has already gone into the term ‘Bollywood’ (see Rajadhyaksha 2003), and nearly all the scholars of Indian cinema continue to explain or footnote their critical distance from its borrowed usage; some even continue to improvise through mutations such as ‘Global Bollywood’ (Gopal and Moorti 2008; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008) and ‘Bollyworld’ (Kaur and Sinha 2005). At the same time, as new industries keep mushrooming under new labels across the world, yet appending themselves to the same marketing vocabulary, they simultaneously rescue and mock one another. They suggest we overlook specific variances and consider them as mere industrial instances of a computer program executing a geographical alphabet. If the term originated in an outward aspiration of solidarity, it has been significantly pegged back by many competing claims from within the postcolonial territories. The remainder of Bollywood, therefore, is its now empty signification. The term makes no claims upon Hollywood anymore, it merely identifies itself with a plain face. While its claim to represent Indian cinema remains contested within, it retains significant purchase internationally. To provincialise it, then, would mean giving it territorial specificity, marking its limits even though making an allowance for its mutable resonances.

Bollywood’s direct reference remains the Hindi language film industry based in Bombay (now renamed Mumbai), which has retained its disputable claim upon being India’s national cinema. The claim holds primarily because unlike their southern counterparts, Hindi films are released in all the distribution territories across the country, in spite of the long contested relationship between Hindi and the nation. It is rather well known that the industries within India, whether Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam or Bengali, have had a long standing tradition of borrowing – with or without acknowledgement – ideas, personnel, practices and genres. Therefore, the internal differences are not entirely irreconcilable if we were to analyse a certain tendency of Indian cinema. In spite of vastly different histories and specific ‘moments’, cinematic enterprises in India have traversed a broadly consistent mode of organisation at production, distribution or exhibition stages. In an international context, then, Bollywood may come to stand in for this entire set of practices, instead of

making a direct reference to the Bombay based industry. What we are looking at is an assemblage of affectations such as: a graduating process, a mocking self-critique, an empty signification, and a growing global vocabulary of entertainment. Cinema or media in Bollywood may even be the missing object. To provincialise it is to 'locate' that object and connect it to its geography, but also to arrest the aspiration to indulge in playful gibberish that wears down the cultural object.

Another reason why Bollywood needs to be provincialised is that in the times of media convergence, the term has become too cluttered with possibilities. Provincialising alone can render it some recoverable stability and meaning. Ashwin Punathambekar (2013) offers, by the way of conclusion, the following points towards Bollywood's emergent cultural geography: i) it is a transnational industrial and cultural formation, ii) it is part of ongoing transformations in relations between capital, space, and cultural productions, and iii) it is a site of technological and industrial convergence (177-181). For Punathambekar, though, the site of analysis remains Mumbai-based convergence. While in agreement with Punathambekar's empirically expansive and theoretically sound analysis and conclusions, I consider it necessary to pay attention to his work as a point of departure. To provincialise Bollywood then would make it necessary to move away to other sites where Bollywood has been *refracted* through a variety of localisms, even though it does not mean they merely translate the transnational enterprise towards local consumption.

### **Whither Bhojpur?**

The emergent cultural geographies exceed or challenge the official political and administrative territories. It is not merely the Bhojpur district in Bihar but even the outskirts of Noida, and cities such as Ludhiana and Nashik that become the provinces of Bhojpuri cinema, as a result of being overwritten by the new geographies of migration. This also means that while Bollywood seceded into the multiplexes, a contestation began to emerge as Bhojpuri cinema threatened to consolidate in its favour the decrepit single-screen economy of north India. The Mumbai based industry then sought to recapture the plinth upon which the Bhojpuri solidarity was mounted. This study does indeed explore the trajectory of that contestation. However, the title does not suggest that Bollywood is a foreign or elite ascription to Indian cinema that we can erase by enlarging the focus to include regional and subregional industries. I do not champion the outlook that Bollywood and a certain global modernity is being overwritten by the vernacular rebellion; quite the contrary. Following Rajadhyaksha (2003), I suggest that Indian cinema *became*



Bollywood, the transnational culture industry, by distancing the state as well as the mass audience to institute a new cultural economy of exclusion. In this process, it also provincialised regions, populations and cultural forms, in the sense that it marked the provincial as its constitutive outside. In other words, Bollywoodisation produced an internal hierarchy and eschewed a major component of its erstwhile self. Provincialising Bollywood, via Bhojpuri and other vernacular industries, refers to a complex process of producing the ‘modern’ as well as the ‘nonmodern’ as effects of an emergent modernity. They make us reflect upon the serpent of modernity that is marked by an internal tension – the head with a burning urge to bite its tail off – to liberate itself and *become* modern, as it were. The modern, then, is never *fully* modern; it seeks distance from *itself* and produces asymmetries, which it again must set out to ‘modernise’. Bruno Latour (1993) situates this very problematic through the simultaneity of *translation* and *purification* within dichotomies that cut across the human and nonhuman divide, and argues that the ‘the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes – such is the paradox of the moderns’ (12).

Bhojpuri media at large is caught between the narratives of modernity and nonmodernity – the latter often labelled as tradition. While partly this is on account of the carryover effect of Hindi cinema, the conceptual binary between tradition and modernity, when staged within narrative, also creates a twin effect: disavowal of modernity projected upon an ideological plane, in co-existence with the contrary drive to modernise (see Prasad 1998: 7-8). The ideological plane, when embodied by the male star, lays down the criteria by which the process of modernisation is to be regulated. The traditional here, in a deeply hierarchised society, claims space for an identity circumscribed by ‘a set of *identifications*, which we develop in order to serve as coordinates guaranteeing the stability of our sense of who we are’ (Prasad 2013). Marking language as the most important of these, Prasad argues that ‘these identifications change frequently, and we endeavour to maintain continuity in the midst of such changes. If there is no change, then the identity freezes into something that must be *preserved*. It is only in change...that identity retains its value’ (ibid.). The Bhojpuri media too offered itself as one of these changes in which the Bhojpuri public saw a new set of identifications. But is it beginning to freeze the narrative of Bhojpuri identity in a way that it may soon demand preservation? Or does Bhojpuri media only provide a transient spell of change lying at the intersection of technology and geography?

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the discourses, narratives, practices, and ideologies circulating within Bhojpuri media industry. I provide, in Chapter 2, a narrative account of the industry, the region, the practices and the perceptions that prevail across the social habitus of Bhojpuri media. I shall put film alongside the music industry, and attend to the Bhojpuri media also via its economic and ideological impediments. In summation, the chapter would map the discursive trajectories and fault lines the Bhojpuri media must negotiate in order to wade through misinformation, dubious practices and existing social hierarchies. In Chapter 3, the focus will be upon the textual expanse of the Bhojpuri media. Cutting across a wide variety of film-texts, including elaborate analysis of a few key films, the chapter would establish the pre-eminent tendencies of Bhojpuri cinema. However, by also including the music video industry and the ways by which the stars acquire the rites of passage into the film industry, the chapter would attend to the resonance across the vast economy of Bhojpuri media. It would also investigate the accusation of vulgarity often hurled against the Bhojpuri media output. Part I, then, attempts to build the descriptive repository of the social, political, cultural, economic and narrative universe that the Bhojpuri media resides within and negotiates on a daily basis.

Part II of the thesis provides analytical accounts of three key factors that led to the surprise emergence of the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema. This part approaches the Bhojpuri media through three significant problems that drive the investigation within each chapter – language politics of north India, the absence of female spectators, and the parallel economy of media distribution (VCDs/DVDs and pirate transactions). Chapter 4 investigates the historical emergence of Bhojpuri as the language of popular media output. In doing so, it situates Bhojpuri language within its ideological, material and demographic location, moving across the Hindi-Urdu debate, language-based consolidations and reorganisations, leading us to the contemporary media climate. Tracing the location of Bhojpuri as a language of cultural expression through this long history, the chapter offers the concept of the Bhojpuri *sanskrit* to grapple with its current value-system. Chapter 5 brings to the foreground spatial relations and place constructions along the axis of gender. I discuss how Bhojpuri cinema occupies the historical chain of genres exhibited in rundown theatres where no women ever frequented. I locate Bhojpuri cinema as distinct from the other ‘rearguard’ genres, yet spatially continuous, and therefore, also absorbing and responding to this generic legacy. Chapter 6 is a brief study of the specifics of suboptimal transactions within the vernacular media industries. I discuss here the curious proximity of the legal and the counterfeit and offer an understanding of the meanwhile practices that do not assert

themselves as much as remain suspended in time. Bhojpuri media's distribution via these meanwhile channels alerts us to its richly varied materiality beyond the film theatres.

The accounts provided in each of the chapters are interdisciplinary in character, driven as they are by the problem under focus. I draw upon a large body of social science literature, apart from the Film Studies literature that I reviewed above. This is not to transgress the province of the discipline but i) to locate its co-ordinates within the larger continuity that holds cinema together in India, and ii) to define the cultural object in relation to the historical and political disputes that enliven the cultural cosmos.

## **PART I**

## Chapter 2

### ***‘Sirf Awaaz Bhojpuri Hai [Only the Voice is Bhojpuri]’***

A hawker at the Lajpat Rai market in Delhi, after about ten minutes of casual conversation about the Bhojpuri films and music albums he sold, said to me, with an amused perplexity, “*Bhojpuri mein research karne ka kya hai?* [What is there to research in Bhojpuri?]

I could only smile back, feeling a little helpless and, indeed, a shade amused. The more my investigation furthered into the various facets of Bhojpuri media industry, the more that curiosity returned to me. Whether in Mumbai, Delhi or the parts of Bihar I travelled to, not many were convinced of the research worth of my subject. Some even advised me to find out about the Hindi film industry – a far more ‘respectable’ enterprise in popular understanding. Yet, lying within the crevices of these expressions of disapproval and anxieties of disrepute remains a large economy that switches between hypervisibility and complete invisibility, depending on the segments of urban geography one traverses.

Since early 2011, I have been engaged in many stints of fieldwork towards the research object of Bhojpuri media – inclusive of films, music albums and stage shows. Instead of the Mumbai based production offices, where the producers, directors, and stars of the industry reside, I privileged the semi-urban and urban Bihar as primary sites of investigation. This is where vibrant and alert networks of personnel could simultaneously inhabit the worlds of cinema, politics, music, activism, theatre, real estate, primary school teaching and bureaucracy. The film crews employ the personnel briefly for production assistance, song lyrics, or small roles in the films and music albums. Information about a new project travels through telenetworks, and remunerations – in cash and kind both – often come in the form of promises. The bulk of these personnel stay on the margins of the Bhojpuri media industry and shift between narratives of aspiration and cynicism. Deeply aware of how things work in the industry, and the abundance of unreliable promises, they seek associations with names and projects that could be realised eventually. I also spoke to numerous cultural activists whose association with Bhojpuri cinema may be marginal, but they constitute a wider community engaging in a dialogue over print and televisual media, theatre, music and films. In particular, I spent the bulk of my time grappling with how the exhibition sector (theatre managers and owners) looks at Bhojpuri cinema and the possibilities it has opened up. I also spoke to newly emergent singers who have either been launched into Bhojpuri films or are eagerly awaiting that moment. Several small-time actors who are already part of a reliable network, and have acted in various films, offered

to explain the constraints under which Bhojpuri films are made. I met young men running a coaching centre training new aspirants in dance and music, even as they were severely condemned by classical music teachers of their own town, who bitterly criticised the youngsters repeatedly coming to them for a fast-track training towards film and music stardom. The producers and distributors I spoke to endlessly criticised the filmmakers and films for a variety of reasons while the directors, actors, singers and aspiring artists spoke of their industry counterparts as people who *deliberately* fail their films, under-report ticket sales, and retain a much higher chunk of profits than they are contractually entitled to. The more people one talked to, the more the fissures and fault lines became evident.

In these circuits, enchantment and discontent both inhabit the same neighbourhood. Stories of success as well as failure are told on the same tea-stalls at the crossroads. Also, rumours, speculations and reliable information – all remain integral to how people make sense of the Bhojpuri media enterprise. While I spoke to a diverse variety of people, I must admit that some of the information did indeed seem counter-intuitive and contradict other available claims. The idea, however, was not to narrow down on the facts, but on the ways in which social formations transact with a rather unprecedented cultural upsurge. I set out to assess how the Bhojpuri media comes to not merely offer itself as a commodity to the consumers, but as an avenue to participate towards a variety of aims, including the championing of a moral, social or political cause. The industry infrastructure – distributors, cinema halls and skilled human resource – can be both an enabler and an obstruction; it could expedite processes and also abort them. During my fieldwork, I witnessed that this infrastructure was itself struggling to survive, and could thus not be a neutral entity; on the contrary, it was rather alert and desperate towards strategic alliances. Brian Larkin writes about infrastructure in Nigeria,

All over Nigeria, when electricity supply disappears and people walk around to the back of the house to bring the generator coughing to life, this simple sensual experience of contemporary urban living highlights the link between technologies and political order. In the disaggregation from networked electricity to autonomous generators lies the shift in Nigerian society from the developmental state to new forms of individual, competitive, liberalism... [W]ith the collapse of the idea of infrastructure as a universal public good owned by the state, has come the move instead toward “enclave” infrastructures... Cumulatively, these breakdowns, the innovations they demand in compensation, and the informal social practices that grow up around them mean that, for very different reasons than the colonial and postcolonial state intended, the presence, functioning, and repair of infrastructure in Nigeria is not invisible or taken for granted but an inescapable feature of everyday life (2008: 244-46).

Similarly, my fieldwork aspired to make visible infrastructural features of everyday life and draw out the *enclave infrastructures* through which the Bhojpuri media flourished. Larkin situates the boom in Nigerian video films within a long history of the technological infrastructure. Seeking a qualitative sense of the strengths and weaknesses, desires and potential, of the Bhojpuri media, I also felt compelled to situate it within the broader history of the region. Not unaware of the poor economic health of the Bhojpuri speaking region (BSR), I set out to understand why such large amounts of capital were being invested in the media economy and not elsewhere. Also, in a region terribly marred by extremely poor basic infrastructure – roads, electricity, public transport, water supplies etc. – what role does the media infrastructure play? While most film and media analyses can assume a standard of infrastructural consistency to derive interpretations and conclusions about the material, I had to be vigilant about the absence of such a luxury. Jostling queues, power cuts, blurred images on the screen, broken seats, torches flashed at the audience, and many such infrastructural inadequacies asserted themselves upon the conditions of film viewing in general. Larkin suggests that we consider in earnest the conceptual impact of infrastructural *breakdowns*, which prepare societies to anticipate them, and therefore build enclave infrastructures. In the BSR, the emergence of Bhojpuri media followed from the existing infrastructure of the Hindi film industry. The elite and middle classes had indeed withdrawn from this infrastructure abandoning it to the poor. For the poor, then, it was reduced to a mere enclave infrastructure – not one to be built from scratch, but a leftover signifying yet another social breakdown.

Even as I queued up at the ticket counter and observed the theatrical audience, I had to remain attentive towards the exceptional space the film theatre occupied within the broader ecology of the entertainment infrastructure. With very high population density and very poor economic health, space comes at a premium in the region. Unlike the metropolitan cities and much of peninsular India – where the municipal councils have a stronger presence and impact – the formal and informal economies, public and private institutions, all jostle for the limited space available to people in the BSR. Poor waste and traffic management leading to clutter, noise and foul smells further delimits spaces of leisure. The film theatre stands alone amidst this messy ecology as a leisure space available to the underprivileged, who cannot enter the 'air-conditioned' environs.

On one hand, these conditions under which an industry prevails do not get accounted in box-office reports. On the other hand, the quantitative data produced by an unorganised economy is always speculative and unreliable. Trade magazines make tall claims of box-

office success, the male actors become superstars even before the release of their films, and only rumours thrive across the information networks. Within the industry too, most of the contracts are verbal without any paperwork. Tejaswini Ganti (2012: 176-185) has produced a detailed ethnography of similar practices in the Hindi film industry before the corporate capital came in. The informal nature of the contracts, and the circulation of money only within the networks of trust, which derive their basis from outside the film industry, is not unique to the Bhojpuri or Hindi film industry. One film producer I visited on the outskirts of Patna had an office full of thick files and images of bridges and railway construction sites. He had been, and still was, a powerful railway contractor with political connections. The office contained no film poster, nor did he divulge any information about the films he was producing except that these were 'big projects'. Through sources close to him, I was told that he had recently received a big chunk of cash from the *Lok Janshakti Party* (LJP)<sup>4</sup>. As is usual in all small or big film industries across India, surpluses generated out of covert political or real estate deals make their way into the film business. The money is only drawn out of one network of circulation and slipped into another via key figures like the producer I met. Yet, there is no way to be sure of the presence of such capital in a certain project.

My other significant concern was the very category of 'people'. India remains deeply divided on the lines of not only economic but also on social and political axes, such as caste, religion, ethnicity, language and gender. This means that the social milieu is not horizontally laid out. The full range of preferences are rarely available to anyone, and are significantly determined by the nature of practices normative to the segment of society one belongs to. A Haryanvi hawker in a Delhi-based informal media market, a Punjabi shopkeeper operating out of the formal Delhi market, and a Marwari cinema hall owner in Patna – all dependent on Bhojpuri media merchandise for their trade – would come together in their contempt for the 'Bihari' working classes – their customers. And yet, two people from a similar economic background in small-town Bihar may have opposite views of the Bhojpuri media industry because they belong to different ends of the caste spectrum. To complicate it further, while practices and judgments are ideologically argued in a loaded language, their sociological bearings are not always evident. This is compounded in effect by the quantitative projections. We may not know enough to establish that among the audience of Bhojpuri cinema, the lower caste or illiterate people constitute a decisive

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<sup>4</sup> LJP is a political party based out of Bihar, led by Ram Vilas Paswan. Paswan's son – Chirag Paswan – featured in a Hindi film *Miley Naa Miley Hum* (2011). After the film's failure, Chirag Paswan turned to politics and was elected to the Lok Sabha from Jamui seat in Bihar in 2014.



proportion, but we do know that caste and literacy are vital indicators of the poor in the region, and should therefore be considered towards an analytical evaluation of the audience. Ratnakar Tripathy, the first scholar to publish widely on Bhojpuri cinema, also highlights the significance of these two criteria (2007: 148).

Throughout my fieldwork, I sought a variety of measures – discourses, statistics, opinions, explanations, positions, hypotheses and takedowns. I approached people within the BSR, Delhi and Mumbai, and went through them to a range of sites and people who agreed to speak to me. I built my own repertoire of participant observation and every time my respondents provided contradictory information or opinions, I put the conflict to them to seek their responses. I was indeed alert to the problem that various discursive facts may not have their basis in, or may not be aligned with, statistical facts, but it discredits neither of them. If a theatre manager postulated that Bhojpuri films fit no trade circuit now and will soon get wiped out, the suggestion held substance even if untrue. Even if yet another trade window opened up to sustain the film industry, the opinion reflected the disinterest of at least one segment of the exhibition sector in Bhojpuri films. The conflict of interest was a finding by itself, as were the many animated responses to what the contemporary output in Bhojpuri meant to the people and the region. These ideas often reflected the investment in another idea – such as the idea of Bihar or a utopia of Bhojpuri culture – to which they thought Bhojpuri media was a genuine threat. Gradually, as I collected various small pieces and put them together a consistent picture did emerge to suggest the conditions under which Bhojpuri media is produced, distributed, exhibited, discussed and accepted or rejected.

In the absence of much analysis on the Bhojpuri media enterprise, this study is an initial step vigilant of its own limitations. I therefore build upon oral testimonies of personnel who have participated in the Bhojpuri media enterprise as much as those of the experts – erudite commentators from the region but with an interest wider than the vernacular media or cinema itself. The idea is to provide a rich narrative account of the information gathered and then build upon the key underpinnings to guide the investigation further.

### **The Bhojpuri Speaking Region (BSR) and the Figure of the ‘Bihari’**

The figure of the ‘Bihari’ far exceeds its empirical provenance, which would suggest a person from the state of Bihar. While all of India is familiar with the figure of the Bihari, the label is interpreted differently as one moves across regions. What unifies the various

interpretations of the label is the contempt and disgrace it carries. A middle class urban engineer working down south may own up to it with more pride than a working class migrant, but they are both aware of the implications it carries in spite of them. I recall visiting a five star hotel in Patna with a friend, who is the Sales Manager for a multinational corporation. The manager of the hotel who came to personally look after us boasted for an hour about his journeys into the foreign lands, only to qualify his condescension for Patna and Bihar. He insisted that he was in Patna only so he could lift its face in the world. Only much later did he admit that he was actually a Bihari himself, and therefore knew how to get work done in Bihar. Another waiter in a top-tier restaurant, having asked us where we were from, spoke to us intimately of Delhi and disparagingly of Bihar. A range of discussions always revolved around the ‘Bihar standard’. These were no exceptional incidents as an entire variety of middle to upper class citizens spoke of their Bihari-ness in very tentative terms. Only after having established that they might also have stationed themselves elsewhere, could they liberate themselves of the dishonour of being a Bihari. Bihar was to be seen as decades behind other parts of India, but as most would note, ‘efforts are underway’ in the right direction.

The BSR comprises of the western part of Bihar and the eastern part of its neighbouring state – Uttar Pradesh (UP). The region’s biggest export is the underprivileged classes working as construction labourers, porters, rickshaw pullers, auto rickshaw and taxi drivers across the country. The migration patterns shift with respect to seasons and industrial growth patterns. Mumbai has been, for the longest time, the prime destination, but in the last two decades, Delhi has become an equally significant destination. Maharashtra and Punjab, the two most affluent states where Hindi has reasonable purchase as a bridge language, attract migrants from the BSR into many of their smaller cities, such as Ludhiana and Nashik. The southern states of peninsular India, having registered commendable growth recently due to the concentration of Information Technology industry, have also begun attracting migration from the BSR. The same holds for the western state of Gujarat, which has one of the most vibrant industrial belts along the Western Express Highway connecting the state to Mumbai. Tripathy (2007) writes explaining the role of migration towards the rise of Bhojpuri cinema,

Besieged by the various social changes and problems, this region clearly faces the danger of seeing migration and development become near synonymous. We certainly have a situation where the only means to a better life may lie beyond the frontiers, and where remittances sent back to the village make a clinching difference (accounting for 25–30 per cent of the family income, seen by economists as a critical figure) to the depressed lifestyles. Survival, movement,

exposure to the outside world, changes in the world within—these become the stuff of everyday life impacting culture with ferocious directness. Trains overloaded with migrant workers on their way to or from, railway platforms packed with the novices and journeymen of migration present us with a two-ended phenomenon. Bangalore train junction simply becomes a depository, a clusterised version and a mirror image of the many Sultanpurs in Uttar Pradesh and the Chhapras in Bihar (147).

Because of these networks of migration, information about work and wages in different regions is often available in the remote villages of the BSR and allows people to choose their destinations for earning their livelihood. In this way, the people who speak Bhojpuri or one of its neighbouring languages – Magahi, Maithili, Angika, Vajjika, and Awadhi – have become a sizeable presence across most parts of India<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly, the working class population in particular is identified as Biharis everywhere, except occasionally in Mumbai where people from UP have a sizeable presence, and together they are categorised as 'north Indians'. The audience of Bhojpuri cinema, outside UP and Bihar, comes from this pool of Biharis. As a social fragment they represent an underclass demographic comprising almost entirely of young to middle-aged men, who rarely bring their wives along but maintain regular ties with their families in Bihar. In effect, then, the Bhojpuri speaking people exceed the boundaries of the BSR in the same way as the figure of the Bihari refers to a population exceeding the state of Bihar. The Bhojpuri media industry must be seen as not merely confined to the BSR, yet critically linked to the social, political and economic scenario of the region. It may then be useful to discuss the specificities of the region under question.

Even though parts of UP and Bihar are both integral to the BSR, Bihar has a lot more stake within the contemporary Bhojpuri media. One of the reasons for this is the enormous size of the state of UP, out of which the eastern part – primarily Gorakhpur, Mau, Jaunpur, Benaras, Balia and Gazipur – does not weigh as heavily as Awadhi, the language spoken in central UP. Tripathy (n.d.) also observes in agreement,

Eastern Uttar Pradesh is often seen as part of what may be called 'purabia' culture along with Bihar and is also regarded as the senior sibling, if anything, owing to the fact that Benaras/Allahabad form the cultural capital of this region. When it comes to Bhojpuri films however, UP is left far behind. Faced with his puzzle, a director with family origins in Azamgarh blamed the shades of difference between the various sub-dialects of Bhojpuri. But this is only partially applicable, as speakers of dialects such as Magahi and Maithili in

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<sup>5</sup> See the Linguistic map of South Asia at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00maplinks/overview/languages/himal1992max.jpg> (accessed 1 April, 2015).

Bihar have embraced Bhojpuri with much zeal despite a tradition of rivalry between the dialects. It seems that cities like Benaras, Gorakhpur, Balia, and Allahabad do not give Bhojpuri films a good run at all (26).

The eastern part of UP, known as Poorvanchal, is marked by extreme poverty and economic backwardness<sup>6</sup>, which is why the central UP based media does not consider Bhojpuri or Poorvanchal representative of the state. On the contrary, Patna based media and civil society has lately taken significant notice of Bhojpuri language as well as cinema. The government of Bihar hosts a Bhojpuri academy, while UP has not reciprocated the interest. UP may not participate in the social and cultural churning initiated by the Bhojpuri media, but as a market, since the days of the expansion of Bhojpuri territory, it has remained vital. The representativity of Bhojpuri culture has, however, been aligned with the state of Bihar. This has vital resonances with the political shifts within Bihar in the last three decades which demand closer attention.

Shaibal Gupta, Director of one of the two most influential think tanks – the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) – points towards the *deficit* of sub-nationalism in Bihar. Using the state of Tamil Nadu as a comparative standpoint, he argues that the strategic leap from anti-Brahminical politics to sub-nationalism later 'triggered economic and industrial development...entrepreneurs both from the social apex (like Brahmins) as well as from the margins (like Nadars, the toddy tappers) could build powerful industrial empires in the state' (2013: 10). On the contrary, in the absence of such sub-nationalism in Bihar, the elites 'failed to chart out an independent incentive structure for economic growth' and also 'failed to ensure the political stability in the state by not sharing power with the subaltern' (ibid.: 11). The new ruling social dispensation of the 1990-2005, which emerged in opposition to the above, comprised what Gupta calls the 'cockney elite' – an underclass outside the market structure, disinterested in state-building, and of an exclusionary social basis. Unconcerned about any development agenda, Lalu Prasad Yadav's Bihar reveled in caste acrimony and a parallel economy of kidnappings and loot. Polgreen (2010) describes the times rather aptly,

For decades the sprawling state of Bihar, flat and scorching as a griddle, was something between a punch line and a cautionary tale, ... Criminals could count on the police for protection, not prosecution. Highwaymen ruled the

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<sup>6</sup> My usage of backwardness must however not be taken as an endorsement of the label. I follow with restraint and discomfort the liberal usage of the idea of backwardness as it applies to the states of UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. While it often deploys the social and economic indicators of the states to label them backward, the persistence of the label is not merely limited to those indicators, as this thesis consciously explores.

shredded roads and kidnapping was one of the state's most profitable businesses... Its government, led by politicians who used divisive identity politics to entrench their rule, was so corrupt that it required a newly coined phrase: the Jungle Raj.

Several scholars, including Gupta (2013), Mukherji and Mukherji (2012), have argued that much of Bihar's terrible health can be traced back to the *Zamindari* system and the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the Freight Equalization Policy of 1948, Central government's apathy and a flood prone ecology. I offer little expertise in the matter and find their arguments more or less convincing. The popular narrative of Bihar's plight, however, leans too heavily upon Lalu Prasad Yadav – the Chief Minister of the state for fifteen years leading up to 2005. Yadav mobilised his supporters on the basis of 'continual confrontation with the historically oppressive elite' keeping the public sector jobs vacant instead of appointing 'qualified people, who were often from the upper castes'. Reportedly, he even 'sacrificed large potential fiscal transfers from the Government of India designed for anti-poverty programs' (ibid.: 23). Even as Yadav's name thus became synonymous with corruption and nonchalance, he proudly wore his vernacular identity in opposition to the English or Hindi speaking elite. Not only did he often speak Bhojpuri with a rhetorical flourish, he gave a 'social license to rebellious counterculture' (Personal Communication, 2014).

The regime change in 2005, then, it could be argued, rendered this existing rebellious layer of counterculture the necessary resources to pursue itself in popular culture. Nitish Kumar, the new Chief Minister, initiated 'a large number of interesting innovations...to improve the delivery of public service and governance in Bihar' (Mukherji and Mukherji 2012: 45). Kumar brought infrastructural development and accountability back on the agenda and remarkable progress was made in the following decade, even though Bihar remains an extremely poor state. Migration from the state has remained rather high even in this phase because while Bihar's economy grew modestly, other state economies prospered more and infrastructure projects particularly needed a cheap labour force. It may be useful to remember that it was in 2004 that Bhojpuri cinema's third phase took off and that in 2006 the economy began to deliver a sizeable output. These factors may provide the context in which Bhojpuri cinema grew rapidly – emergence of counterculture, sustained migration for work, and new surplus capital within the state – but it would be misleading to use them deterministically.

## Historicising the Contemporary

The emergence of Bhojpuri Cinema in 1963 came at a time when Hindi Cinema was already past its high melodramatic phase in which the nation as a reformist moral project dominated the film narratives. Ranjani Mazumdar (2011) has argued that the 1960s constituted a 'peculiar world marked by a reworking of nationalist anxieties, sovereignty, the place of the woman, and the world of location and mobility' (129). The crisis in the aftermath of India's defeat in the border war against China in 1962 had led to food shortages and a currency crisis. What we saw in the Hindi films of the period was 'the opening of the global and a fascination with urban infrastructure, tourism, fashion, and consumption. The arrival of color, the widespread circulation of travel imagery, the promotion of railway tourism, and the explosion in aviation congealed in creating a kind of cinematic tourism...Through this mobility the films encountered the global currents of the 1960s and also played out anxieties around questions of love, marriage, and erotic desire' (ibid.). Avijit Ghosh (2010: 7-17) dedicates an entire chapter to the making of the first Bhojpuri film *Ganga Maiya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo* (1963) – a massive hit in the BSR. Its very popular soundtrack, in stark contrast with the faster rhythmic patterns of globalizing Hindi music, amplified the tropes of regional culture embedded in the project of the film. Ghosh calls the soul of the film 'one hundred per cent Bhojpuri' (12) by the way of its authentic depiction of rural life and its many moods.

Throughout my fieldwork too, people cited *Ganga Maiya...* as the ultimate document of Bhojpuri-ness. Ghosh indeed argues that the commercial success of the film was instrumental in the cultural consolidation around Bhojpuri. In the next four years, nineteen films were released in Bhojpuri, most of them family dramas, and a few mythologicals. The key tropes deployed to establish the solidarity with the Bhojpuri region in the films were the region's 'customs, rituals and traditions' (18). However, the feverish rush among the producers to make Bhojpuri films, left at least fifty of them incomplete, while some 'never progressed beyond the *muhurat* [inauguration] or the recording of a few songs; others perished after a few reels were shot' (18-19). In this period, several producers and directors from Bombay as well as Calcutta (now Mumbai and Kolkata respectively) experimented with a Bhojpuri film. Most of them, however, failed at the box office. Ghosh speaks of Shakti Samanta's *Ayeel Basant Bahar* (1965), which comprised of a mostly Calcutta-based crew. In the 1960s, 'the Bhojpuri film industry had strong links with Calcutta's Tollywood, which provided both technicians as well as actors...[f]ilms were

processed in laboratories in Calcutta and even the sound recordings were conducted there' (24).

It could be argued that by that time, films made out of Bombay had no privileged claim upon the tag of 'national'. Calcutta and Madras (now Kolkata and Chennai, respectively) were both very prominent centres of film production, and movement of personnel, borrowing of styles or texts was a common practice across these centres (Prasad 2011; Vasudevan 2010a). The eventually unsuccessful establishment of the Bhojpuri market in the 1960s can be seen in contrast with the successful establishment of the Telugu speaking film territory, which continued to have its production centre in Madras till much later. As Srinivas shows us, the films in Telugu speaking region were instrumental in the emergence of an integrated film market which made cinema the 'first cultural form in modern times to be made at least notionally available to Telugu speakers across social and regional divides' (2013: 12). This meant that the market 'laid the grounds for the emergence of a populist aesthetics', of which the unintended consequence was that cinema could 'claim to speak for the Telugu nation' (ibid.). Two factors are notable to understand why this was possible in the case of Telugu but not in the case of Bhojpuri. The state of Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1956 integrating the Telugu speaking regions, while Bhojpuri had no politically recognised territorial integrity since the bulk of its speakers were divided across UP and Bihar. More importantly, no investment was made in the expansion of the distribution and exhibition circuits. In the two decades after 1956, the number of cinema halls and the number of films produced per year grew steadily in Andhra Pradesh, but the lack of any such impetus in the BSR meant that the possible emergence of an industry was truncated by the continued reliance upon the dismal infrastructure of the Hindi film industry (see Srinivas 2013: 52-80).

Srinivas also insightfully reminds us that while the coming of sound film created delimited markets, not all emerging markets were commercially viable. In Madras, 'to expand their market and to underwrite the increased cost of production...producers were shooting films in both Telugu and Tamil, or...making two versions of the same film' (ibid.: 59). This is how, before the state formation and the emergence of an integrated film market, the Telugu language industry sustained itself commercially. However, the viability of the Bhojpuri film industry could not be worked out either way. The lack of sub-nationalist consolidation, political boundary formation, or backend industrial integration meant that sporadic film production never consolidated to the extent as to demand investments in distribution and exhibition circuits. Also, the backwardness of the region may not have

allowed the sort of surpluses generated from flourishing Seemandhra agriculture in the case of Telugu industry. However, the problem of commercial viability of a scattered market in which the exhibition sector remained a bottleneck was instead translated into a problem of 'authenticity'. Ghosh (2010: 24-32) has detailed over the contemporary arguments lamenting 'outsiders' producing films that should be rooted in a culture they did not understand. Bhojpuri films' role in shaping society sparked debates and commentators expected the films to eradicate the social evils of the region – such as casteism, dowry and female infanticide (31).

After a decade of inactivity, the second phase of Bhojpuri cinema started in 1977 with the film *Dangal*. A distinct rise of action cinema and narratives of disenchantment mark the 1970s in Hindi cinema. Dominated by the figure of the 'angry young man' – iconised by Amitabh Bachchan – upto the late 1990s, Hindi cinema observed a gradual decline of the family audience, rise of the lumpen proletariat in the cities, and the shift to more visceral effects and rhythms. Bhojpuri cinema's re-emergence, however, retained its distinctive formal identity, best illustrated in rural family melodramas. As Ghosh shows, an interesting new development of this phase was a westward expansion of the Bhojpuri territory. Women continued to form a sizeable proportion of the audience even as the tropes of revenge and violence held sway. The segregation of the identity of Bhojpuri cinema, then, was sustained by the continued patronage of the middle classes. But this patronage was conditional on the nostalgic moral tales projected as the *substance* of the region, and the basis of its separation from the national-popular. The industry in this phase continued to operate through a small group of producers and directors who employed the services of personnel either known to the crew or recommended by word-of-mouth.

The 1980s were also marked by a decline of Hindi film market as the middle-class, particularly women, had begun to opt out of the theatres. This was also the era during which several producers from the south began to make Hindi versions or remakes of southern hits. The Bhojpuri films understandably flourished in the BSR in this otherwise lean phase for the Hindi film infrastructure that they utilised. Ghosh points out that 'Benaras was flooded with fake producers who fooled young actors and actresses into paying them big amounts of money by promising them a break in the movies. Then they would vanish without a trace' (50-51). By 1995 however, the interest in Bhojpuri films once again came to an end. Ghosh attributes this to the rise of cheap sex films in Hindi, often dubbed, which made families stay away from cinema halls. A fixed tax was also



levied on all cinema halls in Bihar by the state government, which worsened the decline (55).

Meanwhile, since the mid-1980s, vernacular music across north India had erupted with the spread of audiocassettes – a phenomenon Peter Manuel has termed 'cassette culture' (1993: 60-88). Manuel's work draws upon political as well as cultural boundaries between states and regions marked by languages (Awadhi, Magadhi, Maithili, Braj etc.) and the folk musical forms (*qawwali*, *ghazal*, *birha*, *kajri* and *chaiti*). He concedes that profitability required an accordingly larger market meaning that there were very few cassettes in Awadhi, while Bhojpuri folk music was much more widespread (161). Yet, limited by the piracy and poverty of the region, only thirty companies were active in producing Bhojpuri music, none based out of Benaras (188). He writes that aside from the various devotional and topical songs, 'the most popular genre is *birha*, a twentieth-century product which has evolved into a narrative tale set to a suite of melodies borrowed from other folk genres, or, commonly, from films. *Birha* is omnivorous in its use of parody, and also in its selection of subject matter, which can emerge from mythological tales to current political events' (ibid.). The majority of cassettes of this thriving genre were bootleg recordings of live concerts, considered more authentic than the studio recordings – often carefully edited and improved with added instruments (189).

Two factors are notable in Manuel's account. First, he informs us that the lack of patronage to the 'dialects' by the upper and middle classed led to a working-class solidarity around the consumption of folk music on cassettes. Second, the form of *birha* by itself was not continuing its historical thrust, instead showing off its contemporaneity, whether in thematic terms or in the use of melodies. Putting the two factors together, we could argue that the rural melodramas of Bhojpuri cinema were already somewhat – and increasingly so – incongruent with this emerging sphere patronised by the working classes and devoid of any nostalgic moorings. Gradually, however, the industrial logic overtook the cultural one. The 'traditional' elements began mutating with their 'modern' counterpart, and new narrative consolidations followed. Also, the migrant working class market encouraged the narratives of cultural nativism and a desirable, even if often antagonistic, modernity.

The 'modern' here was not a reference to historical modernity; instead it referred to the performative markers amplifying distinctions laid out within modernity. The dialectics of rural and urban, subaltern and elite, native and foreign, were all built into the distinctly gendered vocabulary of this Bhojpuri media in which the former was routinely masculine

and indigenous, while the latter, feminine and therefore, the one to be vanquished, occupied or appropriated. These tendencies became more pronounced as the VCDs appeared and the moving images rendered a more identifiable form to the materiality of the desirable as well as the antagonistic. If the audiocassettes had opened the field of self-projection through voice, the VCDs enabled the projection of singer-performers in the audio-visual format. As the music video graduated into narrative forms, particularly of romantic orientation, it enabled singer-performers to present themselves as stars in the making. The music videos compelled male singers to style themselves as desirable commodities with an existing constituency of fans already dancing to their tunes. Romancing a desirable female figure as the leader of the constituency of fans became the prototypical music video form. The shifting nature of themes and representations within the Bhojpuri music economy, from cassettes to VCDs, have been analysed in detail by Rawlley (2007).

At the level of technology too, the VCDs provided cheaper access to videos just as the MP3 did to audio content, but has lately been taken over by Chinese and other cheap mobile phones with a huge storage capacity. Manuel (2012) distinguishes the VCD format thus,

a particularly distinctive feature of VCDs is that despite being a modern digital technology, they are common primarily in the developing world, and especially in association with lower-class genres within those countries. (Due to the ease with which VCDs can be copied, their adoption in the developed West and Japan was actively suppressed by entertainment corporations in the 1990s, during which period the DVD format became more firmly entrenched.)

While the music video format per se may not be new, VCD technology has served to stimulate music video production among genres that were never previously marketed in such fashion, including Nigerian *ju`ju`*, Andean *chicha*, Thai-Malay shadow puppetry, and Cuban *timba* (226).

A music video production company, as Manuel also says, 'might consist of no more than a producer with a mobile phone, who contracts performers, rents studios, and orders mass duplication of discs, colourful paper labels, and the like' (ibid: 227). Indeed, I visited one such space in the busy market space of Patna, which hosted at least two production companies. In the first floor studio, there were only two young men playing carom; they showed me the rooms where the recordings take place. They would also shoot outdoors when needed and send the edited videos to Delhi where the disks would be cut out and sent for censor clearance and thereafter, distribution to the market. However, music videos are

not all that they recorded. Video production has increasingly become a massive enterprise because it makes possible the videographing of the mundane as well as the extraordinary. Wedding videos are particularly exciting mutations of music videos and home videos, excessively animated to blend the rituals with the more aspirational components. The recording studio has become a space where such experimentation and self-styling routinely promise new vistas for a modest price.

The third phase of Bhojpuri cinema, too, could be seen as a narrative extension of this music video industry. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, music channels (V and MTV) hosted a variety of IndiPop music shows – yet another hybrid of Western Pop music and Indian artists, Hindi lyrics interspersed with English phrases, and a rather obvious mimicry of the Western fashion world. A significant percentage of these music videos were not merely an aggregate of dancing routines, but were narratively driven<sup>7</sup>. Most of these were hybrids of Bollywood romances and youth-specific fashion, designed for domestic viewing. While these videos provided a capsule experience of romantic Hindi films, the Bhojpuri media industry simultaneously charted a trajectory the other way around. The music video had been a thriving form in Bhojpuri media; the big boom in films that followed after 2004, came about by narratively extending the music videos, drawing upon the older Hindi film form. The new Hindi film form, which was still taking shape through the ongoing gentrification, had escaped into the metropolitan and diasporic spaces. The prototypical film form for Bhojpuri, therefore, went backwards; this created a temporal slippage between the Hindi and the Bhojpuri film industry. This slippage has been interpreted in rather oppositional terms by a variety of commentators, particularly Ghosh (2005) who has termed it the revenge of the mofussil [the hinterland].

Much of these oppositional readings have been enabled by not so much an overwriting of the popularity of Hindi films in the region, as the shifts in the exhibition circuit. For a high population density region such as the BSR, the screen density is rather poor. On top of that, cinema halls are seen as indecent places for women to visit. This has, on one hand kept the ticket prices terribly low, and on the other, let the halls go on unattended in terms of infrastructural upgrade. Broken seats, power cuts, extremely poor projection, out of order fans in terrible heat, choked or dysfunctional toilets, and spit stained walls and floors – put together, these factors do not invite a middle-class evening out, and are further discredited

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<sup>7</sup> For example, this video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9nqzS7ULiQ>, accessed on 12 March, 2015) sung by Sukhvinder Singh showcasing model turned actress Malaika Arora Khan was particularly popular in its time.

in competition against home video infrastructure – large television screens and cheap DVD players. Indeed, a few young women I spoke to in Patna and Siwan, confessed to never having visited a film theatre before the arrival of a multiplex in Patna. While Hindi films still meant a lot to them, Bhojpuri ones did not. Particularly interesting was the case of a Siwan based family where the father had been acted on the stage and also in a few Bhojpuri films. Yet, he never took his family out to the film theatre in his own town.

In the above-mentioned ecology of the exhibition sector, the film theatres were already marked as dubious sites meant exclusively for men. When Bhojpuri films started playing across small towns, they often replaced new Hindi releases which may have otherwise played there. Also, it is because the theatres and the incoming Bhojpuri films were both marked as indecent that the fit between the two worked out to their advantage. To read this as the revenge of the mofussil is a case of overreach because it fails to explain why Hindi films continue to be seen as superior – having an altogether different ‘standard’, as one after another respondent told me. In fact, Bhojpuri films and their entire ecology – the people who watch them, the theatres where they are screened, the markets where Bhojpuri media is bought and sold, and the language itself – remains an object of *embarrassment* for the middle classes. A very high percentage of people I spoke to across Bihar, but also in Delhi and Mumbai, spoke of Bhojpuri media in *deferred* terms. It is always the others who seem to have an affinity for them – be it the poor, the villagers, the Biharis, the illiterates, the rickshaw-*wallahs*, the labourers, and suchlike. The popularity of the Bhojpuri media was always a little inexplicable, and could therefore be explained best by otherness. It could be the physical exhaustion after daily wage labour, or addiction, or their illiteracy, but it would always add up to a speculative assessment of ‘those who have little to do with us’<sup>8</sup>.

### Searching For Bhojpur

I started watching Bhojpuri films since early 2011 at Leela cinema in Lucknow. Right behind the bustling commercial street of Hazratganj, stood this decrepit film theatre with a massive compound. About a decade ago, Leela used to be a decent theatre screening new Hindi releases. But by 2011, those days were long gone. Half the seats inside were broken, the fans did not work properly, and the projection quality was so bad one could only see blurred images. The walls were stained with paan-spit, the floor very unclean, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Surabhi Sharma’s documentary on Bhojpuri music in Bombay - *Bidesiya in Bumbai* (2013) – also explores the bases of this and similar claims.

electricity would often get cut during the show. I had seen films in theatres with leaking roof and dodgy power supply before, but Leela seemed abandoned, as if nobody cared what went on there. Except that the turnout of audiences was fairly significant. One day I spoke to the manager of the theatre, Suneel Singh (name changed), who always sat on a chair near the entrance<sup>9</sup>. He told me the health of the business did not matter much. The owners had other flourishing businesses in the city and the theatre was a proud possession once. Leela had shifted to Bhojpuri films in 2004 when they seemed to be a smart business idea but for the past two years, there had been no profits in them. The compound property was harvested for its parking revenues, so the theatre could cover the costs. I saw about two dozen Bhojpuri films at Leela before I found it shut down in early 2014.

Unlike Leela, Moti cinema in Delhi has a more distinguished past. As an upper class hall for the residents of what is now Old Delhi, Moti cinema was a key site within the economic geography built by the elite Punjabi families – who owned a high percentage of cinema halls – and the distribution companies based out of Delhi (Singh 2002). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the rapid decline of these Old Delhi theatres began. Singh wrote that 'as a result of low box-office returns or land use disagreements involving complex and long drawn out legal battles, roughly half (eight or nine out of nineteen) of the Old Delhi cinema halls have closed down, including Westend, Majestic, Minerva, Kumar, and finally Novelty cinema... Other halls, like Moti cinema, seem to be on the verge of closure depending on the land use policy and the terms that owners can negotiate for a profitable sale' (ibid.). When I began visiting Moti cinema, it stood on the verge of closing down. And then, in March 2013, on account of the denial of the no objection certificate (NOC) by several agencies – Delhi Fire Service, North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), health department – it closed down before reopening a year later (Kumar R. 2013). Between 2011 and late 2012, I frequently visited Moti to watch Bhojpuri films. It was indeed in better shape than Leela, and its management was much more rigorous towards necessary maintenance. However, the Bhojpuri film business was dwindling; so, after every few weeks, the theatre screened dubbed south Indian action films.

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<sup>9</sup> In this study, I use pseudonyms for all the respondents I quote or paraphrase, except for those I cite in the bibliography. Even though I shall provide the respective position of these respondents within the social hierarchy to establish their vantage points, this is necessary to protect their identity. It must be added, however, that each one of them was notified in detail about the purpose and nature of my investigation, the preservation of interview data, and their freedom from any culpability thus emergent.

Veena cinema is the third cinema hall I visited frequently between late 2013 and early 2014. As was the common practice across north-India (and Kerala in the south) during the 1990s up to early 2000s (see Singh 2002), Veena screened a 'morning show' of Western soft-porn films followed by four shows of Bhojpuri films. There was also one instance of a Hindi film *R...Rajkumar* (2014) playing at Veena; the film had recently completed a two week multiplex run. While I had observed both Leela and Moti struggle against rapidly declining ticket sales, Veena ran to nearly full capacity. This corroborated the point made by Tripathy (n.d.), as well as the Delhi based distributors I had interviewed – that after a very successful stint in Mumbai, Delhi and UP territories, Bhojpuri films' popularity was gradually getting confined to Bihar. Veena is not only an old Patna based theatre, it famously hosted the premier of *Ganga Maiya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo*, the first Bhojpuri film that was released on February 22, 1963. Today, it stands in the most crowded area next to the railway station, covered in filth and noise. But once the darkness inside takes over, the world outside is shut out and cinematic pleasures run riot. As in Leela and Moti cinema, Veena's large compound also invites a large number of lurkers, who come in and stare at the images – large posters as well as film stills displayed behind glass fronted boxes. The crowd remains almost entirely male; the number of women goes up during the week of the Hindi screening, but narrowly so.

While there were other theatres that I visited as a participant observer, in Mumbai as well as small-town Bihar, the above three I visited frequently over a period of time. The other key site I surveyed is that of the media *bazaars*. Among others, Lajpat Rai market in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, and Bakarganj market in Patna, both sell not merely media commodities but an infrastructural universe insulated from the uncertainties of its neighbouring constituencies. Walking across the narrow intersecting lanes, one encounters a space that promises to fix – repair being the keyword – every infrastructural breakdown. Televisions, CD/DVD players, speakers, mobile phones and cameras – loose wires hanging from their intestines mark the media bazaar that connects portable and affordable media gadgets such as mobile phones to all sorts of data – the pleasures of international variety – through 'downloads'. Hardware is repaired, softwares are reinstalled and downloaded, copies and originals compete for the narrowest price difference, and resultantly, hierarchies of information, infrastructure, pleasures and services are flattened. Various banners and hoardings advertise electronic shops offering repair, service, mixing and downloading facilities in their digital studios and mixing labs, video production, digital recording or video mixing units, towards music cassettes, advertising videos, Bhojpuri films and television serials. Often, adjacent to these bazaars were the theatres where Bhojpuri films

were screened. The theatres, instead of declaring their exclusivity, as they did once, now merged within the residual landscape of the infrastructure, which enables access to not only films, but a range of media. This absorption of cinema within the realm of media is most evident in Old Delhi where the Lajpat Rai market, Moti cinema compound and various distributors' offices are all in close vicinity.

However, the presence of Bhojpuri cinema in these residual districts is also important to note because in its current phase, the cinema hall is no longer the primary, or perhaps even the privileged, site of its consumption. The vicinity between the bazaars comprising original as well as pirate disks of the same film that is screened in the theatres, is a productive dimension. The neighbourhoods legitimise each other and produce a spillover effect. In the last decade, the success of Bhojpuri cinema through this fragile infrastructure has been followed by its gradual decline. It would be prudent to elaborate upon the dominant tendencies across this decade before engaging with the broader implications. Starting in 2004, there emerged a wave of Bhojpuri films that were made on very low budgets and stood to gain from a massive territory across which Hindi films were retreating. Outside of the BSR, this meant the national capital region (NCR), Mumbai, Nashik, Ludhiana and other cities where the migrants from the BSR were a sizeable presence. As the films provided good business, the territory kept expanding because more and more single-screen theatres awaiting closure sought consolidation within the emerging trade channel. This new consolidation was also an act of realignment out of the Hindi film market into the Bhojpuri one. The choice, however, was about survival because Hindi films had already moved towards the multiplexes. Many of these theatres were already unable to get new Hindi releases and were re-running old Hindi films or dubbed action films from the south. By around 2010, it seemed that the Bhojpuri films were going out of favour. The majority of theatres have either been reintegrated into the Hindi film market, or gone back to action films – dubbed from southern languages, Hollywood or the older Hindi fare.

Let us take note of Amitesh (2012) who frequently writes about the film culture and business in the BSR. He is a blogger from West Champaran district in Bihar who observes on a visit to his town, Bagaha, the return of Hindi films after ages. It may be appropriate to quote at length from one of his posts,

I saw that in two of the three theatres in Bagaha, dubbed films from the south and Hollywood were playing. The theatre playing a Bhojpuri film was under renovation and it was being run on a makeshift basis so that the theatre avoids

shutdown and some money keeps rolling... The newspapers in Bihar too showcase the films playing in the region. That part of the newspaper, which used to be full of Bhojpuri films, was now full of Hindi films; and more advertisements were for the upcoming Bhojpuri films than for those playing then... The theatres are being fitted with better sound and projection systems. They are opting for UFO systems [that install digital distribution units]. After these new technology updates, the theatres have raised the ticket prices. The theatres which did not charge 20 rupees as the maximum price, now have the lowest ticket for 20 and maximum for 50 rupees<sup>10</sup>. The theatre administration says that people are buying the tickets and the 30 rupee ones actually go first. Special attention is being given to cleanliness and they are trying to forbid people from spitting out betel nuts... The manager of Chitrangada, the oldest theatre of the city, which has recently been renovated, accepted that families have returned... He accepted that hardly anyone would watch a Bhojpuri film for a 50 rupees ticket, and their interest has now shifted to Hindi cinema.

The situation was different a few years ago. These theatre owners could not afford new Hindi releases. The new releases in Bihar would be screened only in district headquarters with a big market. Or in a city like Raksaul, which is on the Nepal border and people from Nepal too cross over to catch new Hindi films. After the run in these cities, the new films would travel to smaller towns. Earlier people would go to watch films on the big screen. There was no cable and VCDs, and the theatres were also well maintained. After the infectious arrival of cable and videos, and after the state of disrepair theatres have fallen into, these theatres could not gather an audience for Hindi releases. By the time a Hindi film would come to these theatres, it had already been seen on other media. Pirated disks had enabled people to watch films on smaller screens at home, as per their convenience. This meant that they paid less and did not have to tolerate the filth and suffocation of the theatres. This also reinforced the elite and feudal practices of the towns. Bhojpuri films had saved these theatres in such times; many theatre owners accept this. Many people in our region still do not go to the theatres... the regular audience comprises of those who visit the markets, avoid cable and compact disks, belong to regions where there is no power, students and compulsive filmgoers<sup>11</sup>.

This account accurately corroborates my own findings across the regions where Bhojpuri films once flourished, and in certain segments they had nearly taken over. The handover of Bhojpuri territory back to the Hindi film industry is a vital turnaround and can be explained on account of three following reasons. First, the dominance of the non-resident Indian (NRI) figures, foreign locales, overseas market, and diasporic communities in the US and the UK, were all connected to the uneven exchange worth of the foreign currency. Films, such as *Taal* (1999), failed at the Indian box office, but were massive hits in the

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Rupee is approximately equivalent to 0.01 Pound Sterling.

1 Lakh is equivalent to 0.1 million.

1 Crore is equivalent to 100 lakhs, that is 10 million.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from Hindi. All translations, unless specified otherwise, are by the author.



overseas market, thus generating a climate in which the domestic territory was losing significance. However, this market got saturated rather soon, and the industry by now known as Bollywood, was losing its grip on all markets. It is in these times that, beginning in 2006-07, various films set in north-Indian small-towns, began to appear. This new trend, finding its sublimation in the massive hit *Dabangg* (2010), reconnected with the provincial film territories of north India. A variety of mass entertainers such as *Ghajini* (2008), *Singham* (2011), *Rowdy Rathore* (2012), contributed to this reconsolidation of the provincial film markets.

Second, the emergence of UFO Moviez India Ltd (UFO), founded in 2005, has been a crucial development. It is the world's largest satellite networked digital cinema chain and has made significant changes to the way films are distributed and exhibited. The website claims to offer end to end digital cinema solutions and delivering films via satellite directly to theatres to ensure *simultaneous release* across the country. Currently, with 3539 digital cinema installations spread over 1350 cities, UFO claims to contribute to the industry's expansion. It also claims to have launched a computerized ticketing platform – IMPACT – aimed at ensuring transparency, efficiency and accountability in the Media and Entertainment business<sup>12</sup>. IMPACT has been deployed towards 400 screens and is vital for the appropriate measurement of audiences, a longstanding problem across the exhibition sector (Ganti 2012: 346-350). The website data shows that of the 159 UFO screens in Bihar, 135 are available for 'Hindi Dubbed' category, 139 for Hindi, while 149 for Bhojpuri. This means that the same screens oscillate between Hindi, Bhojpuri and Hindi dubbed (most often from Tamil, Telugu, English) films. While that may seem fair, this works heavily in favour of the Bollywood economy, which is thus able to eat into the regional cinema market. Note that while 661 screens across India seem to have been available for Bhojpuri films, very few Bhojpuri films release in more than 20 UFO screens.

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<sup>12</sup> All the information has been taken from the official website of UFO Moviez - <http://www.ufomoviez.com> (accessed 10 July 2014). Also see Chakraborty (2012), profiling Sanjay Gaikwad of UFO Moviez:

Gaikwad saw that the system of staggered releases was having an impact on theater revenues and the property health of the single screen theaters around the country were deteriorating... The solution Gaikwad knew would be to introduce digital cinema to more and more movie theaters in the country, so that a larger number of theaters could get access to the film in the first week—the make-or-break week in film circles... Exhibitors are charged Rs.100-150 and distributors are charged at Rs.350-400 for each show. The advantage to the exhibitor was that while he invested about Rs.70,000 only to get the analog prints, he would spend about Rs.8,000-10,000 using the digital technology to show the movie in the same period... The exhibitor and distributor strike a deal on the number of screenings that the exhibitor can have and then that data is available on the server and the exhibitor has a smart card that reads the data, so he can't have more screenings than what has been agreed upon.

The highest number of screens I could locate was 48 for the first week of *Adaalat* (2014). The Bollywood mass entertainers on the other hand, tap heavily into this digital integration by going up to 1527 screens in the case of *Dhoom 3* (2013), even if an average multiplex film releases in about 600-700 screens<sup>13</sup>. The shifts that Amitesh observed, from Bhojpuri to Hindi, have been increasingly enabled by the renovations that include digital distribution infrastructure installation.

Third, and perhaps the most crucial factor has been the implosion of the Bhojpuri film economy, all by itself. Crucial in this regard are two particular dynamics: i) the balance across the production and exhibition sector, ii) the balance between film budgets and market size, in terms of capital. An overproduction of Bhojpuri films and the bloating of the remuneration the male stars demand – have thrown the industry off-balance on both accounts. I shall now take us through the several accounts I gleaned during my ethnographic visit to comprehend the commercial and cultural complexity of Bhojpuri film trade. These views illustrate, but do not exhaust, the variety of discourses that prevail around the Bhojpuri media.

## Enchantment and Discontent

R. N. Dash is a retired bureaucrat with the Indian government, and the President of Patna Cine Society, Bihar, one of the oldest film societies in India. As a regular commentator on the cinema of the world, he spoke at length about the state of Bhojpuri cinema in the context of film history. Highlighting the factors I mentioned above, in this blog entry he argues that Bhojpuri films are

characterised by low budget, devoid of top star-casts, poor in technical quality, lacking diversification of themes, with hackneyed storylines concentrating mostly on rural family dramas, unable to compete with their Hindi mainstream counterparts, running in sub-standard cinema theatres in rural and semi-urban localities, catering to not-so-affluent patrons discouraged by poor law and order, and women viewers shying out from the embarrassing contents of the films, with low priced tickets delivering meagre returns for the distributors and the producers as against disproportionately exorbitant rates being charged by its lead actors.

Bhojpuri film makers, mostly small time producers, giving up after a single flop, unaware of the niceties of good cinema and having no knowledge of marketing strategies and realities, many of them tempted to be a part of the glamorous world of filmdom, feel elated on hearing rumours that *Sasura [Bada*

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<sup>13</sup> From the official website of UFO Moviez - <http://www.ufomoviez.com> (accessed 10 July 2014).

*Paisawala*] earned 15 crores with a meagre investment of only 30 lakhs, and dare to spend 3 to 4 crores, when the maximum potential of the Bhojpuri film market is hardly of one to one-and-a-half crore, spread over the non-remunerative Bhojpuri belt described above. These producers lap up informations that giant production houses of Bollywood such as Rajasree have entered the fray, that Columbia-Tristar of Hollywood is considering to dub its films in Bhojpuri to catch the Bhojpuri belt, *Namak Halal* is being dubbed in Bhojpuri, Mumbai single screens and even multiplexes are being flooded with Bhojpuri films, and that Bhojpuri Film-songs are ruling the streets... The Bollywood giants are too shrewd to jump into the non-viable Bhojpuri arena with its poor track record. Most of the Bhojpuri producers might not be aware that by end of 2008, as many as 144 completed Bhojpuri films were languishing in their cans, waiting to be released, with no takers, and 80% of the released films are unable to recover their investments (Dash 2012).

Arvind Sharma is a distributor-exhibitor and the programming head of the conjoined twins - Mona Cinema and Elphinstone Cinema, both recently renovated into multiplexes, thanks to the tax holiday given by the Bihar government toward renovation. The latter, the first cinema hall in the state of Bihar, was established in 1919 with 1100 seats and was closed for renovation in December 2010 (Tripathi 2013). The former, established in 1979, donned a new look in 2009. Predictably, the ticket prices have gone up from 25-50 rupees to 150-200 rupees. The twin complex is known by the name of Mona, the popular single-screen theatre before renovation, which continued to find middle-class patrons even as Elphinstone descended into the Bhojpuri circuit. However, when I visited the office of the owner of the multiplexes, he distanced himself from the questions about Bhojpuri films, market, audience etc., by claiming that he had nothing to do with Bhojpuri. Instead, he introduced me to Sharma, who spoke to me in earnest over the next hour and more. Sharma said that the audience for Hindi and Bhojpuri films is the same, but after the arrival of digital projection through UFO, the Bhojpuri market has been taken over by Hindi cinema. Like Sinha, he suggested that the overproduction of films, disproportionate to the size of the market, and the male stars' stranglehold on the already struggling economy are the key issues. He also noted that the rights for music release and satellite television release for a film would earlier go up to 30-40 lakhs, but it had now come down to nothing. The reasons Sharma cited for this were twofold. First, 3-4 songs of each film are already sold and popular in the market by the time the film appears on the market, thus making its music rights redundant. Second, the only surviving Bhojpuri channel – Mahua TV – practically had a monopoly on the market and could therefore dictate the price and choice of what film it would buy. The price had therefore come down drastically, and made the film economy extremely unsustainable, particularly in the face of any male star with a degree of success command very disproportionate hold over the market. Sharma was also of the opinion that

while in UP, the theatres were able to charge a relatively higher price, the theatres in Bihar had no such luxury for Bhojpuri films, so they were further reluctant to opt for Bhojpuri films. After all, the maintenance cost was the same for both.

Sharma also made an interesting case against the representativity of Bhojpuri films. He alleged that they do not speak ‘correct’ Bhojpuri in the films. According to him, Bhojpuri is not ‘universally spoken’; it is in fact a ‘misnomer’. It was for him a language lost in the so-called Bhojpuri films. The genuine language instead was to be found in the rural interiors, particularly in their *reeti-rivaj* (customs). Producers, he accused, were a ‘confused lot’. The ‘mini-pants and foreign locations’ they offer, the Bhojpuri audience does not identify with. Instead, as an exhibitor, one would prefer the remakes of Hindi films or those from the South, for they have more ‘positive content’. The people of the BSR, he said, look more like Arvind Kejriwal [a popular politician the keystone of whose politics is the ‘common man’] than Shakti Kapoor [a flashy villain-comedian of Hindi films]. Failing to make sense of the difference, they do not realise that in Bhojpuri films ‘except language, everything is modern’. A respectable person, therefore, would not watch Bhojpuri films ‘out of shame’, and the usual audience is not ready to pay anymore for them. Sharma stressed that the cost for exhibitors are rising as the minimum wage and power tariff have been revised. Erratic power supply means that they must invest in generators which run on diesel for which the prices continue to rise. While the ticket price in rundown theatres cannot be raised above 15-18 rupees, the footfall continues to slide. While earlier the films would run for 4-6 weeks on an average, these days they rarely last more than ten days.

In 2004-07, Sharma maintained, Bhojpuri films had cannibalised the Hindi film economy of the BSR. Salman Khan was losing out to Nirahua. But it has now begun to sink because of the ‘unrealistic’ representation of the region as in *Durga* (2011) which presents Durga, the protagonist, in ‘half-pants’. Comparing it with Punjabi cinema, he said that ‘the Punjabis never compromised with content’. While he maintained that every scene in *Grand Masti* (2013), an adult comedy in Hindi widely panned by every film critic as offensively vulgar, was ‘meaningful’, for a wildly popular Bhojpuri song ‘Missed call’ he retorted, “Only a tea-seller’s child can sing that song! Yours and mine of course will not! Right?” The substantive grouse against Bhojpuri films continued to revolve around the idea of vulgarity and exposure: “the girl is standing in half-pants with her breasts fully in the open”! Needless to add, there are no films with full frontal or even semi-frontal nudity in Bhojpuri; yet the perceptions persist. Finally, Sharma, like most others, operated on a

dialectical opposition with Hindi films, about which he kept insisting that they have a ‘standard’. Bhojpuri, he said, ‘has no literature, no subject, no stories; what will you teach your children in Bhojpuri?’ (Personal communication, 2014).

Another manager of a theatre in Siwan, now running on digital projection for five years, said that people now watched all the films on mobile phones. He said, “See, for everything there is a time limit. Those who have already seen it on the mobile, why would they come to the cinema hall? Whatever film it may be – Hindi, Bhojpuri, whatever – people are watching it all on the mobile. All said and done, the future of the film line, exhibition sector in particular, is not good at all.” He speculated that the audience would return if the multiplexes were built, even in a small town like Siwan. About the distributors, he told me that they no longer buy films. They fear being knocked out of the business if they risked buying a film, so most of the business is done on commission. The distributors often only agree to screening the films of those producers they have built a relationship with over the years. The assurance of sustained business, as opposed to the stray ‘first-timer’, holds the key in such negotiations.

Another theatre owner’s views also resonated with the above in Siwan,

You cannot earn your daily bread with Bhojpuri. It only has the B or C class. Also, it is a matter of embarrassment. After all it is a dialect, the educated people do not associate with it. Whether it is included in the eighth schedule or first, nothing is going to happen till the people feel a sense of pride in it... Even on Bhojpuri television channels, most of the material is in Hindi! Even they are embarrassed to use Bhojpuri! The television rights for Bhojpuri films only get 10-15 lakhs for stars’ films, and merely 3-4 lakhs for the rest. Think about Bengali films which get sold for 3 crores to television channels!

... When the flood comes, the drains, ditches and ponds, all get filled. That is what is happening in the Bhojpuri circuit. But for us, cost wise there is no difference between Hindi or Bhojpuri. We only take a percentage on the ticket sales, and the Hindi films draw a bigger crowd these days. But generally, the business is very lean. Two years ago, if our daily collection was 800-1000, we would take the film down. Now, even the first show goes only between 100-200! In one month, the film is on television... See the thing about the film business is this. You have a wife in the house, you wring her out fully! So, those who are satiated at home, they do not look for a bite outside. People come to the cinema hall to get rid of the *khujli* [itch]! There is nothing else to it. When you can get that at home, on TV itself, why would you bother? TV has killed the market for re-runs too. Earlier it was good business to run old films. Look at *Chennai Express* [2013]. They have showed it on TV sixteen times by now. One channel bought the rights and then it kept selling the rights

to other channels. The number of people who watched the film on TV are much higher than those who watched it in the theatres<sup>14</sup>.

Raviraj Patel is a documentary filmmaker and writer, who works with a prominent Bhojpuri television channel and was the Festival co-ordinator for the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Bhojpuri Cinema held in Premchand Rangshala, Patna from 13 to 19 November, 2013. The weeklong festival released Patel’s booklet on the first-ever Bhojpuri film, and also screened the rough cut of a documentary film (40 minutes) on “50 years of Bhojpuri Cinema” directed by him. The event was organised to host a dialogue among producers, directors, distributors, actors, theatre owners, journalists, bureaucrats, lyricists and film critics. Patel, in discussions that lasted more than three hours, expressed not merely his criticism of contemporary films, but also how he actively seeks to steer them away from the abyss into which they are headed. Patel said,

If Bihar has a representative cinema it can only be Bhojpuri cinema; it is. We must not evaluate it only in terms of the past ten years. It has had a forty-year history behind that. If we look at that in entirety, then perhaps in comparison to all other language cinemas of India, it would not be found wanting... That [the Bhojpuri cinema before the past decade] was only cinema; it was *not* Bhojpuri cinema. It surprises me today as to how the mere change of language for a film can mean a change of technique...this is surprising! We are thinking of a story in Hindi. So when we think of a Hindi story, we think this JimmyJip, that camera, this moment, that shot...where does all this go as soon as we move to Bhojpuri? Watch *Gangs of Wasseypur* [Hindi, 2012]... almost Bhojpuri, right? So did he change his technique? The same film Anurag Kashyap makes, Prakash Jha makes...it comes across as sophisticated, but when these people [Bhojpuri filmmakers] make it, why does it become vulgar? And camera movement...how does that know that we are not in the eighth schedule [of the Indian Constitution that lists official languages of the republic]...or this is Bhojpuri so its shot can be taken from the low-angle, huh? This is beyond understanding<sup>15</sup>! (Personal Communication, 2014)

Patel spoke of how he invited filmmakers and journalists to confront the assumption that if they made *saaf* (clean) Bhojpuri films they would not run. For Patel, the assumption that ‘our audience is not like that...good people do not come’ was not satisfactory. He argued that the onus to take the initiative lies upon the filmmakers. He asserted in a rich idiomatic style representative of the region,

You are running a feast. And the arrangement you have is such that people are unable to sit there. People in the village still take a *lota* to the *bhoj*... but the ‘jeans-pant’ people, they cannot sit; their pants will tear. So you must make

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<sup>14</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

arrangements for those people, right? Set up tables for them, or have the buffet system, or give them a *thali*, a plate, then they can eat! There must be the right arrangement, or else how will they eat? You must find the way to feed them; they only want to eat! ... If a guest comes to your place he is not going to bring his own *thali*, that give me in this only! You have to look after their lifestyle, consider the preferences of the person you are inviting<sup>16</sup> (ibid.).

Patel’s major grouse was not only the prevailing standards of Bhojpuri cinema, but the monopoly of those standards. He added that ‘Bhojpuri is the only cinema you have in the world, which has only one grade. Everywhere else we have A, B, C. We have only C! No trace of B or A! Why do you not search for those?’ (ibid.) For him, the business model of Bhojpuri cinema itself was flawed. At the festival he organised, he made a stirring appeal to the filmmakers to not be myopic about the fleeting worth of the Bhojpuri culture industry. He invited them to see the bigger picture and invest in their skills and business so it could stand the test of time and survive within the changing exhibition sector. He said,

Your business runs on one person! One man gives you 10 rupees... but if the same thing you make properly, you will get his whole family, and from one family you will get ten tickets! So do you want to sell ten tickets or are you happy selling just one? All you need to do to get ten tickets from one person is to raise the level. And this can happen with the same budget. You take that shot from *here* [low-angle] to make it vulgar; what is the harm in taking it from *here* [mid-range, no angle]? What is the problem?... We also made them realise that in the given scenario, if you continue like this, you will all sit at home in a year or two. You will be jobless and this industry will close down! The reason is that now the multiplex culture will begin to dominate. Once it takes off, Hindi cinema, world cinema, will begin to make its mark and you will not find a place there. Where people can see Salman Khan, Amir Khan or world cinema, for 100 rupees, nobody is going to pay that amount for Nirahua or Manoj Tiwari! They will not get their money’s worth. They do not think it is worth 100 rupees. So even if you enter the multiplex, you will do no business. And the theatres where you currently operate, would have been demolished. The theatres where your films run for 20-25 rupees, they are being taken down; and once they are replaced, they are all going to be replaced by multiplexes. Once there’s a multiplex, they will not screen your film. They are businessmen after all! ... So either you make films of that level, or shut shop<sup>17</sup> (ibid.).

Saroj Sinha (name changed) is representative of the emergent community of media personnel across the BSR. During a two hour long conversation that took place inside one of the most prominent retail stores of Patna, located at one of the busiest traffic spots – Dak Bangla Chauraha – he spoke of his association with right wing outfits, theatre activism, film and music video production units, and television shows. He has performed across

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<sup>16</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

<sup>17</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

urban, semi-urban and rural areas, and has also been a key resource for show/event management for units whose task is always cultural as well as political. This confluence of the political and cultural activity renders a particular credibility to people who have organizational skills over and above the understanding of cultural activities. Apart from assisting production units from Mumbai, whether from Hindi or the Bhojpuri industry, he has also been hired occasionally to independently tabulate the approximate turnouts in the theatres of a certain region. It is well known that theatres in remote areas massively under-report the tickets sold so as to hold on to a much bigger chunk of profits. Resource personnel like Sinha, on their independent reporting, hold significant clout in the region as well as the Mumbai fraternity, which duly rewards him with hefty sums of money. The arrival of digital projection through UFO, has also made under-reporting impossible and left the exhibition circuit further disinterested in Bhojpuri cinema. Sinha told me, during an animated commentary, how Bhojpuri film business has annihilated itself by first creating an extremely scarce commodity of stardom, allowing it to command an unsustainable price, and then overselling the films with those stars to evacuate the valuation. He said,

Over here, you will be told, you take him, so the film will be a hit. This is the reason behind the destruction... *Arrey*, it gets monotonous! Think how many times will you see one person? If Amitabh Bachchan wants to appear everyday, I do not think even he will be accepted... If there are four months in a week, and every week you have a film with Amitabh Bachchan, who will watch him?... It was like that in the meanwhile, *ki bhaiya* Nirahua! Who is Nirahua?... His film will be a hit! People fought among themselves to get him. Someone said I will give him 40 lakh, someone else said I'll give 60 [lakh], someone said I'll give him 1 crore! Ten people went bankrupt! The house got sold, the land got sold for many. Some of my own friends are left with nothing. They have not yet recovered *yaar*! I told them you guys were responsible for elevating him. What is it to them? It is all stardom! The public is watching, tomorrow they say they will not! They could push him out. We will not watch you anymore. So... Bhojpuri [industry] has come to this that if you by mistake take its name, even if the producer agrees, he says it flat out that you have to do an agreement with me. If I put in 50 [lakhs], what will I gain? Who will commit to that? Who will commit that for 50, I will give you even 55?... They say if you are really passionate, go ahead, or else I am not doing it. And in Hindi films, what passion, it is all business. If I take a star, I will be on the top. Even if my film is ordinary, I will safely go out. The money will get recovered. But here you cannot recover anything<sup>18</sup>.

As is illustrated here, the Bhojpuri film continues to be seen in the shadow of Hindi film stars and the Bollywood economy. For Sinha, another reason why the Bhojpuri media industry has failed to sustain itself is that a multitude of small-time producers of music

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<sup>18</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.



albums have turned towards film production. As was also ratified by several others, a few (three to five) financiers often get together with 4-5 lakhs each and invest in a film project. According to Sinha and others, it is these desperate small producers who 'spoil' the market. They assume that sleaze would help them recover the investment. Instead, gradually this market for sleaze also collapsed and such investments are now routinely wiped out. It is his remarkable reasoning towards this that, however, struck me,

Even today, the state of villages is such that one cannot touch another woman except the wife! That is the tradition, after all. So what about vulgarity? You could not see vulgarity anywhere else. You had to go to the cinema hall for that, so it worked for a while. Girls were coming out after bathing, people saw and said *ki arrey yaar*, I gave 20 rupees, I have got my worth for that! *Waah! Ahahahaha!* What scene I saw! *Waah!* So, by showing that sort of thing, they took money from the public... It has no head or tail, no subject, no story! The girl is taking a bath in the river, in jumps a villain, even four, he takes her clothes off and the public is happy, "E *bhaiya*, why do you not take the top off as well, it will be such fun!" Gradually, in two, four or five months, the public of Bihar rejected this. No, we do not want to watch this! And even if we want to watch this, why should we watch you? Why would we not watch *Murder*? Full... absolutely... ahh! They told us so. I asked people, what about [Bhojpuri] films. They said "*Be bhaiya!* They are showing *Murder* for the same price. Watch *Murder* na... *baap*, what scene I saw! In just one shot, you get your money's worth." So this is what happened. They got distracted from their roots. There is no ocean in our Bihar, you show us that a half-naked girl comes out of the ocean after a swim like this... this cannot be digested!... I saw, I asked people! *Bhaakk* [abuses]!... Where is the ocean, *e chacha*, is there?... If she came out of some *gaddha pokhar* (ditch or pond), it would feel like it was about us. It would connect with the heart, here! It was not connecting here *na!* She could have come out of some ditch, some canal, or the state boring water! That was the opinion of the people<sup>19</sup>!

With due vigilance, I share these accounts to enrich our understanding of the discursive expanse we are confronted with. The narrative anchors against which these commentators project their views, are worthy of our attention. One could conclude that the conditions under which the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema emerged no longer exist and, as many have predicted, it may soon be extinguished. One could also conclude that regardless of that perceived eventuality, the narrative justifications by which the decline is explained away, may neither be necessary nor sufficient. There is no substantial basis to claim that people only wish to see their 'local' universe projected on the screen. The assumptions most commentators make is that the confines of language, once withdrawn from the broader Hindi totality, must also determine the boundaries of cultural identification. They do not seem to entertain the possibility that new cultural boundaries may yet be redrawn by

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<sup>19</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

an ongoing contestation across spatial imaginaries – as they challenge, resist, or fuse into the other. It must also be noticed that Bhojpuri cinema has failed to establish its own terms of evaluation. Its assumed transience precedes its evaluation. We are only able to see it in the light of those that are absent in it – the canon of Bhojpuri or Hindi cinema, the multiplex economy, the middle classes, and a cultural essence.

Another distinct feature of the cited commentaries is the projection of imaginaries upon the female body. Whether it be alleged nudity, or the quotient of modernity as reflected in Western fashion (half-pant, mini-pant etc.), the representation of female sexuality remains at the heart of these debates. This is indeed consistent with a highly sexualised historiography and philosophy of cinema we are offered at large. When cinema is understood in terms of heightening and unfulfilment of the sexual urge elsewhere, we are thrown into a discursive universe where the enterprise of cinema is reduced to a narrow ideological instrumentality. It is the prevalence of these narratives that sustains the provenance upon which the Bhojpuri filmmakers project their understanding of a ‘safe film’ for ‘the masses’. Bhojpuri, the language, also never quite manages to come out of the shadow of Hindi. It remains an object of embarrassment, contempt or outright pride; pride however might be an inverted projection of the unstable position of Bhojpuri.

Finally, the declining commercial appeal of Bhojpuri films also comes across as a shared ‘fact’, despite the murmurs about the distributors ‘deliberately’ failing the films. Those that suggested so meant that a nexus between the distributors and exhibitors stood to gain from the under-reporting of box office collections; the producers therefore retained a much higher percentage of the exploits than what was promised. This may not be true in each case, and is surely not the primary reason why films fail, but there is some substance here. The theatres still running on celluloid prints are the beneficiaries of their remoteness from the Mumbai based producers, who have no direct or independent access to the market. This is indeed ratified by Tripathy who writes in a comprehensive report – the only study of its kind yet –

[T]he chief irony of Bhojpuri cinema, the disparateness of its production base in Mumbai and its audience base in Bihar...[means] that even Bhojpuri is ridden by a different kind of cartelization. The Bihar -Jharkhand territory, which is the main revenue source of Bhojpuri films, is entirely in the hands of a few distributors who have the final say in all matters pertaining to revenue. Partly through political mobilization and partly by holding the exhibitors captive, these distributors have a stranglehold on the main business territory. When translated into plain facts, it often means that the Mumbai-based producer has no control of the situation in Bihar; he has no access to the real

box office figures, and has to passively accept whatever returns are offered by the Bihar distributors. After numerous discussions with the professionals, it became clear that this is indeed the chief issue facing the Bhojpuri industry. What would have been a highly profitable enterprise becomes entirely iffy because of this one lone factor (n.d.: 23).

As a result, the Mumbai-based producers are resigned to losses in Bihar, the main market for Bhojpuri films. In effect, they make a provision for these losses in the budget while a project is conceived. They also create tie-ups with the Bihar distributors to ensure a fairer deal and make the distributor a stakeholder in the project. Additionally, they use the star as a pawn in the brokering process, which 'in effect means that you package your films with so many stars that the distributor is forced to swallow his pride and do a deal on your terms' (ibid.). The economics of Bhojpuri cinema, Tripathy writes, is going through a crisis and the solution is nowhere in sight.

Despite the difference between the Hindi and the Bhojpuri industry, the requirements seem to dictate that only major hits will sustain a production house in the longer run, which again is quite difficult, indeed almost impossible to sustain in the risky business of entertainment. It is to be noted that both the problems – cartelization of distributors and unreasonably high star fees create a catch-22 kind of situation, especially when the heavy presence of big stars in a film is seen as the only remedy for the distributor's stronghold (ibid.).

It is important to note that in an industry where first-time producers bring the maximum percentage of capital, the distribution singularly lends enormous organizing capacity. The overproduction of films and a very low number of film theatres, on the other hand, mean that the scales are heavily tilted towards the exhibition sector. The sector, however, is completely unorganised; instead, the theatres screening Bhojpuri films are often those outside the 'mainstream' economy, only delaying closure or renovation. If the theatres do get renovated, they are re-integrated into the Hindi film economy, and thus no longer play any role in the Bhojpuri counterpart. Therefore, it is only the distribution circuit that organises the industry, which is otherwise too scattered and unaware of its own map. It is then imperative upon them that the distributors operate through small cartels – both with the exhibition and production sector. Very often, the basis of these solidarities, as Tripathy hints upon, may not be merely commercial. Caste solidarities, which are essential to political affiliations, mediate these cartels, more often than not. But it would take a more detailed investigation on those lines to establish this.

What I must point out, at the same time, is that these distribution-exhibition cartels too need a steady supply of films to survive. Overproduction of films, and the regular

availability of dubbed films from Hollywood or the South, means that this is not the defining crisis of these cartels, but it still instructs them to favour producers who have established credentials in the industry. The credentials are not so much a matter of quality as of quantity. Producers like Abhay Sinha, Dr. Sunil Kumar, Ramakant Prasad and Rajkumar Pandey, feature among this list of dependable names. One of the producers I met in Patna, declared categorically that only those distributing the films also produced by them can continue to survive in the trade. This stress upon the figure of distributor-producer was intended to highlight the fact that the producer remains a distant figure within the industry, unless he is willing to jump in and get into distribution as well, and therefore, regulate and control the trajectory of his product much further. This indeed is the route already taken by *Adarsh Jain Films* or Abhay Sinha owned *Yashi Films Pvt. Ltd.*<sup>20</sup> – arguably the most reliable banner in the Bhojpuri industry. When this is seen in conjunction with the other key problem of the Bhojpuri industry – the ‘Star syndrome’ (Tripathy n.d.: 25) – we shall begin to have a grip on how exactly not only the business, but also the film narrative and form suffer from an overdetermined, highly saturated echo-chamber effect marked by convergence and insecurities.

Tripathy reported that the three major stars charge close to 30-40 lakhs per film – a figure he contrasts with the budgets an average Bhojpuri film – 50-80 lakhs in the beginning of the third phase. He adds,

The recent years have seen a massive inflation of budgets entirely due to star fees, and the doubling or tripling of budgets does not reflect in the production value of the product. Several professionals complained that this will soon lead to an impasse. Sandwiched between the distribution problems and increasing star fees, Bhojpuri cinema may run into an economic deadend... When asked what figures will make their budgets comfortable, the reasonable figure came to around 15 lakhs, which is still considerably higher than both Bangla and Marathi industry [5 lakhs]... The stars thus carry a heavy value quite simply because they are instrumental in both returns at the box office and retrieval of greater revenues from the distributor. Star fees are thus part of the ‘risk package’ that is typical of the entertainment industry. Not investing in stars somehow conveys the message that the producer is only looking at modest

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<sup>20</sup> The website of Adarsh Jain Films – <http://adarshjainfilms.com/> (accessed 13 March, 2015) – states that the company is in Film Production, Distribution, Film Finance & Audio- Video Marketing since last 3 Decades.

Yashi Films’ website – <http://www.yashifilms.com/> (accessed 13 March, 2015) – declares that Yashi Films started out as a film making company in 2004. Earlier it was a Distribution Company in the north India and distributed more than 50 big-budget Hindi/English/Bhojpuri films. It claims to have to its credit the most enviable Bhojpuri film catalogue. As the most respectable & dynamic production house of Bhojpuri, it makes a claim to some of the highest grossers in Bhojpuri cinema.

returns... The Bhojpuri film budgets now range anywhere between 80 lakhs to 2 crores. Star fees are a major component of the budget as Bhojpuri film makers follow a highly efficient or even hurried schedule using minimal sets (ibid.: 25).

The extreme dependence on the male stars and a select minority of cartels has only grown further. This narrowing down of stakes upon a few individuals is a feature of unorganised industries in which capital remains too insecure to experiment, and highly dependent on speculations and easy rationales. My submission is that the conservatism of the Bhojpuri industry – the narrow set of thematic, narrative, stylistic and formal practices, the recycling of older Hindi film content, the frontal mode of address, and the habit of deploying the sexual motif to de-risk the enterprise – is reflective of the conditions under which the films are produced and distributed, and also of the high risk quotient they carry towards never finding a theatrical release. Our evaluation of Bhojpuri cinema, therefore, must take into account these constraints.

Indeed, the euphoria with Bhojpuri cinema being the voice of the vernacular masses has understandably settled down. The logic by which many argued that the masses have rejected the international ambitions of Bollywood and replaced them with their *own* cinema carries little appeal now. In an inspired and often animated conversation at a busy town center of Danapur, not far from Patna city, Vinay Kumar (name changed) declared about Bhojpuri films, “*Sirf awaaz Bhojpuri hai!* [Only the voice is Bhojpuri]” Kumar is a theatre activist, who has been the state coordinator of *Sakshar Bharat Abhiyan* [literally, Literate India Mission] and research fellow with the Union culture ministry, is a noted figure in the region. Every Friday and Saturday, he works with a small set of amateurs to perform a street play on Sunday mornings. He writes the plays himself and often performs the lead role too. Raw and underprepared though they may seem, these performances draw a significant crowd and are staged to initiate a dialogue around shared interests. I attended one such performance after which Kumar spoke to me at length and said,

There is no policy. There is no film policy. About films, there should be something like a vision, right? There is nothing of that sort here! Those films that are getting made elsewhere, there is no policy to release them, let alone investing in production. Why does the *janmaanas* [population] think that Bhojpuri films have been imposed upon them? They are not emerging from here... So, how long will the people bear with these implants? Neither the market, nor the government have a clear vision. The most obvious example of this are the theatres of Patna. You can see yourself... what Bhojpuri film is running. These are just some small little theatres where Hindi films would not run. In Dinara, they are running. In some corner of Sasaram, in Shivsagar, they

are running. The same tired old-style poster...this is the reality, whatever people may say!<sup>21</sup>

Kumar argued that Bhojpuri cinema was yet another instance of the ‘Bombay capital’, now entering a low-bandwidth market through another channel. He marked out the big stars of Bhojpuri cinema and commented that they do not do anything for Bhojpuri – the language, culture or cinema – and only throw around their Bombay capital. This is a key insight that goes on to untangle several complexities. Bombay capital must not be seen as a surplus generated in Mumbai, but one that comes into effect on account of the distance between the BSR and Bombay. It may even be worthwhile to distinguish between Bombay and Mumbai here. While it is true that the former has been renamed as the latter, it is the former that retains enormous mysterious charm and is always mentioned as such. Bombay is the province of Bollywood, both labels exceeding their empirical confines. One of the distinct charms of Bhojpuri cinema remains its intimacy and convergence with Bombay. To enter Bhojpuri cinema is indicative of ‘having made it’ *in Bombay*. This timeless Bombay is the signifier of a glamorous universe that even the drudgery of Mumbai cannot diminish. Tales abound of moderately successful local artists who went to Bombay, lived it up for a few years, returned with a flashier lifestyle, a bunch of followers, a big SUV, possibly even a house, endless promises – and went bust in a flash. Kumar himself spoke of several of his acquaintances who went through this cycle of stardom and were now struggling to survive and pay off their debts.

We must however now focus upon the Bhojpuri film that has generated more public debate than any other – *Deswa*. Publicised as a film that would lift Bhojpuri cinema out of the cultural gutter and bring together Bhojpuri culture, the multiplex economy and the respectable (middle-class) audiences, *Deswa* had cut out an enormous task for itself. By marking itself as the defining challenge to the perceived ‘essence’ of Bhojpuri culture, it brought to the table all sorts of stakeholders. That is why, the *Deswa* debate is the most compelling and perhaps the most revealing tussle to comprehend the state of Bhojpuri cinema.

### **The *Deswa* Debate**

Nitin Chandra is a young filmmaker whose *Champaran Talkies* produced the Bhojpuri film *Deswa* – the first Bhojpuri film to get selected at the Indian Panorama section of the International Film Festival of India. The film has been to a few international film festivals,

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<sup>21</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

received a pre-release showing in Patna, in November 2011 – also attended by Nitish Kumar, the Chief Minister of Bihar. It locates the youth of Bihar in its conditions of economic backwardness and lack of opportunity, pushing them into crime. Marking a transition from Yadav's leadership to Kumar's, the film documents a glorious transition. Chandra's early statements on the film created some rather lofty expectations,

DESWA is like any other world class film with real location, real characters, real situations and real performances. This kind of film is never made in the history of Bhojpuri Cinema. Only when you watch it, you will come to know what I am talking about. [It] will attract the educated bhojpuria audience. There has been no attempt made to attract the educated bhojpuria segment of this country. Most of the bhojpuri films are laced with pornographic type images in [the] form of dance numbers or double meaning dialogues. DESWA is [a] clean, social and crime oriented film which will make you think. This is [the] first Multiplex film in Bhojpuri.

There is a very small segment of bhojpuri speaking people who see bhojpuri films and that is the reason why bhojpuri films are low on budget and poor in quality. Like I said the major segment of bhojpuri society doesn't see bhojpuri film and they are waiting see a classic bhojpuri film. But [at the] same time DESWA will be a hit with single screen audience too...As you rightly said that this is International level bhojpuri cinema ('DESWA will attract the educated bhojpuria audience: NITIN CHANDRA', 2010).

Chandra's sister – Neetu – has acted in a few Hindi films, and as a producer of *Deswa* has been instrumental in it being discussed widely. She predictably echoed her brother,

I thought of getting into production because I want to bring sensibility and sensitivity in Bhojpuri films. I have invested all my savings in 'Deswa'. It's a revolutionary film. There is no violence or nudity, which is typically related to Bhojpuri films, and when you make something which is not a part of the norm, not many people stand by you. But I believed in this film from day one and have done everything, including an item song, to promote the movie. The movie has been received very well in international film festivals (Sharma 2011).

Even though the film has not had a commercial release, Chandra said that it was released in just five theatres so as to qualify for the National Award. The lukewarm response during these screenings and the later debate were instrumental in taking the steam off the early enthusiasm. Conceding that it is tough to find distributors for 'meaningful Bhojpuri movies', Chandra said, "Frankly speaking, I don't know when the film will be released because finding [an] investor for a clean Bhojpuri film is really tough. If I had item girls<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 'Item girls' is a common reference within the popular vocabulary to classify young women who perform a seductive dance whether in a film, or on stage during live shows. The term has been borrowed from Bollywood where the practice of the 'item song' began. Girls who otherwise played

showing their skin and double-meaning crass dialogues, it [would be] a cakewalk for me to release 'Deswa'" (IANS 2014). Not everyone, however, is convinced of *Deswa*'s distinction and the merits of Chandras' claims. The reduction of all complexities to the direct mapping between sexual motifs and audience preference reflects an unfortunate ignorance of various other factors. This narrow overview of the public discourse is something Bhojpuri cinema must contend with on a daily basis. The debate on *Deswa* is curious because it manages to go beyond and liberate the object of evaluation from the vulgar-decent binary, thereby providing a deeper look into the other sentiments at stake.

Swapnil Tiwari had argued that in spite of the natural affinity with Bhojpuri, his mother tongue, he keeps away from the films for he is afraid the films might ruin his affection for the language (Tiwari 2011). Responding to Tiwari, Munna Pandey questions whether the mother tongue is a line drawn on water so that a few rubbish films and double-entendre dialogues and songs may so easily become the basis of one's affection. Pandey also clarifies that he is not entirely enamoured by the narrative, treatment and detailing of *Deswa* but he is enthusiastic about the manner in which the film addresses the reality on the ground in the BSR. However, he adds,

Actually, we do not yet have the category of audience towards which *Deswa* is oriented...the middle-class of the Bhojpuri region does not watch Bhojpuri cinema. If *Deswa* can create the conditions under which it would become possible, we must welcome it. Look at the past two decades of Bhojpuri films and you can easily gauge how many films there have been on [social] issues. We can only discuss separately the issue of nudity and vulgarity. We must not make much noise if the dedication with which *Deswa* was made could not deliver a film up to the critical standards of film analysts. We must also appreciate its positives – acting, music, casting, location, and issue-based plot – to balance the views...Nitin [Chandra] had said that the film will have everything, except vulgarity. And he has delivered his promise in silence. For now, *Deswa* is on the right track, and it is a torchbearer to the way from where inspired friends shall emerge and change Bhojpuri cinema in entirety...How a film, regardless of its many drawbacks, acquires 'cult' status – *Deswa* is its quality example. It raises a possibility despite limitations amidst a barrage of rubbish films defacing Bhojpuri cinema<sup>23</sup> (Pandey 2011).

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no character within the film were imported for one scintillating dance piece, and increasingly this practice has become the mainstay of publicity material for the industry. Gradually, the industry acquired a steady bunch of women who became item song specialists, but at the same time, frontline actresses also started doing item songs in films where they played no character. The term item girl, therefore, has increasingly been evacuated of its disparaging content within Bollywood but the same cannot be said about Bhojpuri media industry where item girls are always women who have no voice, whether on stage or within a film-text. Hereafter, I shall drop the quotation marks around the term even though I maintain a critical distance from its usage.

<sup>23</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.



Amitesh, however, provided the most sophisticated challenge to *Deswa*. He wrote in a blog entry, "On account of the prevailing cheapness of Bhojpuri cinema, this film meant to dispel the notion that there can be no films of standard in Bhojpuri. *Deswa* had excited us and at least I was in its favour before I watched the film and was disappointed that the film which we expected so much from is nothing but formulaic representation...After watching the film, I posted a comment on its [Facebook] page saying that it seems okay if I see it as a Bhojpuri film; but when seen as a film, it disappoints<sup>24</sup>" (2011). Highlighting the positioning of *Deswa* by the Chandras and many others, as a film that challenges the reduction of Bhojpuri culture to the lower classes and vulgarity, Amitesh agrees with the concerns of the *Deswa* project, yet distances himself from the film. He writes,

Now *Deswa* wants your support because it is paving the way for Bhojpuri films. On the basis of this argument, we can support its project, but not the film itself. The reactions to the criticism received by the film argued that if you criticise (not condemn) the film, you would be taken as an enemy of Bhojpuri pride. This is the same argument that connects every criticism of Nitish Kumar [Chief Minister of Bihar] to the condemnation of Bihari pride. Or why a proof of patriotism is demanded from those critical of the state, for they are assumed to be an enemy of the state. It is not necessary to name this ideology...*Deswa* claims to be the vanguard of the purification of Bhojpuri cinema...Can this phase of Bhojpuri cinema be imagined without [*Sasura Bada Paisawala*]? Loosely structured and technically backward though it may be, we cannot overlook the importance of the film. [*Deswa*] is not a more sophisticated attempt. I see *Deswa* in the same tradition which, if improved and successful, can inspire many. The label of vulgarity, which 'the *Deswa* community' uses to discredit substantial efforts, also needs to be questioned.

[..] The elite or upper and middle class that they wish to bring back, has long since abandoned cinema. I also have a problem with the upper class, why should we concern ourselves with them? Should we not bother about the regular audience of Bhojpuri cinema?...Why should the current viewers be abandoned to cheap cinema halls and vulgar films? Are they not important for us? Dialects are always at a distance from the elite and the elites always look down upon them – such is history. Then why should we run after the elite? Why should we not work towards an inclusive audience? Before aspiring for world-class, we must first aspire for a Bhojpuri cinema that is of Bhojpuri...The director claims that [*Deswa*] is not yet in the public domain [and] it is not meant for commercial success. Still my comment is removed because it would influence the audience...The intellectual standards of any society can be measured by the attitude towards those who are critical of them. The attitude of the *Deswa* community is disturbing so I stand away from them<sup>25</sup> (Amitesh 2011).

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<sup>24</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

<sup>25</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

Another scathing critique came from Patel, who has been relatively generous to the film, but very critical of Nitin Chandra’s attitude and approach. He questioned their honesty of purpose and the reluctance to trust the audience, invest in publicity and negotiate with the existing infrastructure of the industry. He said,

See, I do not think there is much difference between those who are making Bhojpuri films and [the Deswa community]... They had already declared that they are making a film that will change the history of Bhojpuri... [The others] say that our film is a superhit, these people said that our film will change history!... You let the film go to the people, let them decide. The effort was good, but the presentation had many errors... The biggest problem with Bhojpuri cinema is that they have no publicity budget. This is not just about *Deswa*. Somehow, they arrange just enough money to make the film... The audience is not omniscient. You say something and everyone is not sitting on Facebook. And it is not a mature way of getting your audience. On the basis of that, you cannot expect people to spend 100-200 rupees and go watch your film... So you make a good film or bad, it makes no difference!

Secondly, they refrained from single [screen] theatres. They declared beforehand that we are different! They are thieves, we are civil... You (i.e. ‘the Deswa community’), instead of persuading them, start attacking them!... The same presentation that you gave on Facebook, or in a seminar, why did you not deliver the same to the distributor? Why did you not present your case in a promotional event?... They just sent a [press] release to all the newspapers that published it with a photo. It does not work like that! You did not hire any PR, so the procedure for making a film successful, you did not follow that... You just write on Facebook that *Deswa* is not a film but a project and fifty people like it and you are happy! Those who liked it may be sitting in Delhi, Ahmedabad or London. They do not care about your film and you are saying ‘oh what a great response!’ So all that was going on inside you, that you will turn it around, and win over all the nonsense here – this evaluation and such claims were wrong. This proves that you do not have good intentions. You should do your work and submit it to the people<sup>26</sup> (Personal Communication, 2014).

There are indeed resonances in the criticisms offered by Amitesh and Patel that need our attention. Both seem to argue that even if *Deswa* is a challenge to the prevailing standards of Bhojpuri cinema, it cannot be granted that legitimacy *prior* to audiences’ approval. They make an argument for establishing qualitative distinctions not by already privileged and distinguished credentials, but by negotiating with market conditions under which the cinema that Chandra disapproves of, prevails. The expectation here is that Chandra would not demand an exceptional position but work towards bringing to fruition a common and inclusive standard of wider cultural legitimacy. Patel adds, further highlighting Chandra’s desire for exceptionalism and unsubstantiated, undeserved distinction,

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<sup>26</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

After your film ran for a week in Jamshedpur, Patna, Begusarai, Champaran... Now that man says the film has not released yet... He is talking about the possibility of a release in another language. He will make it in Hindi, has already changed its name four times... He changed it from *Deswa* to *Des*, then changed it to some English... So they are still not sure as to what they want to do in the film!... If, instead of those six people who turned up for the show, you had six lakh, would you have said that it has not yet been released? When it does not work, it did not release!

[...] Now let us come to the story. The story too is a way of trying to oblige the government. In fact, Nitish Kumar himself. The film can be called a promotional film for Nitish. They did this so that the government shall be obliged and they will get the benefit... All of this was calculated... See the story moves from Lalu's period to Nitish's. In a place, it is also in the dialogue that the Chief Minister here does not even know how to hold a pen. The film is periodised like that... That is why they even brought Nitish to a special screening; he also liked the film, very good. But the *intention* behind the screening, the plan, was not fulfilled. Now they speak against him too. The government is stupid, the people are stupid, good people do not stay in Bihar. He has started abusing now... On one hand he claims to be the well-wisher of Bhojpuri and aspires to change it. But when there are events [like the festival] organised where people discuss such things the man demands money to attend! Even though he is my friend. We fell apart on this itself... We were going to show *Deswa* but he took his film off [the schedule] saying that the film has not yet released... His objection was that if you are doing a festival, do not invite Vinay Bihari (the most prominent lyricist of the industry) and many others. And if you invite them, you should shame them. There is a way of doing these things. We put forward our questions, but with due respect. You cannot just cane them around<sup>27</sup> (ibid.).

*Deswa*'s failure to make substantial inroads is no stray incident. It intended to represent the whole realm of Bhojpuri cinema, which was thought by many to be mis-representing the region. Chandra was admittedly pained by the image the industry painted of his province, and therefore set out to amend it. In order to understand what Bhojpuri cinema, as it stands, means to the people who it represents elsewhere, we must pay attention to Chandra's bitter and sentimental appeals. In a significant piece, he draws our attention to the unpleasant posters of Bhojpuri films washed in loud colours, strange faces and titles. These are posters of films made in 'your language', he reminds his brethren, before drawing a curious parallel, "Perhaps you would ignore your language and identity and walk away like you would put a hand on your nose and walk away from a stinking trashbin, but when the same trash leads to an epidemic, it could awaken us or put us to sleep forever<sup>28</sup>" (Chandra 2011). Chandra points out that the third phase of the Bhojpuri cinema started with the capital investments coming in from as wide a spectrum as the political leadership of Bihar, the

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<sup>27</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

<sup>28</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

bureaucrats from Delhi, ex-spotboys<sup>29</sup>, or ordinary citizens from any corner of India. He adds,

Today, everyone knows which language films would draw the crowds of the poor, illiterate boys, rickshaw-pullers, thelawallas, runaway kids from schools and people intoxicated with this poppy-like cinema, only if you spiced them with eroticism and vulgarity. These people, who buy ten-rupee tickets to watch films, who are devoid of all services and are not even as literate as to think of their own well-being, do not know what is happening to them. Their ability to think is being micromanaged so well that they would not know if it is cinema that is subverting them or something else... Am I talking like a well-bred and upper class Bihari? No, I am an ordinary Bihari who loves Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi and Awadhi, who is concerned about Bhojpuri films' attack on the Bhojpuri society and the structure and culture of Bihar<sup>30</sup> (ibid.)

Chandra's complaint is that Bhojpuri cinema is extremely regressive and is delivering cheap but harmful entertainment. He is also concerned about what those from elsewhere think of 'our society' in the light of these films. He fails to see why unlike other regional cinemas (Bengali, Tamil etc.) an educated speaker of Bhojpuri should be deprived of regional cultural pride in one's representative cinema. In a stirring emotional passage he writes,

Whenever I watch a poster or trailer of Bhojpuri [films], I feel as if my mother-like Bhojpuri is crying out asking her children to not rape her, to give her some respect. But it seems nobody is listening... The truth is there are no filmmakers in Bhojpuri... How they have segregated millions of educated people away from Bhojpuri cinema, while the elites have themselves moved away! They say they do not watch Bhojpuri, even if they talk in Bhojpuri at home. I ask such people, "Stupids! It is your image they are presenting to the world!" Who is that half-clad girl on that poster? Watch carefully. She is Bhojpuri!... She is our mother. Next time, watch your mother and watch those posters on the wall. Selling one's body and heart for money itself is called prostitution<sup>31</sup> (ibid.)

The invocation of the mother-goddess, imagined as representative of a language, is not new here. Ramaswamy's *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India* (1997) discusses visualizing Tamil language as a goddess (*Tamilattay*). Lisa Mitchell's *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue* also traces the invocation of *Telugu Talli* toward the history of Telugu-language politics, highlighting 'the processes that have led speakers of particular languages to see themselves

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<sup>29</sup> 'Spotboys', as they are widely known, are a routine presence on film sets in India. They run errands and perform all the odd jobs, from holding lights on the set to bringing tea for the crew.

<sup>30</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

<sup>31</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

as having a separate history, literature, politics, and identity’ (2009: 11). The emerging politics of Bhojpuri here may not resonate with that of Tamil and Telugu but there is an unmistakably political orientation in the outlook offered by Chandra. The *Deswa* debate is peculiar in how it blurs the distinctions between the personal and the political. The individual and the social categories continue to appear as each other in opposing narratives. While Chandra speaks of the underprivileged as if they were ‘sub-humans’, he is also angered by his language cinema representing him, *in spite of himself*. Instead, the industry finds support in the same ‘sub-humans’ who are being ‘manipulated’ according to him. He finds himself trapped within a nexus of illiteracy, suspect capital flows, and unbridled sexuality – all flouting the moral and cultural bases of the narratives they deploy. Amitesh agrees with Chandra’s project because he too believes that the Bhojpuri film business is sustained by the economic exploitation of that audience which can no longer be enchanted by the bankrupt Hindi cinema. He affirms that Bhojpuri films are fanning the frustrations of the perverted, and will very likely die a natural death. Their disagreements emerge later, as mentioned above, regarding whether or not *Deswa* is a film unconditionally distinguished from the rest.

The debate puts forth interesting points of agreement as well as departures. All the commentators disapprove of the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema, and are ashamed of the fact that it represents their region, their language and their culture. While vulgarity is often singled out as the most iconic and the most symptomatic, it provides a cover for a much wider and more complex set of disagreements lying within. Cultural representation of a region, let alone one as unequal and resistant to social mobility as the BSR, is no easy problem. Except for a few issues specific to the *Deswa* debate, we are routinely confronted by the problem of ‘others’. It is because our cinema, our language, our culture, are all projections that assume the authority of one provenance over another, that they continue to get entangled in the web of an explanation that makes a failed attempt to account for the others. To what extent is it tenable that the poor and the illiterate are sexually starved, and therefore, easily satiated by rampant sexuality? Must we concede that the brief success of Bhojpuri cinema was a cumulative effect of a variety of *deficits* (education, culture, sexual satisfaction, and material resources)? Bhojpuri cinema, it must be remembered, is not unique in its struggle with the classification of audiences, subjects and sites. Ganti (2012: 282) points out the three features of the production culture of Hindi film industry: sentiments of disdain, practices of distinction, and efforts to manage uncertainty. The distinction across audiences and taste cultures (Bihar, family audience, aunties, and servants) illustrate, she writes,

[T]he relevance of social categories, such as region, generation, gender, and class, as well as the dominance of binary oppositions – Bihar vs. family audience, aunties vs. servants – in the Hindi film industry’s creation of a taxonomy of the film-viewing public. Rather than originating from the well-established traditions of market research utilized by the print media, television, advertising, and consumer product industries in India, the film industry’s audience classifications, which are broadly encompassing and highly imprecise, emerge from a combination of intuition, regional stereotypes, and developmentalist perceptions of how education, occupation, and residence shape subjectivities and thus taste cultures. All of the various fragmentations of the audience reproduce a larger and more enduring binary of the “masses” and the “classes” as the two main audiences of Hindi cinema. Filmmakers regard these constituencies as fundamentally in opposition, with completely incommensurable tastes and world-views (ibid.).

As I have illustrated across a variety of quotes above, the same can be said with respect to Bhojpuri cinema. Ganti is correct in drawing our attention to John Durham Peters’ idea of film cultures as technologies of ‘social envisioning’, fulfilling ‘the promise of representing unseeable social totalities, which “make society imaginable to itself”’ (ibid.; Peters 1997). The society indeed needs a narrative basis to imagine itself. In ordinary times, various narratives circulate within closed networks, which make apparently rational judgements on their basis. Within the film economy, the production, distribution and exhibition circuits, as discussed above, all operate upon such stray narrative principles that emerge baselessly. Only when they confront and negotiate with each other, do they update or reorient themselves. It is however in the times of heightened political churning that much of the narrative basis spills over more widely via the media and feeds into the political overtones. The Bhojpuri language may have existed for centuries, but for the first time it has acquired a political fervour, in relation to the discourses of identity. P. Radhika’s report for CIDASIA project of Center for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS), Bangalore – *Report on the Kannada Culture Industry*, part of *Economy, Politics, Culture Industry: Case Studies of the Kannada and Bhojpuri Culture Industries* – makes a highly relevant argument for our purpose here.

Kannada identity politics is a projection of the underground economy of the Kannada cultural industry. Such a mapping should not be mistaken as a reading of an identity politics in ‘economic’ terms where the linguistic is seen as a ‘false layering’ to the ‘true economic tensions beneath’ but as a revisiting of the cultural through the economic in more complex ways.

The importance of understanding cultural economy is not merely confined to financial transactions and profit-making of culture industry but is closely tied to political articulations that emerge from this underground economy. The moment of political articulation is important because it is at this moment that the economic value of the cultural commodity meets its cultural value in a

context otherwise of the difficulty of translating cultural value into economic value (Radhika n.d.: 1)

The *Deswa* debate had indeed emerged at a moment when the economic value of the cultural commodity (Bhojpuri cinema) threatened to determine its cultural value by subverting the dimension of culture that was only recoverable in 'tradition', through a new political articulation. This new articulation privileged the linguistic and addressed a political territory beyond the BSR. Bhojpuri, even though a language spoken by only a few districts of Bihar and some in UP, emerged as the axis around which the new solidarities emerged. It would be a mistake, as Radhika points out, to discredit the linguistic here as mere 'false layering'. Instead of merely following from the economic, it has provided the basis from which to re-imagine one's political location. Crucially, Bhojpuri has also acquired a hegemonic status within the complex web of north Indian languages ranging from Awadhi to Maithili. It has therefore become the pre-eminent enabler of political articulation staging a negotiation between economic and cultural values. Srinivas et. al. (2009: 14) mark this moment as one in which Bihar is becoming conscious of its cultural practices as they are beginning to 'take off' in economic terms. They convincingly argue that cultural value is best signalled by 'what we may call pre-capitalist value systems' – often expressed under the umbrella-term 'tradition'. The migrant labourer is then an iconic figure that makes a 'reluctant transition into the marketplace' and initiates the translation of cultural value into economic value. In the entangled contours of his belonging emerges a politics that drives the emergent commodity. In this process, the culture 'loses its pre-capitalist referents, its consensus-building power, and also is threatened with the loss of its politics. This is a matter of great trauma for cultural practices that have survived on cultural value' (ibid.).

Bhojpuri cinema too had survived in its first two phases on the pre-capitalist referents. The emergence of the third phase, as we have witnessed, has produced enormous trauma as it was born out of a *willful* break with the earlier definitions of Bhojpuri culture. What the *Deswa* debate fails to reconcile with is this entry into the marketplace. *Deswa*'s own failure may be read as the failure of translating old cultural value into economic value, at a moment when the latter has acquired a logic in consultation with the prevailing market conditions, and liberated itself of the old cultural baggage. The break, as we have discussed, first emerged within the realm of the music industry. Even as the theatrical exhibition circuit is expunging Bhojpuri films and their commercial viability is struggling to work itself out – primarily on account of the disinterest of the exhibition sector – the music economy has remained the pre-eminent column of the Bhojpuri media industry.

## **Films, Music, Videos and Politics: A Very Long Engagement**

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a ‘video boom’ due to the liberalisation of video licensing. While regular theatres needed huge investments and had to pay a high entertainment tax, video parlours and theatres proliferated since they needed modest investments and paid a fixed entertainment tax. According to a survey conducted in 1984, there were around 2000 ‘video coaches’ (long distance coaches that played films on video), and 1000 video theatres in India by then. Across the country, there were around 5 lakh VCRs, and every month some 30,000 VCRs came through customs, and nearly double through the black market (ibid.: 10). These numbers only grew rapidly in the next fifteen years. Additionally, across the villages, small-towns and cities, nightlong screenings were held for crowds ranging from one family to a few hundreds. Usually, a television would be brought with a VCR and 3-4 cassettes – pirated or original. These were festive events, which celebrated the availability of films outside the filth and inconvenience of film theatres. Often women participated in them most enthusiastically, for they visited film theaters very rarely, provided that certain male guardians escorted them (see M 2014, M 2014a, M 2014b for a detailed history of the circulation of video in India).

Video parlours, coaches and informal screenings allowed cinema a life beyond the theatres. This video market consolidated avenues of revenue generation, but they also cut into the revenues of the exhibition sector. And indeed, the producers got no wind of these various streams of revenue generation. Srinivas et al. identify them as ‘the economies of video and other post-celluloid formats’ and argue that these economies ‘form a penumbra around the film industry’ (ibid.). The digital economies have only further encouraged a ‘copy culture’ resulting in a very slippery media object (Sundaram 2010), thus only amplifying the zone of the penumbra, and limiting the significance of the box-office. The crucial moment in this history of media commodity emerged when video, instead of only furthering possibilities at the exhibition end, also began to play a role in media production. The music video, then, as we have identified above, was the format that precipitated a major break.

The Bhojpuri music video had at least three major antecedents: i) vernacular music flourishing on audio cassettes or disks, ii) Hindi film music, iii) IndiPop music videos. It is important to recognise that each of these were already impure, hybrid musical traditions fluctuating between the discursive poles of traditional and modern, melodious and ‘dance numbers’ etc. The most difficult reconciliation for the Bhojpuri music video, however, was the one between aural and visual imaginaries. The traditional musical forms – *kajri*, *chaita*,



*birha*, *nirgun geet*, *fagun*, *chhat geet*, *gaali* and *mukabla* – had a performative dimension not necessarily conducive to the visualisation whose precedent was borrowed from film music or IndiPop videos. Many of these forms continue to flourish in audio as well as video formats – mostly as recorded live shows. Yet, they remain inert to compelling visualisations necessary for the uptake of music videos, for they were born out of cultural practices and lacked the fantastic or spectacular quotient. The precedent for more visual song and dance practices, on the other hand, comes from within the media commodity. Throughout my fieldwork the icons of the ‘real’ Bhojpuri music, as opposed to its ‘perverted’ mutants, were Bharat Sharma ‘Vyas’ and Sharda Sinha. Respected and celebrated across the BSR, both Sharma and Sinha are claimed to be the torchbearers of Bhojpuri culture, keepers of its conscience in the midst of ruthless profiteering (see Chapter 3 for more). Yet, the penumbra around the film industry did not include them. Tripathy (2012: 65) attributes the shift to Manoj Tiwari who began to sing songs associated with private community occasions such as weddings, childbirth, and local festivals and fairs – songs not meant for the public platform earlier.

However, the Bhojpuri music industry discovered a new gear of vitality particularly after the success of *Sasura Bada Paisawala* (2004) when Tiwari became the first major star of the Bhojpuri film industry. It is this channel through which one could jump from the realm of singing stardom straight into film stardom that lent further valency to the music industry. This is why it is important to distinguish the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema as one entirely invested in the star figure. It is the ‘star’ – a figure of narrative, visual and performative excess dominating the very logic of progression within the media economy – and also the aspiration to stardom that connects the film and music industries, as they stand deeply entangled. The singer-performer of the music video could walk across into the film screen because even as the film narrative demands multiple tasks as opposed to the amorous function dominating most music videos, the star-effect remains consistent. The young male star, across the narrative scheme of the media industry, remains a figure of sublimation, belonging nowhere but to the narrative geography of an aspirational landscape. This terrain of sublimation connects those realms of the music industry which have become disproportionately vibrant in the last decade.

However, there is another realm of stardom that we must identify before moving further – the live shows. Tripathy (2012), who conducted the most comprehensive survey of the music industry, says that the vast underbelly of live shows/concerts is where the size and power of the music industry can be really gauged. He writes,

It is in fact possible to think of the Bhojpuri culture industry in terms of three concentric circles. The inner circle is of Bhojpuri movies which have an approximate turnover of Rs 100 crore a year, equal to the budget of about three or four big “Bollywood” films. The next circle is of the CD/VCD industry, estimated to be five to 10 times bigger and the outer circle of the “live show” industry which is reported to be more than five times the size of the CD industry. We discovered that even the bigger players in the industry have no precise idea and differ far too much among themselves... It needs to be emphasised here that a vast majority of CDs are produced by the artists themselves. The company often spends nothing till an album makes a big enough hit to deserve large-scale replication. A large Delhi based company may easily release 5,00,000 CDs, whereas a much smaller company in Patna may diffidently toy with the figure of 20,000. These are the “industrial” volumes that this music industry works with. I decided to call the Bhojpuri music economy a “trickle economy” – it is a big river but its main source is not a glacier but rather the innumerable small drops of water oozing out from a million places... if the CD industry is enjoying a continuing boom, the credit must eventually go to the local patron willing to spend Rs 3,000 to Rs 30,000 in a single night. In the process, the music companies seem to lose their tight grip on a market they have held captive... The live show audience appears to us as part customers, and part traditional patrons-sponsors. Analytically speaking, the live show industry may be a threshold between the pre-industrial and the industrial. But in reality when you focus on the threshold it seems to magnify into the wide spaces of concert grounds, much larger than movies or the cassette-CD industry, taxonomic ambiguities notwithstanding (2012: 59-60).

In most societies, there are certain privileged channels of celebrityhood. But the celebrity is not merely a figure of success in a privileged domain, she is also a capital-intensive high-risk industry figure. Which is one of the reasons why capital investments find a way of de-risking themselves by building interlinkages across the seemingly disconnected channels of celebrityhood. The realm of fashion, cinema, advertising, music and many more ancillary industries are infested with such interlinkages across advanced capitalist societies. The Bhojpuri media industry, in not too dissimilar ways, finds the channels of music, live performances, cinema and politics highly interlinked. Most crucially, each of these channels provides a structure of publicity and helps constitute a loyal community that can then be handed over to another channel. The live shows allow artists to publicise their upcoming films and music albums, the music albums often contain songs from an upcoming film, the singer-performers leverage their music albums to find financiers to invest in a film project launching them, and often music and film stars leverage their stardom towards their own or others’ political careers. In a sense, these tendencies also indicate the crunch of publicity expenses at large in the region, which furthers their dependence on structures of community built around the tiers of the entertainment industry.

Stardom and the investible surplus capital are the two ways in which this entangled web can be understood better. As a figure of excess, the star always appears via a triumphant declaration in the language of hyperbole. Most declarations are however unsubstantiated claims of commercial success. Those with a limited degree of success gain further ground by endorsing younger stars, singing a song in their new albums, taking them along on their own live shows. There is no clearly agreeable measure of stardom here, only competing claims upon the idea, always alert to strategic coalitions. Investible surplus capital too, often rides on the aspiration to stardom, regardless of its economic viability. The investments are made more often in oneself, or one's own kin; far less often in an enterprising prospect. An overwhelming percentage of singer-performers, and most of one-time producers and financiers, invest in order to catapult themselves or their offsprings into the realm of stardom. A Delhi-based journalist, Deeptimaan Tiwary, summed it up quite aptly when he narrated an incident of going back to his village in the BSR and being told by one of the personages, "*Bachua Hero Hai!* [My son is a hero now!]" (Personal communication, 2014)

It is important to track these moves even as we focus upon the film industry, because if we take them to be extraneous to the film industry, we would never be able to explain the rationale for its sustenance *in spite of* box-office failures. It is also imperative to assess the film industry as a facilitator helping convert one form of capital into another – particularly, various social capitals into economic ones, and the other way around. A massive proportion of capital invested in the Bhojpuri industry comes from the surpluses generated elsewhere to claim socio-cultural stardom. Most of this would not qualify as investment in the trade parlance. The 'becoming' of one's offspring as a 'hero' is already a conversion of dispensable surplus into desirable social capital. Srinivas et al. (2009) also point towards the film industry being constituted by dubiously legal range of practices that include piracy, under-reporting of box-office sales, tax-evasion etc., and spawning 'a whole spectrum of activities that use the cinema as a resource but do not in fact have anything to do with the film industry as such' (8-9). They argue that the production end of the chain is sustained by a 'new or migrant capital – capital that has quite literally moved from another place (the village, for example) and activity (trade, bootlegging, etc.)'. They argue in the context of Karnataka that it has 'witnessed frequent conflict of interest between production and distribution-exhibition sectors around the question of language' from which, it is possible to suggest that 'one of the political problems with exhibition is that it is agnostic to *content or language* of film' (10).

As I have shown above, similar apathy exists towards the Bhojpuri films by the distribution-exhibition sector – in favour of the Hindi film industry. In order to survive the inability to return profits at the box-office, the consolidation of other revenue streams appears a reasonable possibility. But this possibility is compromised by the fact that *occupying* theatrical exhibition drives the Bhojpuri industry output. Yet, the commercial health of the trade may eventually pull the curtains down on the film industry. The music output, however, could even replenish the gap thus left for it does not depend on the shared infrastructure of a competing enterprise. The live shows and music albums do not only provide an avenue towards substantial stardom and retrievable capital investment, they also bring to the fore, coalitional structures through which one's community could be addressed towards political congregations. The latter becomes most evident in sites such as Mumbai where the community is perceived as a political threat and is threatened with physical violence.

Surabhi Sharma's documentary *Bidesiya in Bambai* (2013) traces the lives of Bhojpuri concerts across Mumbai and illustrates how the Bhojpuri speakers are addressed not only culturally, but also politically. The threat of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), which relentlessly threatens violence towards the migrants from UP and Bihar, has alarmingly raised the political tone of these concerts. Also, *Chhath* celebrations – the most important festival for the people from Bihar – have gradually become, as the film shows, moments of massive political consequence where the biggest Bhojpuri stars perform and they share the stage with the political leaders who declare political patronage to the community. In distant suburbs of Mumbai where Bhojpuri speaking migrants have a sizeable presence along side the Marathi speaking populations, this leads to strategic political coalitions reflected in cultural coalitions between Marathi and Bhojpuri performances on the same stage. Not only are these events attended by huge crowds, they also provide an opportunity for local businesses to advertise themselves. Throughout the film, we witness paltry sums of money being awarded as *inaam* [reward] to the artists who then recognise the contribution of the small local enterprises toward the audience. The structures of political as well as cultural patronage, publicity, and coalitions come together in these events of musical celebration that go a long way in determining the health of the media industry<sup>32</sup>. The Bhojpuri films,

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<sup>32</sup> The divisions or rivalry between the migrants from UP and Bihar, or those across several caste groups, play a vital role in how social clusters and structures of patronage get distributed. Even though her film does not make them explicit, in a personal conversation Sharma spoke elaborately about the palpable sense of these stratifications she accumulated during the shoot. The dominance of Brahmins among the taxi drivers of Mumbai is therefore not a mere coincidence, but the result of certain conscious solidarities (Personal Communication, 2014).

music and stars provide the frontal continuity to this terrain, while in the background strategic coalitions remain entangled. It is with respect to this entangled web that Vinay Kumar told me towards the end of our long conversation,

In Bihar, there is no other industry except politics. There is no other identity except politics in Bihar. There is no other issue in Bihar except politics that you could discuss. Bhojpuri films could have been one of those issues, but they could not do it. So now politics has once again trumped Bhojpuri films... *Nothing else has happened here*, so what could anyone do? There is unemployment, there is migration; people just wander around behind *netaji* [the politician]. I have so many friends, extremely talented, they have everything it takes; but now they are old, so they have just gotten hold of a *netaji*. Some write their speeches, some do something else! *There is nothing else!*... When some filmstar comes here from Mumbai, he meets the politicians here without fail. Having met them, he feels that he has met the *janmaanas* [public consciousness] of this region.

[...] You are going somewhere for shooting... Then you start thinking how we will get the place and permissions... So, *mukhiyaji* [local patron] gets two halls emptied and gives them to us, offering us to live there. Without worshipping the feet of *mukhiyaji*, you cannot even shoot your film, am I right or wrong? You *have to* hold his hand. *There is nothing else here*. This is a very delicate insight. Those people will not tell you. They will say we do not care about politics. But I say they *only* concern themselves with politics. If you bother about other things, you will get ruined here. You won't survive in Bihar like that. There is only politics, *there is nothing else here* [emphasis as in narration]<sup>33</sup>.

Kumar's verdict is neither an exaggeration, nor limited to mere strategic alliances of mundane political nature. In the General Elections of 2014, two of the major Bhojpuri stars – Manoj Tiwari and Ravi Kissen – contested towards opposite results. Tiwari contested for the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP) from a Delhi constituency and won, while Kissen contested from his native eastern UP constituency – Jaunpur – for the Congress and lost. It must also be noted that they did not contest for the legislative assemblies of UP or Bihar, but for the Indian Parliament.

## Conclusion

I have tried to illustrate the convergence as well as the divergences that recur around the Bhojpuri media industry. I have also showed how intensely cultural and economic valuations contest each other, even though both have a rather slippery basis to sustain themselves in an industry where the media object continues to slip out. But the

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<sup>33</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author.

transformation of the media object itself is a result of the demographics of participation. In the last decade, Bhojpuri films and video songs have gone on to add numerous stakeholders. The discontent and enchantment are both combined effects of rapidly growing participation. While we often reduce cultural analyses to an investigation of the cultural output, it would be misleading here to ignore that we are faced with a moment in the socio-cultural history of a troubled region. The churning for which the media have provided an avenue should be seen in relation to the absence of other avenues via which the society could transform itself. The 'disorder' caused by the ongoing contestations bring into a conflict the essence of the provincial authenticity and the modules of prosperity it could aspire for.

Most of these conflicts are not unique to the Bhojpuri media industry. The tension between production and exhibition sectors is almost always resolved politically. The cultural and economic imperatives of any vernacular or regional film industry have struggled to align themselves since the days of silent cinema (see Joseph 2013, Hughes 2010). The economic and the cultural often regulate each other for a while before a stable reconciliation is reached upon. It is, therefore, up to the political valency of the historical moment to consolidate a language-based industry. As we have seen, this consolidation takes place more firmly in the migrant circuits, particularly Mumbai, where the north Indian is always already a political figure. In the BSR, however, aspirations of stardom, the underground economies, legitimacy of cultural representation etc. – all depend too heavily upon the rather lean exhibition sector, which itself is beginning to privilege the Hindi film trade. This compels Bhojpuri media economy, now highly conscious of itself, to mobilise and organise internal resources instead of merely occupying the space vacated by its competitor – the Hindi film economy. The debates about *Deswa* or at the festival organised by Patel, have provided exactly the sort of platforms which can blend the awareness of Bhojpuri cinema's representativity and its thematic, formal, technological and site-specific marginality to regulate one another.

The Principal of a school in Siwan, in agreement with a cultural activist, offered me the classification that English is the language of *vyapaar* (business), Hindi the language of *vyavahaar* (everyday, mundane transactions), and Bhojpuri is the language of *sanskar* (ethical and cultural values). Dubious though these claims may be, the re-marking of Bhojpuri as the language of values is telling to the extent that it offers us a gendered framework of linguistic distribution. At least some of the accusations against the vulgarity of the Bhojpuri media industry emerge from the misalignment of cultural and linguistic

'Sirf Awaaz Bhojpuri Hai [Only the Voice is Bhojpuri]'

spatiality. In the next chapter, we shall analyse the key texts of Bhojpuri film and music in the last two decades. As we grapple with the narratives and their ideological, formal and historical moorings, we shall also investigate the charges of vulgarity, assessing the extent to which they hold substantively.

## Chapter 3

### The Bhojpuri Public Sphere

An overwhelming amount of reflection has gone into the public sphere, but its originary articulation is attributed to Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). According to him, the bourgeois public sphere emerged via a struggle against despotic states; market capitalism further created institutions (newspapers, debating societies, salons and coffee houses) within civil society that occupied a space autonomous from both the economy and the state. While various critiques have been launched against the very conception of a singular and homogeneous public sphere, its historical trajectory has also been delimited by the prevailing distinctions of the public and the private realms – both strategically contested between the state as well as the market. In one of the most relevant critiques, Peter Dahlgren points out that Habermas' idea is marked by an 'absence of reference to the complexities and contradictions of meaning production' and also 'to the concrete social settings and cultural resources at work' (1991: 6). Nancy Fraser also argues that public spheres are not spaces of zero-degree culture, they 'consist in culturally specific institutions, including, for example, various journals and various geographies of urban space. These institutions may be understood as culturally specific rhetorical lenses that filter and alter the utterances they frame; they can accommodate some expressive models and not others' (1990: 69). She writes that we ultimately need 'a critical political sociology of a form of public life in which multiple but unequal publics participate' (ibid.: 70).

To invoke the public sphere in relation to Bhojpuri cinema, music videos and live concerts, then, is to acknowledge the multiplicity of cultural resources, their respective settings and contradictions, but also to forge together a narrative that critically identifies with a form of public life in which these social inequities play a productive role. Indeed, Miriam Hansen (1991) has also highlighted the film industry's strategy to integrate ethnically, socially, and sexually differentiated audiences towards an alternative public sphere for particular social groups. This is a sphere constituted not by rational-critical discourse but via the coming together of various technologies of projection. By staging resonance and dissonance across corporeal, identitarian and intersubjective vantage points, the media and performative practices consolidate a sphere that produces publics in relation to itself. This sphere is only an external identification with otherwise interbreeding forms of cultural encounter. The pre-eminence of cinema within this public sphere is not certain, but highly contested by its neighbouring forms. In the non-Western scenario, where both the state and the market hold



only limited control over proletarian orientations of public engagement, Hoek (2013: 159) rightly terms such a public sphere as a ‘theatre of talk’ in which the public, marked by inequalities of access, becomes aware of itself along certain key axes of resonance. Let us, therefore, set out to recognise these theatrical constellations and the nature of resonance unfolding across them.

On 26 January 2014 – the Republic Day – various cultural shows were held across Mumbai by Bhojpuri singer-performers. Taking place simultaneously across suburban sites of the metropolis from the afternoon to late night, the shows were ticketed 150-250 rupees as per the two tiers – floor class and chair class. Most of these were publicised under the singular name of a celebrity performer, but a few others were also advertised as a collegium of minor celebrities. I attended one of these concerts in Jogeshwari – a western suburb – by Guddu Rangeela, considered by many the pioneering figure that lowered the standards of Bhojpuri music. That however is also a reference to his phenomenal success with a few albums – notably *Ja Jhar Ke*, a rustic amorous song that was a sensation when it appeared. A short and flabby man, Rangeela’s last name is a self-styled nickname meaning colourful – an underhand reference to his bold attitude with sexuality. Almost every artist in the BSR goes by an ambitious nickname. Rangeela is not much of a singer, however; the provocative play with quasi-sexual vocabulary is the singular rationale for his popularity.

Once I seated myself on a chair amidst the crowd, I could observe the enthusiasm and commentary closely. The show began with a *vandana* [devotional song] and patriotic songs – all dished out with apologies or excuses. The crowd remained entirely disinterested and applauded only when they were repeatedly asked to do so in order to encourage the artists. Repeatedly, they were also assured that the *rangarang* [colourful] dance would soon follow. The audience was entirely male, most of them between 20 and 45 years of age. The only women around were the singers and item girls, who remained backstage and came into public view only to perform. A female singer performed a patriotic song ‘for the martyrs’ wearing a *saree* (a traditional female costume marked by respectability), which was followed by the anchor demanding applause, “*Sasural mein jeeja saali pe nazar rakhta hai. Aur kalakaar hamesha taali pe nazar rakhta hai* [At the in-laws place, the brother-in-law keeps a watch on the sister-in-law. And the artist is always seeking applause].” The anchor then welcomed another song by a new singer declaring that he will soon be a ‘big Bhojpuri filmstar’. However, not until the dancing girl appeared did the people show any interest. Clad in a *ghaghra-choli* with ample cleavage exposed, she was

presented to appease the audience. Her performance piece was a seductive dance to the tunes of one of the most famous Bhojpuri songs – *Misirji... Tu toh baade bada thanda* [Oh, you are so cold!].

The anchor improvised and fumbled over some Urdu poetry, mixing it with Hindi and Bhojpuri commentary. When Rangeela arrived on stage, people welcomed him loudly but he began with a Bhajan (devotional song) saying that ‘one must remember the gods even before thieving’. Quite unambiguously, he added that ‘you all know what I am going to sing after this, and what I’ve sung as yet’. A Samajwadi Party (SP) member came up on stage and awarded Rangeela 501 rupees. About seven artists performed in rotation and each introduced oneself through their films or albums released or upcoming. The anchor offered a brief introduction only for the item girls, who do not get to speak to the audience directly. Disappointed by the paucity of item girls, the man sitting next to me informed his friend that they should have gone for the event by ‘Shilpa Theatre’ for they do *mast* [fun] programs and always have 7-8 girls! In the middle of the show, two men brought along a film poster and pinned it on the curtain behind the performers. It was a poster for Rangeela’s upcoming film *Ghayal Sher*. The anchor begged the audience to watch the film after its release and continued to perform silly jokes and ineffective mimicry.

The most contentious issue by now had become the videographer who obstructed the line of sight of a majority of the audience. Despite repeated attempts to boo him, or shout out loud at the organisers, he continued to obstruct the crowd’s view of the dancing girls. Even though the recorded versions would soon be available in the market and may be bought by the same audience, or downloaded from Youtube, the inaccessibility of the unmediated spectacle annoyed the audience. Various recorded songs still continued to stage the item girls attending to the metaphors of youth, sexual penetration and softer forms of desire. The cleavage was deployed strategically as a key asset in the practice of naughty playfulness to engage the audience. The already popular songs received much more attention than the unknown ones. The relatively unknown singers merely filled time and at times, merely accompanied the item girls. As opposed to that, when Rangeela sang, the girls danced to his tunes and gave him much more attention. Dancers were also very conscious of the camera and performed their knockout moves in the very face of the camera. Then a young dashing male dancer appeared who pleased the crowd immensely by sexually dominating the girl, thrusting pelvic moves into her and acknowledging the audience with each of his moves. He even sought gestural permission from the audience to go wild on her, and it was instantaneously granted and encouraged. Then, he took the girl

down on the floor and forced himself even as she refused to relent. With every move of excess against her wish, the crowd was pleased further. Eventually when they got back up, the girl shyly acknowledged her pleasure.

Rangeela reappeared and declared before singing that he sings that what already happens, what has *maza* (fun) – *chahe dewela, chahe lewela* [whether the one that is given, or the one that is taken]. The female singer who sang relatively modest songs only bored people who started shouting her down. She apologetically requested, “Do you want to see dance? Of course there will be dance, but the entire night still remains. Please allow us singers a chance.” But an engulfing and contagious boredom prevailed in the absence of the dancers. When the woman began singing a patriotic Hindi song and the crowd showed nothing but disinterest, she was compelled to plead in the name of the nation for a patriotic song, asking them to join her but to no effect. The crowd was only waiting in anticipation for sensational dancing now, and every announcement otherwise only annoyed them. Rangeela himself appeared repeatedly to change the mood but he made no impact in the absence of dance. Also, even though the crowd had given up asking the videographer to get out of their sight, all annoyance multiplied in the face of impatience. All the talking, cajoling, persuading and singing fell flat and only bored the audience further. The person next to me asked why they do not just play a CD instead. We were then told in an underhand way by the anchor that they do not have the permissions to cross the limits of ‘decency’ tonight.

Then a bunch of politicians from the student wing of the Congress appeared and performed a small thanking ceremony. It was followed by the slogans of *zindabad* [hail] for Bhai Jagtap – a local leader. The crowd remained entirely indifferent and only awaited their departure in silence. As ‘outsiders’ they understood the necessity of tolerating such interventions. One of the speakers informed the audience that in the region, Bhai Jagtap is the *rehnuma* [custodian] of north-Indians. When they left, they announced that the show will have the permission to go on for an extra ten minutes, making up for the time they took. But when the show continued on the ‘decent’ course – soft melodies without any dance on offer – the people started leaving en masse. They were requested to stay on, told that the real thing might yet follow, but without anything on offer right away, the show came to an abrupt end with the exodus.

There are at least five reasons why looking at this live concert, and looking through it at the massive economy of such shows, is vital. First, the live concerts are the key sites where the Bhojpuri community comes to be conscious of itself via its encounter with a select set

of performers. These are also the sites where the popularity of certain stars, songs, and dancing girls becomes a shared fact. The films and albums, by themselves too scattered in their distribution, are unable to create the effect of simultaneity that the live shows produce naturally. Particularly, the songs demanded by the crowd, and by extension their singers, catapult into the realm of fame. Second, while it is evident that sexual pleasure remains a key mode of address in these shows, the crowd is trained to anticipate and wait while the outer layers of the encounter – devotional, patriotic, popular romantic songs in Hindi and Bhojpuri etc. – gradually peel off. Third, the shows also work as a vital structure of publicity. Various young artists are introduced under the patronage of established stars. Loyalties and lineages are thus established, particular styles are consolidated, and commercial stability is provided by the recording companies associated with the show. Fourth, even as the consumerist community comes into being, it is made aware of its political location. In the small-towns of Bihar too the local politicians address the people as political subjects. But as migrants in Mumbai, they are made further aware of the threat of violence, and therefore, the necessity of political patronage. Fifth, the commercial stakeholders of the area who reward the artists in the middle of the show build located solidarities. In this way, they render visibility to their own enterprise, but also to their public endorsement of the Bhojpuri community.

The films provide a crucial horizon here. While the Hindi film stars primarily inhabit the realm of the screen, any encounter with them would remain overshadowed by their film stardom. This applies as much to their appearance on television or advertisements, as to the rare occurrence of a physical encounter. But the stars from the Bhojpuri film industry become familiar to the masses in their person *before* they go on to appear on the screen. This is a vital departure from the screen cultures that we are aware of. The anxiety about the person *behind* the star that feeds into mass euphoria toward the celebrity figure is trumped here by the joy of a relatively familiar person going on to *occupy* the realm of celebrity. It is in this way that the film-texts too merely provide a distinct continuity with the Hindi film-texts, so as to foreground the contiguity across Hindi and Bhojpuri realms of celebrity. Bhojpuri stars and their films, then, do not aspire to stand independent, or outside, of the Hindi film industry. On the contrary, one of the major thrills provided by the Bhojpuri film industry comes from the idea that the Bhojpuri speaking singer-performer goes on to *become* a filmstar. The template of stardom indeed continues to remain the Hindi film stardom, which is why even as a Bhojpuri filmstar, the star commands familiarity with his audience on the terms drawn by Hindi cinema. This is

indeed an act of *provincialising* Bollywood. While we analyse the key Bhojpuri film-texts across the last decade, we must keep this in mind.

### ***Sasura Bada Paisawala* [My Father-in-law is Very Rich] (2004)**

The recipe for *Sasura*... came from three primary sources. First, Manoj Tiwari, the actor who played the protagonist in the film, was already a very successful singer-performer in the region. Second, the film's music drew further upon the already popular risqué idioms in the music albums, departing from the 'family film' prototype that existed by then. Third, befitting the idea of the star as a figure of excess, it dared to produce two iconic moments of confrontation, in which Tiwari delivers passionate monologues. It is important to remember that unlike the earlier two phases of Bhojpuri cinema, this phase emerged and sustained itself through stardom. As a figure of excess, the star needs key conflicts to articulate a position that is not fully realisable in a realist narrative. Raja (Tiwari), who returns in the film from the city as an English-educated youth, tames the arrogant urban female protagonist Rani (Rani Chatterjee) in a memorable scene before falling in love with her.

While the village is the site of their encounter, both Raja and Rani are the only characters who speak and understand English, and are therefore figures of social mobility. The site of their encounter too is the liminal space of the railway station that connects the city and the village. Raja awaits passengers for his friend's *tonga* at the station because his friend has taken ill. Rani, on the other hand, is visiting the village to attend her friend's wedding. This marks the event as an accidental occurrence merely facilitated by the realm of Bhojpuri. Rani, dressed in a sleeveless top and trousers comes across as distinctly urban while Raja is clad in a *dhori kurta* only because he was rushed out of a domestic chore. When Raja's assistant drops Rani's luggage, she shouts at him in English calling him a rascal. It is then that Raja responds in English, giving it back in the language of cultural superiority – English. By shouting Rani down, he asserts himself as the rightful patron of rural values unspoiled by his excursion into urbanity, while establishing that Rani has been morally defiled by the city. He says in English, "Hey! You shut up! On getting a little education, do you think that other people are just insect[s] in your opinion? Ma'm, education enhances the power of civilisation, but *you people*! You people have degraded the culture of our society! Excuse me!" A villainous bunch at the same time observes Rani as a *bidesi maal* (foreign item), Raja promptly tells his attendant that he has give her one *khuraak* (dosage). This allows the film narrative to successfully draw a line between rural and urban value

systems. While articulating that the city ‘degrades’ the culture of society, it simultaneously produces Raja as the heroic figure who remains morally astute *in spite of the city*.

From this point on, the film gradually moves towards the sublimation of romance between Raja and Rani, punctuated by the comedy strand. To set up the romance, Raja saves Rani from drowning once and then from a bunch of villains who try to rape her. With her life and honour restored by the certified masculinity of Raja, Rani stands entirely tamed and performs her submission by falling to his knees in a song. However, the next hurdle remains their respective class backgrounds. Unwilling to relent for Rani’s marriage in a poor household, Rani’s rich father finally lays down the condition that Raja must stay at his place instead of taking the bride to his house. This leaves the Raja’s entire village distraught at the dishonor. Raja submits only because his brother, who has been tricked into submission by Rani’s father, ensures that Raja agreed to the condition. But this leads Raja to refuse to consummate his marriage with Rani, who then protests against her father to her mother. Meanwhile, Raja declares that he will pull a cycle rickshaw to earn his livelihood, at which his father-in-law fears his own loss of honour. In the other key moment of confrontation then, Raja says, “My father-in-law’s honour is honour because he is a rich man. And my honour? *Kotha par ke randi* (a whore) that anyone can come, strip and leave!” He reminds his father-in-law that his lust for money has destroyed his daughter’s family. Before the father-in-law could fully realise his guilt, the film plunges into a climax that sees Raja taking a bullet in his shoulder to save the father-in-law, fighting a bunch of goons trying to kidnap Rani. It is only by Rani’s incessant prayers then that Raja is rescued and both the families get reconciled to everyone’s pleasure.

Eleven songs and routine comic relief punctuate this melodramatic journey that cuts across two primary conflicts: one between the urban-rural values and the other vivified by the class divide. Family, honour, morality and love are routinely deployed to invoke the ethical paradigm that Raja – the star – embodies and eventually everyone gets aligned with.

### **The Bhojpuri ‘Social’**

To those familiar with the Hindi film form, *Sasura...* was distinctly reminiscent of what Prasad (1998: 30) calls the ‘feudal family romance’. Analysing the narrative structure of a form that emerged during the 1950s and remained unchallenged until the early 1970s, Prasad says that the form included ‘a version of the romance narrative, a comedy track, an average of six songs per film, as well as a range of familiar character types. Narrative

closure usually consisted in the restoration of a threatened moral/social order by the hero' (31). The form, he maintains, was flexible enough to include a wide range of contingent elements, including references to topical issues. Prasad also adds that each of the component elements of this form is capable of much internal variation, but 'their consistency from film to film is ensured by the fact that these variations are not demanded by the narrative... The heteronomous conditions under which the production sector operates are paralleled by a textual heteronomy whose primary symptom is the absence of an integral narrative structure' (44-45).

This stable, accommodating and reasonably porous form resisted the genrefication of Hindi cinema for a very long time and allowed the 'social' to remain the only genre in the Hindi film industry, identifiable only in its 'contemporary reference' as its dominance was ratified by a certain ideological imperative (136). The dominance of songs in the 'social' marked it as an intermediate form in which cinema's links with the stage are worked out, and in which 'pre- and extra-cinematic skills and languages are put on display' (ibid.). Prasad read it as 'a symptom of the continued dependence of the cinema on the resources of other cultural forms' (ibid.). He also clarifies that the neo-traditionalism of Indian popular film culture is a political, not a technological, issue. The 'social' is not a transitional form; instead it *resists* genre formation of any kind, particularly the type constituted by the segmentation of the contemporary. The disaggregation of the 'social' into genres, Prasad says, is prevented by the mode in which music, choreographed fights, parallel narrative tracks, etc. are combined with the realism indicated by narrative continuity (ibid.). The strength of this form, as Prasad has illustrated, lies in producing segments which may also serve a narrative function, but deliver an autonomous mode of pleasure by themselves. This form of Hindi socials provided a framework by which new elements could be added, and older elements such as the musical or action strands could get a complete overhaul, without destabilising the overall design of the framework.

The dependence of cinema on the resources of other cultural forms, in the case of Bhojpuri cinema, as I have discussed in the last chapter, is huge. This is partly why at the formal level, Bhojpuri cinema adapted the 'social' as its mainstay genre. Following from Vasudevan's (2010c: 383-97) argument about the eventual appearance of genres in the Hindi cinema of the 1990s, Prasad (2011: 70) writes that 'genres do not simply disappear but continue to survive in less visible market segments'. His discussion highlights the prevalence of mythologicals in Telugu much after they declined into near disappearance in Hindi cinema. On a similar note, the prevalence of the Bhojpuri 'social' also took over

from its near disappearance in the Hindi cinema of the twenty-first century. The Bhojpuri 'social' drew a formal continuity with Hindi cinema even as the latter sought to reinvent itself through new genres, shorter runtimes, and various other fundamental changes. The persistence of the 'social' is explained by Prasad in terms of an aesthetic of contemporaneity, by which cinema worldwide became a successor of theatre's social role. He adds that 'the absence of generic differentiation within this overall contemporary framework and the persistence of classical melodrama have to do with socioeconomic factors such as the degree of capitalist penetration' (ibid.: 72). In the case of the BSR, the degree of capitalist penetration has remained dismal and therefore, the argument holds even for the twenty-first century where the incomplete transition from theatrical forms into cinema is distinctly visible within Bhojpuri cinema.

At the same time, genrefication also compromises the capacity of stardom. The star of the 'social' essentially comes across as the sublimation of the heroic prowess in response to all the prevailing social ills. Genre formation would indeed lead to multiple shades of stardom, all of which remain integrated within the star of the 'socials'. Therefore, the most significant variations within the trajectory of Bhojpuri cinema can be observed on the axis that stages the narrative conflicts. The degree of threat to the prevailing moral order, and the performance of the challenge staged by the film against it – before the order is restored by absorbing the demand for reform – show variations as we move across time. *Sasura...*, while a text that departs from the transitional Hindi film form of its time, re-produces the 'social' in scale and structure. The film allows Tiwari to perform a distinct variety of skills – romance, dance, fight sequences, comedy, ethical rebellion as well as submission to traditional values. They mark him as an outstanding figure of mobility – an attribute most scarce within the film-text. He belongs to the city as well as the village; he speaks English, Hindi, and Bhojpuri; he wears shirt-pants as well as *dhoti-kurtas*; he submits when he could have revolted; he revolts when he could have submitted. But both the major conflicts staged within the film – against the arrogant urban woman, and against the rich and powerful father-in-law – are resolved by the reformation and taming of the characters. Tiwari commands the restoration of the moral/social order on distinctly ethical terms, but the restoration takes place as the defaulters submit to him and reform themselves without letting the conflict spill over.

Curiously, the film has a rather animated soundtrack, particularly when the comic or romantic registers unfold. The introduction of Rani at the railway station is decorated with an animated sound that directs the gaze toward the indicators of 'modernity' – the attire



and physicality of the *bidesi maal*. Similarly animated soundtracks are routinely deployed during the comedy sequences to underline the already unsubtle and often physical efforts at comedy. These practices puncture any illusions of realism and continue to mark the narrative space of the film as a highly performative one. On the other hand, the animated soundtrack also compensates for the relative banality of the images; it fills the visible gap between the aspiration and the capacity of the image. Sound, therefore, plays a very conscious role in the low-budget aesthetic of Bhojpuri cinema which, we must remember, found the decrepit theatres and worn out disks, out of favour with its already compromised images.

The film also stages its aesthetic continuity with the stage-performances in a ribald song, performed on a stage in front of a blank white curtain amidst a huge crowd, by a *launda* (female impersonator). The *launda naach* (a genre of performance native to the BSR) itself has an illustrious tradition and continues to be the mainstay of popular performance in the interior villages of Bihar (Singh 2013: 123-172). However, the most popular song of the film – *gamchha bichhai ke* – was within the tradition of what is popularly called the ‘item song’ – in which a dancing girl who serves no narrative purpose otherwise, performs a lewd song. The Hindi film item song precedes the Bhojpuri variant; the earliest item song in popular memory would be ‘*Main ayi hoon UP Bihar lootne*’ from the film *Shool* (1999). The Bhojpuri item song however, borrowed the idiom from popular Bhojpuri music videos and installed them within the item dance. The lyrics of the song are highly suggestive here: *Saiyan ji dilwa maange le gamchha bichhai ke* literally refers to the lover demanding her ‘heart’ by spreading a stole. The performance is staged as a *mujra* on Raja’s wedding night, in which a distinguished audience sits on the floor in a circle while the girl performs within the space circumferenced by their bodies. But unlike the elegance of the *mujra* traditionally performed on a slow rhythmic ghazal, this is a fast paced dance performed by the girl clad in a tight blouse and an above knee length skirt. The words of the song make a clever reference to the demand of sexual intercourse but the reference is entirely idiomatic.

We must remain vigilant and conscious of this idiomatic reference to sexual motifs, if we are to pursue the question of vulgarity in Bhojpuri media content. While the centrality of sexual motifs remains a fact, it should not mislead us into ignoring the rich idiomatic references that anchor a deliberate playfulness with language. This wordplay and the metaphorical wizardry around the sexual motifs have set off an intense competitive economy within the Bhojpuri enterprise. *Sasura*... only gave certain glimpses into what

was to intensify further in later years. The next major shift in the trajectory of Bhojpuri cinema arrived via another type of star iconography.

Dinesh Lal Yadav started out as a very popular singer of *Birha* – a folk form of longing and separation that traditionally belonged to the Ahir community that Yadav belongs to. On the back of the massively successful music album *Nirahua Satal Rahe* (2003), Yadav was popularly rechristened as Nirahua. Literally meaning a simpleton, the Nirahua label found an entirely new life of its own when he entered the film industry with *Nirahua Rickshawala*. The most spectacular success of the music album had been a song *Dulhin rahe bimaar, nirahua satal rahe* [His bride is sick but Nirahua would not leave her alone]. Beginning as a conversation between an elderly man from the village and another young man called Dinesh (played by Yadav himself), the song discusses Nirahua, the character, in his absence. They describe him as the one who has cut himself off from all his friends and relatives and refuses to leave his wife even when she is sick. The rest of the song is staged as a debate between Dinesh and Nirahua's wife, who defends him in a distinctly possessive tone [Nirahu is mine and he stays by my side!]. The resultant suggestion is not merely that Nirahua is infatuated with his new bride; his sexual obsession is obliquely being discussed as it has become the talk of the town.

### ***Nirahua Rickshawala* [Nirahua, the Rickshaw-puller] (2007)**

When Yadav was launched as Nirahua as an audacious rickshaw puller, who has 'Nirahua Rickshawala' written behind his rickshaw, it marked a decisive shift. Unlike his predecessors, Nirahua was lean, young, and quick with his moves. He was launched as an action star, as opposed to the earlier melodramas in which the action sequences were never staged as attractions. Nirahua's flying and revolving kicks meant that most of the conflicts in the film are resolved by force, through a fight sequence. *Nirahua*... cleverly translates *Sasura*... into an action melodrama. The reformist project and the melodramatic scale are retained, but action provides the narrative thrust and organisation. Except in the last sequence, all conflicts are resolved via violence. Both Raja and Nirahua have lost their fathers before the films begin. They are figures of absolute authority within their respective families who still submit to the mother and the sister-in-law on key occasions. The railway station remains the liminal site even in *Nirahua*..., as the female protagonist named Rani – once again – returns from the city and wishes to hire a rickshaw to go home. Finding the shared jeep too uncomfortable, Rani persuades Nirahua to take her home by making an appeal to his masculinity. Clad in jeans, Rani attracts too much attention and except for the

protection extended by Nirahua, fears for her safety. Having also spent a night at Nirahua's house when it gets too late, Nirahua has already fallen in love with her but Rani refuses his romantic persuasion. There is indeed an attempt by a bunch of miscreants – who call her a *bidesi timatar* (foreign tomato)<sup>34</sup> – to rape her but Nirahua intervenes in time and takes her home. Then, in a sequence that shook popular consciousness, Nirahua gets into a confrontation with Rani's politician brother and to avenge his pride at being slapped, kisses Rani in front of him.

This revenge-kissing, bizarre though it may seem, reflects upon the *place* of the feminine within a universe imagined and contested entirely on masculine terms. The female body becomes a site upon which an assault could be staged to contest a competing masculinity. Even though Nirahua returns to ask for forgiveness later in the film, the question of dishonour lingers as Rani has been *defiled* and nobody would marry her. The film remains ambivalent, even a bit confused, between romance and compromise hereafter. Rani soon falls in love with Nirahua, but also maintains that it is the only way in which her honour could be restored. The next leg of the film stages a series of showdowns between Nirahua and Rani's brother. Attempts at humiliation, scheming and outwitting continue to deploy physical or verbal violence, while targeting the masculine honour as invested in the patriarchal family. All possibilities of a resolution lie upon the stakes of the heroic masculinity. Reform as a possible resolution, however, does not fit into the framework thus drawn. Unlike in *Sasura*..., the order cannot be reformed from within, it must be annihilated.

However, in the climax, Nirahua reaches Rani's house with the wedding procession and declares that he will not return without the bride. Rani's brother agrees upon the condition that if Rani declines the marriage, the procession would amicably return. Simultaneously, he makes an appeal to Rani through their mother in the name of family honour to come down and refuse to marry Nirahua. Rani reluctantly agrees, but when her brother threatens her with dire consequences before she were to declare her decision, she erupts, "Dare not! Because a man wanted to prove his masculinity, a woman has been shamed! You slapped a man to show him his place. And he kissed me to prove his own masculinity. But only the woman is abused! Only the woman! Because it is a man's world, where the woman is

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<sup>34</sup> As Rawley (2007) explains in great detail, there is within Bhojpuri audiovisual practices a long tradition of using metaphors of fruits and vegetables to refer to the sexual attractiveness of the female body – whether in full, or fragmented in sexualized anatomy. The qualifier of the foreignness multiplies with that practice and establishes Rani's urbane, non-native persona that makes her furthermore desirable.

placed on the pedestal of *Seeta* or *Durga*, but her right to speak is taken away by cutting her tongue off! Your values say that when a man touches a woman, she belongs to him. And if another man touches her, she goes from wife to the fallen one. To wipe off that same blemish, when I accepted him, you became adamant! By crushing my emotions, you decided to wed me to someone else? Huh? Now I am standing on that juncture from where if I go one step ahead, your honour gets dusted. And if I go back, he gets insulted who I have installed as the deity of my heart. I am only sad that I have caused you so much pain, that I have saddened your heart. But what should I do? What do I do? The brother whose arm I tied a *rakhi* on throughout my childhood to protect me, his own hands have turned to ruin my life!”

The sudden outburst tempers the action film back into the melodramatic fold. The violent resolution is avoided and the brother is so intensely moved by Rani’s emotions that he gets reformed and accepts her wedding to Nirahua. The moral order of the ‘social’ is restored yet again without any fundamental shift. Unlike Raja, Nirahua is all too aware of the performative aspect of stardom and routinely uses his sweater, jacket and the rickshaw as props that help him retain attention within the frame. Also, unlike Raja who remains polite and subdued, Nirahua sticks to the image of an action star and occupies a distinctly aggressive slot. In agreement with this image, then, unlike Raja who merely sits on the floor and smiles while the item girl dances, Nirahua is an agile and expressive dancer in one of the item songs of *Nirahua*... - *Hachkawe balma hamka rickshaw chadha ke* [Mounting me upon his rickshaw, my man strokes me]. The usage of the idiomatic vocabulary towards the explicitly sexual act is rather evident here in the song performed on a concert stage in front of thousands of people. Dressed in *ghaghra choli* (a small skirt and a tight blouse), with ample cleavage on show, the girl dances with Nirahua, in what is popularly known as the *Nautanki* format. Well aware of its pre- and extra-cinematic continuities, as Prasad pointed out, Bhojpuri films continued to deliberately stage their lineage of cultural entertainment.

However, it was the other item song of the film that became wildly popular. *Misir Ji* showcases a dancing girl (quite obviously a prostitute who is eventually taken to the bed by the feudal figure in whose service she dances) clad in a sexualised version of *ghaghra choli* and teasingly challenging the patron as she sings, “*Kaise gaad paiba mohabbat ke jhanda? Misir ji... tu toh bada bada thanda!* [How will you be able to plant the flag of love? Misir Ji... you are so cold!]” Among a series of metaphorical digs and insults she throws at him, at one point she unfavourably compares him even to the female

impersonator – *tohra se neek baate naach ke lavanda*. Eventually, Misir Ji responds in verse, calling her an item and telling her that he would certainly plant the flag of ‘love’ for he is Misir, not a *lavanda* (female impersonator). The pronounced stakes of masculinity are evident here within the performance of desire, but it is the format of the contest that must be taken note of, alongside the reign of the idiomatic. The wrestling of one metaphor with another, and one performer with the other, both ornament the layers over explicit sexual vocabulary. It is then the uncovering of these layers that poses the tension between the erotic and the vulgar – a subject I shall bring up later in detail.

### **Action-Melodramas: Individuation of the ‘Social’**

As a romantic story in which a rural man falls in love with a girl returning from the city and then struggling against the social divide between the respective families to eventually marry her, both *Sasura...* and *Nirahua...* are not very different films. The Bhojpuri ‘social’ then came into being through a main romantic narrative intercut by several comedy and musical strands that punctuate it. The significant transition takes effect by translating a reformist melodrama (*Sasura...*) into an action-melodrama (*Nirahua...*), which only eventually presents the case for reform. Shot mostly in mid- to long-range shots, both the films bring into visibility the village as the site of such contestations. The social universe of these films comprises of the rural community, the family, the masses who attend cultural events, the dancing girls, the police station and the political leadership. The rippling fields of grain, the railway station, the rural mansions, the live performance stage, the livestock, the stacks of hay, the village pond, the riverside *ghat*, and the festive or ritual occasions mark the various sites of this ‘social’ turned visible by the early Bhojpuri films of the third phase.

However, the arrival of Dinesh Lal Yadav decisively altered the form of Bhojpuri cinema. Beginning with NR, the melodramatic reformist ‘social’ began to recede as we saw the rise of action-melodramas. Even though the village or the small-town remained the primary site of the unfolding events, the distinctive fragments that consolidated the village in earlier films were far less visible. *Nirahua* itself became a liminal but hypermobile character bridging the on and off screen popularity of Yadav. While he may now be better known as *Nirahua*, an entire series of his films were titled under the label *Nirahua* [*Nirahua no 1* (2009), *Nirahua Chalal Sasural* (2011), *Nirahua Banal Don* (2011), *Nirahua Tangewaala* (2011), *Nirahua Mail* (2012), *Nirahua Hindustani* (2014)], thus alerting us to an existing contiguity across distinct film-texts. And yet in many more films not titled thus, Yadav

played a character named Nirahua. This contiguous territory of action-oriented films, in conjunction with the decline of Tiwari and Kissen – the other two major stars of Bhojpuri films – marked a decisive shift towards films loaded with an endless series of violent confrontations, and often verbally excessive.

More crucially, the action-melodramas altered the visual language of Bhojpuri films. The *mise-en-scène* gradually began to evacuate the ‘social’ and privilege the flesh. The animate as well as inanimate objects and sites that composed the ‘social’ in earlier films were slowly making way for close-ups. The frames were more filled with the male stars’ expressions, their energy, and their flashy attempts at style, as well as with the sexualised fragments of the female body. Violence and the threat of violence would motor the narrative along, while the song and dance showcasing female sexuality filled the gaps. In this new Bhojpuri action film, the subaltern male ‘protector’ was often brooding and disinterested in the amorous offerings of the female protagonist, who either returned from the city, or was a rich landlord’s daughter, and often both. She, amidst various threats to her sexual safety, would be protected and tamed by a disinterested and all-powerful man, to whom were already available the pleasures of ‘public’ women – the dancing girls. Therefore, competing with her own physical fragility and the threat of the public women, the female protagonist would offer extreme devotion even as she ‘privately’ performed in various songs, the sexual openness of the public women. One example of this could be a dance performed by Monalisa for her disinterested male partner in *Kartavya* (2011), which contains the refrain, “*Maal ha dehat ke, label shehariya. Duno ke swaad le la, suna e sawanriya* [I am a village item, but the label is urban. Get a taste of both right here, my love].” She is dressed in a series of bright short dresses, and dances with a fair degree of sexual abandon. This ambivalent desire to be simultaneously urban and rural, public and private, sexually pure as well as enchanting, draws us into a space more private than public.

The recession of the ‘social’ takes place on above-mentioned terms. The primacy of violence also consolidated in one villainous character the sublimated force of evil, which is then avenged by the male protagonist. Therefore, the sexual enticement and the violent duty revolving around the star draw the *mise-en-scène* out of the rich social universe. This is not to say that the contemporary Bhojpuri film does not showcase the social web of relations, but to observe broadly that the nature of conflict that drives the films has gradually been *individualised*. Because the community only appears intermittently, often as a bystander, the social universe has increasingly lost its stake in the narrative. The

aggressive and fetishistic visual language of the action-oriented form, then, revolves around the right to privacy that the star commands *as* an individual. It is within this ecology that Pawan Singh, a very popular singer from Bhojpur, appeared as a film star. But in spite of his significant popularity, it was not until the arrival of Khesari Lal Yadav's (hereafter Khesari) phenomenal success that the next major turnaround happened within Bhojpuri cinema.

The rise of Khesari had much to do with the decisive shift in the Hindi blockbuster after the unexpected success of *Dabangg* (2010). The film brought back action blockbusters as mass entertainers – a form that went on to become a vehicle for all the major Bollywood stars. In a few years, most of the big-budget Hindi films were not only action films featuring one major star in a superhuman role, they also deployed an aesthetic identified till then with south Indian films. A very high number of shots fast edited into action sequences that made no sense in realistic terms, were brought into vogue. In such sequences, human bodies could fly away or recoil above head height, once banged on nearby surfaces. The star could not only fight more than twenty men at the same time, he could showcase his spectacular muscularity, fling himself across large halls and rebound using surfaces as well as human bodies. This new vocabulary of action sequences defied all the common sense of space, time, and force. Indeed, action sequences across the world are rarely realistic, but the new Hindi action film deliberately breached the final yardstick of probability. To that extent, these films were consciously spoofing action cinema. By walking on this quasi-spoof line these films mixed action with comedy – the other dominant register holding the text together. *Dabangg*, in the process, broke the aesthetic barrier that separated southern blockbusters from the Hindi mass film. This was most evident in the use of what could be called 'reverberation effect' in which a banal act of standing up or looking at someone, when performed by the icon – the male star or his prime opponent – acquired the supreme significance to be worth multiple repetitions. So, one could notice across action sequences or other heightened moments, such repetitions of any shot with a loud swish-swish sound. This aesthetic, peculiar by then to the south Indian action films and several television dramas, was borrowed wholesale after *Dabangg*. Along with slow motion takes of fast action, the reverberation effect consolidated a new aesthetic of the Hindi action blockbuster.

As *Dabangg* was the biggest success in the BSR for a long time, Bhojpuri cinema too liberally deployed this aesthetic. This connection has been evident in citational references to *Dabangg* in many Bhojpuri films – either in the soundtrack or the titles themselves. Two

recent films have been named *Chalbaaj Chulbul Pandey* and *Shreemati Chulbul Pandey* – both referring to the name of the protagonist – Chulbul Pandey – in *Dabangg*. Therefore, alongside the rise of the muscular Hindi star (Salman Khan, Ajay Devgan, Akshay Kumar), Bhojpuri cinema has also moved away from the relatively stout bodies of Kissen and Tiwari, distinctly privileging Nirahua, Singh and Khesari.

*Sajan Chale Sasural* (2011) was the film that launched Khesari, on the back of his notable popularity as a singer-performer. In an interview (Kumar V. 2013), he looks back on his life and speaks of the time when he assisted some traditional musicians who sang Ramayana and Mahabharata as a *jhaal* player. Then he came to Delhi, borrowed money from his father and released a ‘cassette’ (a blanket reference for cassettes or compact-disks). Two of his ‘cassettes’ flopped before he started a shop selling *litti-chokha* (a staple diet native to the region) with his father. Even though he joined the Border Security Force (BSF) for about six months, he ran away, again borrowed 15000 rupees from his father and brought out another ‘cassette’, which made him popular in Chhapra, Siwan, Gopalganj and Motihari districts of Bihar. Gradually, thus, he earned his fame as a singer-performer before launching himself as a filmstar.

What makes Khesari’s films bold and somewhat unique is his *launda* act. Even before Khesari entered films, he was popular for his magnificent performances as a *launda*. A singer I interviewed in Sasaram, Bihar, told me how Khesari actually trained under a *launda* performer for months before going on to stage performance. It is important to note that *launda* performances are a taboo for they undermine the performer’s masculinity<sup>35</sup>. As Lawrence Cohen observes in his ethnographic work based out of Patna, the *launda* tradition of men in drag is seen as an impoverished version of the *orchestra*, which has young women instead. Both sort of performers get invited particularly during the weddings where the presumption is that ‘in addition to music and dance, sex is available as part of the wedding experience’ (2008: 38). Cohen was frequently ‘offered the example of dancing boys as a powerful *figure of backwardness* linking the region, its notorious Laloo [then Chief Minister of Bihar], and the conditions of roads, schools, and more generally the decline of planning and reason [emphasis added] (ibid.). He goes on to add that,

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<sup>35</sup> Carmen McCain whose doctoral research studies Hausa popular expression in Nigeria, told me in a personal conversation that the cross-dressing ‘*yan daudu*’ in northern Nigeria share the conceptual space of sexual outlaws primarily associated with *karuwai* (brothel prostitutes or independent women) and *bariki* culture, where drinking, music, and entertainment would take place (see Gaudio 2009, especially the chapter on Ibro Dan Daudu).



In actual practice, young men who dress as women to dance in Buxar exist but they cannot dance locally out of shame; most wedding dancers, I was told, are migrant laborers, young men from Bangladesh hired on annual contracts negotiated at a yearly market in Kolkata (Calcutta). A senior RJD politician in Patna, then third in command after Laloo and Rabri, told me much the same thing... ‘*Nautch to hota hai, is duniya mein*’ – dance is a part of the world. It is ‘*lok git sangit*’: folk dance, not elite Patna dancing with ladies. ‘We do not wish to shame our daughters’ (ibid.).

O Henry also provides an elaborate account of the dancing style deployed in *launda naach*,

The *launda*’s performance ranges from the pleasantly sensual to the lewd. The *launda* makes a jerky hip dancing. He circles and turns with a gyrating pelvis, often one hand on his hip and the other behind his head. He might also lean back with his bent legs spread and arms in the air, jerk towards his leering, slightly crouched and pelvis-thrusting partner, who with hand at crotch level motions with his upraised thumb (as cited in Singh 2013: 125).

It is in this context that Khesari’s *launda* act must be seen as a rebellion. His success must be seen in contrast with the near-universal disdain for him among the middle classes. A Brahmin *acharya* [music teacher] in Sasaram spoke of him with extreme derision, “*Who is Khesari? What is he? Launda hai... naachta hai* [He is a mere *launda*, he dances]!” Unlike Tiwari, who is often lauded for his early songs, unlike Pawan Singh who is often rated as a singer at the least, Khesari’s mention invited nothing but contempt<sup>36</sup>. The local newspapers treat him as a symbol of the decadence of Bhojpuri cinema, a ‘fact’ emphatically substantiated by his *launda* performances. Khesari himself takes an interesting position on the matter. He distinguishes himself as someone whose film stardom is secondary to his live concerts. He says,

I am still doing shows. If I must leave films for them, I will. I belong in the middle of the people. I sing to make them dance. I entertain them. Whatever I am, it is because of them. I cannot even think of being away from them... The audience wants to see me in the *real look* even on the screen. *I have also impersonated women in fifteen of my films*, and all of them have been hits. I do

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<sup>36</sup> Some of this, one must admit, also has to do with the rivalry between the Shahabad region (Bhojpur, Rohtas, Kaimur and Buxar districts) and the Saran region (Chhapra, Siwan and Gopalganj districts). Khesari hails from the latter, which is a region widely held responsible for the rise of vulgarity in Bhojpuri music in particular. The iconic example of the unscrupulous *Chhaprahiya* (an oblique reference to the people of the Saran region, particularly those from the Chhapra district) however remains Guddu Rangeela. During my interviews I could clearly notice a pattern that Pawan Singh, who belongs to the Shahabad region is hailed at least as a singer there, even by those Pandits who are contemptuous of the entire Bhojpuri music album phenomenon. Khesari, on the other hand, finds much higher acceptability in the Saran region, if not as a singer-performer and actor, then at least as a successful local boy.

not like becoming an officer or a rich man. I am not comfortable that way<sup>37</sup>  
[emphasis added].

Khesari's understanding of his proximity with the people is premised upon a performative belonging that is diminished by role-playing, as mandated by cinema. The cinema he attends to is not really an autonomous plane on which a narrative unfolds in its own time and space. Instead, it is a mere extension of the stage-based role-playing – an assertion that he underlines by repeatedly offering his *launda* act. Even in the film-texts, his *launda* performances are a matter of grave embarrassment for his family and they go on to remark the deliberate privileging of his imagined audience. By becoming a *launda* again, he insists that he – Khesari, *in spite of* his character within the narrative – belongs to them. This rustic connect with his audience works not merely as a reminder of the backwardness of the region to many, but also celebrates what must be deplored. But on the other hand, Khesari's celebration of the *launda* is an explicit acknowledgement of the two hundred *Bidesiya* parties that Brahma Prakash Singh estimates to be operating in the BSR<sup>38 39</sup>, and perform routinely to an audience 2000-3000 strong (2013: 125-142).

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<sup>37</sup> Translated from Hindi by the author. See <http://www.bhojpurimedia.com/news/mai-public-ka-aadami-hu-khesari-lal-yadav.html> (accessed 13 March, 2015) for more.

<sup>38</sup> *Bidesiya*, named after a play by Bhikhari Thakur, now stands for a performance genre that is a blend of 'the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, of dance, songs, music, love, labour, jokes and obscenity. The *Bidesiya* artists borrow freely from existing performance genres ranging from caste-based songs, women's songs, labour songs and devotional songs to popular film songs and music (Singh 2013: 124). *Launda naach*, Singh argues, has now become synonymous with *Bidesiya*, even if historically their coming together was mostly circumstantial.

<sup>39</sup> *Bidesiya*, as Singh informs us, is challenged by 'orchestra culture'. Unlike *Bidesiya*, orchestra parties contain female singers and dancers, who sing on Hindi film songs or dance on recorded versions. A far more significant distinction is in terms of social status of the two competing forms, marked by caste segregations as well. The upper-castes have switched to patronizing orchestra parties, a trend that has now caught up with lower caste communities as well. The young people have also decisively moved towards orchestras. As a result, the surviving *Bidesiya* parties have had to adapt by incorporating several elements from the orchestra. Singh (2013) gives us this thick description of these parties thriving across rural Bihar:

A *Bidesiya* party usually consists of eighteen members. Of them, five members constitute the musical repertoire and become part of the chorus: members playing *dholak*, *nagara*, *casio*, *jhal* and *nahar*. Four of them are called the masters or the gurus. They have one assistant. Other than them, there is one *mahant* or *ustad* (manager) of the party, who is known by his name. He is responsible for contacting artists, managing accounts and fixing programs. The *ustad* decides on the script, keeping in mind the training of the artists and their health, safety and travel. In this region of Bihar (i.e. Patna, Nalanda and Vaishali districts), the manager mainly belongs to one of the two castes: the Yadavas (Backward Caste) and the Dusadhs (Dalits). The power of caste is important when it comes to the selection of a manager. Artists prefer a manager from a powerful caste, or at least one, which has a strong base in that particular region. That makes the entire group powerful, accords security and a degree of networking in terms of contacting and making clients. Besides these, the rest of the members are actors and at least five to six of them play the role of female impersonators on a regular basis... around 75 per cent of the *Bidesiya* dialogue is in the form of a song. Actors are also expected to be singers and dancers. Interestingly, from time to time, actors pitch in to play instruments and some musicians act. Often, a female impersonator also plays a male role in some scene, while in the

Khesari's films have also been daringly self-referential. His very first film *Sajan...* underlines his stardom as a singer-performer and anticipates his success as a Bhojpuri filmstar. Unlike his later films and also unlike the above-mentioned visual language of action-melodramas of its time, *Sajan...* is a throwback to the early melodramas of the third phase. Khesari arrives in the city only to avenge his father who was betrayed by a friend, and marry the friend's daughter he had been engaged to as a young boy. To prove his worth, however, he must acquire enormous wealth. By repeating a sequence the kind of which we have seen many in older Hindi films, *Sajan...* shows Khesari mocking a singer while recording only to be challenged by the crew whether he can sing instead. Making the most of the opportunity, within a year, Khesari's character goes on to become the biggest Bhojpuri singer and then filmstar. In a way then, the film anticipates as well as precipitates Khesari's film stardom by producing it first on screen. The audience, in full awareness of his popularity as a singer-performer, encounter his rapid rise within the narrative as the unfolding of an event foretold. And then as an extension of the same, the narrative foretells the event of Khesari's film stardom. We see Khesari arrive in the city only midway into the film, and instead of projecting him as an extraordinary action star, it projects him as a star who takes to action only as the last resort. The extremely confrontational visual as well as verbal vocabulary that took off in Bhojpuri films after the arrival of Nirahua, is absent here. Instead, Khesari is projected as an innocent villager in an unidentified city that is marked by an insensitive and immoral competitive tendency. *Devra pe Manwa Dole* (2012) also follows from the success of *Sajan...* and pitches Khesari in a rural family melodrama in which the entire story unfolds within the rural confines. Here too, Khesari's action star image is held back.

### ***Jaan Tere Naam* [My Life, for You] (2013)**

*Jaan...* became Khesari's biggest hit to date. The film marks many continuities with *Sajan...*, but makes a distinct departure in terms of its visual language and the star persona. By now, Khesari has turned into an action star who is introduced to the film in terms of his energy, athleticism, decisive approach, and when necessary, potential to violence. Also, by now, the village is no longer the primary site of action. It is the site of departure, instead. In *Jaan...* and also *Ae Balma Biharwala* (2013), Khesari spends only a brief while in the village. In both the films, he performs his *launda* act in the village, which receives strict

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next scene he may come back to perform a *Bidesiya* song as a 'woman'. While the king speaks standard Hindi, other characters use local dialect (138-140).

condemnation from his family. Only after his major success in Bhojpuri cinema does he find acceptance with his family in *Jaan...* The site of conflict, romance, action, and redemption has by now moved to the city. If in earlier films, the male star fell in love when the female protagonist returned to the village, Khesari's romance here is an entirely urban phenomenon. The aspiration to tame the city is now performed within the urban confines.

*Jaan...* opens in Patna on the Valentine's Day to a college compound where hundreds of girls and boys await Kishen's (played by Khesari) romantic choice of the day, as he rests on his motorbike with his face covered with a hat. He sits up as several repetitive slow-motion takes cut to him wearing sunglasses, as he removes his hat in the close-up, then shakes his head in slow motion again, only to put the sunglasses back on. This absurd opening stages the star over a delicate melody as he takes out a red rose and announces that whichever girl the rose touches shall become his lover. Having kissed it, Kishen throws it up in the air and it lands into the blouse of the female protagonist. As she wonders where it came from, we watch him take another slow-motion walk – shot from a very low angle – towards her. He declares his love (in the English phrase *I love you*), she protests using phrases *shut up* and *you bloody idiot*, and Kishen promptly goes on to shame her for her choice of clothes, “*Naam Radha, aa dehi pe kapda aadha* [Your name is Radha and you wear only half the clothes]? If you were wearing proper clothes, my flower would not have gone where it did, it would have stopped in the right place (her hair). Your shirt is clasped to your body and your skirt has become a tent. I actually feel like inserting a stick within this tent and raising it.” Saying this, he laughs and tickles her, making her respond, “You! Don't touch me!” At this, Kishen bursts into a song and dance pestering her as the crowd watches on and dances along.

Visually, the song intercuts between close-ups of Radha's animated face expressing annoyance to Kishen's joy, and mid-range shots of Kishen dancing, lifting her in his arms, and chasing her. Every now and then, the reverberation effect is used on the beat. Visually, the aesthetic remains edgy and fairly disconcerting as rapid cuts join cycles of harassment. The aesthetic arrangement of this song and dance is derived from a large body of songs across Indian cinemas. Between the 1980s and late 1990s, this form emerged and flourished across Hindi, Telugu and Tamil cinemas. To that extent, Bhojpuri cinema is not unique in deploying it to the pleasure of its entirely male audience. The gradual shift is primarily in terms of rapid editing and an extra burst of energy that fills every shot making the harassment far more visceral than playful sexual banter. This is also the form that now

flourishes across the Bhojpuri music videos where the disinterested female is enthusiastically pursued by a bunch of male dancers led by the singer.

The song is immediately followed by an action sequence. Radha runs to her brother's car even as Kishen casually walks towards her in slow-motion low-angle shots. Her brother, a small-time crook, is also projected dangerously in slow-motion reverberation effect of zoom-ins to the act of taking off sunglasses. Animated by a loud soundtrack at the point of reverberations and zoom-ins, we are taken into the territory of confrontations. The hyperactive camera and rapid editing presents the action sequence, prefaced by rhetorical verbal confrontations, as an event effected by the audiovisual language instead of unfolding in narrative over the visual layout. The action is flamboyant and improbable; Kishen lifts and holds one of the goons mid-air on a single punch. By the end of this entire sequence, the film only manages to establish the extraordinary narrative position of the star, on the basis of his physical features. To have a hold over women in general, and the outlying female protagonist in particular (best indexed in her choice of fashion), is presented as the primary star persona, supported by his capacity for violence.

In the next sequence, we are taken into the melodramatic space of the rural family. Returning to his feudal family, Kishen is greeted by garlands and gunshots. His father announces a party in which a *launda naach* would be performed. In due time, however, the dance party has disappeared and Kishen takes upon himself the responsibility to entertain. He dances as the *launda* singing '*Marata seeti lehengawa mein cooker*' [The cooker whistles in my skirt]. His dance scandalises his father in particular who readies himself to shoot Kishen calling him a *namard* [not man enough]. Kishen reminds him that it is an art that Lord Shankar started, while his father instructs him to mend his ways, or else he would let nothing get in the way of family honour. We are then introduced to Radha's brother Tiger, who is presented as Kishen's near-equal, through a fetishistic montage of extreme close-ups. He receives money to kill a man and save a girl, a task he duly performs alone in a sequence of brutal violence at the end of which he penetrates an eye of his main opponent with a knife. The girl he saves promptly falls in love with him and starts seducing him with another song and dance. Yet again, the hyper-performative seduction is met with complete disinterest on the part of Tiger, thus stanza after stanza of the song going after him, eg. *Na jawaani ke udaye kabo garda, milal baklol marda* [Does not ravage my youth, oh I have got this stupid man]. In the very next sequence, Kishen saves Radha and her friend – the same girl Tiger rescued earlier – from being raped in another montage

of highly improbable shots of violence, only to follow it up with yet another song where Kishen's molestation meets with Radha's flat refusals amidst a bunch of dancing girls.

The film routinely cuts across sequences of violence and romance, both unfolding as public spectacles performed by the star. The comedy strand which held a prominent place in the earlier films has by now made way for more action. The ultimate project of the film remains the quest for a moral yet supreme masculinity. The star vanquishes the male body in violence, while the female body either subjugates itself in a performance of seduction or resists public molestation before submitting to the male star. What makes these star-driven narratives unique is that without a *pre-given extraordinary legitimacy* awarded to the star figure, the ethical structure of the narrative would collapse. The molestation and violence do not derive their ethical legitimacy from within the narrative; they are spectacles precisely because the audience knows and approves of their stardom *in spite of* the absence of narrative justification. Also, even if the narrative is driven by the romantic impulse, the female body merely *mediates* the star's triumph over, or appropriation of, another order which too is patronised by masculine figures. The seamless movement across violent and romantic pieces also serves to establish the same. The romance and violence are never entirely independent of the other – they remain two modes of the shared project in which the female body facilitates contiguity while the male star switches the mode.

Kishen, in order to have regular access to Radha, impersonates a woman and begs Tiger for protection pledging to serve his sister as a servant in return. As a result of his acceptance, Kishen ends up living with Radha round the clock and develops their relationship further. When he is forced eventually to reveal his identity to Radha, she first raises the rifle to kill him, but when he dares her, she crumbles and confesses her love in yet another switch between violence and romance. As Kishen is still dressed as a woman, and spotted in an embrace with Radha, Tiger beats him to pulp because Radha does not let him respond in violence. Tiger duly dumps Kishen dressed in a *lehenga choli* at his father's doorstep abusing his tainted masculinity and their family honour. The father refuses to accept Kishen, so his friends help him recover till he and Radha run away and get married in a temple. When Tiger's men chase Kishen and Radha to kill them, they are saved by a divine intervention that follows the blessings of Sufi saints at a *mazaar*. This lands them in the city, where they struggle to put together a new life together.

Without money and any means of livelihood, the film turns to the melodramatic mode and takes us slowly through their romance as it blossoms through hardships. The narrative

shifts when Kishen works on a film crew moving the lights around and begins to dance while they are shooting a song sequence for a Bhojpuri film. The director spots him and asks him to lead the dancers in the song. In a little while, Kishen takes over the realm of Bhojpuri stardom. One telling song that he dances to, puts Khesari – to whom there are other references throughout the film – in the league of other Bhojpuri stars. The song contains these lines: *Khesari ke jaise Kishen thumka lagawe, uparwala zero ko hero banawe* [Kishen grooves like Khesari, God turns zero into a Hero]. It is then implied that the film in which Kishen acted announced him to the Bhojpuri industry with the film *Jaan Tere Naam*, which turns out to be a massive hit. In an animated scene, the frame on which Kishen is dancing is squeezed onto a theatre screen where a full house is watching him. This spectacular self-referencing plainly states that the film is not much more than a vehicle for stardom – a facilitator of the encounter between the masses and the male star. Also, when the film within the film, instead of serving an allegorical purpose, collapses the separation between the metaphor and the object, we as the audience can no longer inhabit the narrative universe. Such strategies directly invite us to participate in the playful toggling across on and off screen realms. Akin to his act of becoming a *launda*, Khesari's stardom deploys this fudging of boundaries as a key textual strategy.

The last leg of the film then presents Kishen Kumar the star to his and Radha's family back in the village through a television interview. As a 'Bhojpuriya superstar', he gets to thank them all in a melodramatic speech which duly melts their hearts<sup>40</sup>. The reformist and the violent resolution are both blended in the climax. While the family is reformed, another treacherous character poses a threat to the familial order by threatening to kill Kishen and Radha's son. Tiger and Kishen join hands to perform one last sequence of violence in slow-motion, reverberation effect and close-ups; they negotiate the threat and save all lives. The familial order is restored and the various differences are eventually reconciled. Apart from the fact that the film takes the viewer on a whirlwind ride across a variety of pleasures and narrative anticipations, it begins and ends at precisely the same point – the 'fact' of Khesari's stardom. In comparison to the other two films discussed, the city has grown in prominence and the urban tropes have been embedded into the aesthetics of stardom. The contestations around the familial honour and masculinity retain their ground but the language of audiovisual articulation has dramatically altered. The sites of the 'social' universe have shrunk considerably as we are now arrested within the highly

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<sup>40</sup> McCain (2012) also points out a similar event in a Hausa film where the actress who has been thrown out by her family melts their hearts and receives forgiveness after granting a TV interview about her past life as a star.

individuated and stylised diegetic compositions. As opposed to the earlier films, the screenplay in the later films is so tightly packed with events and confrontations that the *mise-en-scène* is compelled to align itself with individuals.

### **Narrative Production of Stardom**

Khesari's stardom needs to be investigated further because it is the engine that drives contemporary Bhojpuri cinema. To that extent, a comparison with Pawan Singh is most appropriate. While Singh followed soon after *Nirahua* as an extremely popular singer-performer, he could never entirely translate his success into a major filmstar. Even as he survives as one of the bankable names in the industry, he cannot compete with Khesari's phenomenal popularity. What distinguishes the two is Khesari's consistent and unique star-text. His repeated attempts at *launda naach* and integrating his off-screen stardom within many of his film-texts, have been two most notable stylistic tropes that mark him. Even in *Pyar Jhukta Nahin* (2013), the film opens with the public execution of a couple who belong to different castes. We are introduced to the execution by a speech being made in the name of familial honour, tradition and public shame. Khesari not only interrupts the spectacle, he delivers his own speech in defense of love as a universal value. All of a sudden, the scene is interrupted by the film crew and we come to know that it was a film set. While Khesari is still acknowledging the received adulation as a film star making direct references to the film title, we cut back to him mumbling in sleep, lying on a cot spread under a tree in a village. With this double interruption, we retreat into the village and the narrative now sets about the task of producing stardom – stated upfront as the ultimate desire – as a diegetic project.

Also, it is when the star has a stable constituency that he is called upon to serve a more political purpose, and speak and act on behalf of the community. In *Pyar...* when Khesari arrives in Mumbai halfway into the film, his luggage and wallet is promptly stolen, and he is helped by another private security guard from the BSR who identifies him as his brethren through his politeness. Later, when he spots the thief and chases him to his 'area', he is rebuked not as an individual but as a representative of the north-Indian community ('bhaiya' is a popular insult used against people from the BSR in Mumbai). The local bigwig, who represents the Marathi community but speaks in Hindi, shouts at him, "*Ae bhaiye! Neend se jaga, khet mein bhaga, aur ataichi utha ke Mumbai bhaga* [You wake up, relieve yourself in the fields, and rush to Mumbai with a suitcase]?" This allows Khesari to beat him to pulp not merely as an individual defending himself, but as the exemplary



representative of a subjugated community. A more developed variant of this persona appears in *Chhapra Express* (2014), perhaps the most violent film in Bhojpuri to date. The amateurish aesthetic of Bhojpuri films, which had matured considerably in *Jaan...*, has become relatively sophisticated by *Chhapra...* Also, the intent of the recent Bhojpuri films, to blend with the wider aesthetic of the action blockbusters appearing across India – Hindi, Telugu, Tamil cinemas in particular – finds its best expression here.

*Chhapra...* brings forth a curious problematic for Bhojpuri cinema, however. On the one hand, a very high percentage of film titles that are borrowed from Hindi films or popular songs are indicative of the desire to engage with an audience beyond that of Bhojpuri speakers. On the other hand, to address a politically knit Bhojpuri community – to which sentiments of shared humiliation could be addressed purposefully – the films must address the particularities of the region. With an audience base scattered across all the major cities of India, and significant parts of Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, it is not surprising that Bhojpuri filmmakers wish to target larger audiences. *Chhapra...* is the open-text story of an angry young man from Chhapra who cannot bear any injustice. As his family becomes the victim of repeated incidents of violence perpetrated by the local mafia, Arjun (played by Khesari) destroys them all through the film. Set in Patna, Arjun is himself called Chhapra Express – with reference to a fast train from Chhapra – and repeatedly declares that in the city of no real men, he has turned up as a *man*. The entire screenplay moves across scenes of violence, romance and comedy, punctuated by song and dance. One of these – a club song – is entirely in Hindi, while another imitates a distinctly south Indian aesthetic. The latter opens with the tune borrowed from a recent Hindi hit *Rowdy Rathore* (2012), which itself was a remake of a Telugu blockbuster. It could be argued that the action blockbuster aesthetic, which has traveled from the south to Hindi cinema, is thus finding its way into Bhojpuri cinema as well. This allows the formal convergence upon the action genre which has become the clear winner for the big star films across India. Dubbing films from one language to another – mostly from southern languages – is a stable practice across regional cinemas to exceed the regional commercial territory. The open-texts of the action genre are indicative of the desire for commercial viability across languages through dubbing.

### **The Discreet Charm of Bhojpuri Cinema**

Having navigated through the recent history of Bhojpuri film-texts, we could now identify certain key tendencies sustained through the period under discussion, and their

implications. The starkest of these tendencies, perhaps, is the articulation of a threat to the female body. We have seen countless sequences in Bhojpuri films after 2004 in which a woman walks across open spaces – rural fields or small-town markets, during the day as well as the night. In *Nirahua*... the entire journey from the railway station to Rani's village is marked by the threat of lawlessness that enables the lingering specter of rape, offset only by the presence of the male star. These sequences firmly establish a two-fold articulation: i) the open terrain in Bhojpuri cinema articulates a threat that women cannot negotiate themselves, and ii) the female body remains available for easy violation, except when protected by a male guardian. Any combination of the female body and open terrain invariably leads to the threat of violation, or an inane accident resulting in the woman drowning, falling etc., only to be saved by her prospective partner. Rather worryingly, it continues to project the domestic space as the terrain of tradition, moral values and 'private women' – mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. It is only the public women – prostitutes, *nautanki* or *mujra* performers – who can safely negotiate the outside because they can no longer be defiled.

Another tendency that I have noted is that of the language. Within the Bhojpuri film universe – precisely because it is built upon a split from Hindi – the languages appear with their own ideological baggage. The language of officialdom here seems to be Hindi, analogous to how Hindi cinema before the late 1990s deployed English to mark a distance between the administrative and informal. This distance is amplified particularly in interactions with the civil servants and the police personnel, who speak Hindi as the language of the state. The Muslims too – those who wear a cap, keep a beard and maintain an easily identifiable Muslim-ness – often speak Hindi, not Bhojpuri. Also, Bhojpuri cinema routinely acknowledges the significance of Mumbai as a key site. Not only is it a formidable commercial territory, working class migrants from the BSR form a huge chunk of the population there. The resulting animosity with a particular strand of Marathi right-wing politics<sup>41</sup> has resulted in a few sequences, such as the one mentioned earlier. In these sequences, the narrative distinctly sides with the north Indians who speak Bhojpuri, while those insulting them would often speak Hindi. Marathi – a 'regional vernacular' - is translated here to Hindi as the 'national vernacular'.

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<sup>41</sup> There exists a substantial constituency within Maharashtra that is mobilised by parties like the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) against the north Indian migrants from UP and Bihar, most of them Bhojpuri speakers. The rise of the MNS was strictly on account of the mandate to throw out the north Indians, and led to violence across the cities of Maharashtra. Lately however, the MNS has slid considerably, even though the same cannot be said about the mandate for that political tendency.

The performance of sexual disinterest, when met with otherwise outrageous seduction, also stand out across Bhojpuri films as well as music videos. This applies primarily to female seductresses and male disinterest, but in many songs a bunch of men also harass an annoyed and disinterested woman. However, in all these cases, it is only a matter of time before the disinterest makes way for true love. Very often, we are also told that the disinterested man or woman is only covering up for a burning desire within. Why are such performances staged in one song after another, whether in Bhojpuri music albums or films? While persuasive molestation provides the misogynist pleasure of soft violence, seduction serves a double purpose. First, seduction is simultaneously performed over the male counterpart as well as the overwhelmingly male audience as the female performer uses her body and metaphorical references to the sexual act to entice and invite them. Second, seduction also makes possible a performance of submission, servility and powerlessness in the face of the prowess it desires. As Surabhi Sharma's documentary *Bidesiya in Bamba* shows, performances by male singer-performers across Mumbai are attended by thousands of men, where most of the songs stage the female desire. This back projection of desire, supplanting the migrant male yearning upon the female figure that stays back in the village, is a collective mourning for its own absence at the site of that desire. The female body – imagined as demure and submissive – when performatively produced as burning with sexual desire for the man, performs a proxy purpose. The seduction performed in film-songs too, serves a similar proxy role – it supplants desire and submission upon the female body to amplify the effective sexual quotient. After all, the male body is always already sexually charged, even when in denial. It is when the woman burns with similar levels of desire that we witness a heightened eroticism. But what makes this 'vulgar', instead of erotic?<sup>42</sup>

It is the inability of eroticism in Bhojpuri films to occupy its own diegetic universe that brings forth, I suggest, the notion of vulgarity. The erotic is contained within the narrative universe; it is the resultant articulation of a private transaction between the characters firmly situated within the narrative. In Bhojpuri films, the erotic is compelled, and therefore *sullied*, by the need to speak to the spectatorial gaze. While the erotic is that component which is available fully to those who participate in it, and whose affective

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<sup>42</sup> Hereafter, I shall drop the quotation marks around the term vulgar. I maintain that I use the term across this chapter with full knowledge of the contestations around it. The claim of vulgarity remains dubious, even though it has substantial basis in the material that circulates within the industry. This chapter is an attempt to carry out a thorough investigation of the same, by discussing the film and music texts and their modes of articulation.

meaning spills out from their immersion in the act, the sexual attributes of Bhojpuri content are only marginally available to the performers. In trying to make the sexual accessible to the audience, it becomes performatively frontal. This also means that the lyrics play the most significant role in the bulk of songs. The puns and metaphors deployed become the primary articulation, and guide the possibilities that the image could then visualise. It does not mean that the images have remained stagnant across the recent history of Bhojpuri cinema. The growing sexual intemperance indeed follows from the lyrics to visuality. But more significantly, the sexual mandate earlier served by the public woman in a stage performance is increasingly housed within domestic confines. Therefore, the earlier reference to erotic pleasure as an outside to the domestic morality has now been repackaged as the female protagonist often performs the double task of moral purity and sexual abandon. Only few songs, however, explore the erotic possibilities in which physical intimacy is performed in alignment with the soundtrack.

The other mode of discomfiting sexual representation deployed by Bhojpuri films is the voyeuristic one. In *Karela Kamaal Dharti Ke Lal* (2013) the scene in which Monalisa performs fitness exercises and in *Ziddi Ashiq* (2013), where she tries to repair her car, are both illustrations of voyeuristic pleasure, to which we are distinctly alerted to in the soundtrack. By singling out parts of the female anatomy (such as lips, breasts, hips and navel), the composition draws us away from the otherwise mundane activity of repair, exercise or bathing. Instead, we are unmistakably offered a voyeuristic entry into the private domain. This may not be at odds with the representation of female body at large, but while such representation may be assimilated much better elsewhere, Bhojpuri films find it awkward to regulate and reconcile with the voyeuristic gaze and present the material as such (see Mulvey 1975). They remain much too aware of the spectatorial gaze and their mandate to converse with it.

To understand this better, we might consider returning to the problem of stardom. The Bhojpuri filmstar, as I have noted above, does not draw the legitimacy of his stardom from within the diegetic space. The male stardom simply carries over from the outside; it bursts into the frame as a necessary intervention from the outside. It is because stardom becomes not so much the property of the character as the star's personhood, that the star walks into the film narrative on the strength of his popularity and projected prowess. The erotic content within this dynamic remains an act *performed by the male representative upon the female body for, and on behalf of, the (almost entirely male) audience*. The aesthetic arrangement of intimacy, then, follows from the live show where sexual aggression over

the female body is duly cheered. This dynamic is further reinforced by a variety of factors. Each of the Bhojpuri male stars belong to the BSR, while most of the actresses who have survived in the industry come from outside the region. Rani Chatterjee hails from Mumbai and uses a Bengali name. Rinku Ghosh, Tanushree Chatterjee and Monalisa are all from Bengal, while Pakhi Hegde comes from Maharashtra. Most of the actresses a decade ago came from the lower rungs of Bollywood, where their careers never quite took off; Nagma, as an exception, had been reasonably successful in Telugu films. The more recent actresses – Shubhi Sharma, Smriti Sinha, Anjana Singh, Akshara Singh – come from north-India, though. Still, as we have seen through the films discussed above, within the films too, the women mark themselves as rich, urban and English-speaking before they are eventually tamed and provincialised by the subaltern Bhojpuri speaking male star. This marking of women as ‘outsiders’ and the men as ‘our representatives’ means that what would have been an erotic transaction between them is loaded by another layer of meaning. My contention is that vulgarity emerges from this outside layer, which further genders the iconic corporeality within the film-text.

Interestingly, the women in the Bhojpuri film industry have had more stable careers. This is unlike most other film industries in India where women have much shorter careers that end abruptly. In the Bhojpuri film industry, even as a few male stars have acquired longevity, they have still continued to work with the same set of actresses. The young men launched one after another also desire to be paired opposite the same set of women, established in the industry and reinforcing the commercial viability of the project. Raviraj Patel explained to me how this viability works via the cost of female labour. While extremely underpaid, the low cost of female labour in the industry has also given them longer and stable careers. Patel observed,

If I have put in my money, I will obviously play the hero. Now when I am the hero, what is the point if I am not in at least four *hot scenes*? See how Khesari does romance? Totally absorbed in it... So if I've put in the money, I'm the hero, then I need a super hot girl. And well... I will also want all of those things that those people have done. Properly vulgar stuff...kissing, pulling, clinging, bed scenes, the works! They think this itself is success. And this is why they cannot say much after the film has bombed. Because they think the money invested has already paid off, at least in half... If they are the hero, they want to *enjoy*!... The women are mostly from elsewhere, so culturally they are more open. And if you are struggling as an actor, Bhojpuri works for you. You may not get too much money, but you can run your household... If the actor is charging 15 lakhs, the actress will get maybe 1.5-2 lakhs... See, when the hero is a new face, for the film they also need a familiar face, an established name. So they want Rinku Ghosh or Rani Chatterjee. Those are the established ones. If they take a familiar male actor, half the budget will go in that only! So for

much less money, you can get a heroine, an established one actually. That gives the women longevity while new guys continue to become heroes. So it is the female cast that often makes the film commercially viable to the distributors...

So, the established stars may experiment with new female faces, but the new guys want to be paired with the familiar faces only. *Those* are the women who have attracted them! The ones who have been romanced by Nirahua, they also want to do the same sort of things [getting intimate with them on screen]! This is about mentality and intention. And they do not have to work very hard for that. The heroines get regular work *because* of this – the small and big both come to them. (2013, Personal Communication).

As Patel informs us, screen intimacy is never seen only as a narrative event. Instead, it is understood in terms of what Khesari or Nirahua *did* to the body of a certain actress on screen. The aspirational economy of stardom, therefore, desires to provincialise that act of intimacy. The desire here is to *displace* Khesari or Nirahua, and perform the same act upon the same female body. It is a desire to *occupy* that what mobilises one's passions when separated by the screen. Unlike other film economies where the barrier for such occupation may be beyond aspiration, the Bhojpuri film economy with its modest means makes the aspiration viable<sup>43</sup>. The resultant effect of this dynamic, is indicative of the terms on which the film-text and the audience have a dialogue, feeding further back into the screen.

In tens of discussions that I had with local artists who perform to rural, semi-urban as well as metropolitan audiences, each one of them admitted to the enormous popularity of risqué songs without which one is unlikely to find much popularity. The film soundtracks too, starting from *Sasura*... all the way up to Khesari's songs, make space for the bawdy elements in acknowledgement of their popularity. My suggestion is that while we speak of vulgarity in Bhojpuri films and music, we make a distinction between: i) the bawdy elements that are often included via stage-based orchestrations, such as the *Nautanki*, *Mujra*, or wedding ritual dances by the *launda*, and ii) the more individuated performances of public as well as private seduction between the male and female protagonists. Even if

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<sup>43</sup> Satyendra Kumar (2014: 108) in his study on Bhojpuri cinema, also underlines this relationship between Bhojpuri and Hindi film industries. The aspiration to enter the latter, when fails to make inroads, often compromises itself by launching oneself in the former:

Sudip Pandey, a former software engineer and aspiring actor, struggled in the Hindi film industry to get a break but couldn't make it. He went to the USA, worked as a computer engineer, earned in dollars. He launched himself in his self produced Bhojpuri film with a budget of Rs.40 lakhs. He said "I realized after struggling for one year in Mumbai that no one will give me a break so I earned and saved the money to launch myself. The aspiration of becoming an actor is also a motivating factor for investing money in a Bhojpuri film – made at a budget of Rs 40 to 60 lakhs, which is yet affordable compared to the Hindi film budget of a minimum of Rs 4 crore. Those actors, artists and technicians, who can't get success in the Hindi film industry, try their luck in the less competitive Bhojpuri film industry.

both can be accused of vulgarity, the rationale varies significantly. The latter, as I have discussed, on account of its frontality and inability to inhabit the diegetic universe; the former, on account of its distinctly oblique references to the sexual. Even as the instances of the latter have been growing in the films, via an increasing individuation of the narrative itself, the mainstay of Bhojpuri vulgarity remains the former<sup>44</sup>. It is the bawdy that one thinks of the moment one thinks of Bhojpuri music videos. Predictably, the live concerts across the BSR and Mumbai, as Sharma's documentary also shows, thrive on the same. It is pertinent, therefore, to understand its persistence.

### **The Bawdy and its Remediations**

The humorous indecency, laced with metaphors ranging from cultural objects (such as *gamchha*, *shamiyana*, *lehenga*), to iconic objects signifying modernity (such as jeans and mobile phone), marks discursive boundaries across which the playful dialogue is staged in performances. By themselves these objects may be rather banal, but in a spirited yet oblique expression of desire, they are rendered loaded meanings. In the case of Bhojpuri, much of this playfulness takes place in the realm of the sexual. Still, we must not overlook the multivalent articulation of the bawdy. The indecent itself is not merely reducible to the sexual. It is a device that upsets the social equilibrium of 'decent' dialogue and transports the audience into the performative space. Its mode of address ruptures the glue that holds the familial, religious, or caste, class, gender based communities together. Instead, the audiences are re-aligned in relation to the rebellion facilitated by indecency. But at the same time, the humour remains an integral component of the dynamic. How do the humorous, the erotic and the rebellious reconcile themselves within the bawdy? Even as they may be indistinguishably mixed in the mode of address, the terms of reconciliation, I would suggest, are established by the nature of the performance. Let us take, for example, the two songs mentioned earlier: i) *Saiyan ji dilwa maange le gamchha bichhai ke* [my husband demands my 'heart' by spreading a stole] from *Sasura...* and ii) *Hachkawe balma hamka rickshaw chadha ke* [Mounting me upon his rickshaw, my man strokes me] from *Nirahua...*

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<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that one does not recall many instances of the private seduction song in Hindi films after *Dhoom* (2004). *Koi nahin hai kamre mein* [There is no one in the room] – a song that became extremely popular – may have been the last popular song of the format before the disappearance of the form. In the same period though, it became increasingly popular in Bhojpuri films. The song *Ye Mera Dil* [This heart of mine] from *Don* (2006) that recalls the form came back in a film that was itself a remake of *Don* (1978).

Both the songs are performed by an ‘item girl’ amidst an entirely male audience. Yet, in the first song, it is only the girl who dances while the men watch on. Raja lowers his eyes often as he is held within the frame. The dancer expresses spirited abandon, her gyrations are erotic and indeed rebellious for a woman surrounded by the men. There is no humour here, and the erotic element is underlined by Raja’s expression of mild shame. The second song, however, is performed on a stage in front of a large audience. But the two others present on the same stage are the male and female protagonists of the film. While Nirahua dances with the girl and is enticed by her moves, Rani tries to hold him back, expresses embarrassment, frustration, jealousy and anger all the while. Even though both the songs are similarly bawdy in spirit, referring to the sexual act with clever metaphors, they could not be more different in terms of their mode of address. The second foregrounds humour, undercuts the erotic, and disperses the rebellious over the scattered presence of bodies on the stage. The first, however, primarily stages the erotic abandon. The bulk of the *launda naach* performances by Khesari, similarly, foreground the humorous and the rebellious spirit. Also, each of these song texts, when performed to a live audience in rural Bihar, would be remediated via a new performative orchestration, and would thus lead to different meanings.

Also, repeatedly across Bhojpuri media practice, a popular song from some music album is adapted for a film version. In fact, films often use a certain already-popular song as a publicity tool, by including one of its mutations. Other artists also routinely cover popular songs, with varying degrees of changes to the tune and the lyrics. During live shows, all the performers are asked to perform the then biggest hit songs, regardless of who the original performer may have been. All these practices sustain a media economy in which popularity only renders the ensemble-text – the lyrics, the music and the performance – much more open to further adjustments with varying degrees of loyalty to the ‘original’. The bawdy too, then, is not a permanent attribute of any of the subtexts, but could be an appropriate description of a specific textual arrangement. Also, the possibility of mutations across films, music albums and live shows, energises the entire Bhojpuri media economy around the bawdy. But it also integrates them as one large set of Bhojpuri entertainment in which thousands of artists, some key sites of production and consumption, and many constantly remediated ensemble-texts engage with one another.

As Bolter and Grusin argue in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), remediation is ‘the representation of one medium in another’ (45). It comprises a dialectic between immediacy and hypermediacy. The authors add, however, that these seemingly



contradictory logics not only coexist but are also mutually dependent within the ‘double logic of remediation’. They argue that each ‘act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all’ (55-56). While there is no getting away from the real as well, remediation refashions or rehabilitates other media. In the context of Bhojpuri films and music albums, I wish to expand the idea of remediation beyond media into a wider framework of representation. When an ensemble-text – comprising of performance, lyric and music – is refashioned with varying degrees of change within the same media, it may also be accounted for as remediation. In such remediations, however, the double logic of remediation collapses into a singular one. Immediacy and hypermediacy, instead of emerging as two opposite margins of the new composition, get embedded within the performing body. The audience is all too aware that the new text appears via other popular texts, and therefore rehabilitates or refashions them. But it is also aware that in spite of the hypermediacy, the performing body of the singer-performer makes it a completely transparent and immediate text. The more lasting impact of this singular logic of remediation, then, is that both the films and music albums are situated within a *remediating continuum*.

Let us look at the textual journey of Bhojpuri music to explicate this better. It must be said upfront that while the lyrics, the music and the performance – all contribute to the composition, the lyrics surely determine the extent to which the other two could remediate it. The progression we must consider, therefore, is that of the shift in the lyrics. One of the oldest popular songs, released on a cassette in the mid-1980s, was the highly regarded Sharda Sinha’s *Paniya ke jahaaj se paltaniya ban ayiha ho, piya le le ayiha ho sendur bangaal se* [Oh my love! Return as the naval commander by the ship, and get me some vermilion from Bengal]. The song is sung by a woman to her husband going away for work, as she asks for different objects from different parts of the country, on his return. True to the spirit of *bidesiya*, this is a song that delicately caresses the suffering of the waiting wife. In the early 1990s, Bharat Sharma ‘Vyas’, another luminary that everyone in the region speaks very highly of, came out with *Goriya chand ke anjoriya niyan god badu ho, tohar jod kehu naikhe bejod badu ho* [Oh fair one! You are beautiful like an image of the moon, you are peerless, there is no one like you]. Another very popular song in the ‘nirgun’ (monotheistic formless devotional) tradition, which appeared around the year 2000, was Madan Rai’s collaboration with Sharma – *Bhanwarwa, ke tohra sange jayi* [Oh beetle, who will go with you]. Both Sharma and Rai became the most popular practitioners

of the ‘Vyas’ tradition – singer-performers often called to perform during wedding or other social occasions.

However, the most successful song of the 1990s was Guddu Rangeela’s *Ja Jhar Ke*, his fifth album. The lyrics of the song went thus:

*Khalu tiranga, goriya ho faar ke, ja jhaar ke.*  
*Baaki ayiha aitwaar ke, ja jhaar ke*  
[Eat the betel nut mix, oh fair one, and walk about in style  
come next Sunday, now go in style]

Tanul Thakur’s fascinating profile of Rangeela informs us that before he erupted on the stage with his inventive lyrics, he started with *Ashtjaam* songs, then sang for *Ram Leela* and *Shiv Leela* (plays held during festivals celebrated in honour of the gods Ram and Shiv), slowly getting offers for *bhakti* (devotional) songs. In a few years, he switched to singing *kirtan* (a genre of devotional songs), and then moved over to singing *nirgun gaan*. With modest success in such forms, Rangeela was barely satisfied. He identified that *dholak* and *jhaal* were prominent instruments in Bhojpuri music, but there was no concept of ‘musical’ - songs which are composed using contemporary Western instruments ‘such as the guitar, the keyboard or the mouth organ’ (Thakur 2014). He, therefore, decided to introduce the sound of ‘musicals’ to Bhojpuri music. Not only did he find unprecedented success as a star singer, Rangeela blasted open the bawdy possibilities of Bhojpuri music. The devotional, amorous or *bidesiya* songs continued to grow, but the figure of the star singer was born with Rangeela. There was indeed a sizeable presence of the raunchy music even before him, particularly the songs by Tara Bano Faizabadi and Saira Bano Faizabadi, but Rangeela became a star through a rebellious projection. Thakur writes,

He has recorded, he says, “more than 250 albums” and sung “more than 2000 songs”... His most successful albums since [*Ja Jhar Ke* (What A Swagger)], *Humra Hau Chaheen* (I Want ‘That’), *Jeans Dhila Kara* (Loosen Your Jeans), *Hum Lem* (I Will Take) and, of course, *Rasdaar Holi* (A Saucy Holi) are brimming with sexual allegories that are even more vulgar than they sound. In case you think that isn’t possible here are a few examples. A ‘Mango Frooti’ (a popular processed mango pulp drink) in a Guddu Rangila song implies a pair of breasts, as do ‘lemons’. ‘Laal rasgulla’ (red rasgulla) is a euphemism for a vagina. ‘*Maal*’ (commodity), in Rangilaspeak is a girl and a *pichkari* (Spray) a penis and so on... Rangila’s popularity mushroomed over the years and in 2004 T-Series—a big Indian music company that has been a huge beneficiary of his rocketing album sales—christened him the ‘Diamond Star’... He began singing as well as acting in Bhojpuri movies in 2006, and has since played the lead in five of them. His recently released film *Ghayal Sher* (Wounded Lion), saw him starring opposite Rani Chatterji, one of the highest rated actresses in the Bhojpuri film industry. Around five years ago, he

founded his own company, Sanjivani Entertainment, that earns lakhs of rupees a month via both online and offline album sales as well as YouTube revenue (2014).

Vishal Rawlley, in his comprehensive account of Bhojpuri music album covers, also agrees that Rangeela turned traditional music into pop music, as his ‘troupe propagated electronic synthesizers and drum-pads instead of traditional instruments’ and converted the *nautanki* into an orchestra (2007). Rangeela, more importantly, saw his rebellious allusions to complete male sovereignty over the female body, as the terms of his popularity. He went on to sing songs such as *Ghus gayil, phans gayil, adas gayil* [It went inside, got stuck and stayed there], and *Khol ke dikha de gori laal rasgulla, toh ke karayeb hum dudhwa ke kulla* [Show me your vagina (literally, red sweet)/ I will make you gargle with milk]. Curiously, familiar with his reputation for such songs, he also sang *Bhaasa Bhojpuri Ke* [The language of Bhojpuri] which had the line: *Bhaasa Bhojpuri ke uthayi kaise ho? Sabbe suna ta hi oohi to sunayi kaise ho* [How do I uplift the language of Bhojpuri? If everyone listens only to those (indecent) songs, then how can I make them listen to something else]? Not surprisingly, the singers such as Rangeela are no champions of sexual liberty; instead they establish their contingent sovereignty by granting themselves the exclusive right to indulge in the otherwise unacceptable. But of course, while the liberties thus taken promptly coagulate a community of fans and supporters, the tussle over the shared norms of decency and propriety duly intensifies.

On the other hand, Manoj Tiwari, had already been very popular with songs such as *MA mein leke admission kampateesan deta* [My son has taken an admission in MA and is appearing for competitive exams]. The song captured most powerfully the struggle of the Bhojpuri speaking people to escape the lack of employment avenues. Loaded with words such as competition, registration, petition and permission, the song brought up a new vocabulary that would not shy away from processes that alienated them. In a sense, the landmark song consolidated the community around the bureaucratic harassment they fought earnestly against to prevail in spite of the alienation. Sample these lines:

*Chanas bhidawle baate deike peteesan*  
*Kachahari se leke parmeeson kampateesan deta*

[He has given it a wild shot by filing a petition  
taking permission from the court, he is still appearing for competitive exams]

In the post-Rangeela climate though, Tiwari came up with his own biggest success – *Bagalwali Jaan Mareli* [My neighbour bowls me over] – which used the ‘musical’ sound

of western instruments and faster rhythmic patterns. Except for the new sound design, it was an innocuous romantic song, but it marked a decisive shift towards a new sort of sound. Arranged as IndiPop, the score had a relatively fast rhythm but the melody playing over it retained its folk ethos. The rustic and conversational aesthetics of the early music, as in stage performance, now made way for a more hybrid sound. The traditional percussion instruments such as *dholak*, *jhaal* and *tabla* were now used less frequently. Tiwari's *Bagalwali...* was soon inserted into *Saiyan Hamar* (2003) as *Bagalwali Aankh Mareli* [My neighbour winks at me]. The Bhojpuri film music that followed after 2004 followed this pattern, broadly speaking. While the rhythmic arrangement matched steps with the contemporary Hindi music to some extent, the playback voices retained their autonomy over it.

The next major change in this aesthetic emerged with the chart-topping hit – *Lollypop lagelu* [You look like a lollypop] (2008). Apart from its racy rhythmic sound design and disco beats, the song showcased a drastic stylistic choice – what artists in the region popularly call ‘detoning’ of the voice. This technique renders a cascading metallic effect to the singer's voice and takes the timbre and tunefulness of the vocals out of the equation<sup>45</sup>. The resulting effect is a harsh, electronic, mechanical sounding but intensely impactful voice. What one hears is in complete contrast with the folk ethos that foregrounds the timbre of the voice. The extent of ‘detoning’ also allows the flaws of certain voices to be overwritten. It became a rage in the region because it allowed terrible singers to come out with fast rhythmic dance numbers in which their voices were barely identifiable. Yet, by flaunting such released albums with their faces on the cover, a bunch of songs with them singing and dancing with girls, dozens of boys rose to modest levels of local stardom. *Lollypop...* was more in the league of *Bagalwali...* than Rangeela's *Humra Hau Chaheen* (I want ‘that’). Yet, it draws from both traditions, without intending to cross deep into the bawdy terrain. Note the lyrics of the song:

*Tu lagawelu jab lipishtik,  
hillela Ara district,  
Jila top lagelu.  
Kamariya..  
Kamariya kare loppalop  
Lollypop lagelu*

[When you apply lipstick

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<sup>45</sup> This may be a reference to some variant of the Auto-Tune (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto-Tune>, accessed 18 March, 2015).

the whole of Ara shakes up  
you look like the topmost beauty in the district  
The waist...  
Oh the waist, it shakes so seductively  
you look like a lollypop]

The video of the song is adorned with bizarre visual effects absorbing the rhythmic pattern of the orchestration. Low angle shots are intercut with long shots of one girl dancing amidst a bunch of boys led by Pawan Singh. The lyrics move across a range of edible metaphors (sweets and snacks) and express how struck the various districts of Bihar are by her beauty. Singh is also seen sucking on a lollypop at different moments in the video. Notably, the girl voice ends the song as she says in Hindi: *kuchh bhi bolte ho* [whatever]. The implication of *gender as class* – native masculine subalternity desiring urban, wealthy and educated female body – continues to hold<sup>46</sup>. Given that Singh's stardom began with this song, its importance could hardly be overstated.

Another song that should be mentioned within the discussion of the remediations of bawdy is *Jagahe pe jaata* [Goes to the right place]. I first noted the refrain on the poster of *Ziddi Ashiq* (2013); it was mentioned as the ultimate attraction of the film. Clearly, the refrain was borrowed from an already popular song, perhaps the version by Pradeep Maurya. Later the same was used in *Nirahua Hindustani* (2014). Other variants of the song are also available with different voices, slightly altered lyrics and quite distinct musical arrangements. Yet, what they all share – except the *Ziddi Ashiq* version which only uses the refrain – is the sexual pun in the lyrics deployed to good effect in the visuals. Whether the man applies oil to his partner's feet or slips bangles on her arm – both with gentle force causing pain – they visualise the most mundane variant of the suggestive conversation:

Woman: *Chhoda na rajajaji bahute dukhata* [Leave it please, it really hurts]

Man: *Jayed a ye jaan eta jagahe pe jata* [Let it go, my love, it always goes to the right place]

While Rangeela always makes a public spectacle of the bawdy rebellion, here it is domesticated within the intimate confines. Also, Rangeela and many after him, render the bawdy in partly conversational terms, routinely asserting the refrain as a statement repeated outside the composition (such as *Ja jhar ke*). But increasingly in the film songs,

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<sup>46</sup> A very similar template was used in another wildly popular song: *Missed call maratadu kiss debu ka ho* [You are giving me a missed call, are you going to give me a kiss?]. So popular was the song that several variants of the same appeared in the market, one of which was also used in Nirahua's film *Deewana*. The enchantment with missed calls prevails across a range of regional films as Mridula Chari's article discusses. (See <http://www.scroll.in/article/662866/Why-regional-films-across-India-are-expressing-love-through-missed-calls>).

we see a more private and individuated version accommodating the bawdy as less rebellion, more comedy. This is how, I must conclude, the bawdy continues to get remediated across sites and texts. It offers an eclectic composition of the erotic, the comic and the rebellious with varying emphases and purposes. The slippery, ambivalent, quasi-sexual, playful and naughty lyrics, in this regime of remediation, could be seen as enablers. If the song lyrics were to be rather straightforward, they would clamp down on the possibilities opened up by their counterparts. But even more importantly, the playful irreverence with sexual innuendos has also become the standard axis of competition within Bhojpuri music. It is the yardstick by which the popular merit of an artist is evaluated. Also, it allows a dynamic and uncertain scenario to emerge through which the male performer converses with his audience, but also with the female body. There is no denying, after all, that the liberties granted to the male performer are always under the pretext that masculinity is performed *via* its relationship to the female body.

### **The ‘Vulgar’ Public Sphere?**

After this detailed historical survey of the variety of texts spread across Bhojpuri media, it is only appropriate that we venture into a broader assessment of the tendencies that thrive in it. Lest it should be read as a celebration of destabilising cultural conservatism, I must bring attention back to the dreadful possibilities contained within Bhojpuri cinema and music. The event-specific sexual rebellion of the male star attempts to *centralise* a contrarian tendency against the wider prohibition of the private. The public performance of the male star seeks to benefit from the provocative transgression that treads upon what William Mazzarella (2013) calls the ‘open edge of mass publicity’. The censorious repression is accounted for by Mazzarella in terms of an ‘ideological loop of censorship’ that comes into being to ‘protect these illiterate unfortunates from their own worst instincts’ (15). The openness of the edge emerges from the subjective formation of anonymity rewarded by cinema to vast multitudes. The film theatre renders stability to the ‘obscene superego loop’ – a moralised attachment to the laws of the symbolic order that is inextricable from the pleasure of transgressing them’ (216).

The discourse of vulgarity does not merely follow from the bawdy, erotic or even pornographic cultural practices. Instead, it is symptomatic of the prevailing censorious repression and the inequities of access which encourage uneven standards of evaluations. They result in both – overzealous criticism as well as the rebellious value of transgression. Lotte Hoek’s analysis of Bangladeshi popular cinema also suggests that the resonant

vulgarity debate – fed by affective excess and interbreeding texts – makes indistinguishable the boundaries between ideological and class positions (2013: 159). This view resonates with both – Judith Butler, who argues that sexuality prohibited becomes the sexuality produced (1997: 94), and Linda Williams, who writes that the paradox of moral crusading against obscenity results in ‘bringing *on* the obscenity in order to keep it *off*’ (2004: 3, emphasis in original). Hoek, surveying the reporting on obscenity in Bangladesh, concludes that the dismissive reports ‘cannot resist the excitement forbidden sexuality affords... The discursive rejection of obscenity cannot be divorced from the corpothetic qualities inhering in the discussion of sexuality in the public realm’ (2013: 171). Hoek convincingly argues that the public sphere is constituted by a space of resonance in which each story echoes another, different accounts of obscenity may accomplish the same end, and moral indignation of indecency could blend into titillation (179).

The Bhojpuri male stardom thrives on the open edge of mass publicity, further animated by the rampant remediation across media forms and sites. The star feeds off the ideological loop of censorship and projects himself as a figure of rebellion within the sphere resonant with the threat of vulgarity. The indignation and repulsion suggested by the moral tirades, as much as the cheering masses’ seeming approval, contribute to such stardom. What they indeed hide is the exploitative side of this public sphere. The Bhojpuri public sphere may not be unique in its exploitation of the female body – to entertain as well as anchor the male stardom – but its largely masculine character is indeed worrying. In this public sphere, the women must be either of unquestionable morals or available for lewd public pleasure. It would thus be dishonest to overlook that the hypermasculine stakes of Bhojpuri cinema and music are rather disturbing. Some of my own fieldwork indeed recalled Bhrigupati Singh’s dilemma discussed in his essay on C-circuit cinema. Singh could feel ‘the violation of another person’s body’ and suddenly felt ‘a bit distant from the affect with which [he] had entered [the] hall: *a cultural studies type celebration of the lowbrow* (2008: 272) [emphasis added]. I share Singh’s reservation about celebrating cultural events where the female body is subjected to such worrying instrumentality.

Yet, toggling between celebrating and outrightly dismissing what we are faced with, we might be falling prey to the binary that the open edge of mass publicity thrives on. As Bourdieu argues, cultural consumption is ‘predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences’ (1984: 7). By rendering to the textual corpus of Bhojpuri media more agency than it holds, we would be undermining the layer of social stratification beneath it, of which it is but one symptom. At the same time, it

is also about different levels and orientations of articulation deployed to generate autonomous pleasures, not always reconcilable or aligned to one singular axis of expression. For James C. Scott too, the ‘public transcripts’ of deference in the performance of dominated classes represent resistance to power in a stratified society. The rules of etiquette represent the grammar of social intercourse imposed by the guardians of taste and decorum. Vulgarity, then, arises from a deep awareness of power equations and the deliberate will to offend them. He quotes Bourdieu’s observation that ‘the concession of politeness always contains political concessions ... the symbolic taxes due from individuals’ (as cited in Scott 1990: 47-48). This makes vulgarity, quite appropriately, a form of tax evasion. Michel de Certeau, on the other hand, reads a ‘tactic’ within the practices flouting socially appropriate behavior. The tactic for him is ‘a calculus which cannot count on a “proper”’; it depends on time and ‘must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities’ (1994: 480).

The enterprise of Bhojpuri media production is so diverse and unregulated that its public sphere makes space for the tactical manipulations as well as the relatively innocent culture of imitations. The strategic component of vulgarity need not be asserted beyond a point. When the public transcript of deference provides a template for misogynistic masculinity, we must be alerted to the mixing of resistance with a spectacular form. Steve Neale (1983) has most clearly delineated the terms of ‘masculinity as spectacle’ in three processes: identification, voyeuristic looking and fetishistic looking (15). The voyeuristic look is curious and inquiring, while the fetishistic is so captivated by what it sees that it does not wish to inquire further. In Bhojpuri music videos and cinema, the female body is the site of voyeuristic looking while the male body is fetishised – not by desire, but fear and aggression. The former crystallises desire while the latter disavows it. The masculine however remains beyond inquiry. Therefore, the public molestation or violation of the elementary dignity of the female body produces both – i) an uncritical fetish for the spectacular masculine act, and ii) the voyeuristic curiosity towards the exploited female body. The act of violation produces simultaneity between the two looks, thus integrating them further within a stable grammar of the Bhojpuri spectacle. It is this grammar that is deeply worrying, even as it also stages resistance.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown through a detailed analysis of some key texts of Bhojpuri cinema how the films emerged from stage-based practices, flaunting instead of hiding the transition of the



singer into the actor. At the level of form, the rural and reformist melodramas that emphasised upon the social composition of the Bhojpuri milieu gradually got individuated and increasingly dependent upon verbal and physical violence to foreground the male star over and above the narrative. Yet, the reformist streak has retained its ground and the 'social' remains the only genre in Bhojpuri cinema. The star, on the other hand, has become the primary point of intersection where continuities as well as departures are highlighted. A turn towards action, through leaner and more athletic stars, thus allowed Bhojpuri films to borrow the aesthetic vocabulary of contemporary Hindi cinema, but also provincialise it by showcasing performative elements such as the *launda naach*. The key site of the allegedly vulgar content, however, remains the lyrics while performances across media seek to blend the comic and erotic registers. The songs within the films, in contiguity with the contemporary music albums, accommodate the bawdy pleasures even as the film-text by itself shares little in common with them. Thus, shifting the focus upon Bhojpuri music, we traced its journey from tuneful folk melodies towards increasingly heavy orchestrations and rhythms. Through the interventions of Rangeela and other artists who followed in his image, then, we also observed the rise of playful sexual innuendos ranging from tastefully metaphorical to deliberately rebellious and unsubtle.

I borrow from Bolter and Grusin the concept of remediation to explain how one text of bawdy representation gets remediated multiple times and offers to its audience both pleasures – immediacy and hypermediacy. In a sense, borrowing from Hindi film-texts and aesthetic, Bhojpuri media at large too, offers the pleasure of remediation – simultaneously both, itself as well as a collage of its various antecedents – folk performance, Hindi cinema, star-specific histories and stylizations etc. Drawn as they are from a politically scattered and socially condemned sub-region, the narratives aspire to a moral but native masculinity. The morality is projected in contradiction to its bankruptcy elsewhere, only to be duly vanquished by the male star within the narrative. The native masculinity is projected upon the 'outsider' female body that gets tamed into the eventuality of devotion towards the male star. The bawdy performances fill in the gaps and spice up a range of pleasures offered around the male star. After all, as opposed to the female performance – strictly coded between public and private realms – masculinity is distinctly identifiable in its performative expanse, flourish and eclecticism.

At the end, I ask if vulgarity is a central feature of the Bhojpuri public sphere. However, as we discovered through a range of insightful discussions on 'the vulgar', we need to assess it as a sociological construct, instead of a mere property of the media text. The widespread

perception that the Bhojpuri public sphere thrives on indecency resonates around the ideological loop of censorship. In this loop, a stratified society is always on the very edge of the threat posed by uncontrollable, anonymous multitudes. Their public transcripts of deference appear to be threatening to the ideological order. Yet, even as the dominated masses may draw strength from their cultural resistance to propriety, their choices may not be as tactical as they seem from the outside. The politics of Bhojpuri cultural solidarities indeed lack the organised intent we may assume on their behalf. On this account, as the Bhojpuri public sphere is led by the vast enterprise of music, Jacques Attali's assessment may offer something valuable. He writes that 'music is a credible metaphor for the real ... It is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society' (1985: 5). He argues that music makes audible the essential contradiction of developed societies – '*an anxiety-ridden quest for lost difference, following a logic from which difference is banished*' (ibid.) [emphasis in original]. In developing societies, however, the difference is not yet banished. That is why, music itself becomes the site for staging how differentially noise is organised within different segments of the society. As Attali suggests, the apparatus that controls music organises noise within that circuit of power. Noise gives birth to disorder and the world; and 'with music is born power and its opposite: subversion' (ibid.: 6). While Bhojpuri music, and media at large, is born out of the quest for difference and change, with it is born another order of subversion operating against women.

Stardom that feeds off the above-discussed misogynistic tendencies continues to hijack the benefits of this change. But at the same time, it is also the primary driving force behind a media enterprise that invests into it economic or cultural surpluses gained elsewhere. The result, therefore, are two co-incident currents – i) in the framework of media narratives, the subaltern masculinity follows the performative transcript of the dominant narrative form to aggrandise itself, particularly by taming and subverting the urban 'outsider' femininity; ii) in the corresponding social sphere, the subaltern man seeks to replace the dominant star and occupy the seat of stardom by investing one form of surplus in the hope of achieving another. It is the relatively stable success of the first module that continues to vivify the second module. Also, dialectically, the two modules also shape and regulate each other, becoming somewhat indistinguishable in shape. In the first chapter of the next section, we will see how these modules resonate with the rise of Bhojpuri as a language.

## **PART II**

## Chapter 4

### The Bhojpuri *Sanskar*

This chapter attempts to historically investigate the language question, so as to situate the role of Bhojpuri language in Bhojpuri cinema and beyond. Indeed, the language appears within cinema via a particular history, and in the case of Bhojpuri, also via a latent political intention. The history of Bhojpuri language needs to be excavated from the historical accounts of the languages of north India, so that we can then assess its contemporary tendencies. But in doing so, we shall also be excavating a criss-crossing history of several other overlapping linguistic practices. North India is particularly complicated for the political boundaries of states do not overlap with languages, or even dialects. Instead, from the far west in Rajasthan right up to the western border of West Bengal, the northern plains are categorised as the Hindi belt. But of course, the label Hindi here reveals a lot less than what it hides. The Bhojpuri language is reduced to one of the many ‘mother tongues’ within the vastness of Hindi. Within the metropolitan understanding, Bhojpuri remains indistinguishable from its neighbouring languages – Awadhi and Maithili most prominent among them<sup>47</sup>.

The Indian nation emerged via the colonial provenance, which sought to produce a ‘spatially delimited entity’ through a domestic market economy, integrated administrative structure and geographical mapping (Goswami 1998). While these sociospatial practices were critical to the economic exploitation of India, they also produced new contestations across national and regional imaginaries. While in some parts of colonial India, the national was imagined in terms relatively aligned with the regional, in other parts the two were in a deep conflict. The colonial apparatus and the Indian nationalists indeed sought to unify the national space in infrastructural and discursive terms, but to produce the nation as a narrative, the realm of print media and language was vital, as per Anderson’s influential thesis (1983). However, the prevailing linguistic practices of north India were so messy that one language could not be equated even with one script, let alone one culture. This forces us to question what formed the basis of linguistic difference as it was refracted by an intensely contested nationalist history. Gal and Irvine (1995) direct our attention to the ideological aspects of linguistic differentiation,

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<sup>47</sup> See the Linguistic map of South Asia at <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00maplinks/overview/languages/himal1992max.jpg> (accessed 1 April, 2015). Particularly, the Bhojpuri speaking region situated between Awadhi and Maithi speaking regions of north India.

[T]he ideas with which participants frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and the differences among them, and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them...[W]e call these conceptual organizations *ideologies* because they are suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field, and because they are subject to the interests of their bearers' social position (970-971).

They identify three semiotic processes by which people construct ideological representations of linguistic difference: *iconicity*, *recursiveness* and *erasure*. Erasure, in particular, is a mode of homogenisation by which sociolinguistic phenomena become invisible. Gal and Irvine show how ideological frameworks of cultural distinctiveness are mapped onto linguistic practices to amplify or produce difference, and then homogenise them internally as per the essence thus accorded. Such misrecognition and simplification of complex language practices thus produces delimited social groups and uncluttered political messages (972-985).

### **The Hindi-Urdu Consolidation**

The case of Bhojpuri needs to be looked at in terms of such erasure during the intense battle over the representative language of north India. Even as the messy linguistic continuum ruptured and consolidated into Hindi and Urdu, the several 'dialects' that preceded both these modern constructions were effectively silenced for a considerable duration. It was in 1837 that Urdu replaced the use of Persian in the courts of law. As a result, through an ideological separation from Urdu – now marked as the language of Muslims alone – Hindi appeared as the language for the Hindus, and was then duly standardised by institutional, literary and political means. Simultaneous to this process, Hindi also acquired its own ideological corpus. It was gradually historicised, linked to the great literary works of the past, and thus given a 'respectable ancestry' (Dalmia 1997: 148). In this newly discovered mythology, Hindi became an offspring of Sanskrit – the ancient mother tongue of the Aryans – and also that of the devotional bhakti movement. It thus came to symbolise the modern variant of what was the civilisational genius of the Indian masses, which was no longer willing to relent to its Islamic past. Several scholars have indeed told this tragic tale of two autonomous linguistic spheres emerging out of the shared linguistic wealth of north India (Dalmia 1997, King 1994, Orsini 2002, Rai 2001). While briefly recounting this modern reconfiguration of the linguistic, ideological and political map of north-India, I must point out that modern standard Hindi had never been the mother tongue of any Indian, while the nationalist supporters insisted that it was

spoken in homes across the length and breadth of north-India since much before the ‘Muslim invasion’.

The need for internal cohesion within Hindi drew from the various spoken variants even as it sought to ‘create not only uniform orthography and grammar but also a standard literary idiom’ (Dalmia 1997: 150). It thereby appropriated the space occupied by former literary languages, such as *Brajbhasha* and *Awadhi*, which now became sub-standard ‘dialects’. Dalmia argues that the homogenisation of languages ran parallel to the similar movement taking place in the constitution of modern Hinduism; the ‘sects’ were absorbed first and then evaluated in terms of their deviation from the central strand, the *sanatana dharma*, which had apparently stood the test of time without any wrinkles (151). According to her, as opposed to Persian – the language of the Mughal court – *Hindavi* was the collective designation for the indigenous group of northern Indian languages. But to demarcate it from Sanskrit, the language of erudite discourse, many poets also called it *bhasha*. The designation used, Dalmia adds, ‘depended on the cultural consciousness of the user and the context in which he felt himself to be placing his literary endeavours’ (154). At the tail end of the Mughal period, however, efforts were made to cleanse the court language of *Hindavi*, thus inaugurating what was to later become Urdu, the language of the cultivated urban elite.

The British, on the other hand, having failed to classify the fluid linguistic practices, attempted in the final event to categorise them on the basis of religion. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, they considered Hindus and Muslims as separate races with distinct histories and cultures. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British quest for a national language hastened, primarily towards their administrative convenience. The Act of 1837 introduced *Hindustani* in Perso-Arabic script to the vast tract of north India. This virtually amounted to a patronage of Urdu. While the move strengthened the institutional presence of Urdu, it also deepened a rural-urban schism, which mirrored the Hindi-Urdu dynamics. The indicators for Hindi and Urdu by now were scripts more than the vocabulary. A campaign for Nagari – which later became the official script in which to write Hindi – against the Persian characters, is what led the battle for Hindi. This crystallisation is significant because texts continued to be written and translated in both scripts till much later. The politics of Hindi finally took shape through the 1893 establishment of *Nagari Pracharini Sabha* – literally, a community meant to campaign for the Nagari script. The modern standard Hindi, written in the Nagari script, adopted the Khari Boli, which was spoken by the merchant castes of UP and used for long distance trade communication (Orsini 2002: 3). The champions of this Hindi came

from ‘higher and middle castes, of once-diverse linguistic competencies, that compacted around Khari Boli Hindi’ (4). This spectrum did not really widen even after 1920, even as Hindi competed with the more developed modern competence of Urdu literary sphere. Orsini, furthering the story told by Dalmia, narrates how Hindi gained enormous ground between 1920 and 1940, to stake its claim as the national language.

The shift between early and later speeches of Harishchandra that Dalmia explores, is indicative of a move from more dispersed resourcefulness of the Hindi campaign to a more stringent one. One major protagonist of Orsini’s narrative is Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi who entirely purged the print-language of colloquialisms, regional usage and ‘Urdu’ words. As the editor of highly influential journal *Sarasvati*, he privileged abstract words over concrete ones, and standardised the Sanskritised Hindi. In the two decades of rapid institutional and literary growth, the press, educational institutions, literary genres, civil and political associations, all create spaces to reshape language, literary taste and identities. The need for one national language, based on the European model, encouraged the service classes and intellectuals to refashion their linguistic repertoires into standard vernaculars. Within north India, Hindi consolidated its Hindu majority towards *public* support, even as both *Brajhasha* and Urdu retained their significance in the *private* realms. In the print-based literary sphere, however, the quest for a ‘high’ standard for erudite expression in Hindi gradually marginalised Hindi’s self-definition as a language of the masses (ibid.: 30; also see Rai 2001: 91).

Curiously, as we move towards the realm of leisure, the print based public spheres were often complementary. The Hindi and Urdu *qissas*, songs and theatre chapbooks remained oblivious of the colonial presence. This is in sync with Mir’s (2010) discussion of Punjabi *qissas*, which refused to exceed their local sociospatial surroundings. Orsini (2009) speaks of a unified field of commercial publishing created by three forces: i) the arrival of oral traditions into the print market, ii) hybrid forms harnessing resources from old genres for new textual dynamics, and iii) assortment of performative pleasures acting as a catalyst for poetic and musical forms inviting multiple and overlapping audiences. As print was rapidly aligning itself with existing regimes of pleasure and leisure, it also provided means of social mobility. These texts tagged along with, reproduced, or multiplied the pleasures offered by oral performers (2009: 5-10). The Hindi/Urdu *qissas* that Orsini studies in great detail, manifest mixing of narrative traditions in an eclectic manner, a Hindi-Urdu idiom moving across a wide range of registers and styles. While Orsini calls this idiom multivocal in the Bakhtinian sense, Kumkum Sangri adds that a literary history of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century would be incomplete without the *qissa* for they ‘enfolded multiple dialects and was intersected by several narrative traditions – folktale, theatrical forms like *sangit*, and even reformist prescription’ (Sangri 2004: 213).

It may also be useful here to reflect over the insights offered by Aishwarj Kumar and in particular, the role of Sir Grierson (1851-1941) – the colonial official who distinguished between north Indian Hindi and ‘Bihari’ languages/dialects. Kumar argues that in spite of Grierson’s sustained efforts to highlight the literary sense of the ‘Bihari’ languages and their fundamental separation from the Hindi of north-western province, the Bengali and Bihari elites expressed clear solidarity with the Hindi elites to subvert the distinction. Grierson printed ‘materials like the *Alha* stories and *biraha* songs which had traditionally been transmitted through oral means’ to show that ‘the Bihari languages did have a body of literature in them even if this literature had not been written down’ (Kumar A. 2013: 1734). He reiterated that ‘no great poet had been born in Bihar under whose name a “literary school” could form’, but this did not indicate the absence of ‘popular literature’ in Bihar (1735). Instead, the existence of the vast number of Bhojpuri songs was evidence to the contrary. Grierson ‘mainly focussed upon and discussed the *biraha geet*’, and showed ‘how many of these songs were centred upon beliefs that were prevalent in Bihari society relating to religion and gods and goddesses’ (ibid.). Despite Grierson’s battles then, the consolidation in favour of Hindi only further weakened the eastern vernaculars. The realm of textuality and school education was taken over by Hindi while the vast repertoire of songs in the vernaculars including Bhojpuri remained in the realm of orality.

Having said that, the folk musical forms could often be valourised as they stand cleansed of the very basis of their entanglement with communal memory. Harishchandra and his followers valourise the *kajri* as an ‘annual articulation in the highly semiotized, sensuous monsoon month of Savan—a well- established, feminine-erotic, semi-classical musical genre’ overwriting the ‘popular remembrance of a timeless rapacity of Hindustan’s medieval Muslim conquerors’ (Amin 2005: 22). Badri Narayan Sharma ‘Premghan’ – a prominent Hindi author and aesthete of eastern Uttar Pradesh – focuses upon ‘the low caste feminine nature of this folk form, so as to protest against its defilement at the hands of commercialized bawdiness of city-based male singing troupes’ (ibid.: 23). For Premghan, *kajri* is rustic women’s folk form – an equivalent of what *Holi* is to men. This cleansing of the folk forms is vital to their progression and the absorption of new possibilities, but it does not mean that the communal basis for their persistence must be discarded. It is via such entangled affects that the folk genres persisted in the shared memory and thus became



vital repositories of affective belonging. Other Bhojpuri caste-centric or specific oral forms, such as *alha* and *dhobi geet*, have also mutated beyond their respective origins and become more generic, addressing wider constituencies.

There are, then, two prominent strands within the complex history of linguistic practices of north India. First, the realm of an eclectic assortment of pleasures including the oral pleasures which did not concede ground to print variants. Instead, the arrival of print technology aided a hybrid oral-literate inflection of multivocality. Second, while this realm continued to thrive among the common people, another intense contestation continued to take place between Hindi and Urdu elite – a battle that was decisively won by Hindi by 1940. Hindi may have thus entered textbooks and curriculums forcing Urdu out in independent India, but the public produced by the heterogeneity of pleasures did not disappear. This ‘traffic between scripts’ – partly a carryover effect and partly a new development produced by the complementary print-based spheres – ‘marked the modernity of Parsi melodrama and, later, cinema (Orsini 2009: 275-76).

However, the consolidation of the *Hindi project* – which Rai (2001) calls “Hindi” – provided the means to a politics that must be acknowledged before we assess its impact upon Bhojpuri. The Hindi project emerged via the linguistic majoritarianism that noted historian Shahid Amin calls “‘kya kar loge’ [what harm can you do] attitude’ (2005: 186). As Rai points out, the Nagari script chosen for standardised Hindi also launched a fierce battle against its then-stronger rival – Kaithi. It is because the former was also known as Babhni – the script of the Brahmins – and the latter was much more familiar to the Muslims, that a ‘sublimated form of caste politics’ joined hands with the politics resulting in Hindi’s triumph (2001: 52-53). Rai points out in the light of the staggering illiteracy – 97 per cent – that much of this contestation was ‘a *symptom* of a hard and ineluctable struggle over jobs and access to power’ between an entrenched Urdu elite and the aspirant upper-caste Hindi elite (58). The politics of Hindi, then, was refracted by the existing faultlines of religious, caste and class divides – all duly amplified by the colonial modernity. All the regional languages in this scenario went through Sanskritisation in terms of filial relationship, lexical borrowing, etc. This was an important tactic in the *regional* power struggle by which the regional elite consolidated its position, Rai points out. He adds,

The people’s vernacular had been distinguished by its diverse borrowings, its flexibility, its local sensitivities, its enormous geographical and social reach, and therefore proposed as the language of the national movement. But the

ideologues were able to substitute for this a *rashtrabhasha* “Hindi” that was characterised by its uniformity, its *absence* of local colouring.... Produced in the exigencies of a *regional* politics, [it] was now available—purified of locality, historical adulteration, regional colour—as a vehicle of “national” aspiration for a regional upper-class elite. That Hindi which was merely local, marked by the specific usages of specific people, was unsuitable—precisely because it belonged to *a* people, it could not pretend to belong to all, *or almost all*, the people (ibid.: 109) [emphases in original].

### **The Vernacular *Sanskar***

Orsini (2002: 43-48) deploys the notion of *sanskar* to explain the switching practices across different literary traditions. *Sanskar*, according to her, emphasises the creative process of acquiring and combining tastes. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the various ways in which inherited tastes encountered emerging linguistic identities and ideologies, and thus led to new sensibilities. These sensibilities found expression in literary as well as performative realms, but they produced significantly autonomous modes of address. The popular texts and performances thrived on combining orality and literacy to deliver the joy of mixing idioms. But the realm of literary publishing, elite journals hosting debates on the future of national literature, and the gatherings of poets sought to develop a unified literary *sanskar* representative of a ‘great civilisation’ and worthy of the nation India was to become. This drive may not have promptly produced a singular *sanskar* but the Sanskritist quest of Hindi, in collusion with powerful state-backed educational institutions, meant that it became the provider of social mobility. Orsini (2002: 383) identifies these as processes of co-optation and socialisation into Hindi’s middle class culture – ‘the culture of a subordinate but culturally self-satisfied middle class’. But precisely because this middle class culture was built upon the social mobility enabled by the nationalist consensus, it held Hindi less as its own language, more as a disciplinary tool. Hindi became symptomatic of the disciplinary zeal, the premise of which was the control of the masses by the regional elite. In empirical terms, this elite was composed of the upper caste that was rechristening itself, via the education system, as middle class.

The above-mentioned consolidation of Hindi, in spite of its enormous hold over north India does not account for the alarming levels of illiteracy, and the vast social clusters that remained below the threshold of social mobility. It also does not account for the institutionally receding yet significant Urdu *sanskar*. Orsini does point out that the Urdu *sanskar* was largely a secular one, remained more eclectic than Hindi, and reflected a ‘mature’ reading public that sustained novelty in literary aesthetics (2002: 73). As Hindi

gained further ground at the cost of Urdu, the Urdu *sanskar* which was already dominant in Parsi theatre circuit, diffused itself across the unregulated spheres lying outside the nationalist politics of disciplining. Cinema, which gradually established itself as the most formidable component of popular culture in the 1950s, drew enormous strength from this Urdu *sanskar* which, in the form of songs at least, survived till the late 1990s<sup>48</sup>. It is well known that the Bombay film industry provided employment to a huge range of Urdu poets who wrote screenplays, scripts, dialogues and songs for a number of years. The oral-literary sensibility that decades of Hindi film melodrama deployed to moving effect built primarily upon the Urdu *sanskar* that defined the visceral prowess of Hindi cinema.

However, in order to excavate the autonomous vernacular *sanskars*, we must look towards the logic by which the vernaculars voluntarily put themselves on standby. Ernesto Laclau, in his exceptional work on political philosophy – *On Populist Reason* – writes,

So we have two ways of constructing the social: either through the assertion of a particularity – in our case, a particularity of demands – whose only links to other particularities are of a differential nature; or through a partial surrender of particularity, stressing what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common. The second mode of construction of the social involves, as we know, the drawing of an antagonistic frontier; the first does not. I have called the first mode of constructing the social *logic of difference*, and the second, *logic of equivalence* (2005: 77-78).

The nationalist consensus that was expressed in the politics of Hindi exhibited the logic of equivalence, against the antagonistic frontier of Urdu, demanding partial surrender of particularities from the various vernaculars of north India. On the other hand, the languages of south India – particularly Tamil – consolidated their own communities against the antagonistic frontier of Hindi. They deployed the logic of difference as well as equivalence to good effect. While Hindi became the symbol of yet another Aryan invasion against the Dravidian people, Tamil, and later Telugu, also asserted their cases by sacralising their particularities in the form of a mother-goddess (Ramaswamy 1997, Mitchell 2009). The question may, then, be asked: why did the vernaculars of north India surrender their own particularities and not challenge the disciplinary zeal of the Hindi consensus? Hindi brought with itself a modern and nationalist language ideology unavailable to Awadhi, Brajbhasha, Maithili and Bhojpuri, among others. Kaviraj (2010)

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<sup>48</sup> Even today, however, in spite of the increasing prevalence of other idioms, the romantic songs are saturated with imagery and vocabulary drawn directly from the corpus of Urdu poetry. Also notable is that no professional singer can aspire for a flourishing career without getting her Urdu diction perfectly spot-on. Even as actors need not have the perfect *talaffuz* (diction), the singers must, unless they only aspire for a specific genre of singing (e.g. Mika Singh).

makes a noteworthy distinction between the identity of a language and linguistic identity. The latter, he says, is not ‘formed by the simple objective fact of some people having a common language; it lies in a more deliberate choice to see this fact as the essential criterion of their identity’ (141). To explain this further, Kaviraj deploys the idea of a fuzzy, unenumerated world of imperceptible gradual change – ‘a world of transitions rather than of boundaries’ (143). In this world self-identifications are ‘crucially incapable of considering what they can do to force the structure of their social world to their collective benefit, if all who are like themselves act together’ (ibid.).

This world of fuzzy linguistic practices went through careful mapping and enumeration in the colonial times. Bengalis, Marathis, Punjabis and Tamils thus came to be aware of the numerical strength of one another. However, the ‘dialects’ of Hindi escaped this mapping and did not arrive at any comparable political self-awareness. Also, as Hindi provided the means of social mobility to the regional elite, they drew themselves out of the respective vernaculars into Hindi’s middle class culture. This not only allowed them to align themselves closely with the modern state, but also rid themselves of their caste-specific elitism. Therefore, vernaculars such as Bhojpuri were largely abandoned from the nationalist diglossia distributed between English and Hindi in north India. As print technology was instrumental in the construction of language ideologies, the absence of the north Indian vernaculars in the domain of print led to their marginalisation. This is not to conclude that the vernaculars lost their significance, but that they became locally confined. Even as Bhojpuri’s numerical footprint remained overwhelmingly large, its misrecognition as a mere dialect of Hindi reduced its influence considerably.

It is important to point out, nonetheless, that Bhojpuri was neither absorbed by standardised Hindi, nor made its presence distinctly visible in the realm of writing. Let us briefly consider Hindi’s celebrated author Phaneeshwarnath Renu, who is credited for inaugurating the *anchalik upanyas* [regional novel]. As Hansen (1981) has shown, Renu’s linguistic virtuosity recreated the magic of the spoken word, aggregated in its varieties within the novel form. Renu did not shy away from Sanskritised Hindi, but he also introduced us to the polyglot rural life and its own multivocality. As a sincere student of the rural speech patterns, he integrated the lyric songs, the folktales and rural dramas into the Hindi novel. He interwove the narrative prose and lyric poetry to add dimensions ‘of mythology, of the dream, of private reverie, to the publicly perceived experience’; he is as indebted, in Hansen’s assessment, to the tradition of *katha* and *qissa*, as to *git* and *gatha* for he adopts the structural features of the traditional story form and applies them to his

own narrative material (287). These attributes signified what the vernacular *sanskar* could be. Like Renu's regionalism, it need not have stood in opposition to modernity or Hindi itself. It could have been a bridge between the many inherited sensibilities of the rural variety and the relatively new urban pleasures. However, Renu's own place within Hindi literature remained contested and underappreciated. What I wish to highlight, then, are the distinctly modern sensibilities of Renu. His regionalism *draws* upon the rich traditional forms, but itself emerges out of a distinctly modern sensibility. It is also free of his specific biographical roots in Mithila, instead distributed over rural north India in a broader sense. And yet, it is a regionalism of Hindi literature, not so much of an autonomous corpus of vernacular literature. Renu's case, then, is symptomatic of the two glaring absences on account of which the vernacular *sanskar* did not find any substantial and stable expression in print: i) the modernist sensibility that was continuously absorbed by the Hindi project, and ii) the self-aware political regionalism that could distinguish across the vernaculars. That is why, the consolidation necessary to constitute a language specific literary *sanskar* was never constituted within vernacular north India.

In such a scenario, the vernaculars such as Brajbhasha, Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili, remained fuzzy in their identity and territorial distinction. Hindi cinema, while leaning clearly towards the Urdu *sanskar*, often acknowledged the Braj, Awadhi and Bhojpuri turn of phrases to evoke the notion of the national space, thereby seeking to legitimise its case as a national cinema. The vernaculars' surrender to the logic of equivalence was partly in acknowledgement of the nationalist dream, but partly also due to this tokenistic gesture of Hindi cinema in the realm of popular culture. The legacy of a cosmopolitan and composite popular culture was inherited by Hindi cinema from Parsi theatre, which lost significant ground to the former at the arrival of sound cinema in 1931. In fact, the fact that silent cinema did 'little to threaten the appeal of Parsi theatre', but the talking and singing motion pictures poached its finest 'actors, musicians, scenarists, and playwrights' (Hansen 2011: 25) indicates something noteworthy. It was not the charm of visuality, but the oral and performative aggregation of audiovisuality that finally stole the thunder of Parsi theatre. Hansen's extraordinary work on Parsi theatre historiography rescues it from deeply communalised accounts available in Hindi, Urdu and Gujarati. She also observes that it was when Parsi theatre began to wane that Urdu and Hindi dramas tried to revive their divergent trajectories (2001: 60). In her aggregation of key Parsi theatre biographies, she shows the influence of many traditions of poetry at the turn of the century – *rasos*, *prashastis*, *ashtapadis*, *akhyans*, *lavanis*, *jhulnas*, *ghazals*, *bhajans*, *chaupais*, to name a few. The impact of rural dramatic forms, such as Svang, Nautanki, Bhavai, puppetry, Ram

Lila, Ras Lila, embedded within a calendrical cycle of festivals, highlight the impact of oral genres upon Parsi theatre (2011: 44-45).

It was indeed this rich corpus of performative intimacy that Hindi cinema had taken over as the legacy of a cosmopolitan entertainment form. In doing so, it made space for a large range of pleasures – oral and literate, rural and urban, mythological and reformist, realist and melodramatic. It was not until the 1970s – the moment of disaggregation (Prasad 1998) – that the Urdu *sanskar* housing this plethora of pleasures began to make way for a largely urban action cinema, even if the 1960s had already set in motion the tendencies that precipitated the shift.

### **Bhojpuri's Logic of Difference**

The first phase of Bhojpuri cinema did not sufficiently articulate its difference from Hindi cinema. The overlap with, and dependence upon, the Hindi film industry was immense. The Bhojpuri films of the first and second phase could be seen as a regional genre within Bombay cinema. Indeed, smaller budgets, the absence of a competitive star system, and the relatively sparse film production were key factors. Also, across north India, due to the poor primary education system and very slow urbanisation, the levels of literacy remained rather low in Hindi. Therefore, the audience of Bhojpuri cinema were the same regional elites whose nostalgic moorings of a fossilised cultural fantasy were articulated in these films. For the same set of reasons, while there were films made in many of the north Indian vernaculars, they could not consolidate any vernacular *sanskar* shared by the masses. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the site of the later emergence of such new *sanskars* was music instead of cinema.

However, there has been no dearth of attempts to this day, to cultivate Bhojpuri as a literary language. Among a relatively minor section of the regional intelligentsia, small networks and literary associations in semi-urban or rural centres have survived. Cheaply produced magazines and journals circulating across the regional elites have continued to breathe life into the aspiration of a literary *sanskar* in Bhojpuri. Tripathy and Verma (2011: 112) list a few of these literary constellations: *Akhil bhartiya Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan*, Patna; *Vishwa Bhojpuri Sammelan*, Deoria; *Purvanchal Ekta Manch*, Delhi; *Akhil Bhartiya Bhojpuri Manch*, Saran. Their publications include: *Bhojpuri Sammelan Patrika*, Patna; *Bhojpuri Mati*, Kolkata; *Bhojpuri Akademi Patrika*, Patna; *Bhojpuri Sansar*, Lucknow; *Bhor*, Muzaffarpur; *Sursati*, Sasaram; *Purvankur*, Delhi; *Samkalin Bhojpuri Sahitya*,

Deoria. There is also government-founded *Bhojpuri Sahitya Academy* in Patna which receded into relative non-activity after the prolific 1960s-70s. Now, admittedly there are various e-zines on the web, which publish creative and opinion pieces on a variety of issues concerning the region. The Patna based academy too has become more active in its campaign for Bhojpuri. Yet, it can hardly be denied that the literary *sanskar* attempted by the smaller networks, with a high percentage of translations, made very little impact. Also, the more recent urgency in online publications has been produced by their wish to *distance* the community from the Bhojpuri music and cinema. A close analysis as to why the attempts to forge a literary consolidation in Bhojpuri failed to make a mark still needs to be done. Yet, from a general survey of the material it is apparent that Bhojpuri literary *sanskar* failed to move beyond a borrowed prosaic sensibility. As the titles also suggest, the literary sensibilities offered by the largely upper-caste campaigners is borrowed from the Sanskritist impetus of the previous century. The biggest challenge towards a modern literary *sanskar* drawing out of a largely lyrical verse-based vernacular tradition is often the fundamental mismatch between analytical and rhetorical sensibilities. It is in this regard that Renu's landmark efforts laid down a possible model not sufficiently followed.

As in Renu's regionalism, the vernacular *sanskar* found the song to be the most suitable mode of articulating the private and public reveries across a widely shared idiom. Part of the reason was indeed the fact that textbook Hindi of government syllabi refused to absorb or even acknowledge the *sanskar* expressed in orality. The rift between the 'mother tongues' – as the Census of India acknowledges Bhojpuri, among other vernaculars – and Hindi only widened further. The realm of newspapers, journals, novels and popular fiction too cared very little about the vernaculars. It took the emergence of the audiocassette, and therefore, the media that defies the written word, for the vernaculars to make themselves 'visible'. The institutionalised apathy towards the possibility of Bhojpuri text, then, works for two reasons: i) the regional elite's migration out of Bhojpuri into the realm of Hindi via the state education system, and ii) Bhojpuri's unrecognised status as an autonomous language. While the case of Bhojpuri difference is thus enfeebled in the official circuits, it burst through the popular realm with the advent of technologies that privilege the performative register over the textual. Also, in spite of the temptation to draw the lineage of the Bhojpuri *sanskar* from Bhikhari Thakur, Mahendra Misra and the 'Vyas' tradition that I have discussed in the last chapter, I would argue that Mazzarella's 'open edge of mass publicity' is vital to the *sanskar*. The itinerant performance troupes or stage based concerts that have a long tradition much beyond the BSR indeed became a *resource* for the excess of sound recording that followed in the 1980s, but they were also separated by the

*threat of unregulated circulation*. Only after the vernacular audiocassettes did it become imperative to grapple with what ‘can or cannot be allowed to circulate’... for the new Bhojpuri media commodity, ‘whether in a register of promise or panic’ made palpable potentials that exceeded ‘any enumeration of contents’ (2013: 3). For Mazzarella, the open edge is recognizable in ‘the element of anonymity that characterises any public communication in the age of mass publics’ (37). The contemporary Bhojpuri *sanskar* is a product of this open edge as much as that of the resources it draws upon. That is partly why, it took very little time in abandoning the substantive continuity of these resources.

The arrival of cassettes and compact discs could successfully tackle the hurdles of textual literacy, educational structures, urban bias and the disciplinary zeal. The celebration of performative energy drew upon the rich resources of expression confined to local geographies. The shift thus allowed the vernacular *sanskar* to liberate itself of confinement and distribute itself widely. Manuel (1993) documents the various genres that emerged across north India, and the means by which a variety of messages – political, social, and cultural – could be transmitted. It may also be considered that the audiocassettes were growing rapidly even as what Jeffery (2000) has called ‘India’s Newspaper Revolution’ was still taking place. On the strength of a remarkable improvement in literacy between 1991 and 2001, Hindi newspapers in particular grew enormously. The growth in Hindi literacy, however, did not run counter to the interests of ‘cassette culture’; on the contrary, it fuelled it. The familiarity with textual Hindi reinforced the political awareness and connectivity of the masses. Not only did they become regular consumers of news, but basic literacy also helped them connect with television as a medium, and eventually led to the massive growth of mobile telephony (Jeffrey and Doron 2010).

While higher political awareness and connectivity became contributors to migration and employment-friendly information exchange across long distances, they did not necessarily exhaust the realm of pleasure. Hindi pulp fiction also gained massive ground between the late 1980s and early 2000s, losing its popularity only after the arrival of satellite television. The easy mutual intelligibility and the absence of patronage to Bhojpuri by the educated classes meant that Bhojpuri could never aspire to displace, or distance itself from, Hindi in the realm of print media. The success and emergent autonomy of Bhojpuri through music, therefore, is of critical importance. The music filled in the gaps enabled by the employment opportunities in metropolitan centers and in southern states. The middle class that was able to convert its literacy into formal sectors of employment did indeed abandon Bhojpuri to a great degree. At the same time, the growing regional disparity across India made migration



an eventuality; the edges of such heavy-duty migration were softened by the aural intimacy Bhojpuri music provided.

Having said that, two cautions must be raised. First, the Bhojpuri *sanskar* was no pure essence of the region transmitted all the way from the communal traditions to Bhojpuri music. Second, the aural intimacy provided by music also brought with itself a quest for the performative community, followed by political threats leading to a more political community formation. It is through this politics, as we have discussed earlier, that a rich diversity of folk genres crystallised into more hybrid idioms, and then led to the rise of stardom as the gravitational center of a variety of pleasures. As Bhojpuri cinema followed from this thriving music industry, it combined a range of factors to build upon the aural intimacy by rendering to it a visual expression. Indeed, like in the case of music, once the language entered a new technological habitus, its growth within the habitus was no longer contingent to linguistic desires and practices alone. The cassettes, disks, or film theatres imposed their own materiality to shape the character of the Bhojpuri media. However, it is with the emergence of an independent star system within the Bhojpuri media industry that Bhojpuri's claim to the logic of difference was strengthened. Such is the intensity of the sovereign representation claimed by the star figure that his arrival marks the beginning of another chapter.

It may still be asked whether stardom is a sufficient condition to set in motion the logic of difference. It can hardly be overlooked that even as Hindi's reach within the vernacular hinterlands increased across north India, the popular surrender to the logic of equivalence promised by Hindi has not been fulfilled. The rise of similar media industries all across north India (Chhattisgarh, Garhwal, Haryana, Marwar, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Laddakh etc.) also establishes the persistence of the vernacular constituency. The question then remains whether this persistence is an effect of the inability of Hindi, or that of the 'Hindi project', to breach certain boundaries of intimacy. In other words, we could read the eruption of the vernacular constituency as a compound effect of certain *failures*: i) the failure of the state to take primary schooling to wider populations, ii) Hindi's failure to establish a productive dialogue with the vernaculars, and iii) the reluctance of Hindi popular print (pulp fiction, journals, newspapers etc.) to engage with the reveries still locked within the realms of orality. The problem with such an argument may however be of overdetermination. The failures of the 'Hindi project' may not necessarily be the sole rationale behind the residual orality that eventually found an expression in the performative realm of music, dance, and cinema. At this point, it may be useful to grapple with the most

substantive gap in our narrative: while in most language based public spheres, the transition from orality to textuality had already set in motion a preservatory impulse, to which the audiovisual media rendered another dimension, did Bhojpuri and other vernaculars have no substantive mediation by textuality? Catherine Servan-Schreiber's research on the Bhojpuri folklore may be useful in this context.

Servan-Schreiber (1999) identifies three phases of the printing of the vast repertoire of Bhojpuri folk music: by the colonial administration led by Grierson, by the Bhojpuri scholars and folklorists between 1950-1970, and through the popular printing of chapbooks since the 1980s. In the first two phases, the bulk of the activity comprised of the preservative rationale. The colonial as well as the regional scholars sought to grapple with the extraordinary wealth of songs, ballads and poems that belonged to specific occasions and communities. During the 1940s, however, began the creation of new folk genres inspired by the theme of Bhikhari Thakur's (1881-1971) *bidesiya*. In this period, 'the "*purvis*" (songs of the one who travels eastward), written by Mahendra Mishra in the 1920s, were printed and sold by the thousands on the pavements and in the bazaars' (1999: 85). Both the independent printers and government institutions participated in this collection process that still remained confined to the elites of the region. With the advent of chapbooks, the heavy-duty migration from the BSR set in motion the desire to connect with the repertoire of songs one grew up amidst. Servan-Schreiber writes,

The places of sale are usually the maidans of the big cities, the bazaars, the vicinity of railway-stations, and the melas. Sales are done either from small carts or directly on the pavement. On the Calcutta *maidan*, every Sunday, while the singers of *Alha-Udal* perform the epic, the sellers of Bhojpuri chapbooks occupy the space around... At the Station Road of Patna, numerous carts full of *gathas* in chapbook editions may be found, while near the Hanuman Mandir, the same *gathas* are sold directly on the pavement... Many coolies, jute workers, bus drivers, rickshawals, *caukidars*, *bhainsahas* (traders who export goods on the back of a buffalo) and peddlers of Nepal and Calcutta have chapbook in their *jholi* or pocket (ibid.: 90-91).

This reasonable popularity of the chapbooks brought to prominence the figure of the collector. With due credit to these collectors, also emerged the question of fidelity and authenticity. Servan-Schreiber argues that instead of the text, it is the illustrations that primarily distort the tradition, thereby pointing out four major distortions in the chapbooks: avoidance of the violent inclinations to spread a controlled image, introduction of chaste values, glamorous and commercial covers, and the concealment of the low-caste origins transforming Dusadhs and Ahirs into princes. There are two particular ways in which these

distortions, then, anticipate the distortions that later emerged with the audiocassettes. First, as in the case of *kajri* mentioned earlier, the communal basis of solidarity around a set of sentiments had to make way for wider solidarities, thereby having to cleanse themselves of narrow vantage points. Second, the introduction of the visual field, by the way of illustrations, foregrounded the ideological dimension embedded within technologies. An act of violence or amorous couplings may have been acceptable as an utterance or even as printed text, but their illustrations rendered them uncomfortable vis-à-vis public morality.

What we can say on the basis of this evidence is that the printed chapbooks and the scholarly collections before them had aggregated the self-awareness about various genres of folk music and made them widely available. The era of chapbooks, however, only set in motion a network of cheap distribution. Until the advent of audiocassettes, the dimension of authorship could not be invoked. As Servan-Schreiber points out, the collections were published under the name, and sometimes photographs, of the collector. In this era, the basis of the immense popularity of Bhikhari Thakur and Mahendra Mishra's plays and compositions lay in their modern improvisations over the folk genres. It was the same spirit that fed into the first two phases of Bhojpuri cinema, where a vernacular modernity was imagined on the strength of its traditional resources and their gradual withdrawal. What exactly changed, then, between this era and the one that appeared via the advent of audiocassettes? Should we surrender to a continuity thesis here or can we identify substantive departures? My response to the question would be to acknowledge the shift of command from the folk to modern forms. Whether it be Thakur or Mishra, or the larger body of collections printed – they began to cognise the force of modernity and tried to absorb it within the traditional forms. Modernity was acknowledged here as a *destabilizing force*, which enriched the finest renderings of the era as responses to migration, illiteracy and other community practices, which one could assess from the outside only *in* modernity.

Beginning in the late 1980s with the audiocassettes, this command was eventually handed over. The modern form now *recalled* the traditional folk repertoire to showcase its own prosperity. As Manuel points out and I discuss in Chapter 2, the spirit of cassette culture was entirely contemporaneous. Thakur and Mishra while articulating the traumas of their times, also mediated the transition into a new era. The chapbooks after the rise of cassette culture became providers of content for the singer-performers. Thus gradually, the collective mandate to preserve the cultural wealth slipping away, made way for recalling the same wealth via new technologies. The chapbooks could only preserve the *traces*, but

they were also already clear *signs* of loss. The cassettes, on the contrary, rendered the recall an appearance of stability, as expressed in performative flourishes. Instead of being mere avenues of record-keeping, the cassettes heralded a new era of interbreeding forms led by corporeal, and by extension, entrepreneurial attributes. The new forms of narration set in motion the compulsion to bring within the visual frame, social modalities and practices that lay outside it. As an extension of this mode of address, Bhojpuri cinema too was compelled by its visual modernity to vigorously renew its corporeal ambitions.

The audiocassette did not only provide the means to project an authorial voice, it compelled the author of the voice to project substantive difference. It broke the cycle and rhythm of repetition and foregrounded *difference*. As a singer-performer, then, one was not merely transmitting the depth of tradition, but improvising over it. The disembodied nature of the technology further reinvigorated the need to install the difference within performance, as stage presence could no longer account for it. Multiplied by the possibility of local stardom and the emergence of the open edge of mass publicity, this gave birth to the Bhojpuri *sanskar* that remains the essence of the contemporary Bhojpuri media<sup>49</sup>. If the Hindi *sanskar* was consolidated at a moment when European nationalism had deeply influenced the modular form of the nation, the *sanskar* of Bhojpuri entertainment deployed the modular form of Hindi cinema.

### **Vernacularisation, Melodrama and Alienation**

Sheldon Pollock has put forward the most compelling argument on the assertive literary growth of the vernaculars in premodern India. Surveying a wide array of historical genres, Pollock concludes that the vernaculars domesticated ‘the literary apparatus (themes, genres, metrics, lexicon) of the superposed cultural formation that set the rules of the literary game’ (1998: 8). Sanskrit indeed ‘mediated a complex set of aesthetic and moral values of imperial culture’ and the order of its grammar was ‘itself a model or prototype of

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<sup>49</sup> One of the ways in which we could grapple with the shift under discussion here would be by observing the role of caste. Servan-Schreiber (2003) describes the many routes that Bhojpuri peddlers took across north India as tellers and sellers of tales. In tracing these circuits of trade from early 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 21<sup>st</sup> century, she highlights the significance of caste (Telis, Netuas, Noniyas, Doms Kevats, Ahirs, Dusadhs etc.) as central to the narratives and genres that circulated alongside objects of commercial value, such as cattle, exotic birds, spices or milk. Even as these routes of travel for trade and otherwise may yet continue, the advent of audiocassette based Bhojpuri media production sought to overwrite the caste and community specific origins of the narratives and genres. In tandem with a much wider possibility of distribution that the cassettes, as well as subsequent technologies, carried, the Bhojpuri *sanskar* that emerged via them sought to develop a mode of address applicable far beyond the performers’ communities. The distributive network of mass publicity thus opened was no longer aligned with community-specific trade channels and thus also enabled the advent of new narrative forms.

the moral, social and political order' (14). However, Sanskrit literature also represented a cosmopolitan cultural form constituted through the cultural flows from the vernacular, just as the vernacular later constructed itself by appropriation from the cosmopolitan (25). Vernacular writers localised Sanskrit epics and appropriated a range of Sanskrit literary models into their languages.

According to Orsini (2012), this model does not work well for north-India on account of the substantial presence of another cosmopolitan order – Persian – and therefore, the preference for less Sanskritic literary models. She highlights the multivocal, multilingual and overlapping maps of literary cultures across north India that do not quite resonate with Pollock's model (237-242). While in complete agreement with Orsini, for our purposes here, I would like to consider Pollock's model beyond its historical efficacy to explain the growth of the vernaculars. While I acknowledge the limitations of Pollock's model in empirical terms, I might add that in structural terms, it provides us with a tool to analytically observe the dynamics between cosmopolitan and vernacular forms. For Pollock it is the high literature that provides the most significant footprint of the cultural tendencies of the time, but for Orsini the realm of orality and performance is of equal relevance. In the case of contemporary vernacularisation of Indian cinema, we observe the imaginary dependence of the vernacular constellation upon the respective cosmopolitan form – Hindi cinema – that resonates with Pollock's model. Even though the Bhojpuri media begins to take shape through the performative cultures of the region, the cinema as a widely distributed form is compelled to imagine itself along the cosmopolitan order – the Hindi film form. What makes the turn further more interesting is that Bhojpuri cinema was staging a vernacular appropriation of the cosmopolitan order even as the Hindi film form was itself going through genrefication (Vasudevan 2010c; see Prasad 2011). Also, it is not merely Bhojpuri cinema that appropriates the Hindi film form; all the films made in Chhattisgarhi, Haryanvi, Marwari, Santhali and Khari Boli, attempt the reformist social melodramas that Prasad (1998) labeled the 'feudal family romance'.

What, then, can we say about the vernacular *sanskar* that seeks to express itself via the appropriated cosmopolitan form – particularly, one that has already imploded? To understand this we must acknowledge the openness of the socials. The melodramatic form deployed in these socials had at least two key features: i) narrative production of time, and ii) a particular form of cinematic high language ascribed to characters of impeccable moral integrity. The male star remains the primary figure of social mobility, who disrupts and eventually re-establishes order. The narrative production of time heightens the scale at

which the events unfold, thus separating the narrative opening and closure further. Whether in reformist or revenge narratives, the separation of the beginning and the end is magnified via the narrative strategies of mobility across age, space or social order. When these effects are blended with stardom and melodramatic idealism, we get the recipe for staging social conflict. The vernacular cinemas too lay down their linguistic territoriality by their choice of social conflict, which then plays out over the same form. One of the key aims this melodramatic structure serves is that of pedagogy; the moral order thus championed by the male star is prescriptively articulated. The star thus derives his authority from within the narrative, even as he carries a component of it from the outside.

The contemporary wave of vernacularisation closely resembles certain tendencies of south Indian cinemas. Even through the political boundaries of vernacularity are still rather fuzzy, and the formal structure of the various vernacular productions relatively indistinct, it is the male star who becomes the signifier of linguistic as well as political difference. Even though Bhojpuri is the most prominent of the vernacular film industries, in all other vernaculars too local male stars can be identified as representing their linguistic communities. It is through the male star, the reformist melodramas, and linguistic communities that the distinct sets of vernacular zones are emerging. As Prasad (2014: 108) astutely observes, the star belongs to the community he represents, but he must be separated from it, alienated, constituting an *internal exterior*. He adds,

The classic example of alienation as a factor in the consolidation of identity is, of course, the nation-state. The nation's identity is never complete without being externalised in the form of the state. The nation has no identity in itself: no internal substance, no cultural matter, no food or clothing habits – nothing can really serve as the guarantor of its identity even if it serves as the basis for identity claims. If identity were *internal* to an entity, it would be absurd to struggle for it. It is in order to acquire the alienated element that will guarantee identity that such struggles are waged. Every struggle for identity is in this sense also a struggle for alienation (ibid.).

Therefore, stardom, in association with the melodramatic form, provides a way of plugging the vernacular into the cosmopolitan morphology. The wish of the vernacular turn is not to confine itself to its linguistic territory, but to determine the constraints under which the internal as well as the external take shape. Bhojpuri cinema also aspires to represent at the cost of alienation. It is misleading to assume that it innocently represents its own internal essence. In other words, it implements the cosmopolitan interface to establish a dialogue between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan. The Bhojpuri male stars best embody the terms of this aspirational dialogue. That is why, as I have illustrated in Chapter 3, the

growing athleticism and the transformation of a rural simpleton into a semi-urban action star, is distinctly symptomatic of the process of alienation. Even though other vernacular cinemas spread across narrower sociospatialities display modest alienation, the vernacular gets drawn increasingly *away* from itself as it provincialises.

### **The Contemporary Bhojpuri *Sanskar***

If alienation is the natural trajectory by which the vernacular community finds representation, what is Bhojpuri about the Bhojpuri media? Does it actually represent the authentic Bhojpuri sensibility? Could we substantially locate the creative mixing of tastes in Bhojpuri cinema and music? I suggest we begin answering these questions by locating Bhojpuri media firmly upon the open edge of mass publicity (Mazzarella 2013). The wave of globalisation in the 1990s brought with itself an entirely new regime of entertainment. To insert itself within the already robust and thriving circuits of popular media, this regime could not entirely take over. The performative speech – as exhibited by the anchors of MTV – was the first layer of popular culture to turn porous and absorb ‘foreign’ codes of entertainment. Within national television, this gradually became the realm of Hinglish. Sliding across repetitions, translations, inane insertions or interjections, as well as intelligent code-switching, television became the pre-eminent site where distinctly autonomous codes were blended to produce a contemporaneity saturated with referents. This blend was gradually diffused across the linguistic spectrum and produced more regional, provincial, locally confined blends. The *sanskar* of each of these blends was not diglossia but code-mixing. The former requires relatively autonomous, deeply hierarchised domains of two linguistic practices, while the latter maintains more even dynamics. This is not to argue that these practices put different languages on equal footing; they merely made differential orders of the popular available to the media market.

The Bhojpuri cultural order, which had been a participant from the margins given Hindi popular culture’s easy accessibility via national television, also displayed an affinity towards the pleasures of code-mixing – not only across linguistic spheres, but across a vast vocabulary that is turned into the metaphorical service of sexual innuendos (*Daroga Babu I Love You*, *Mard No. 1*, *Saniya Mirja cut nathuniya*, *Bodyguard saiyan*, *Bhojpuri tadka*, *Maidam style maareli*, *Missed call maratadu kiss debu ka ho*, *Shaniya se labh chalata*, *Dube ji dubal rahi*, *Holi mein lasar lasar*, *Choliya mein emergency*, *Chumma catch karila*, *Pipe daal dem frooti mein* etc.). As the linguist Ayesha Kidwai put it in her reflection on Hinglish, such mixing involves an active manipulation of the symbolic and social meaning

of language itself. It creatively addresses the underlying asymmetry of the languages and produces a wider identification with the speech community of a self caught in multiple and overlapping linguistic zones. Such code-mixing allows the subject perceived association with multiple communities; the subject amidst them becomes a signifier of a social choice of multiple identities (Kidwai 2014). For Bhojpuri media, however, the underlying asymmetry was spread differently across the visual and the aural axes. The multiplicity of identifications was not merely a linguistic question laid out over an otherwise even terrain. The visual and the aural, as in the enticing images and the Bhojpuri voice, often quarrelled over the leadership of the Bhojpuri cultural order. While the sonic transformations arrived first, their own limits were breached and then reconfigured by the new regimes of visibility that rendered another dimension to the aspirations of stardom. The Bhojpuri images competed with the mainstream images of Hindi cinema and television at the same time when the Bhojpuri voice sought parity via code-mixing across the referents saturating the concentric but hegemonic order of Hindi popular culture. As noted in Chapter 3, therefore, the slow infusion of rapid cuts and action-images in the films, oversaturated rhythmic orchestration of music albums, the voyeuristic gaze and its private and public habitats – all of these should be seen along with the mixing evident in the lyrics of *Lollypop lagelu* or *MA mein leke admission*.

It must be asserted however that Bhojpuri remained the embedded language of the Bhojpuri media; it provided the frame into which the *lingua franca* of popular English and Hindi entertainment supplied outside pleasures. Indeed, this ethos of mixing was, and remains, anathema to the language of melodramatic idealism of cinema. There are certain sites and tendencies which are clearly more amenable to code-mixing. Popular song and dance, apart from the odd instances of comedic and action register, have become the primary sites. The song in particular thus became the interlocutor enabling, even encouraging, the mixing of codes. The penetration of this tendency within cinema is limited by its allegiance to action-melodramas, only interrupted by the song and dance that taps into code-mixing practices. Indeed, this mixing of codes compromises, even dilutes the claim of Bhojpuri autonomy – its logic of difference – for those who would instead prefer an unadulterated assertion. For them, Bhojpuri cannot quite liberate itself of being a dialect unless it frees itself of such blatant code-mixing. It is not my task here to champion any cause, however; I only wish to highlight the orientations by which Bhojpuri media negotiates the challenges that confront it.



The contemporary Bhojpuri *sanskar*, therefore, is born upon the open edge of mass publicity. It draws upon the various referents that saturate the segments of the open edge that encircles the realm of Bhojpuri media. That is why, the creative impulse of the industry is to draw upon these resources as much as upon those that sit within the ‘traditional’ bracket. The technologies of distribution play a vital role in shaping this *sanskar* beyond the realm of folklore. Even as a fair percentage of the media output still preserves the ‘live’ recordings of folk performances, the burst of energy infused comes from distinctly entrepreneurial models of stardom. The visual and the sonic here are differential registers of a shared *sanskar* that is regulated by their competitive and unstable relationality. The logic of most music albums resonates with this compulsion to *balance* while mixing the ‘modern’ and the ‘folk’, the ‘romantic’ and the ‘vulgar’, the ‘sad song’, the devotional songs and numbers that the urban youth could dance to. The openness of the edge of mass publicity simultaneously vivifies this *sanskar* and brings widespread condemnation to it. All these improvisations draw upon a vast pool of resources indeed, but do not indicate either the essence of Bhojpuri itself, or the vernaculars in general.

## Conclusion

Prasad (2014) suggests that the ‘Hindi-speaking society remained unrepresentable as a nationality in Hindi cinema due to the more onerous representational responsibilities placed upon the shoulders of this already internally split language, or, to be more precise, “language-complex”’ (135). Bhojpuri, as one of the many components of this language-complex, and with a significant stake in Hindi cinema, also remained relatively unrepresentable in isolation, except as an entirely rural society. To some extent, it took the breakdown of the logic of equivalence across north India, which had withheld the autonomous growth of the vernaculars, for Bhojpuri to reassert itself. This is however, not to argue that the ‘national’ (Hindi) and the ‘vernacular’ (Bhojpuri) are part of a zero-sum equation. Languages can often cohabit within an informal division of labour, as English and Hindi often do within most of urban north India. Within deeply hierarchical societies, they could coexist and flourish by splitting between demographics, event-specific sites, and bounded sociospatial confines of public and private pleasures. But the uneven means of distribution available to them for a sustained period of time, when multiplied with ideological grids, could also produce a *recoil* effect. Bhojpuri media’s eruption by no means suggests a decline of Hindi popular culture, but the logic by which it appears to project an ‘inferior’ language from a ‘backward’ region within the same cosmopolitan space dominated by Hindi, renders Bhojpuri media somewhat rancorous. As seen in Chapter 2,

Bhojpuri media is always evaluated in terms laid out by Hindi cinema and therefore, an oppositional framework has been imposed upon it.

Parsi theatre, and later Bombay cinema, tapped into a vast variety of local idioms to consolidate within their formal architecture, more informal and local pleasures. The handover between them as a cosmopolitan form ran parallel to other nationalist and regionalist consolidations across India. Hindi cinema's reasonable influence across the country was also on account of the creative mixing of genres, particularly from Madras (later Chennai) and Calcutta (later Kolkata) (Prasad 2011). These internal translations rendered Hindi cinema a pre-eminence which it later abandoned wilfully (see Chapter 5). The ongoing wave of vernacularisation has emerged out of these dynamics. Bhojpuri cinema resurrected not merely 'tradition' but an argument for tradition housed within the binary of native and foreign, urban and rural etc. The contemporary Bhojpuri *sanskar*, then, is a diffused and complex mode of address that borrows from the vast repertoire of folk performances, the culture industry of Bollywood, and the advertising universe that encapsulates contemporary screens; these idioms are mixed both visually and aurally on the open edge of mass publicity so that the Bhojpuri self may continue to inhabit one's own affective provinciality as well as the wider ambit of pleasures.

In the next chapter, I shall investigate the foundations of the alleged continuity between a range of B/C circuit films and Bhojpuri cinema. By the 1980s, the action and sleaze-based genres had become the mainstay of most of the film industries. Running into the next two decades, the film business across India went through certain crucial turnarounds resulting in the shift towards overseas markets in the late 1990s. The key aspect of this turnaround was the gender distribution across the spaces of leisure. The absence of female spectators across most segments of the exhibition sector marked the manner in which urban spaces across India were negotiated. The arrival of the multiplex as the post-liberalisation consumerist complex was thus instrumental in the recovery of gender distribution, but also in the rupture of the cosmopolitan form of Hindi cinema. We shall now discuss how these two aspects precipitated the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema.

## Chapter 5

### Gendered Leisure, Gendered Promises

In this chapter, I intend to deploy gender and space as the axes shaping film exhibition across India. How urban and semi-urban space is orchestrated for leisure, and distributed in gendered terms, informs us about the segmented promises of cinema. In order to grapple with this segmentation, we need to recognise the differentially arranged production, distribution and exhibition practices, and the key role of gender in shaping this arrangement. The gendering of the space of Indian public life has been strategically navigated by the pre-eminent framework of family. This means that for a woman, the right to her gender is regulated by her current family – controlled either by the patriarchal figure of the father, or the husband. The gendering of the public space, therefore, is aligned with the terms laid down by what Prasad (1998) categorises as the ‘feudal family’. Vitali (2000) also writes,

The family has been a central concern of Hindi cinema and, more generally, Indian culture since the late nineteenth century...Colonial modernisation presented itself as an operation on and within the public sphere...[C]onstructed by the very logic of colonial segregation as the unreconstructed, pre-modern site of indigenous-ness, for Indian nationalism the sphere of the family came to function as the privileged site of Indian identity... During the late colonial and post-colonial periods, the domestic sphere of the family thus emerged as the terrain where Indian nationalism deployed its own project of modernisation.

Ganti (2012) too underlines the significance of the family audience while maintaining that for the filmmakers, ‘unmarried women do not exist as a separate demographic group’ (294). There is a need to understand the stratification of urban leisure in terms of both space and gender as their entangled history unfolded across Indian cities. Only then can we begin to situate the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema within this urban landscape in terms of its continuities and departures, thus establishing the tendencies that it merely followed and those it promised anew.

#### The Stratification of Urban Leisure

Early cinema sought to entertain the slowly growing urban populations. Analysing the spread of early cinema in Bombay, Bhaumik (2011) suggests that cinema arrived at a time of transition in cultural lifestyles and urban leisure. In the 1910s and 1920s, large sections of the population were immersed in ‘a hyper-interactive arabesque of public spaces for

leisure activities and spectacular engagement, including restaurants, bars, tea shops, photo studios, promenades, band stands and public gardens, the race course, modern music and dance halls, and a range of shops selling new cultural commodities' (44). The success of cinema, which became by the 1920s the pre-eminent form of mass entertainment, owed much to the emergent synergy between mass leisure habits and the changing nature of public spaces. Bhaumik argues that the Europeans, Eurasians and upper class Indians populated the cinema halls of the Fort<sup>50</sup>, while the expansion of audiences outside the Fort was due to 'the increase in the population of students, lawyers, clerks, shopkeepers, petty-traders, and workers in the areas surrounding the Grant Road–Lamington Road axis' (ibid.: 53). Numerous students and single working men who were entering the city in large numbers were added to the growing mass interest in cinema up to the 1920s.

It was however in the suburban areas of Bombay that the distinctions in the quality of cinema halls along class lines could be mapped on to the topography of the city. Bhaumik says that '[a]lthough everyone from the Fort to Borivili saw the same films, the contexts in which they were seen were markedly different. The stratification in audience tastes went a long way toward expanding the exhibition circuit and ensured that a substantial section of the population saw films without having to step outside their locality' (54). The film industry responded to the differential audience segments by evolving 'a system of first-run, second-run, and in some cases, even third-run cinemas. According to this routine, films were first released in the upmarket theaters of Grant Road–Lamington Road and, depending on popularity, were then traded off to suburban and mill-area halls. Social romances were seldom passed down the line' (ibid.). By establishing such segmentation of exhibition circuits, the variety of films in the market – the dominance of which was gradually shifted from Hollywood to Bombay cinema – helped expand the market beyond Bombay.

The most crucial years of Indian film historiography, however, are known to be the 1950s – marked by the nationalist mood and post-Independence consolidations. Often termed as the golden period of Indian melodrama, the distinction of the 1950s, and the assessment of the dominant film form of the era, has shaped much scholarship on Indian cinema. Such is the structural pre-eminence of the era that until recently little attention was paid to the alternatives forms and genres. One of the scholars who have revised the historical pre-eminence of the 1950s, is Valentina Vitali. In her account (Vitali 2008), the 1950s were

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<sup>50</sup> Fort is a business district in southern Mumbai, India. As the center of activity in colonial times since the 18th century, it rose into prominence and currently comprises of high-value real estate.

the ‘interlude years’ for they temporarily held back the surge of action cinema. She argues that the 1930s established the autonomy of the distribution sector, which introduced a heightened degree of competition for the exhibition space. The figure of the heroic woman in this era held together a narrative that foregrounded the desire for industrial modernity, and figurations of physical energy<sup>51</sup>. The temporary abandonment of this generic trend in the 1950s was a response to ‘a generalized concern over the new terms of socially acceptable behaviour, the relations that were to create India as an independent nation state’ (2008: xxix).

Unlike before the interlude years when the films bursting with physical energy dominated Bombay cinema, the action cinema of the 1960s was relegated to another circuit. Dara Singh films of the 1960s were produced under ‘a circumscribed and far from integrated film exhibition sector rooted in localized and, on the whole, pre-industrial financial circuits’ (ibid.). The increasingly fragmented production sector sought to capitalise on the emergence of a suburban, working population with low-budget films ‘made to measure to circumvent the exhibitors’ reluctance to expand’ (xxx). She reminds us that these other modes of narration operating on the margins of the exhibition economy enabled the re-emergence of the action ingredient as ‘a defining category of Bombay cinema’s centre ground in the 1970s’ (xxxi).

What I wish to highlight across these historical accounts is the stratification of Indian cinema audiences closely mirroring the spatial stratification of urban and semi-urban India. Bhaumik’s close study of Bombay in the times of early cinema provides the map which, more or less, captures the entire process of urbanisation, industrialisation, the rise of working class male populations and the coeval growth of cinema, differentially distributed. Most of urban India went through a similar process once the exhibition sector began expanding even into semi-urban centers. The distinctions between first-run and second-run cinemas developed in relation to the class composition of the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. As Singh (2008) narrates in his account of cinema halls in Delhi, such distinctions first played out within the Chandni Chowk area, and then with the migration of the middle classes away from the city center, the old city theatres acquired a more

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<sup>51</sup> Indian film history poses a somewhat curious paradox here. While melodrama in broader film history has been considered one of women’s genres where the female desire and vantage point is privileged, the rapid growth of melodrama in India was aligned with the birth of the postcolonial nation represented by the male protagonist. The heroic woman’s figure predated the melodramatic encapsulation of the Hindi film form, and was widely considered to be the preference of all-male audiences.

subaltern character. The concept of the middle class family audience played a vital role in the crystallisation of such differentiation. It was in the 1950s that this hierarchical character was gradually shaped, which is why we must turn our attention to the same.

### **A Short History of 'Family Film' / 'Action Cinema'**

Vitali (2008) points out the enormous bargaining power the exhibition sector began to have over the production sector in the 1950s. The producers, who could make successful films regularly had started their own companies, such as Mehboob Productions, RK Films, Navketan and Basant Pictures. But even for these large and stable companies, finances remained unstable. Therefore, films were financed 'with loans taken by producers from moneylenders who charged high interest rates. Producers pre-sold their films to distributors, who in turn "sold" them to exhibitors. The producer became the primary risk taker and his or her need to liquidate the debt gave the distributor and the exhibitor considerable bargaining power' (124). The chronic shortage of cinemas in the 1950s, while film production was expanding at growing production costs, gave the exhibitors an upper hand even though the sector lacked cohesion and integration.

It is in this phase that a few exhibitors, in close association with the distributors, could wrestle away the big-budget films. The disaggregated exhibition sector meant that it was the exhibitor-distributor nexus that dominated the local arena, which continued to screen the most iconic, the most successful feudal family romances of the time. Vitali points out that the struggle within the industry was between the big-budget film production and the 'fragmented production and distribution sectors entirely dependent for their finances and schedules on the terms and conditions imposed by locally entrenched exhibition networks ... By far the majority of Hindi films of [1950s] and the following decades were produced by small production units relying on precarious finance., competing for the limited exhibition space, and struggling to meet the generic dictates of [the] exhibition sector' (125). The generic dictate of the dominant production companies elaborated and crystallised the narrative conventions that came to constitute the feudal family romance, and also played in the cinema halls that grew in stature through these romances. This formed a recursive loop between the ideological pre-eminence of the family on the screen and the empirical pre-eminence of the middle class family in the cinema hall.

Therefore, the 'mainstreaming' of Hindi cinema was partly a result of the pressure applied by the exhibition sector. And this produced a generic frame that subverted other generic

conventions. The memorable melodramas of the 1950s were thus ‘expensive, glossy productions, at times with extremely long turnover times, so that producers, depending on local exhibition networks, remained more or less confined’ (127); they regulated on the basis of the sustenance of family, religion and caste, the socially acceptable behavior. Partha Chatterjee, in a description that holds for most of the twentieth century, renders a more grounded description to the market for cinema and other industrial commodities. According to him, it is

spread all over India but it does not incorporate the whole demographic mass of the country. It only skims off a thin top layer of consumers from all the regions, and constitutes itself as an ‘all-India’ market. This layer, thin as it is in comparison to the whole population, nevertheless includes not only the bourgeoisie, but also most of the middle classes, the richer landed classes and even a section of the relatively better-paid working class (Chatterjee 1997: 152).

This misleading category of all-India is what comes apart in Vitali’s extremely alert historical account, which rests on two key shifts. First, the acute shortage of cinemas and the stranglehold of the exhibitors on the film business meant a big drop in production and distribution of films in the early 1960s. The struggling India economy and the war with China further deepened this crisis. This, along with a host of other factors, created another tier within the exhibition sector where low budget ‘action cinema’ began to thrive. Second, this other tier of exhibition was integrated with the mainstream in the early 1970s, thus allowing the mainstream Hindi releases a much wider access and significantly better returns. Unlike much of the 1960s when exhibitors refused to expand the sector and only sought high rent on their scarce assets, towards the end of the 1960s with the gradual lifting of state governments’ sanctions against the construction of new cinemas, Bombay also witnessed the opening of suburban upmarket cinema halls. For such venues, the amount invested in the construction was ‘not rent on land, but “capital”, understood in the fully capitalist sense of the term’ (139). This meant that the low-budget action film of the 1960s was integrated with several elements of the melodramatic ‘social’ of the 1950s, thereby forging together the reigning form of action-melodramas, which lasted from the 1970s up to the late 1990s.

It would be impossible and unnecessary to repeat the rich pool of evidence Vitali mobilises to establish these shifts. I shall only broadly trace the key points of this trajectory. Even though much of her account traces the Bombay territory of film distribution – the most profitable of all the distribution territories – it usefully establishes the manner in which the

Indian film market was arranged. Most crucially, she integrates the Hindi cinema historiography within a much wider international market. According to Vitali, the Hindi action cinema of the 1960s

responded to economic pressures that were rooted in international developments but which, in India, triggered specific reactions. From a comparative perspective, it is important to take these transnational factors into account. Among other things, they led to the emergence of other types of action cinema elsewhere – to mention but a few examples from the late 1950s and early 1960s: Italian peplums (sword-and-sandals films), Mexican wrestling movies, Japanese *yakuza* films and, in Hong Kong, Shaw Brothers' '*wuxia*' productions (140).

Among these international productions, American action cinema, Italian Peplums and Hong Kong martial arts films had an enduring presence in the Indian film market. Dara Singh films, which spectacularly led the low-budget action film production in India, incorporated and adapted the conventions of the Italian peplums. Through these films, the small film producers attended to the non-metropolitan publics even as the exhibition sector remained reluctant to let go of the market block. The peplums were caught in a fetishisation of their 'heroes' oiled and muscled bodies', over which the camera dwelled 'for undue lengths of time to emphasize the human effort' (148). Dara Singh films deployed similar representations of muscularity and physical energy, and they competed with peplums produced with the capital fleeing an American industry in the overproduction crisis. However, Dara Singh films were compelled to bypass mainstream exhibition networks only to circulate in the fringe market. Throughout the 1960s, tension mounted between production and exhibition circuits as the latter would not expand in proportion to the former. This resulted in a critical polarisation between 'the few who could count on sufficiently large returns from the box office to guarantee a degree of revolving credit, and, with it, regular production, and those who relied on the volatile intermediation of small financier-distributors. As the number of ad hoc producers grew, the number of films produced fell' (199-200).

It was not until 1974 that the exhibition sector expanded significantly on account of 'the large amount of money that had become available in the film industry following the nationalisation of banks when, unlike other sectors of the Indian economy, cinema emerged as one of the industries' outside the state's scrutiny and regulations that centralised control (201). The action-melodrama blockbusters of the 1970s, Vitali shows, were responses to the new configuration – much larger capital available for production and the speed at which it was to circulate. The older melodramas could not deliver on both accounts targeting only the upper end of the market. The new configuration required a



much larger market including both the fringe and the central venues, but also modes of practice characterised by a high turnover of films, as prevailed within the lower end of the market. This posed the compelling necessity to integrate not only two realms of exhibition circuits, but also the 'family film' with low budget action fare, and the middle class with the largely subaltern male audience. It is also on account of this new configuration that the suburban upmarket hall opened, often with air-conditioning. The production sector thus began to attend to the priorities of this new exhibitor. Larger capital was now 'wrapped around those narrative ingredients that had proved to sell at the lower end of the market, including and above all action, in order to make such productions saleable to a more affluent section of the population' (203).

Once the new configuration of the 1970s reigned in, Hindi cinema had its most successful run during which speculative finance capital was pushed through the film industry, pumping larger amounts into the narrative ingredients earlier circulating in the fringe market. Often explained in terms of Amitabh Bachchan's stardom, Vitali's more convincing argument establishes the industry dynamic and consolidation of stratified spheres as the rationale behind the aggregation. However, the centrally located 'respectable' cinema halls playing the big budget family melodramas to the sought after demographic – the middle class family – could only withstand the new configuration for just about a decade. The fact that most of the 1970s action blockbusters were trying to mainstream the fringe genre of physical energy gradually became evident and the demographic imbalance led to the slow withdrawal of the family from all the venues. However, before we enter the lean phase of the exhibition sector and its overall impact on fringe genres, it is important to discuss how the Indian city itself remains a highly gendered space within which women carefully negotiate leisure. Because it is women who hold the regulating capacity within the exhibition sector, we must also identify the habitus that the film theatre occupies within the built architecture of the city. As women's public leisure is always a matter of surveillance, they choose their sites of leisure carefully so as to stay on the favourable side of public morality.

### **Gendered Mind-Maps: Space, Time and Leisure**

Due to various socio-cultural control mechanisms, women's mobility has always been highly regulated. The family form becomes the mediating institution for these regulations. Historically, including women in its trade imaginary made commercial sense for cinema, but women's journey from the domestic space to the theatre remained tense. This resulted

in a tension between production and exhibition – two ends of the film lifecycle not necessarily aligned. The family film and the ‘family theatre’ could not always be synchronised, particularly as you moved away from the metropolitan regions. The success of mainstream films, therefore, depended on this very alignment – producing films that would attract a family audience and playing that film within the theatre of family audiences’ preference.<sup>52</sup> This tension is punctuated by the public life of women as it often needs sanction from the male patriarchs. The notion of the middle class woman remains crucial in these dynamics because ‘honour’ is inscribed upon her body. Lakshmi Srinivas writes that middle class women are

the sought-after demographic. They are placed in the category of the ‘class’ audience as opposed to the ‘mass’ audience of lower class men, the unemployed, and the uneducated. Middle class women and the family audience are thought to lend a certain tone to a film and to frame it as ‘good and decent’ entertainment which elevates it (Srinivas 2010a: 292).

There is a recursive logic at work here: respectable women choose public spaces marked by respectable and orderly activity, while those spaces and activities continue to shape themselves in order to attract more female participants. As a result, the middle class women become vital to the evolutionary selection of spaces and activities. But even within the film theatre, women’s ‘place’ has historically been contested. For a long time, they were seated separately. But as the exhibition sector itself became stratified along class-based settlements, the balcony – the elevated segment within the theatre priced above all other ‘classes’ – emerged as the safe habitus for middle class women. But since the 1980s, upper-middle class women gradually relegated themselves to home viewing on VHS and later television. The 1980s, and to a lesser extent the 1990s, saw the leanest days for the exhibition sector with a declining family audience. It is not as if women stopped going to the theatres, but their choice of theatres shrunk much further. This historical trajectory of the female audience is entangled with the historical geography of public spaces.

Space bears the markers of the terms of inhabitation under which it is cultivated. Notions of respect as inscribed upon spaces are also negotiated through intense social tension that

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Lakshmi Srinivas (2010b: 200) writes, “Filmmakers and distributors are very selective about the theaters in which their films are released. Distributors find that they have few choices because the location and history of the theater shape audience expectations and the movie experience. As one Bangalore distributor put it, ‘the reputation of the theater also builds up reputation of the picture shown. People will think ‘Oh, the picture coming to Santosh? It must be a big movie!’” See, that link is there. That is why we want a good theater.”

orchestrates urbanity. Within a gendered spatial distribution of bodies, the female body becomes the entity whose presence regulates spaces and their reputation. Under the vicious cycle of violence and blame, women become responsible for protecting their bodies on behalf of their male partners. The film theatre, burdened as it is by its spatial continuities, operates under the same gendering logic as applies to spaces adjacent to it. To understand how women negotiate film viewing, we must understand how they negotiate public space in general. Shilpa Phadke, who has written extensively about the gendered use of public space, writes,

Women spatially inhabit a city differently from men. They/we not only negotiate the city differently but also perceive it differently. This difference lies not only in the strategies women use to produce safety but also in the mind-maps that women carry in their heads of the city (2010: 1).

The gender-specific mind-maps are indicative of an urban ecology in which women must confront sexual harassment and civic indifference. The drastic shortage of public toilets for women<sup>53</sup>, for example, reflects the extent of the problem (see Phadke 2005; 2007; 2010 for detailed analyses of women's strategic navigation of Mumbai, for example, and Whitzman (2013: 39) for sexual harassment in public). Tripta Chandola's (n.d.) account of Nehru Place market in Delhi narrates the case of a public convenience that was being used as a municipal godown. She says that 'the "missing toilet" reveals the conceptual space permitted for its functionality in the structural design, spatial practice and patterns'. The re-delegation of a public utility was possible only because of the gendered demands for public toilets, as men would relieve themselves otherwise. Urban policies thus fail to provide for women, except by segregating them from men in public or semi-public modes of transport, thus denying contact. But at the heart of women's spatial negotiation remains the gendered civics of contact<sup>54</sup>. The built space of decrepit theatres, frequented by the male-only audience, is struck off the mind-maps of most of the women. They must regulate their

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<sup>53</sup> Two women's toilets and twenty-four men's urinals at a busy Mumbai train station (Phadke 2010: 10), hardly captures the true degree of shortage. In most hospitals and bus stations, even the women's toilets that exist are often found locked as they have not been cleaned for a long time. Also, considering the much higher danger of urinary infection in extremely unclean toilets, women avoid using them as best they can.

Paromita Vohra's 2006 documentary, *Q2P*, also provides an account of how mobility, toilets, and health are intertwined. Examining women's access to toilets in Mumbai, she discusses how the lack of public toilets hinders women's mobility. Vohra also links the problem to health problems such as urinary tract infections that women face.

<sup>54</sup> Whitzman (2013) also cites another study in which 'a large number of women interviewed said they would rather risk crossing railway tracks, in a city where ten people die in train-related accidents every day, than risk harassment on pedestrian footbridges' (41). A more common strategy in the study, also indicative of the public life at large, is 'avoidance of public space'.

presence in public by using a gendered sense of spacetime, so that potential *defilement* can be evaded. While the threat of violence is real, it may also arrest us within the trap of protection when the real issue is that of the rights. The relation between women and the public space must then be allowed to stretch itself across leisure time. This is an issue taken up by some of the feminist scholars who campaign for women's right to *loiter* (Phadke et al. 2009; Phadke et al. 2011)<sup>55</sup>. The notion they challenge therefore is that if women cannot manufacture a sense of purpose for which their presence is mandatory in the public space, they must instead be where they really belong, that is, the domestic spaces (Ranade 2007).

If decrepit theatres are to be assessed as spaces of leisure, the gentrification and gendering multiply to elevate the gender-equality of middle class leisure, but simultaneously ensure that lower class women are further discouraged from leisure. Given that the cities in India have been repeatedly 'beautified' in the last two decades, urban slums have been declared a 'nuisance' (Ghertner 2011a, 2011b) and their inhabitants 'resettled' at the outskirts of the cities. An appropriate example would be that of Yamuna Pushta in Delhi, which housed around 35,000 working-class families, who had been living there for more than three decades. Many of them were daily wage labourers, domestic workers, hand-cart pullers, head loaders and ragpickers (Menon-Sen and Bhan, 2008). Considered to be illegal migrants settling upon public land, 'dirtying the landscape' and engaging in criminal activities, they were resettled in Bawana, towards the Haryana border. Yamuna Pushta was located in old Delhi where many single-screen theatres like the Moti cinema are located. The daily wage labourers of the slum formed the bulk of the audience at these theatres. Once evicted to Bawana, even though the men continued to travel to south and central Delhi for work, most women lost employment and were forced to confront the acute water crisis, filthy or blocked community toilets leading to open defecation, blocked drainage, terribly smelly pools of waste, and rampant sexual harassment (Khosla and Dhar 2013). Strikingly similar results have also been found in the resettled neighbourhood of Lallubhai Compound, Mumbai (Ayyar 2013).

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<sup>55</sup> Phadke et al. (2009) write, "From our perspective however, the quest for pleasure and the struggle against violence are deeply inter-connected. The quest for pleasure strengthens our struggle against violence, framing it in the language of rights rather than protection. The struggle against violence as an end in itself is fundamentally premised on exclusion and can only be maintained through violence, in that, it tends to divide people into 'us' and 'them', and actually sanctions violence against 'them' in order to protect 'us'... [T]he right to pleasure...includes the provision of infrastructure like transport, street lighting, public toilets, and policies that enable more sensitive law enforcement by recognizing people's fundamental right to access public space" (185-186).

There are two broad tendencies that need to be counterposed here: i) all homogenous neighbourhoods: housing societies, buildings, chawls and slum settlements that are composed of single or similar communities are far more restrictive of the movements of women than more heterogeneous communities (Phadke 2007), but simultaneously ii) heterogeneous resettlements of lower class inhabitants into cramped and poorly resourced housing quickly leads to identitarian fissures along the lines of caste and religion, amplifying the threat quotient of ‘the other’ and leading to fragmented and homogeneous social clustering (Ayyar 2013). In both cases, women’s behavior has important implications for the reputations and marital prospects in highly endogamous caste and community practices. Within this changing urban ecology, lower class women are domesticated in neglected and marked neighbourhoods, while men, whether homeless pavement-dwellers or slum inhabitants, end up in a deeply stratified universe. Work and leisure, public and private, ‘respectable’ and ‘available’, come to bear distinct and much-heightened rhetorical affects in this universe. It is by assembling these affective polarities of the social into a conservative narrative that the marginal film economies constitute themselves.

Notions of respectability, by the virtue of their very fragility, are traded between bodies and spaces that must guard themselves against defilement. If domestic and public spaces engender the performance of female bodies, women too in turn engender spaces by marking them out of their personalised maps of the city. They mark them under a negative sign on their mind-maps on which a wine shop, a *paanwallah*, or rows of lottery stalls – all sites of male congregation and activity – are denotations of an implied threat alerting them to a sense of being in the wrong place/time (Ranade 2007: 1522). Women across class share such mind-maps even if they do not have to negotiate it in the same ways. The rundown theatres screening films only watched by a male audience, have thus earned their place – devoid of respectability and female participation. Just as women go across the road when they encounter a wine shop, they *invisiblise* such theatres as symbols of all-male activities. These rejections have far less to do with the actual content of the films screened, and much more to do with self-regulated spatial vocabulary. As we grapple with the fragmentation of spaces, bodies, languages, settlements and narratives, we observe how they are often forced into smaller homogenous pockets. Through these mechanisms that they come to be socially marked – ghettoised and provincialised.

An anecdotal account of my first visit to Moti cinema in Delhi could be useful here. I brought along a female friend to watch *Kehu Hamse Jeet Na Paayi* [No one can defeat us]

(2011). We bought ‘Rear Stall’ tickets and asked if they had managed to sell any balcony tickets for the show at all. Nobody had bought balcony tickets, which affirmed my expectation. The Balcony, a typically secluded zone for the *gentry*, serves little purpose for working-class men who would not pay ten rupees extra for spatial distinction<sup>56</sup>. There was, however, a female security person at the entry gate who thoroughly checked my female friend while I joined the queue for men. I was taken aback when I was asked to go through the entrance for women. One after another, several men suggested so. When I refused to, they asked me to go to the front of that very queue so I could enter comfortably without having to wait with them. The baseline for both suggestions was the same. As I clearly did not look *their* kind, I was generously granted the right to escape the ordeal which would be regular discomfort for them, the underlying assumption being that I would not be used to it.

To have a sense of the space and how it is embodied, let us engage briefly with the Moti cinema in particular. Given the poor footfall, the people could get dispersed and find themselves the kind of public space which is on a steady decline in the cities, particularly in Delhi. Here, they could stretch themselves, put their legs on the front seat, eat *gutkha* and spit anywhere, fiddle with their mobile phones at will and shout at the top of their voice, “*Chalu karo!* [Get on with it!]” Indeed, that is what audiences watching B or C circuit films in decrepit theatres do everywhere. The Moti cinema was not going to tolerate any of it, however. As soon as one of the men spat next to himself, an administrator came to him and said, “*Ye sab nahin chalega yahan. Thookna hai toh bahar jao!* [This will not be tolerated here. Get out if you must spit!]” When the film started and darkness arrived, the various administrators, among them the woman at the security gate as well, got busy policing people. They often flashed torchlight at the people they suspected to check their activities as one of them also carried a wooden stick around. The people were strictly told to keep their legs off the seats in the front and their tickets were checked repeatedly to make sure no one had entered without it. Sure enough, people spat around themselves, kept their legs on the seat in front and there were indeed defaulters without a ticket. There was a significant rationale for the inspection drill, one would be correct in pointing out. Yet, the administration’s contempt and exasperation with the Bhojpuri audience is toned down by a business compromise. Even though Moti cinema seemed in a relatively reasonable state, the theatres that show Bhojpuri films are often in serious need of renovations, half of their

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<sup>56</sup> See Lakshmi Srinivas (2010a) for more detailed understanding of the significance of Balcony viewing for upper and middle class citizens, particularly women.

seats are broken, fans may or may not work, power cuts are the routine, and the quality of projection is so poor that one wonders whether one is a rightful ticket-bearer. The image, at best, merely suggests the action, mocking at claims of indexicality.

The rundown theatres such as Moti cinema, once driven out of the mainstream family film business, have historically depended on the supply of fringe genres. Particularly through the 1970s when action cinema was integrated within the mainstream, gradually a steady supply of B/C circuit films emerged that sought to occupy the theatres on the margins of the exhibition sector. It is to understand this realm of film business unfolding across overdetermined spatial relations that I use the category of 'rearguard' cinema.

### **Producing 'Rearguard'**

I borrow the term 'rearguard' from Clement Greenberg (2003), without completely buying his proposition that it is an effect of the avant-garde, merely the ready-to-consume version of cultural practice. The *rear* in rearguard film practice, as I deploy the term, is only indicative of its spatio-cultural *location*. In fact, if the artistic avant-garde harvests the 'cultivated', as Kumar Shahni and Mani Kaul did, the rearguard practices blend their formal eclecticism with an anticipation of fringe audiences. Rearguard is a broad and porous category aggregated by the exhibition side of the film trade<sup>57</sup>. It may share certain characteristics with what is known as the B-film but it is also indicative of a mode of production, and thus invites attention to not merely itself, but a body of films. The cluster might be integrated by a small-time star, or a producer-director, or certain narrative schema. Most remarkably, the parodic register is always embedded in rearguard practice. Even as it presents itself in all sincerity, it also makes available for critique that which it deliberately *misrepresents*. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the rearguard provides no cultural capital; it refuses to project upon the singular axis of social hierarchy. Bourdieu writes,

By obliging one to formulate the principle of the convertibility of the different kinds of capital, which is the precondition for reducing the space to one dimension, the construction of a two-dimensional space makes it clear that the exchange rate of the different kinds of capital is one of the fundamental stakes in the struggles between class fractions whose power and privileges are linked to one or the other of these types (1984: 125).

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<sup>57</sup> It could be conceded that both the avant-garde and the rearguard share two primary characteristics: an outright masculinity and a desire for distance from the middle. In fact, one may argue that masculinity, and by extension a gender imbalance of their internal composition, is an effect of the shared desire to find a 'niche' – a social segment separated from the societal whole to which they could offer their 'artistic' product.

The rearguard offers a dimensional challenge to the *space* of cultural exchange. It refuses to comply with reducing the space to one dimension, even as the cultural capital it offers has negligible convertibility towards social mobility. It is not so much a matter of low cultural valuation as of cultural channels below a certain bandwidth. An entire range of films circulate in this circuit. It may even seem absurd to aggregate an eclectic set of practices under any label, particularly when the result is further amplified and de-standardised at every stage of the film's lifecycle. If hundreds of small distribution companies would anticipate the potential of cheap imports and indigenous soft-porn, the exhibition circuit further spiced things up by including *desi* or foreign bits of explicit sexual intercourse, much in tune with Lotte Hoek's (2013) ethnography of Bangladeshi action cinema. SV Srinivas' work (2008) on the mutations of Hong Kong films in this circuit labels such practices under B-circuit describing it as the 'final frontier' of the film industry. The rearguard practices of the 1980s and 1990s had continuities with Dara Singh's action films – the most significant being their dependence on 16mm. Through the 1970s, Ramsay horrors acquired immense popularity and raised the proportion of sleazy content within the rearguard practice. There were also the films of Kanti Shah – producer and director of various films throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, *Gunda* (1998) being the most successful – some of which had ageing stars like Mithun and Dharmendra. The entire phenomenon of Ramsay horrors and later Mithun films shot in Ooty could also be included within this circuit. It is nearly impossible to aggregate these very different sets of films and the nature of their circulation, but for our purpose here, it may suffice to note that numerous alternative practices had been sustained by the rundown theatres of the north Indian small towns for a long time.

Ramsay Brothers' films (mid-1970s to early-1990s), broadly categorised in the B-circuit, had a tremendously successful run in B-, C-, and D- centers (Nair 2012). There is no formal recognition of circuits and centers in the Indian film trade; we depend on distributors' highly inconsistent nomenclature. This segment is indicative of a broad set of practices signifying a cottage industry. Following the expansion of the exhibition sector in 1974, it flourished within less-favoured urban theatres as well as the remote towns where the films would get 're-released over and over again for the next few years' (ibid.: 127). Tulsi Ramsay renders this scattered remoteness a sense of place: "*Jahaan pe train bhi nahin rukti hain na, wahaan business hota tha humara*" [Places where even the trains do not stop, that is where we would make our buck] (as cited in ibid.). The suburban towns at the edge of large cities and various small towns across north India are aggregated under a broad geography of remoteness here. The remote spaces constitute the long but scattered



tail of the leisure network. For Ramsay, these spaces provided an inverted opportunity – instead of treating them as the tail, an alternative distributive network could treat them as the head, as the primary site of an alternative model.

The most representative and versatile component of the category, however, would be the ‘morning show’ phenomenon. The ‘morning show’ was a way of utilising the otherwise dormant resource of the 10-12 am slot before the conventional four shows of the main screening began. The practice of introducing sleazy films in that slot targeted compulsive filmgoers and adolescents bunking school. From the mid-1980’s to late-1990’s a set of films, identified as C-circuit ‘morning show’ by Bhargupati Singh, found wild popularity. Singh describes these films as containing elements of an indigenous horror-cum-sleaze (such as *Khopdi* [Skull], *Khooni Panja* [Bloody Palm] *etc.*) and dubbed versions of semi-pornographic films from the west. He describes the C-circuit scenario:

[T]he illicit and fleeting pleasures and dangers, the gigantic posters with half-naked female bodies (usually with white women), the titillating but absurdly repetitive titles, uncomfortably translated or more often than not, just completely fabricated (*Call Girls*, *Night of Love*, *Private Tuition*) bearing little or no relation to their French, Finnish, Russian or Australian origins (Singh 2008: 257).

The massive success of rearguard practices was as much a matter of low-cost production as of astute distribution and exhibition. Poor production values and the absence of mainstream stars with nearly no publicity ensured that these films always operated on the fringes of the mainstream. Morning shows in gentrified as well as decrepit theatres became a popular bastion for working class regulars, compulsive filmgoers and students on the run from schools. Singh quotes Bal Kishen Malhotra – manager of the now-closed Jagat cinema in Delhi – who disgustingly calls those who watched these films ‘*chavvanni-class ki audience*’ [an audience of paupers], indicating ‘local rickshaw-walas and *jhalliwalas* (coolies for the various commodities that circulate around Old Delhi) and the local floating/working population’ (ibid.: 251). The theatres once marked by the audience of paupers, would find it nearly impossible to attract the gentry unless they were renovated in entirety.

The emergence of rearguard films was led by the small-time entrepreneurial capital, but the uptake of that capital as films was possible only because of rundown theatres. Morning shows emerged in the 1980s when VHS tapes and television had arrived and the middle class began to escape the film theatres without air-conditioning and an impeccable

reputation. Only very few theatres were privileged with a high concentration of urban families. In the mid-1980s, the number of cinema halls outnumbered the big budget films that could be released during a year. The morning show, then, provided a ‘supply of oxygen’ to the theatres helping them survive, since it was a regular source of profit. Singh writes,

Out of seventy-two cinema halls in Delhi, roughly fifty-five had the morning slot reserved for foreign or indigenous soft-porn... During this time, a number of minor distribution companies entered the fray, since for a potential entrant into the film trade, the soft-porn circuit was the safest bet, requiring minimal investment and generating a sustained, though unspectacular profit...[T]he numbers swelled to about fifty distribution companies involved in foreign and indigenous C-Circuit films (ibid.: 259).

By the mid-1990s though, the numbers were already dwindling and towards the early 2000s, the morning show was not so much a matter of profitmaking as of lean days for the exhibition sector. Singh predicts the end of the morning show in the near future, citing the leading C-circuit distributors – Devi Shakti and Pankaj Raj – as ‘desperately looking for a new trade to enter’ (ibid.). Within two years of his interviews though, Bhojpuri cinema had made a strong claim to being a new commodity within the same trade, with the release of *Sasura Bada Paisawala* [My Father-in-Law is Very Rich] (2004). The production scenario of the sleazy rearguard, however, only reflected the mirror image of the anxieties that prevailed in the exhibition trade. Ashim Ahluwalia, whose *Miss Lovely* (2012) is set within C-grade film atmospherics, spent time between 1998 and 2000 on the sets of *Maut Ka Chehra* (Face of Death) — a sex-horror film that was being cranked out in four days by a bunch of ex-convicts. The debutant producer was actually a dubious builder from Karjat in Maharashtra, and had roped in Jolly, a director who lived in his building. Jolly employed his friend Shirish, ‘a ladies supplier’, to find girls ‘who would get naked on camera’. Ahluwalia elaborates,

They would shoot on glorious 16 mm, a simple story of a serial rapist who lives in a sandy graveyard and wears a mask made of gum. Of course, this was just the wrapping. The secret ingredient would be contained in the two additional “tota” or “bits” reels of illegal sex that they would shoot with Rosie and Sheeba, Shirish’s girls, in a flat in Madh island. These “X-rated inserts” would bypass the Censors, be carried at night on bicycle, and then be spliced back into the film later, in a small-town cinema. The police would be paid to look the other way, the projectionist would roll the inserts and red-blooded men, deprived of actual female flesh, would flock to the cinemas (as cited in Singh 2012).

Ahluwalia speaks of production and casting offices opening and closing on a weekly basis. Shirish was living with six underage girls. The film's locations were: the producer's ex-girlfriend's flat, an abandoned factory, a one-hour love hotel in Andheri and some exteriors shot at the crumbling Essel Studios, which Ahluwalia calls the "MGM" of Bombay's gutter cinema. The films do not have a screenplay, are shot within days and completed within weeks. Ahluwalia met producers, directors, financiers, struggling nymphets and divas; years later, he read a newspaper article about four people who had been detained shooting a porn video in Karjat, including Shirish and two of his girls (ibid.).

If nothing else, this entire habitus of rearguard film practice was orchestrated around slim possibilities hidden within the crevices of the mainstream. By aggregating vast tracts of the residual infrastructure of Hindi film industry across north India, and by deploying physical energy as much as sexual enticement as narrative ingredients, a window of possibility thrived within the Bombay-based industry for nearly two decades. The sexual violence and enticement were both used as modes of disintegration and reintegration of the outsider protagonist. Both, however, would also provide an opportunity to sexually *isolate* the female body. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was no irreconcilable discord between the imaginary offered by the mainstream fare and the rearguard narratives. It is not that the mainstream Hindi film did not offer carefully packaged sleazy 'attractions' but their proportions would indeed differ. Using an alternative network of distribution-exhibition, the rearguard fiddled with those very anxieties that were glossed over in the mainstream circuit for the moral comfort of the middle classes. The rearguard only deployed the mainstream cinematic habituation to amplify certain effects and get rid of the rest<sup>58</sup>. The cheap soft-porn imports, however, merely isolated the white female body for voyeuristic pleasures. They offered no stable terms of affinity, nor an entry into the social configurations of private and public pleasure<sup>59</sup>. As Singh suggests, the coming of digital culture, the Internet, and cheaply available pornography on compact discs virtually slaughtered that segment of the film trade. Although the continuities between the indigenous low budget content and the rise of Bhojpuri films needs a closer investigation.

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<sup>58</sup> There has been notable interpenetration across these sectors of film trade. If Vitali (2008) has shown how Dara Singh films' staging techniques informed Amitabh Bachchan films, the exhibition slot evacuated by Dara Singh films was later appropriated by Ramsay horrors. The production end too was conjoined by both being shot on 16mm. The rape and revenge narratives throughout the rearguard channel perhaps also informed rape-revenge sagas in Hindi films, which continued well into the 1990s (see Gopalan 2002 for a detailed exploration of some of these films).

<sup>59</sup> The figure of 'the white woman' in these films was consistent with erotic magazines showcasing nude pictures particularly popular at that time.

### **Multiplexing Imaginations: Bhojpuri Cinema as Rearguard?**

How do we situate Bhojpuri films as against the sleazy rearguard? Could we say that the sleazy rearguard prepared the ground for the arrival of Bhojpuri cinema? Or Bhojpuri films merely provided stable window of opportunity to the exhibition trade? The vital connection between the two is an absence: the female spectator. Bhojpuri cinema's surprise emergence was indeed on account of the *audience of paupers* and the rundown theatres that earlier survived on sleaze-cum-horror films. The residual tendency continued to prevail over the theatres as well as working-class migrants, a majority of whom hailed from the BSR. The Bhojpuri film only appended itself to the rearguard space. Bhojpuri cinema stages a false binary between 'tradition' and modernity via the figure of the woman. The woman is modern enough to command desire, and often errant in her attitude towards rural or traditional imaginaries. Her body is sexually isolated, distinctly marked as an object of desire in a space where it finds no continuities, then gradually tamed, or protected by the male protagonist self-avowedly native to his tradition. Unlike the rearguard films, female sexuality is not permanently isolated here. As I have shown in Chapter 3, there lies a clear distinction between the public and private women – both perform distinct narrative functions and bear distinct ideological thrusts. The love interest of the protagonist, though, is the site of ambivalence. She must perform a double function: display the seductive capacity of the public woman in privacy and become the private woman in public. The moral project often mobilises conservative rhetoric and anticipates social reform. Curiously, this moral project has been completely sidelined from its earlier site of Hindi cinema. Now it is staged as the narrative of the fringe audience while the multiplex has become the primary site of Hindi film exhibition. The functional decrepit theatres remain the only *entertainment shelters* available to working classes in cities where they can barely afford any other form of leisure. The audience of Bhojpuri cinema, many among them neither native speakers of Bhojpuri nor directly interested in Bhojpuri films, seek a shelter in the cinematic space often regardless of the film<sup>60</sup>. In that sense, Bhojpuri films, as they lay claim to spaces earlier marked by the exhibition of sleazy rearguard, provide a spatial continuity to a segment of exhibition trade.

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<sup>60</sup> This is a point that needs to be seen in association with the fact that due to lean business, the theatres playing Bhojpuri films mix them up with older south Indian action films dubbed in Hindi. Indeed, even mainstream Bollywood has been looking southwards for the mass-film template (as in *Rowdy Rathore* and *Ready*). Bhojpuri films, much like the south Indian titles, improvise upon a comedy-action scheme. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Bhojpuri films also cater to audiences who do not speak Bhojpuri. The mutual intelligibility between Hindi and Bhojpuri means that several speakers of other north India vernaculars find Bhojpuri relatively easy to understand.

However, the arrival of the multiplex-mall also needs to be understood fully in order to unpack the nature of space that single-screen theatres represented in the post-multiplex scenario (see Athique and Hill 2010 and Hill and Athique 2013 for a detailed analysis of the multiplex-mall). The late 1990s saw the emergence of both – the multiplex-mall and digital cultures. On the one hand, it led to easy access of sleazy and pornographic entertainment on personal devices, and on the other, the multiplex attractively packaged itself as the pre-eminent ‘safe’ space of urban leisure. As a result, the single-screen theatres gradually lost out on both fronts – the mainstream film trade narratively dominated by the family film, and the fringe market of the sleaze-cum-horror film. The key social benefit that multiplexes offered to those who could afford the more expensive tickets was on account of gendered leisure: gentrification of the demographic distribution meant that the threat to upper and middle class women from working class men was effectively nullified. As Athique and Hill (2010) document and explain in great detail, the multiplex-mall consolidated a new configuration of space, class, film form and profitmaking. But it was also deployed as a pedagogic space of consumer civility. In this space saturated with commodities and the advertising aesthetic, the encounter with film was merely one of the many such encounters of desire. It is understandable then that the

multiplex operators do not see themselves as being part of the existing theatrical industry, but rather as a new industry in their own right. They have formed their own consultative body, rather than join existing exhibitors’ associations, and none of the management staff in any of these firms has been drawn from the film industry. Instead, the majority of senior operations personnel have a background in the top-end of the hospitality industry while the rest come from the retail and television industries. As such, both the self-image and the outward image of the multiplex industry is light years away from the “briefcase in a darkened restaurant” and “assets buried in the backyard” model of operations formerly associated with India’s “disorganised” entertainment sector (Hill and Athique 2013: 604-605).

The multiplex-mall was expected to be the appropriate habitus for a new kind of cinema; it would target the audience and gradually *train* them in the very act of desiring. The new consumer of multiplex cinema would therefore bring to the multiplex a desire refracted by the mall – the saturated sensorium of globalisation. There were at least three ways in which the multiplex-mall configuration sought to fundamentally change cinema.

First, by promising a stable economic model targeted only at small numbers. For the last two decades, the mass film had gradually declined in its capacity to aggregate differences. In fact, the biggest successes of the 1990s had been films that made huge profits in the overseas market by situating the ‘over-traditional’ diasporic family at the heart of the

narrative. The domestic audience had been segmented across circuits of exhibition – both family film (such as Mukta Arts, Dharma Productions and Yashraj Films) and action cinema (for example Sunny Deol, Sunil Shetty and Akshay Kumar films) had been contesting the space. In fact, several of the former production houses had dabbled in more action oriented films without much success. Throughout this phase, then, there had been enormous confusion over how to address the ‘mass audience’. The multiplex provided a strategic way out of this quagmire by promising much higher returns with a much smaller ‘niche’ audience. As Ganti (2012: 110-118) has shown, the multiplex was welcomed as a site of experimentation, quality, and class. In a short span of time, it provided the means to install a new configuration within the economy that most of the industry personnel – producers, distributors, exhibitors and stars – sought critical *distance* from. Multiplexes allowed Hindi cinema to distance itself from its (erstwhile) ‘self’ – the deferral in discourse could now become site-specific.

Second, on account of the risk appetite of the corporate capital that was pushed through the multiplex economy. The Hindi film industry was granted industry status in 1998 and it resulted in curtailing the dependence on unreliable sources of capital for the producers. This has also resulted in greater integration between production, distribution and exhibition. Production companies such as Yashraj Films and Mukta Arts entered distribution while distribution companies entered exhibition (Shringar Cinemas), and exhibition companies into production (PVR Cinemas) (ibid.: 267-68; see Vitali 2008: 239). This attempt at vertical integration was then further dependent on the scarcest commodity of film business – the star. With few bankable stars this produced several tiers within the film business, each belonging to a different risk-bracket. The major stars began to command the increasing remuneration further raising the risk quotient of the film, thus making this first tier increasingly dependent on a risk-free business model. The middle tier stars could experiment more and indulge in a relatively free trade zone. And the last tier of non-star films with low budgets could be risked because of the integration of music and satellite television economies with cinema, where rights could be pre-sold to make table profits offsetting risk. Interestingly, this last tier had opened the doors of the industry for new filmmakers with genre filmmaking (see Sharma 2003). But it is indeed the first tier where big profits came from. Therefore, while all these tiers still remain functional, what has gradually changed is the increasing preference of the production business towards the first tier. Several middle tier stars have been launched in the first tier while the last tier has been gradually marginalised to weekday morning slots (see Vetticad 2012: 38-74).

Third, by the way of feedback systems and data mapping. For the longest time the box-office collections had been rather opaque, particularly as one moved further and further away from Mumbai. Under-reporting however was not merely limited to the exhibitors evading entertainment tax, the distributors too had an incentive to under-report the collections within the minimum guarantee system. The producers also downplayed profits. The entry of the multiplex digitised the entire channel, organised the capital flow and mapped data transparently. As Ganti writes, the multiplexes are located within a 'political economic framework where visibility of revenue is privileged and rewarded' (2012: 347). While the earlier structure encouraged under-reporting, the multiplexed system provided incentives to show growth on the stock market. Digital ticketing and data transfer allowed the monitoring of the business independent of the personnel involved. While this data sustains the divide between the bulk of the single-screen economy that remains unavailable for such mapping and the multiplex, it also symbolises a new regime of accountability. Multiplexes thus become significant not only because they deliver much higher revenues, but because they support enumeration and data interpretation, which 'operates as a form of capital within the world of organized corporate finance and its discursive production of company annual reports, red herring prospectuses, and investment analyses. The knowledge capital is then used to attract investment capital' (ibid.: 349). Ganti is right in pointing out that to produce a 'universal hit' that appeals across barriers is no longer necessary for the social mobility of the filmmakers. However, it is through the multiplex-based feedback systems that different tiers were eventually formed within the multiplex economy. The early multiplex economy had indeed tried to ignore the masses altogether, but the big-budget star films increasingly grew so bloated with capital that they were compelled to succeed within the single-screen theatre economy as well. By around 2010, then, the multiplex no longer sought exclusivity from the wider film exhibition sector; instead, it sought a reintegration.

The location of the multiplex within the mall is also not without significance. It allows the multiplexes to lease floor space within shopping malls at relatively low cost. It means that the multiplexes do not need to invest in property assets, which used to be a 'crucial stumbling block for expansion given the soaring property prices'; in addition to this, several states have given entertainment tax exemptions specifically to multiplexes (Vitali 2008: 238). All these factors not only tilted the mainstream film economy entirely in favour of the multiplex, they also gentrified Hindi cinema while making the gendered promise of safety. The seepage of class into gender-based ideologies of space here was an effect of the historical thrust I have discussed above.

The concentration of interest in the multiplex-based horizons emptied a big chunk of the single-screen economy, which welcomed Bhojpuri cinema with open arms. This is not to suggest that after Bhojpuri cinema's arrival in 2004, it took over the single-screen segment. It only provided a trade option to those theatres that faced closure for they were already on the margins of the exhibition sector. By the end of 2000s a significant percentage of theatres gradually closed down as the temporary promise held out by Bhojpuri films also began to crack. Many single-screen theatres also renovated themselves into multiplexes thereby re-integrating with the mainstream. The Bhojpuri film business occupied a moment of transit in this gradual makeover of the exhibition sector. However, provided that we are only speaking of the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema, it may be worthwhile considering to what extent the trajectory of Bhojpuri cinema in this phase has been overdetermined by the space of exhibition it was allowed to prosper within. Instead of analysing it as an expression of the regional culture, we must understand that its theatrical footprint sought to generate capital out of the working class men who earlier visited those theatres. In spite of the shift from Hindi to Bhojpuri – mutually intelligible languages indeed – the takeover of the rearguard space partly contributed to the shaping of Bhojpuri cinema as rearguard.

### **The Missing Women**

As I have discussed in Part I, Bhojpuri cinema's first two phases had deeply familial orientation. The rural melodramas attracted a large female audience before the enterprise fell through (see Ghosh 2010). The return of the Bhojpuri film in 2004 was not merely on account of the multiplex intervention into the mainstream film trade. The mode of address of the 'universal hit' (Ganti 2012) was already falling apart and the single-screen theatres which had cultivated, and were cultivated by, the mass film could no longer keep up with the aspiration. It may be useful to conceptualise the mainstream single-screen economy as one toggling between two key operative modes: i) as the singular proprietor of an extremely scarce commodity, and ii) as the aggregated channels of capital flow symbolised by well-advertised major stars. The major expansion and integration of the circuit in 1974 allowed the exhibition sector to migrate from the first mode to the second. But by the early 2000s both the modes were sufficiently crippled. The shortage of major stars to push through large sums of capital with minimum risk led to a struggling film industry. The multiplex accommodated this failing economy by offering it a 'niche' audience. It provided the Hindi film industry a way out of its inability to address the 'masses'.



Indeed, this was also the phase of Information Technology (IT)/IT Enabled Services (ITES) led employment growth. Young middle class graduates migrated from north India to southern states where lucrative jobs awaited them. Working class subjects simultaneously migrated to the National Capital Region (NCR), Punjab, Karnataka and Maharashtra looking for daily wage employment. These two trends fed into the trajectories that branched out of the older Hindi film economy. The multiplex-mall catered to the young, urban migrants with disposable incomes while the vernacular industries emerged to address working class men across the cities of north India. The Bhojpuri media enterprise, within this new configuration, increasingly grew into the fringe exhibition across India. The presence of migrant laboring bodies grew in all parts as infrastructural development made imperative labour intensive projects across India. As the mainstream single-screen economy was outmaneuvered by the multiplex economy, it increasingly merged with what was the fringe of the exhibition sector. Theatres with a glorious past, one after another, became a part of the rearguard exhibition channel, which was dominated by Bhojpuri cinema till the end of 2000s. What truly distinguished these segments – the multiplex and the rundown single-screens – was the female audience.

In the highly gendered space of exhibition, the multiplex-mall brought the freedom and promise of safety that was unprecedented. But the rundown single-screens completely lost out on the middle class demographic, thereby further raising the threat quotient to the women who may have otherwise visited these theatres. This was indeed also on account of the realignment of the film sensorium with the wider habitus of consumption. While the exhibition sector, as I have argued, was always stratified, the distinctions had never been so stark and regimented. This threw Bhojpuri cinema, which had seized the opportunity thus available within the single-screen theatres across north India, within the pool of the rearguard, which had been cultivated by the absence of the female audience. The figure of the woman among the rearguard audience had always created discomfort, anxiety and threat. Hoek's (2013) description of her ethnographic work in the theatres of Bangladesh, where soft-porn cut-pieces are often inserted, resonates with this anxiety – indeed multiplied by her 'foreign-ness' – about the woman among the audience. This is why, the trajectory of Bhojpuri cinema within the third phase was also in anticipation and acknowledgement of the nature of its audience. The shift from the rural melodramas to more individuated action cinema within the last decade of Bhojpuri cinema, as I have shown, is also an effect of this growing acknowledgement. The ambivalence, of which the film song and the narrative have been two asynchronous instances, has thus been gradually mitigated.

The absence of women in the theatres watching Bhojpuri films is not merely an empirical fact that accounts for the films addressing male attention and instrumentalising female bodies. It also marks the persistence of a habitus which has a long history in Indian cinema spectatorship. Within a highly gendered vocabulary of urban leisure, it imposes a historical baggage and an ideological grid upon the enterprise that may have otherwise taken an alternative course. This grid to some extent anchors an otherwise disorganised industry, thus propagating dubious facts about audience tastes being overdetermined by their class and gender. The primary axis of such ‘facts’ passes through the female bodies on and around the screen.

## Conclusion

Attempting to situate the emergence of Bhojpuri cinema within the spatial dynamics of the Indian urbanity, we observed two remarkable shifts. First, the mutation of an exhibition sector that commanded pre-eminence within the film economy on the basis of its scarcity into a complex saturated with extra-cinematic commodities that began to regulate the film trade—the multiplex. The multiplex reconfigured not only the exhibition sector, but also distribution and production. It did so via the re-investment of capital into other sectors and concentration of the trade within fewer hands, thereby replacing the scattered film economy and flushing out most of the older fringe circuits. If the fringe genres earlier sought to monetise the scattered crevices of the exhibition sector by targeting a ‘niche’ audience, the multiplex sought its own niche within a highly organised system towards the most affluent demography. It does not mean, however, that the multiplex-based new film economy has been perfectly streamlined and is firmly within the grip of corporate capital. As Vetticad (2012) shows, numerous small films produced by industry insiders with reasonable clout continue to get screened within the multiplex<sup>61</sup>. Second, the space acquired by the entertainment economy within the city has itself grown tremendously in proportion. If the retail and repair based economy earlier stood alongside the narrow zone of entertainment economy, the massive growth of service industries has gradually

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<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the multiplex became such a major harbinger of hope for quick returns that in about a decade it also began to suffer from the excess of multiplex-malls. This has produced a significant fringe within the multiplex economy that must make space for key producers and distributors who control the scarce resources of the new film trade. Therefore, a multiplex dependent on the big distributor who is expected to distribute a major upcoming release X, might also be forced to screen a film Y that stars the son of a producer upon whom the distributor is dependent for some other favours. This shows us that the corporatisation of the Hindi film industry has not forced out the kinship based structures of commodities and capital flow. The former has only challenged the pre-eminence of the latter, which has resulted in some of the kinship-based entities making a successful and dominant transition to the corporate end (such as Yashraj Films), while forcing the rest on the margins.

aggregated the transmedia economy, real estate, and various consumer services within one large whole anchored by the entertainment data flow. The film trade has been housed within this aggregated complex, which itself continues to grow in size and network cohesion. The multiplex-mall is one of the major sites where this complex is housed. However, the access to this complex is marked in terms of social indices and ‘catchment areas’ – ‘pockets of affluence with the highest average incomes’ across cities (Athique and Hill 2010: 101).

However, we have also seen that the space that multiplexes currently occupy within Indian cities is not new. There is a long history of stratification within the urban design, mind-maps and daily practices. The primary axis of this stratification has been the middle class female body. It is via this body that gendered rights are made available to selected classes. Therefore, we are routinely confronted by a conflict between gender and class based equity. The emergence of the multiplex-mall within this conflict delivered a paradox – *equal access to an unequal demography*. It accelerated the makeover of the Hindi film economy strictly on the basis of gentrification, which was gradually absorbed all the way by narrative ingredients, *mise-en-scène*, iconographies, and most significantly, the codification of leisure within the multiplex-based Hindi films. Both the site of exhibition and the narrative mounting of film-texts began to address the audience primarily as a consumer of commodities, deploying an advertorial aesthetic. An entire realm of existence in conflict – based on prevailing inequities – was thus ejected out of the mainstream. That is how the decrepit single-screen theatres and the subaltern narrative assertions found themselves locked in an embrace within Bhojpuri cinema. Within the gendered vocabulary of spaces and leisure, the promise of Bhojpuri cinema was also gendered. Even as it provincialised the Hindi ‘social’ and retained the morally upright feudal family, its mode of address acknowledged the empirical truth of the all-male working class audience. Gradually, the anticipation was followed by the successful spread across north India within rundown theatres. Therefore, the supply of a distorted femininity, as refracted by the imagined collective masculinity, was further increased alongside lean, agile and violent male stars.

In the next chapter, I shall briefly describe and analyse the nature, expanse and implications of the non-theatrical circulation of Bhojpuri media in particular and vernacular media in general. Even though the theatres are still the pre-eminent sites of the filmic encounter, it is outside the theatres that film and other vernacular media find themselves in a confluence. It is imperative upon us, therefore, to include in our discussion

the rather broad margins of the mainstream economy. It is after all within these margins that the regulatory stranglehold of the film distribution infrastructure cannot hold firm. A range of commodities circulate within this channel of suboptimal transactions, to which we now turn our attention.

## Chapter 6

### ***Otherwise: Suboptimal Transactions of the Meanwhile***

The question of piracy in the circulation of Bhojpuri media is a treacherous one to negotiate. This is partly because the legitimate enterprise itself deploys the ‘culture of the copy’ that is central to the idea of piracy. As I have shown, in occupying the crumbling infrastructure of Hindi cinema, in repackaging the older Hindi film form, in using old Hindi film or song titles as Bhojpuri titles, among other similar practices, the entire Bhojpuri media enterprise copies audaciously. Unlike the contemporary Hindi film industry where rehashing international cinema is a routine but unacknowledged practice<sup>62</sup>, Bhojpuri media foregrounds its citations and references. How, then, do we understand the pirate networks within the circulation of Bhojpuri media? If piracy represents the alternative order of infrastructure, our conventional understanding suggests that this alternative stands on the wrong side of legality. In the case of Bhojpuri media, though, the legal and the illegal remain curiously entangled, and they collectively form the alternative infrastructure. The pirated images, therefore, are not identifiable here as what Brian Larkin (2004) calls ‘degraded images, distorted sounds’, as opposed to the high-definition domain of the ‘world-class’ image; both the original and the copy suffer from degraded and distorted conditions of reception, whether in a rundown theatre, or on a disk or as a mobile download. Additionally, for Larkin, piracy’s ‘negative characteristics are often commented on: its criminality, the erosion of property rights it entails, and its function as a pathology of information processing, parasitically derivative of legal media flows’ (2004: 290). But without disregarding these, he maintains that ‘the structural focus on legal issues tends to obscure the mediating nature of infrastructure itself’ (ibid.). He persuades us to acknowledge the generative aspects of piracy and not merely be concerned with its legality.

However, unlike in Nigeria where the infrastructures of piracy that enabled access to international commodities later mutated into the providers of video films, in India the vernacular, national and international commodities have all circulated via more or less parallel routes. Piracy has had a generative effect upon each of these segments but the

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<sup>62</sup> Very recently, the practice of making official remakes has however taken off. *Bang Bang!* (2014) and *Citylights* (2014), for example, were both official remakes of international films. See Bhushan (2014) for more.

spread of vernacular media did not follow from the scarcity of access to international media commodities. This is where most available accounts of piracy, shadow/informal economies, and the commodity practices of copy/fake/counterfeit fall short. Whether it be Laikwan Pang's analysis of cultural control over creative industries via commodity imperialism of the copyright regime (2006, 2008, 2012), or Larkin's assessment of piracy hooking the Nigerians up with 'the accelerated circuit of global media flows' (2004: 297), these remain examples of *high-gradient* inequities. Evidently, the analysis offered to grapple with them leans too heavily on globalisation, international politics and the nature of advanced capitalism. Without disregarding the value of these accounts, what we also need is a *low-gradient* understanding of piracy.

While Lobato's study of informal film distribution also spreads across the global scale, it offers one particularly interesting account (2012: 85-92). He writes about a shop in Tepito, Mexico City – one of the largest markets across the world of pirated commodities – that hosts an extremely rich informal archive of Mexican films. Unlike its counterparts in the same market that are saturated with counterfeit Hollywood material, this shop ends up being a threat and is shut down by the Police even as the rest stay unscathed. Markets, it is well known, do not only fetch profits for the owners of copyright; they also sustain a relationship between the buyer and the commodity, even if by counterfeit means. That is why, even though the market saturated with pirated Hollywood disks was not attacked, their local counterpart – the Mexican films' DVD – became extraordinary as a niche product. As we observe here, the low-gradient piracy posed a much bigger threat.

The counterfeit vernacular commodity is also traded in similar low-gradient markets alongside the legitimate counterparts. Together they claimed a shared space in a market already saturated with media products. As I have discussed, this was partly on behalf of the different social clusters that different language media address. But the emergence of the vernacular commodity – in the form of music albums – was on account of the absence of any vernacular repertoire in the media market. The role piracy played in this emergence needs to be understood in terms of widening the net. There is very little that could be achieved with a neat bifurcation of the official channel and the counterfeit one. The understanding that the former is fully legal and the latter compromised overlooks the possibility that the distinctions are often laid out in spatial terms. The pavement hawker on the margins of the media market and a registered shop owner within it are distinguished not by the actual object they sell as much as by the co-ordinates they hold temporary rights

towards. The most significant contribution of piracy might yet be the regulation of its legal counterpart.

### The Pirate Regulation

In most of the theoretical or empirical accounts of piracy, the defence of the practice is launched on behalf of the unevenness of access, particularly heightened by globalisation. The suggestion, in summary, is that pirate transactions enable an underground network to make available objects that prevailing information networks of commodity capitalism saturate the realm of advertising with. Therefore, the pirate networks tap into the gap between the advertorial saturation, which heightens the desire for the commodity, and the structures of economic subjugation that deprive people of the same commodity. I wish to direct attention to a crucial distinction here. In the case of the vernacular media commodity, this tendency of piracy remains limited to the *hardware*. Even as the hardware object – the VCD, the DVD, the mobile phone etc. – is desired, pirated, reassembled and becomes an essential accessory, the vernacular *software* – the songs, films and images – provide an opportunity to *provincialise* that commodity. Unless we segregate the hard and soft aspects of the commodity, we cannot grapple with the slippage between the form and the content. This slippage allows the provincial self an opportunity to *install itself within* the pirated commodity.

Is there a conflict between the desires for the hardware and software? Does one come before another? Or they must necessarily come simultaneously, enabling each other? I shall recall an incident from my fieldwork to address this. In a personal conversation with a pavement hawker in Old Delhi, who sold pirated CDs/DVDs outside Bhagirath Place market, I learned that he made a good deal of money by buying a ‘master-copy’ of *Sasura Bada Paisawala* (2004) for rupees 3,000 and made countless copies out of it. The hawker was from Haryana and was at best amused by the Bhojpuri media phenomenon. For him, the buyers were poor Biharis yearning for their culture. He did not hide the fact that he had nothing but contempt for Biharis or Bhojpuri media. Yet, Bhojpuri media constituted the bulk of disks that he sold. At a little distance from this hawker, I spoke to the Punjabi owner of a permanent shop within the Lajpat Rai market. He sold the copyrighted versions of vernacular media disks and held the Biharis (including their media) and the hawkers in equal contempt. For him, those who bought and sold cheap and pirated material had no ability to understand ‘quality’. The distinction he made between the merchandise he sold and the one sold by the hawker was qualitative, but it was not based on the idea of rights to

property. They were part of the same business, they sold the same content, but their merchandise came from different sources. The difference was articulated as that between adjacent channels of superior and inferior versions. In my understanding, this view was largely consistent with how pirate products are seen across India.

But let us add another layer to this. Very close to both the hawker and the shop stood Moti Cinema where Bhojpuri films have now been screening for a decade. Around the time the ‘master-copy’ arrived in the market, theatres like the Moti cinema also saw a trade opportunity in Bhojpuri film trade. The success of *Sasura...* in both the pirated and copyrighted VCD circuit, and within the rundown theatres, fed off one another. The film theatre and the pavement hawkers both hold the hardware of an infrastructural channel. But operating on the fringe of their mainstream counterparts – which lay claim to more steady capital flow – they are also compelled to take a risk towards early gains. Their case is however aided by the small investment they need to make towards it. This is one way to understand the everyday reality of pirate regulation: the pirate transactions often form the first row of risk-takers. Unlike their counterparts, their low-value hardware compels them to remain much more alert towards the software of commodities. If the multiplex, for example, seeks to attract attention to itself *prior* to what it exhibits, it is not a luxury available to the hawkers and rundown theatres operating on the margins. They attract attention to themselves via the ‘new’ commodity. The software of the pirated commodity, then, drives the trade in vernacular media business. Apart from the price premium charged for legality, the pirated commodity also regulates the condensation of data within a disk of its legal counterpart. A single DVD currently prevalent in the market contains four to six films each. The contestation clearly did not only play out over the price, but the *value* contained in each disk.

As Bhojpuri media never seriously threatened its genuinely mainstream counterpart – the Hindi language media – it always operates, like all vernacular media, in a separate orbit below. Needless to say, it is also priced accordingly. During my fieldwork I learned that the prices of disks had been corrected over a period of time to maintain a very minor price difference between legal and illegal disks. Together, they form a cluster of what I would call *suboptimal transactions*, operating as they do below the threshold of distinguished attention. The crucial distinction we must make regarding the commodities that are traded within the suboptimal band is that they are not evaluated on terms similar to their sophisticated counterparts. The suboptimal commodity provides an infrastructural connection where none exists otherwise. Let me illustrate this in terms common across



rural and semi-urban north India. As a poor family takes their baby daughter to a nearby hospital, they are not particularly vigilant about the distinctions between a doctor, a compounder and a ward-boy. The hospitals, whether public or private institutions, are often poorly manned and makeshift arrangements address varying degrees of crises. Equipments, medicines, qualifications and norms of professional propriety variously occupy a suboptimal transaction territory. Infrastructures of transport, education, health, retail etc. routinely operate in this suboptimal band where questions of propriety are avoided for they become utterly counterproductive.

This is by no means to argue that the rural or urban poor cannot cognise the difference between orders of transaction. It is, however, the sorry state of infrastructure around them that trains them to be accommodating of dubious practices. If the parents in the example used above were to identify, or be informed of, the stakes upon the daughter's life, they would indeed rush to Delhi. All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the pre-eminent medical institution in India, witnesses these inequities as an endless mass of people lives on the pavements around the institute for months, even years at times, just so they get legitimate medical attention. Such dire situations compel people to reserve their battles for an opportune moment. The media commodity remains less deserving of strict vigilance. If the song or film a bunch of men watch on a disk player or a mobile phone happens to be a pirated product, it need not symbolise resistance to the mainstream commodity or infrastructure.

The proximity of Lajpat Rai market shop and the pavement hawker must not lead us to believe that the legal and pirated counterparts always sit neatly adjacent to each other though. At the south end of the city, in the quasi-rural neighbourhood of Kishengarh, there were several shops selling pirated Bhojpuri media – none claiming otherwise. And yet, as I say this, I have no way to be sure. It is eminently possible that some of the disks were indeed legitimate. The legal is often indisguishably mixed with the pirated in most such neighbourhoods. The distinctive practice was to 'check' every disk before selling it, because as the seller told me, sometimes the disks turn out to be empty or corrupted. Such practices defer the site of authenticity – from a brand label and its packaging quality to the projection onto a portable television screen. It may be worthwhile looking at Tripta Chandola's (n.d.) a rich account of Nehru Place – one of Asia's largest electronic goods market,

Taking Paras cinema as the centre of reference, on the left lies the Paharpur Buisness Area and on the right, the blocks with the concentration of the Garment export traders. Both these areas mentioned are characteristically different from the central courtyard which the melting pot of the market. Here computer hardware, spare parts, cartridge refilling, pirated software, second hand books stalls, accessories to technological gadgets, nicknacks, cobblers, eateries, placement agencies, digital conversions, books, toys and other hardware-software peripherals are available. This is also the stage where most of the spectacles unfold; eviction of the hawkers for 'illegal' encroachment of space, arrest of vendors selling pirated software, display of grotesque generators (the Paharpurbusiness area and the garment blocks have their power back up systems on the roof) and encounters with the crowds. This is also the space where the 'emptiness' is most felt in the after affects of evictions and raids. Within the legitimacy which is ordained to Nehru Place, it is in this space that the 'illicit', 'illegal' networks and nexus unfold, of pirated software and people.

It is in this market that 'Microsoft's headquarters stand in the middle of the main courtyard overlooking the corridors where the pirated software is sold' (ibid.). Adding further irony, the space where the Microsoft building now stands was earlier marked out for another cinema hall in the original markings. However, the most significant site of suboptimal transactions has now become the 'mobile shop' – shops that sell new SIM cards and recharge existing pre-paid ones, sell mobile phone accessories and repair handsets. Saturating the big media markets and present on every other street corner, these shops sell mobile cases, flip covers, strings, screen guards, SD cards (memory cards and chips), earphones and headphones, duplicate chargers and batteries, USB cables, etc. But their most significant business, albeit sometimes undeclared, remains that of selling 'data' downloads.

### **Technologies of the Meanwhile**

Ravi Sundaram whose study of Delhi's media urbanism remains an authoritative descriptive as well as analytical account of the pirate practices, writes,

Each version becomes a new one, with camera prints in the first release, advertisements in the next, and hundreds of versions of popular film and audio hits. This proliferation of near-copies, remastered versions, and revisions refract across a range of time-space shifts, moving between core and periphery of the media city phenomenologically, rather than spatially. Versions of popular numbers are produced by the pirate market, fade from the big city and return in devotional music, local videos from Bihar, Haryana, and Western UP - and back to the city, brought by migrants and travelers. Piracy does not dwell only in objects or spaces, it enacts them momentarily. Its materiality consists in its mix of place, time, and thing, a mix that dissolves and reconstitutes itself regularly. Piracy *an sich* seems to have no end, just as it had no particular point

of beginning. Piracy therefore produces a surplus of cultural code, which fractures the surfaces of media spectacle through a tactic of dispersal.

As a phenomenon that works on a combination of speed, recirculation, and dispersal, pirate products are consumed by the possibility of their disappearance – by more imitations and versions. This is a constant anxiety in small electronic enterprises; the first past the post stays there for only a few months. New copies follow, from rivals and former collaborators. The doctrine of the many is haunted by its own demise – all the time (Sundaram 2010: 138).

There are two kinds of narratives we could get drawn into. First, one that draws its conclusions via an aggregation of the specific sites, technologies and markets. In this case, we would understand the informal practices of vernacular media as a resultant effect of these interventions and departures. Second, one that acknowledges the general tendency of a consumer demographic to negotiate the sites, technologies, markets in existence so as to access a certain media material. In this case, the specific departures are subverted under a porous legal enforcement system that continues to provide access through one of its unidentified bylanes. The argument I pursue here is that the arrival of the audiocassette marked the first order of shift, which bookended an entry into the second order of media markets. From the audio to video cassettes, then to VCDs, followed by DVDs, and now internet downloads or the bulk data transfers – the informal economy has followed up one *meanwhile technology* with another. These technologies only hand the baton over as they seem to *update* themselves. For the end-user, only the mode of access appears to change. It is not my argument, however, that the technology itself makes no difference. I only wish to suggest that the meanwhile technology provides a *technique of strategic negotiation contingent to the present*. It is a technique of its time, not a definitive tool that may have enabled its users to dictate or regulate the temporalities they inhabited.

However, it is also true that within advanced capitalism, all technologies are marked by a foretold obsolescence. What, then, makes the technologies of the meanwhile any different? Also, does the meanwhile have a temporal horizon? In my assessment, the meanwhile realises itself via suboptimal transactions and their tentativeness. Consider the case of Apple's iPhones. Even though it is most certainly a technology product soon to be made obsolescent, the branding and sales strategies via which it acquires its prominence appears to make it its own horizon, best expressed in the advertising quote: "if you don't have an iPhone, well, you don't have an iPhone!"<sup>63</sup> The narrative structures of advertising render such commodities a definitive characteristic, in order to offset the obviousness of their

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<sup>63</sup> The Apple commercial to which I make a reference is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtsslPQC-sI> (accessed 3 April, 2015).

looming ephemerality. The technologies of the meanwhile, on the other hand, provide no comparable claim or even momentary solace. They appear bare-bodied, stripped of the aura of any definitive defiance. They are always already intermediate in their temporal constitution. Which means that what makes the meanwhile of key relevance here is not the technology itself, but the habitus within which they are circulated. It is also the resonance across meanwhile subjectivities (as discussed in the next section) and the meanwhile transactions that define their temporality. Without the narrative thrust of marketing and branding, technologies can appear to be suspended in time, making only a claim to the present – the time they inhabit – as opposed to the future. The meanwhile technologies, therefore, become mere techniques without a horizon.

The mobile shops often load Hindi and Bhojpuri music, film clips and full films onto SD cards and flash drives for a small price (approximately, less than 50 rupees for one GB). The consumers of Bhojpuri media commodities do not regularly download music and movies from the Internet, either because they lack requisite technical skills or cannot afford to be online regularly. Rashmi M, who conducted her fieldwork in and around Bangalore to investigate these mobile shops in reference to Kannada music, found that the users are generally ‘unbothered about the legality of the content they consume. On the contrary they feel rightfully justified to consume content they source from these shops because they think they “pay” for it. The notion of copyright and its attendant legality does not seem to affect their choice of content or who they buy it from. Most of these users are not even aware of copyright and its legal entailments’ (2014). She also traces a long history of the emergence of these shops, which comprises of three key moments. First, the emergence of the figure of the ‘technician’ who would repair, sell, install and cultivate the media habit starting in the early 1920s through the gramophone. However, this practice was restricted to the urban elite. Second, the emergence of the audiocassette that segregated the sites of commodity software and hardware. She writes, ‘The figure of [the] technician still remained central to [the] media business even in the cassette era but the trade of media technologies and devices moved out of the shop of the technician/trader/collector while content trade (selling cassettes and recording services) still remained with the technician’ (2014a). This was also a key moment of democratisation leading to a much wider net of consumer interest. Third, the emergence of the peer-to-peer networks, cheap broadband services, and availability of all sorts of media commodities via Internet downloads. This allowed the middle classes with a stable Internet connection to abandon the media markets (such as Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place in Delhi and National Market in Bangalore) that were earlier vital sites for transacting both the disks and devices.

As a result of this, the contemporary informal market targets users uncomfortable with the Internet. Often living outside permanent residential spaces, the working class people cannot access broadband connections; also, the limited ‘data packs’ they usually subscribe to are much costlier for substantial data transfer. The mobile shop slips into this gap easily as yet another meanwhile technology, addressing a low-gradient inequity only to make space for the next fragment of the meanwhile when it duly arrives. Technologies of the meanwhile resist an easy association with markedly political orientations; they remain suboptimal in their political prowess too. Another such meanwhile technology is the ‘Chinese mobile’ – a very inexpensive smartphone with an extraordinary array of features, storage space, sound output, and large screens. As the name suggests, these phones come from China and blend into the phenomenological infinitude of commodities that have overtaken the Indian market in less than a decade. Among the urban, semi-urban or rural populations, the ‘Chinese’ counterparts have become omnipresent, and in some cases have wiped out their ‘original’ rivals. Numerous objects of daily, occasional or festive usage are now identified as ‘Chinese’. The cheap but loud and sturdy smartphone is perhaps the most popular of them among the urban poor. Its dramatic surge has threatened the sales of video disk players and, in the process, has given rise to the practice of individuated media consumption as opposed to a collective one.

The phenomenon that regulates the meanwhile technologies is repair. Repair – the practice of fixing breakdowns – is the most definitive material feature of suboptimal media transactions. In the media markets across Delhi, Lucknow, Patna, Chhapra and Mumbai, small shops advertise repairs, servicing and downloads as much as the accessories and made-to-order electronics. Hanging wires and open cabinets, soldering equipment and screwdrivers, batteries, memory cards, waiting customers and ringing cellphones constitute some of the integral components of every shop in the media markets. In the background, there exist workshops of ‘quasi-illegal’ settlements like Angooribad where ‘a network of knowledge workers...hack into circuit designs and then produce “copied” circuit boards through a process of careful reverse engineering. They innovate on the relation between the circuitry and the casing’ (Bagchi 2006). This materiality is similar to the scenario Larkin (2004: 304-309) narrates about Nigeria. As second-hand parts break down, and local ‘innovations’ and adjustments fail, a ‘cycle of breakdown, repair, and breakdown again’ becomes the condition of existence for such meanwhile technologies (ibid.: 305). By taking pirate products into consideration without the breakdowns that recur, we often overlook that the material conditions of pirate consumption actually reinforce the marginality of their users. Be it in terms of delay, disorder or degraded audiovisuality, the

meanwhile technological experience gives recurring reminders of its transitional and makeshift ontology, never too far away from yet another breakdown.

Returning to the distinction between the hardware and the software of media commodities, we could say that while the hardware is regulated by repair, the software is regulated in recycling. Both are ways of stretching the meanwhile further. The Bhojpuri media content floods the media markets. Independent and film music albums are often combined within a pile of disks, along with VCDs and DVDs of four to six films in one. Add to this, the recording of live concerts and innumerable music albums released on festive occasions, particularly Holi. Whether original or pirated, such piles of disks represent chewed out fragments of times abandoned to the margins. After a brief phase of interest in particular albums, these software commodities become increasingly indistinguishable from one another. It is this undistinguished and assorted pile that the act of downloading represents where only the overall measure of ‘data’ – songs, clips and films – in gigabytes (GB) matters. What lies within the transaction of 50 rupees a GB, for example, begins to lose its autonomous value. Even though this data transfer itself may be illegal, the body of songs and films may actually have been copied from both legal and illegal disks<sup>64</sup>. Much of this ‘otherwise’ economy operates below any measures of distinction. But even within the rundown theatres that screen Bhojpuri films, the screenings are frequently changed. Also, the new releases suffer from slim publicity and are released in a small number of theatres, leaving a large percentage of theatres – particularly, those outside Bihar – to rarely screen new releases. This means that unlike most film economies that are arranged in temporal orders of distribution, the Bhojpuri film economy is often classifiable only in terms of star-identification<sup>65</sup>. The films outside the pool of big stars are often as indistinguishably laid out as the data downloaded onto mobile phones. What does this debris of ‘content’ indicate and how does it address, effect and negotiate the invisible archive of Bhojpuri media? More significantly, how does the portable ‘otherwise’ economy of Bhojpuri media sit in proportion to the theatrical circuit? To what extent can we distinguish between them?

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<sup>64</sup> While the volume of consumption has indeed been grown tremendously throughout the last two decades, the same cannot be said about the engagement with a particular media product. This may not, however, have as much to do with ‘quality’ as that of the mode of distribution.

<sup>65</sup> This is also on account of the fact that in proportional terms, the ‘otherwise’ economy is overwhelmingly dominated by music videos instead of films. Which means that the mode of consumption of the former follows from the latter.

## The Meanwhile Self

Lawrence Liang (2008) offers a crucial insight by arguing that ‘the temporal nature of distribution is tied not just to an economic logic, but also to an economy of anticipation. The build up to the latest film, the trailers, the posters, the release of the soundtrack, the first-day-first-show phenomenon all work within an economy of waiting...[T]he social life of piracy occurs at the intersection of the economy of anticipation and the culture of aspiration’. It is because the Bhojpuri media in particular, and vernacular media in general, does not have access to the scale of capital that large industries mobilise that they remain outside this economy of anticipation. Only very few big-star films are pushed into the margins of the zone where anticipation and aspiration intersect. That is why, their peculiarly low-gradient piracy finds its boundaries smudged and does not resonate with Liang’s formulation. The enterprise of the Bhojpuri media is amplified by the meanwhile technologies regardless of their legal status. The piracy within it is not a result of the temporal organisation of large-scale film economies that deploy windowing mechanisms across technologies to squeeze out capital returns. The windows in the vernacular media market are organised spatially, instead of temporally. The market selling original as well as counterfeit VCDs/DVDs, or downloading a heap of films onto cheap smartphones, *appends a spatial window to the distribution* of the vernacular media. It does not pose a threat to the theatrical economy, instead works along with it. Together they allow the meanwhile commodity to flow across meanwhile technologies and meanwhile spaces – all forever under the threat of breakdowns, closures, demolitions and displacement drives of urban resettlement programs.

How do we, then, conceptualise the meanwhile archive? If the archive symbolises the orchestration of distinct temporalities within a particular space, how does it store, narrativise and regulate the meanwhile? Here, we must enter the idea of property. The space of the archive, we could say, also stakes a claim to property over the commodities of a certain kind. The meanwhile commodity, however, does not quite entertain any stable claims to property. Its tentative temporality slips out of the firm archival grip over time and narration. This is not to say, however, that the meanwhile commodity cannot be accommodated within any archive. *Youtube* continues to be an open access archive that stores nearly all, or at least a massive proportion of, the output Bhojpuri media industry produces. It also contains a vast proportion of the entire vernacular archive. This happens because *Youtube*’s idea of organizing time and space is radically opposed to the conventional archive. Its own temporality is always in the present; instead of orchestrating

time, it provides material distributed across scattered points of origin at the time and space of the user's command. Instead of being available at fixed co-ordinates, it attends to the command raised at any geographical co-ordinates. The meanwhile commodity within it does not stand for its own temporality, but abides by that of the supreme present. *Youtube* also does not stake a claim to the ownership of the material. A vast proportion of the material on it remains illegal, even as it refers to and is referenced by (on the side panel) the networks of legally shared commodities. To a large extent, then, *Youtube* offers itself as the ideal, even though unofficial, archive of the meanwhile commodities.

Several authors in *The YouTube Reader* (Snickars and Vonderau 2009) appropriately problematise its archival potential on account of its instability, and its uneven relationship with the past. Yet, for the meanwhile commodities merely suspended in the present, it becomes the closest form of archive. In terms of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995: 29), the archive is born out of the negotiation between the death drive that incites amnesia and the archive drive linked to the pleasure principle. The archive fever, therefore, is to have a compulsive, repetitive desire to return to the origin (ibid.: 91). The meanwhile commodity, however, is unaffected by both these drives and indeed of the nostalgia for the origins. It does not exist in deep time and makes no claim over distant past; *YouTube* offers it the temporary and unstable resting place which only serves the function of the archive in the meanwhile. The contract between the archive and the commodity remains just as unstable as that between the commodity and the user – both brought together only temporarily. These tentative rights over the archive also go on to determine the political marginality of the meanwhile subjectivity as Derrida argues that '[t]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (4).

Jane Gaines (1998), in an insightful essay on the problem of property in copyright laws, foregrounds a more fundamental 'problem of property in the self as it is modeled on property in the commodity' (546). The meanwhile commodity, offering only a tentative model of property in itself, then, brings forth an alternative model of property in the self. It sustains a meanwhile self – armed only with provisional, tentative property in the self. This is not to say that the commodity alone can provide a model to the property in the self. Instead, the meanwhile commodity – as the currency of suboptimal transaction – and as a symptom of the transient, provisional right to property the subaltern self exercises, resonates with a wide array of conditions. The meanwhile self is a cumulative effect of



these conditions. There is another insight from Gaines that could be useful here. She adds that in her study of the Anglo-American copyright doctrine, ‘the “person” historically has been recruited to underwrite the commodity form even as he stands antithetical to it’ (ibid.: 546-47). It is entirely possible to extend this formulation to the meanwhile commodity, which recruits the meanwhile selves to underwrite itself. The copyright doctrine behind this recruitment drive, can only be interpreted in absentia. Instead of claiming exclusive rights over a commodity that is publicised by large-scale capital flows and publicity budgets, this other doctrine puts out there in the market a narrative package that must *recruit witnesses to go fully public*. Its publicness does not come prior to its existence. Instead of mobilizing large capital as the Bollywood enterprise does, the vernacular commodity and industries only go public in the meanwhile – at the cusp of modest visibility and tentative subjectivities. They are aggregated in the supreme present that archives itself, as it goes on, within the meanwhile. Unlike the institutional archives, it is not the past and its multiple narrations that are excavated from the ‘proper commodity’ in this act of archiving. The meanwhile commodity archives itself in the present for the present. This archive provides no privileged vantage points into the past; it is always in the realm of the contemporary. As a recruit of such commodities though, the meanwhile self remains in flux; it finds within the commodity an anchor that helps it navigate the uncertain turbulence of the temporality they cohabit. It is important to understand that within a universe that grants only tentative rights to space within the changing ecology of urban India, temporal dimension comes to bear an amplified gravitas. The hardware and software of the meanwhile commodities, in spite of the breakdowns, allow the vernacular publics to adjust and synchronise themselves with the world around them.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that there is a need to move away from the high-gradient explanations of pirate practices towards more low-gradient ones. This is partly on account of the fact that the vernacular media commodity entered the Indian markets via an alliance between the international media hardware and provincial media software. This crucial split within the technological entity and the resultant insertion of a vernacular soul – indicative of the provincialising imperative – has been instrumental in the rise of vernacular media. But we also need to understand that the high-gradient iniquitous origins of pirate practices always gradually move towards more mundane low-gradient distinctions. In order to grapple with the latter, then, I suggested that we should focus upon an entangled web of suboptimal transactions where legality itself often remains indistinguishable from its

counterpart. Internally, however, the counterfeit products regulate the commercial value of the legitimate ones. I also discussed the data downloading practice and ‘Chinese mobile’ handsets that currently form the mainstay of the technological apparatus through which most of the vernacular media content is accessed. Briefly discussing the history of its evolution, I argue that we may benefit from conceptualising these as meanwhile technologies that offer techniques to update the mode of access, strategies contingent to the indefinite present. Once we look at bulk data downloading in this way, the pile of assorted content transferred onto cheap smartphones begins to make sense. In this vast ‘otherwise’ economy, every media entity remains undistinguished from another. Together, they form the debris that fills the void of the meanwhile.

Within this meanwhile, we do not find the competitive arrangement of distributive windows that must come one after another in order to squeeze out maximum capital returns. The windows are spatially arranged to support the various suboptimal channels feeding into the meanwhile. Investigating further the relationship between the commodity and the self within this meanwhile, I have argued that the transactions with various meanwhile commodities provides a model for the meanwhile self. The tentative rights to the self as property here compromise the firmness of stable property rights exercised by the self over the commodity elsewhere. The copyright regime seeks to produce, via the commodity, the modern self that relates to itself via its sovereignty over the commodity. But in the vernacular media trade, the meanwhile self and the commodity both remain in a temporal flux, unable to fully regulate the other, or substantiate the self via the other. They recruit each other to achieve the desired publicness, and leave for us to investigate the archival footprint of the meanwhile. It may then be suggested that the suboptimal pile of the vernacular ‘data’ is downloaded into the meanwhile. While we have analysed in detail the economy that lays out the distinctive textual features of this data in other chapters, we must not overlook the ‘otherwise’ economy in which the data is not laid out horizontally, but vertically – as an assorted pile pressing upon the meanwhile.

## Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will recount some of the key arguments from earlier chapters before considering the further scope of this research. In revisiting the conclusions of our discussion up to this point, I would also like to consider the possible interpretations not fully drawn out in earlier chapters. In the process, I shall also seek to re-aggregate the research object of this thesis, not merely as drawn out from the chapters, but as it sits within the broader force field the chapters have sought to account for. The idea is not only to explain what Bhojpuri media is, but also to establish what it ‘does’ within its historical, material constraints. Its province is that realm which shapes the Bhojpuri universe and is also shaped by it. The effects of the Bhojpuri media practices are then first absorbed by this provincial plane which I have tried to make familiar.

The chapters of this thesis are broadly delineated along the following axes – discourse, text, language, gender and space, and piracy. The discussion of Bhojpuri cinema in particular, and vernacular media in general, revolves around each of these in respective chapters where historical and theoretical insights are drawn towards an argument. The first part of the thesis leans towards the descriptive imperative while the second part deploys the strength of the descriptive richness – of plain facts, texts and discourses – towards more analytical pursuits. But seen in another way, all the chapters work towards establishing a range of contestations (cultural versus economic valuation of the media commodity, staged binary between tradition and modernity, the cosmopolitan and vernacular belonging etc.) that are carefully negotiated within the Bhojpuri media practice. The empirical layout of the historical contemporaneity is thus navigated as the personnel, industries or proprietors of key infrastructural resources make strategic choices. To interpret these within the tidy but simplistic framework of ‘subversion versus resistance’ would be to overdetermine a much more open-ended process. It would also be a mistake to put too much analytical burden upon the contemporary moment. In each of the chapters, whether on language, gender or pirate practices, I have showed that there exists a rich history of sustained contestations out of which the prevalent practices emerge. To an extent, vital to the shape of the contemporary moment, which I identify as ‘Provincialising Bollywood’, is the convergence of several technological, economic, architectural and political shifts that I have studied. The provincialising imperative is not born autonomously, or on account of only one dominant tendency, but via the resonance across contexts of which the cumulative force-field is a resultant effect.

In the first part of this thesis, I drew upon my ethnographic observations and interviews with certain observers native to the BSR, to establish that even as the Bhojpuri media practices operate within an ‘invisible’ channel, the fact that they could represent the cultural repertoire of the region draws strong emotions. The media industry becomes for a vast multitude of people across classes, a window of opportunity. But at the same time, to the extent that this window provides the means to overcome the moral framework by which ideologies of culture are regulated, it upsets those who otherwise have little stake in it. The thorny issue, therefore, remains the representative totality of an industry that is but a symptom of the cracks within the social composition. Crucial to this becomes the language by deploying which a low-budget film industry threatens to destabilise the community specific narratives of the regional ‘essence’. This is consistent with, as I discuss in Chapter 4, the pre-eminence of language in providing the basis upon which to imagine the region. Bhojpuri media destabilises the nostalgic purity of the elite imagination by threatening to represent the BSR *otherwise*. Its emergence offers alternative means by which the region could be seen from the outside as well as the inside. It is this possible revision that threatens the prevailing social order that remains firmly within the grip of the cultural elites.

At this point, it might be useful to recount certain observations from the BSR. As I roamed across Patna, Siwan, Sasaram and the small towns of western Bihar, I was indeed struck by the manner in which large compounds of public and private property are cordoned off. Extremely high boundary walls that one encounters while moving along the roads compel the observer to take note of large properties that shun visibility to the public eye, even as they occupy a disproportionate share of space within the city. The tendency of the upper and middle class, or the landed elite, to dictate terms without participating on equal terms with ‘the people’ becomes apparent. The traffic too becomes a symptom of the stubborn insensitivity towards ‘others’, as merciless honking by cars and motorbikes affirms. On the roads of these towns, a cycle-rickshaw, a motorbike, a bicycle, a shared auto and a car – all negotiate one another even as they negotiate speed, infrastructure and time. Increasingly, the middle class citizens try to withdraw from this messy public order into private confines, while the non-elite populations are left to negotiate one another. The growing dispensable incomes have increasingly provided the means to withdraw and have resulted in substantial alienation. The more one is alienated from one’s surroundings, the stronger the threat perception towards any changes in the ecology one inhabits. The Bhojpuri media enterprise also amplifies this threat to those who are otherwise alienated from the everyday, in proportion to their alienation. The fiercest criticism I witnessed indeed came

from the people who were the most ‘protected’ – perfectly cordoned off – widely respected Brahmin ‘acharyas’ who taught classical music and other subjects, as well as the corporate professionals whose surroundings never intersected with subaltern geographies. The media markets discussed in Chapter 6, or the rundown theatres discussed in Chapter 5, do not coincide with the mind-maps of either the traditional or corporate elites. McCain (2012), in her work on Nigerian cinema, has come across similar patterns of indifference across otherwise intimate geographies.

It is the traditional landed elite, however, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, whom the Bhojpuri film-texts seek to reform, but without disturbing the social order fundamentally. We, the audience of Bhojpuri cinema, are thus persuaded to believe that the arrogant dust of the feudal order can be wiped clean by the subaltern male-star who awakens the moral subconscious of the traditional elite. Only in later films, as action begins to take over and the urban order becomes the focus instead of its rural counterpart, villains beyond redemption emerge as the foremost rivals of the male star. In these films, then, the male star’s own family symbolises the traditional elite from which the star gets estranged before they are reformed. In my assessment, this partly goes on to show what I suggest in Chapter 5 – that in spite of the spatial continuity across B/C circuit films and Bhojpuri cinema, the *latent* desire of the latter remains to appeal to the social order that shows nothing but disdain for it. This affirmation of the existing social order works not only along the axis of class, but also gender. It is only in the exceptional narrative position that the male star occupies that the idea of public as well as private women is collapsed. The male star does not in any way threaten the segregation between public and private women – the former being the bearer of collective desire outside the familial order, while the latter, a bearer of collective familial morality. It is only the taming of the female protagonist that allows the doubling: the private woman also performing the duty of providing the voyeuristic pleasure, otherwise an attribute of the public woman. The act of taming is co-constitutive of the overall thrust for reformation without demanding any substantial change.

This should alert us to the vocabulary of pleasure within Bhojpuri cinema. As my discussion of vulgarity in Chapter 3 suggests, the key sites for the encoding of pleasure would be stardom and verbal pleasure. Visual pleasure, here, is coded in two types of gaze: i) the voyeuristic gaze towards the representation of the female body, and ii) the fetishistic gaze towards the male star (Neale 1983, Mulvey 1975). While the former appears only intermittently to append to the primary sites of pleasure, the latter is integral to the primary mode of pleasure. The uncurious fetish towards the male star, however, is regulated by the

most significant attribute of Bhojpuri cinema: *verbal pleasure*. The confrontational staging of verbal challenges that the male star poses helps the audience navigate across the film-text. The songs form another constellation within this film-text where the voyeuristic gaze and the singing voice come to the foreground. Yet, gradually, we have observed the rise of rapid editing and other special effects that reinforce visuality and amplify the visual pleasure. In the last decade, the image output has also gradually improved towards sharper images, better colours and sophisticated framing. The materiality of the image, therefore, no longer suffers from the extent of inferiority as opposed to Hindi cinema as it did earlier. I must concede, though, that within this dynamic matrix of the visual and verbal, the voyeuristic and fetishistic pleasures, it remains difficult to pinpoint the primary, secondary and tertiary formulations. This is partly on account of the empirical difficulty to assess the proportions within an unregulated industry, which does not produce any clear data footprint. Even an assessment of a vast number of texts, or that of the qualitatively dominant texts, does not allow the researcher a firm grip on different orders of engagement. The best we can do, then, is identifying the layers of encoding that could be made visible via empirical as well as critical theoretical means. Another factor I would revisit, as a note of caution, is the polarity between the image and the narrative with respect to female characters. While the image may intermittently offer the voyeuristic pleasures, the narrative could give the female characters a stage to deliver a counter-narrative, such as in *Nirahua*... discussed in Chapter 3. Instead of gauging how one measures up against another, I only wish to underline the rhetorical verbal charge that is often deployed to offset the power of the voyeuristic visuality.

Yet, I have also argued that the text is not the only site of pleasure. The politics of language, the historical construction of gender and space within the leisure economy, and the plethora of activities that make up the ‘otherwise’ economy of suboptimal transactions – all collectively hold together the realm in which the media-text holds a pre-eminent position. Pleasure, however, remains encoded in each socio-historical formulation that is able to turn a page via the media-text. For instance, the fact that a film in Bhojpuri language – widely considered to be a mere dialect of Hindi – occupies the same theatre that once screened only Hindi films itself produces a specific sort of pleasure. As does the fact that an entire Bhojpuri film can be stored within a mobile phone, and one can watch it as one sits awkwardly within a cramped railway carriage. Without attending to these adjacent regimes of pleasure, we cannot fully grasp the idea of pleasure within the Bhojpuri media industry. Also, the film itself sits here, as I have shown in Chapter 3, within a vast transmedia economy. The film theatre, the VCD/DVD, the mobile phone, and the live

concert stage are the key sites of this economy where the audience encounters the media experience. It is through a careful investigation of these sites that the overall sense of the Bhojpuri media has been aggregated. In my assessment across these sites, stardom remains the primary currency of the economy. The male star in particular, but celebrities in general – including singers, lyricists, producers and directors – have become the primary identifiers, the pre-eminent signs of the Bhojpuri media economy. As I have discussed, the male star acquires part of his aura by the virtue of the binary that media-texts stage between tradition and modernity, but also by taming as the subaltern native the potential moral ‘deviance’ of the urban woman. The ‘rebellious’ yet ‘cultured’ masculinity is what sustains the male celebrity within the economy. Having said that, predictably, in a largely unregulated and unorganised industry, very few celebrities gain sufficient acceptability. It is the stranglehold of their celebrity that heavily weighs down upon the economic viability of the industry, yet continues to remain a strategic commodity. Therefore, it is by purchasing, or trading in the exchange value of, this celebrity quotient that the realm of politics and local business – key among them businesses that hold strategic land titles – display their power. Male stars have thus become key assets not only within the transmedia economy, but much beyond it. The BSR remains the most vital arena for these alliances, and the ‘Bombay capital’, as discussed in Chapter 2, ratifies their disproportionate power.

Therefore, even as we study the thrust towards Bhojpuri media as a provincialising imperative, its interest and impact is by no means confined to the provinces. Provincialising here is indicative of *restoring* the command within certain strategic assets of the province, but indeed that reorientation is routed via its hegemonic counterpart. Provincialising also remains an ongoing process – the label deployed to identify a set of forces acting upon the culture industry of Bollywood. The process has neither reached the end, nor has it claimed sufficient ground. As I discussed in Chapter 2, however, the provincial force has not only been acknowledged by Bollywood, the latter has also absorbed it to consolidate some lost territory and offer itself *as* ‘vernacular modernism’ akin to Hansen’s assessment of Hollywood (1999). Therefore, we witness a battle unfold between i) the hegemonic force repackaging itself as vernacular as well as cosmopolitan and ii) the vernacular force packaging itself in the hegemonic mold but to exceed the vernacular net. The province too must locate itself on this battlefield dynamically, for there is no static location possible on a map with shifting boundaries. A more fundamental doubt remains whether the provincialising imperative is only expanding the catchment area of investible surpluses. Once we begin to see vernacularisation as a recoil effect waiting to be subsumed under the prowess of corporate capital, we are confronted by the possibility that

the distinctiveness of the provincial may soon be reduced to a genre within. The unorganised mode of production in the vernacular industries may therefore be taken over and organised by corporate finance. Not only would this enrich the bouquet of the production houses, but it would also mean a steady supply of capital flow into the industry and reconfigure it on terms similar to Bollywoodisation (Rajadhyaksha 2003). I raise this possibility not to undermine the present, but to alert us to the disproportionate power large capital holds within any culture industry, as also suggested by the examples of media industries from across the world.

It cannot be overlooked, at the same time, that it is not the film industry, but the vast music industry and numerous live concerts that drive the Bhojpuri media production. Controlled as the film industry is by a handful of distributors, it does not open the wide array of opportunities that inspire the multitudes to participate. This is why the aural economy of Bhojpuri media must take precedence even in our broader analysis. The film industry, as an audiovisual constellation, came into being as an *effect* of this aural economy that gradually settled into a visual vocabulary. The unregulated infinitude of aural diversity shapes a peculiar sort of sonic modernity. It is aurality that led the Bhojpuri audiences into the technological habitus which then demanded its corresponding visual footprint. Even as the visual stabilised itself in relation to the advertorial, televisual and cinematic images of more mainstream variety, aurality continues to lead the Bhojpuri public sphere into new entrepreneurial vistas of sonic modernity. This indeed resonates with the landmark ideas of Attali (2014) who singled music out as a *predictive* social science. In Attali's terms, music as a force that organises noise, is always ahead of its times and anticipates the arrival of new values, ideas and rhythms. As an immaterial activity, it explores more rapidly than any other realm of potentials. The sonic modernity that arrived via the audiocassettes in the vernacular media did not experiment with the character of sound as much as with lyrics and ideas. The early tendency was to reproduce older compositions modeled on the collective folk repertoire of music, thus rendering new ideas in old idioms. Only gradually did the sound change remarkably and sought mixing with idioms from outside the vernacular repertoire. In the now incumbent sonic modernity, music has become a nomadic object, as Attali predicted. But most significantly, it is marked by one of his seven possible evolutions of modernity – *ethnomodernity* – ‘a rise of identity-related tensions and a desire to turn inward and close borders’ (ibid.). This alliance between localism and music, as Attali points out, is a growing phenomenon across the world.



At least in the case of the Bhojpuri sonic modernity, but also across the vernacularising north India, this localism is a result of two crucial simultaneities: i) the hegemonic form turns outwards and begins to blend into the thin layer of globalisation dominated by large capital, and ii) the local, earlier tentatively engaged with this hegemonic form, is left to itself. The alliance between localism and music emerges because of the immaterial form of music, the low threshold of entry-level capital investment, and the possibility of constructing its own plane of projection, which could *regulate the social hierarchies within a modern framework*. Stardom, therefore, does to entrepreneurial ambitions and communitarian restrictions (of caste, gender etc.), what music does to noise. It provides, or at least promises, a modern system of regulating, organising and reconfiguring hierarchies. This promise of stardom has made it a remarkable channel of escaping unchanging social straightjackets. But precisely because of this, older hierarchies also continue to hijack this channel, or legitimise and reinforce themselves via the channel of stardom, so as to occupy the traditional as well as the modern bracket – competing temporalities that find themselves in a complicated tangle within Bhojpuri media narratives. Having said that, stardom itself depends here on strategic coalitions. It is not as much a product of certain inherent properties of the star as that of a crucial chain of endorsements. This is where the irony lies, then. *In spite of the promise of stardom being a way of escaping unrelenting hierarchies, it is often via coalescing with one's identitarian community (region and caste being the most dominant of these attributes) that one's aspiration to stardom is realised.*

The idea of stardom here is not one ratified by the internal architecture of show business and the press coverage around it. The very event of finding space within an autonomous modern frame – the screen or an album cover or a magazine – can distance the subject from its social universe, so as to reveal its embedded star-quotient to the society.

Throughout my fieldwork, I came across young men of both kinds: those who were beginning to realise their aspirations to stardom – as a singer-performer of varying success – via region or caste specific communities as well as those claiming a more independent trajectory. But in a longer conversation, each of them would go on to reveal the insurmountability of a largely coalitional mode of existence. It never ceased to strike me that for years artists have offered their talent and resources without any significant remuneration. The aspirations to celebrity may be widespread across the media industries of the world, but it is the absence of even partial acknowledgement of creative labour that needs to be understood better. I would suggest that such practices continue because the disacknowledgement of creative labour is key to conceptualising labour as desire. This allows low-budget media industries to divest the labouring subject of rights over its

corporeality. It is by drawing the subject out of its labouring subjectivity that they re-produce and crystallise the media industry as a relatively autonomous sphere, possessing significant purchase over the social. The subject that moves across these spheres is marked by its will to *adjust* within the media industry, claiming only partial entitlement. The provincialising imperative is clearly ridden with this compromised aspiration to adjust and rebuild with the leftovers instead of reclaiming in full. This is partly because of the long memory within the BSR of its own economic and political marginality. The scars of contemptuous treatment meted out to the region have compelled it into a coalitional compromise, which means that rights are demanded not by individuals, but by social clusters. Subjugated communities forced into submission seek strategic political patronage on the ground, and rhetorical patronage by the star-image. As they go through cycles of demolition and displacement, richly explored by Sharma's documentary *Bidesia...*, they learn to repeatedly rebuild with the leftovers. It is this tendency to rebuild the demolished, and find one's space within the cracks of a crumbling infrastructure that defines the *artisanal mode of production* that dominates the Bhojpuri media industry.

Now, I would also like to speculate on certain larger questions and offer possible responses. One of the concerns that I keep returning to is what this explosion of media events does to the proportion of media experience within the everyday. In an atmosphere saturated with event-ness, is there a point beyond which one actually begins to see the lived reality through, and in terms of, the media experience? How else are we to assess the multitudes that view a live concert while video recording it? As a node between two mobile phones – one playing the song over which a dancer performs live, and another recording it – how does one bear witness *as* a human subject? When the media begin to produce a multiplicative constellation around the subject, how does it alter the subjective ability to regulate this media experience? Also, what is the place of cinema within this multiplicative constellation? Does it remain the pre-eminent media form or have its splinters – clips, music albums, posters, mp3s – begun to take over? Even though I began my enquiry on behalf of cinema, the bulk of my answers have alerted us to the shifting balance.

Second, how do we grapple with the out-of-tune singing voice? It becomes increasingly difficult to treat it as an aberration when its omnipresence within the Bhojpuri media invites us to investigate its alternative aesthetics. Can we possibly argue that its imperfection is indicative of its absorption of the noise around it? Is it indicative of the insufficiency of the regime it represents to organise the noise within and without? Music

must not only organise noise, but also prevail over its ambient noise. As we have seen in this study, the tangled web of social relations in the Bhojpuri media universe produces deafening sonic excess. Could it be argued that the imperfect, tuneless voice of Bhojpuri music albums is textured with the wrinkles of this sonic excess? At the same time, it could be said that the sonic texture of global modernity renders such metallic quality to the voices that we hear not the singing subject as much as the recording technologies themselves. The vernacular music erupts out of this sophistication, protesting the erasure of the voice, and by extension, the subject.

Third, let me add the dimension of autoethnography here. I write this thesis in Glasgow, Scotland. Bollywood, in this part of the world, is an autonomous constellation of entertainment. Its connection with India is akin to that of the British Indian food. One can note the tentative resemblance across signs without bothering much about substantive connections. The intelligibility of Bollywood is significant; Bollywood dancing too seems rather popular among a certain section. Given Bollywood's own infrequent interest in the Scottish landscape and built architecture, it is also seen as a feeder service into the tourist economy of Scotland. Bollywood, therefore, uses Scotland as a backdrop, while Scotland aspires to use Bollywood itself as a backdrop for tourism. None of this tentative engagement seems to bother about the materiality of life in India or South Asia. The transmission losses registered within the Bollywood image are further amplified in this multiplicative interplay of signs. Where do I as an Indian, as a 'legitimate' arbiter of these inert materialities, stand? Do I retain any power to disqualify 'inauthentic' signs in an intercourse with each other? More significantly, does this intercourse not determine how I get assessed amidst these foreign locales? To be fair, the exoticisation of Bollywood here makes me uncomfortable, partly on account of my helplessness to address it, but more so because of the ease with which it acquires a representative capacity. This discomfort resonates perfectly with the frustration that Bhojpuri media causes within the BSR among a section of the population. It is only when I arrive at the Bhojpuri question via my autoethnographic sentiments that I am confronted by the ease with which the mass media often bypass existing systems of elementary ratification.

Finally, among the many limitations of this thesis, one may be that it has been unable to sufficiently elaborate upon the Bhojpuri *sanskara*. Even as we identify its many characteristics and its boundary conditions, we cannot quite elucidate with any degree of confidence its definitive internal substance. What could be reiterated here is that this *sanskara* is not an attribute of the region and language that merely finds expression within a

media. The media is integral to the shaping of the *sanskar*; it is constitutive of the latter. This is why we cannot go too far back in time in the search of this *sanskar*. It is my understanding that the prevailing Bhojpuri *sanskar* is neither traceable to the itinerant performers of *bidesiya* parties, nor to the idioms of speech used by relatives at home. The sonic modernity that arrived with the vernacular audiocassettes blended the linguistic intimacy with a technology that offered the pleasure of bridging distances. The disembodied aural mode of address produced by the audiocassette carried forward the performative aesthetic of the stage, but it replaced the ‘statist’ address of the radio. This fusion of a peculiarly disembodied intimacy first found acceptance on the street corners, in the *bazaars*, and within the spheres of predominantly masculine community. The late 1980s was also the time when, simultaneously, television was entering the middle class households. Interestingly, the mode of address deployed by the state-owned *Doordarshan* – the only television channel till the mid-1990s – was strictly statist. As new technologies must cut through ideological imaginaries of ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms to find their acceptable locus, television expressed its solidarity with domesticity while the tape recorder found favours outside.

The Bhojpuri *sanskar*, then, took shape on the same ‘open edge of mass publicity’ which had long been the domain of cinematic pleasures – not quite illicit, but morally suspect (Mazzarella 2013). The resources it drew upon ranged from the vast repertoire of folk music and colloquial witticisms to Hindi cinema and the traces of global popular culture. Yet, the journey of the Bhojpuri media *sanskar* – from cassettes to disks and theatres, or from aural to audiovisual – has primarily been a journey across disembodied and bodily intimacies. It has been led by a sonic modernity compelled to offer its visual footprint while still in the process of acquiring a stable aurality. This slippage between the aural and the visual, and its own historic journey across time in other cultural contexts, would have to be investigated in relation to the vernacularisation of north India, so as to further build upon this study. Having said that, it is in cinema that the aural and the visual often become fully synchronous, lending power to the other instead of battling over limited resources; yet, the brief history of the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema is a history of their unstable relationality. The pre-eminent site of the reconciliation between the aural and the visual remains the body. The paradigmatic shift brought in by the third phase of Bhojpuri cinema was its imagination of Bhojpuri corporeality across the dramatic spectrum. It is on behalf of this corporeality that the disembodied vernacularity made a gradual transition to the bodily one. Cinema provided the means by which to account for the Bhojpuri society via its corporeality. To the practices of sound recording, it appended the visual dimension in

narrative. As Sterne (2003) argues, sound recording ‘does not preserve a preexisting sonic event as it happens so much as it creates and organizes sonic events for the possibility of preservation and repetition’ (332). This preservatory and repetitive impetus, when extended to visual narratives, compels societies to rediscover and reconcile with their pasts and futures. It puts an extraordinary burden upon the contemporary moment. The earlier phases of Bhojpuri cinema did not acquire the scale necessary for such a reconciliation. In this study, we have seen the representative Bhojpuri corporeality struggle to come to terms with itself. Whether as a voice or as an action-image, the corporeality remains cluttered, asynchronous, restless and intermittent. In trying to overcome the vast range of contestations and manoeuvres I have explored here, the Bhojpuri media absorbs several unwanted properties. As we have also noted, the Bhojpuri corporeality, instead of reconciling, has instead offered a case for its exceptionality, even though the basis of that exception is drawn from its corresponding hegemon – Bollywood. The discomfort and clutter results from the contradictory desire to *represent via alienation* – to be intimate to the corporeality, yet not so much as to collapse the imaginative distance that lends its charm to cinematic pleasure. As we go further, I reckon that the vernacular voice would continue to anchor the native intimacy, while the visual constellation would desperately match steps with the adjacent cultural configurations. The media-texts therefore would continue to bear the burden of fierce contestations between opposing force fields that only stardom can negotiate effortlessly.

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