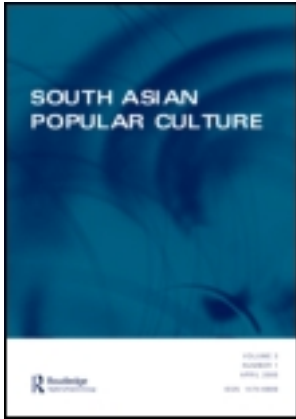


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Mediating *Bhojpuriya*: Migration, circulation, and Bhojpuri cinema

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Although often described as a rural dialect of Modern Standard Hindi, in the last five years Bhojpuri has emerged as the language for a new cinema industry, complete with superstars, superhits, and media speculation about the particular ‘rural values’ that have catapulted the industry into success. But despite Bhojpuri’s reputation as a ‘rustic’ way of speaking, Bhojpuri cinema critically inhabits both urban and rural spaces. While Bhojpuri speakers generally consider Bihar and Uttar Pradesh their homeland, millions have migrated into urban centers seeking work, and the films’ modes of production, narrative themes, and distribution have followed them from Bihar to Mumbai. Understanding these films solely in terms of ‘rural values’ thus dismisses the interplay between city and countryside that gives meaning to ‘ruralness’ in the first place. This article traces the movement of capital, people, and films along the Bhojpuri cultural circuit, illuminating how rural and urban identities, technologies, and audiences constitute one another.

In early 2006, I was exposed to Bhojpuri audiovisual media for the first time, in the city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. A group of female friends – all sisters, aunts and cousins – showed me a VCD of individual, standalone songs accompanied by choreographed dances, entitled *Namaste, Yadavji (Hello, Mr. Yadav)*, dir. Ram Sevak Yadav, 2007). This type of cheaply-produced music video collection, called an ‘album,’ is popular in many North Indian languages.¹ My friends were especially taken with the title song, which explicitly invoked their own caste, not only in its title and lyrics, but also in the visuals depicting the traditional Yadav occupation of cow- and buffalo-keeping. The song was set to up-tempo music with a risqué undercurrent in the lyrics, emphasizing the desirability of the Yadav men depicted.

In the video, men danced in somewhat informal unison, holding milk pails on their heads, dressed in regionally specific *lungis* and *gamchhas* – utilitarian multi-purpose cotton cloths that can be rolled up and used as headgear, or slung over a shoulder to have at hand during a day of work. These men were shown on a packed dirt plaza accompanied by brightly dressed and slightly scantily clad women. These motifs – milk pails, dirt floors, explicitly ‘rural’ attire, and dairy animals – had been growing scarcer in mainstream commercial Hindi cinema, or Bollywood,² for the last decade or two. This short music video in Bhojpuri visually worked to celebrate village life in the Purvanchal region of north India in a way that was quite different from Bollywood films that increasingly locate their customers and protagonists geographically (and often thematically) far away in the United States, the UK, or Canada.³ But Bhojpuri media – especially filmic media – cannot

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be understood as a simple celebration of pastoral village nostalgia. In fact, music videos like *Namaste, Yadavji* are accompanied by other videos like *Jeanswali Collegewali* (*The College Girl in Jeans*) and *Missed Call Mareli* (*She Sent A Missed Call*),⁴ both of which depict young men in a campus-like settings, wearing jeans and t-shirts and chasing after a young woman and her friends, who are all similarly attired. Bhojpuri – which is nearly always described as a rural dialect with little official status by most of my informants, speakers and outsiders alike – has a cinematic scope that exceeds and challenges the rural category into which it is placed.⁵

Language and dialect

To understand the contingencies of the Bhojpuri filmic space, it is necessary first to understand some of the contingencies of the Bhojpuri language. Bhojpuri is most often considered a dialect of Hindi, originating in the Purvanchal region of western Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and other small sections in surrounding states. It is not a standardized language – it is highly regionalized, with speech patterns changing, as the saying goes, every nine *kos* (about every 18 miles).⁶

Bhojpuri occupies a particular place in its speakers' linguistic repertoires, which usually also include Modern Standard Hindi, often called *khari bhasha* ('standing language') by Bhojpuri speakers. Bhojpuri is usually described by its speakers as a *mithi bhasha* – a 'sweet language' that is soothing to hear and comfortable to use. Speakers often emphasize its informality as one of its chief positive attributes. I quote from a comment made by a girl who lives most of the time near Delhi, where she goes to high school, but had travelled to rural Azamgarh district, Uttar Pradesh, to attend a family wedding:

When we're in school, or talking to someone important, or someone who just doesn't speak Bhojpuri, we speak *khari bhasha* . . . it's formal. When we come here [i.e., back to the village in Azamgarh] we speak Bhojpuri, because it's what we grew up speaking. It's easy. We just start speaking it when we get back here. We didn't learn it. It's a natural language. *Khari bhasha* is not natural; you have to learn it. We know it, but it is not a natural language. (Singh)

Bhojpuri is often devalued in popular culture, not least in mainstream Hindi cinema, as low-class, backwards, and provincial.⁷ Even the abovementioned speaker's appreciation for Bhojpuri's informality and naturalness is tempered with a constant comparison with Modern Standard Hindi as the *de facto* language of the economic, educational, and political sphere. Other speakers are quick to point out what they see as an ineluctable shift from the ease and naturalness of Bhojpuri to the constraint and formality of Hindi, to that most cosmopolitan and learned of languages, English – simply because of the lack of opportunities that a knowledge of Bhojpuri brings. And for everyone interviewed, knowledge of *only* Bhojpuri is a sign of lack of education and general lack of worldliness. Others, even those who exclusively speak Bhojpuri at home, call the language *dehaati* – a word used pejoratively to mean 'rustic.' It is in this milieu of ambivalence surrounding Bhojpuri that the Bhojpuri film industry began to thrive.

However, despite Bhojpuri's reputation as a 'rustic' way of speaking, Bhojpuri cinema critically inhabits urban spaces with at least as much importance as it does rural spaces, complicating both. Tracing the circulation of capital, people, and films on the Bhojpuri cultural circuit illuminates the ways in which rural and urban identities, technologies, and publics work to constitute one another. In this article, I seek to explore the ways in which Bhojpuri cinema is not a rural phenomenon but a set of cultural products and practices which constitute Bhojpuri's imagined 'ruralness' by marking out a complex social and

filmic space opposed to, entwined with, and inside the 'urban.' This space is made available through the circulation of people (through migration) and images (through the film industry). As this film industry expands in scope and influence, films are constrained by what the audience of Bhojpuri speakers will accept (or, more accurately, by what its producers believe its audience will accept). Simultaneously, what it means to be a Bhojpuri speaker is reconstituted and contested through these films, and through the public discussions they engender, as they reconfigure a new kind of Bhojpuri imaginary.

Media circulation and labor migration: Landscapes of Bhojpuri cinema

In describing the new landscapes engendered by global modernity, Arjun Appadurai writes of a situation that is familiar to any Bhojpuri speaker, as well as to Bhojpuri film producers:

Deterritorialization, in general, is one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies, while sometimes creating exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home state. . . . At the same time, deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies . . . which thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland. (Appadurai 37–38)

The space of the Bhojpuri imaginary has long been constituted, in part, by realities of movement: migration undertaken by choice or by force, shifting populations of Bhojpuri speakers far from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In the nineteenth century, this movement largely consisted of labor migration to such far-flung colonial locales as Trinidad, Mauritius, and Guyana, among many others, where the new migrants were mostly indentured laborers on sugar plantations.⁸ This massive migration certainly informed Bhojpuri cultural production such as *nautanki* (plays) and songs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which dealt directly with themes of loss of the *pardesi* – the migrant – who rarely returned even after the period of indenture was over (B. Tiwari 12). Echoes of these themes can be found in contemporary Bhojpuri media, which is not to claim that twenty-first century Bhojpuri film borrows directly from nineteenth-century folk songs (though this may be true). Instead, this history makes themes of movement, loss, and forced migration due to economic necessity socially available as part of a Bhojpuri cultural inheritance which can be seen as authentic by its consumers and producers alike.

Furthermore, the movement of Bhojpuri cinema and Bhojpuri-speaking people has not let up in the twenty-first century, as internal labor migration to urban areas increasingly defines the chances for success in Bhojpuri-speaking areas in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Usually this movement is tied to economic necessity due to the 'depressed' nature of the region:

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. (Tripathy 147)

But migration cannot be seen as just a negative sign of economic backwardness. In addition, it can also signal educational opportunities elsewhere (viewed by many as positive) and the ability to partake in the pleasures of urban life – and, not surprisingly, both of these aspects are amply depicted in Bhojpuri films. Even if widespread migration sociologically indicates a lack of opportunities in the home region, the experience of migration is often ambivalent – simultaneously full of homesickness and the pleasures of

urban consumerism that become available to migrants.⁹ The ambivalent situation is that of the modernity Appadurai describes, in which ‘the plurality of imagined worlds’ constitute what he calls ‘global cultural flows’ (Appadurai 5). Most important for understanding Bhojpuri cultural practices are those flows that he calls *ethnoscapes* and *mediascapes*: ethnoscapes consist of ‘tourists, immigrants, refugees . . . and other moving groups and individuals,’ while mediascapes are landscapes of images which provide ‘large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world’ (Appadurai 35). These landscapes do not occupy simple categories but rather exceed their boundaries, illuminating new ways that meaning is produced in the modern world.

Here, Bhojpuri speaking people and Bhojpuri media both exceed the boundaries of the rural, ‘depressed’ area, and are imbricated in ethnoscapes and mediascapes which trace circuitry between the city and the countryside. In English language newspapers, however, the Bhojpuri film industry was depicted as just one more example of how film producers find new markets to satisfy and exploit – an economically determined account of how Bhojpuri film works.

Making it big in Bhojpuri: News analysis of the ‘Bhojpuri Phenomenon’

Bhojpuri cinema began to garner attention from the popular press in 2005, when a cheaply produced Bhojpuri film, *Sasura Bada Paisawala* (*My Rich Father-in-Law*, dir. Ajay Sinha, 2004), had had a much higher box office take in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar than the reigning mainstream Hindi film of that time, *Bunty aur Babli* (*Bunty and Babli*, dir. Shaad Ali, 2005):

From Bihar to Mumbai, from Madhya Pradesh to Punjab, . . . ‘Sasura . . .’ has smashed all box office records. Vouches the film’s Delhi distributor, Jogendra Mahajan, ‘This film was made for only about Rs. 40 lakhs and has done a business of over Rs. 2 crores.’ He is not exaggerating. At a time when Hindi films are increasingly dubbed as a hit after a two-week run, ‘Sasura . . .’ completed its golden jubilee in Kanpur, Lucknow and Lakhimpur. (Us Salam)

The tone of the Indian English language popular news media was incredulous, and focused on the record-shattering profits of the nascent industry. The BBC and *The New York Times* later ran stories on what was described as the ‘Bhojpuri phenomenon,’ depicting this regional cinema as a challenge to Bollywood cinema’s cultural and economic hegemony over the entire filmgoing nation, while simultaneously stressing that the Bhojpuri film audience was circumscribed by linguistic difference, relatively low income, and the geographic area of the so-called ‘cow belt’ of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Chopra; Tewary). While news articles around that time were impressed with the new economic clout of this little known regional cinema, there was very little discussion of the content of this revitalized media form. The narrative was instead focused on the economic and material success of the films:

Bollywood is having to take a backseat as the hitherto little-known regional Bhojpuri film industry steals the show in India. The industry . . . is raking in cash like never before. Sticking to home-grown Indian family melodramas and throwing in some glamorous faces and slick foreign locations for a contemporary feel, Bhojpuri films are often outperforming Bollywood [films] at the box office these days. (Tewary)

Thus the unexpectedness of Bhojpuri cinema’s rather sudden success was explained away by the ways in which this success was coded: certainly not as the efflorescence of a vibrant but underserved culture, but rather as the logical result of an ignored rural market segment suddenly attracting the notice of media manufacturers, who then rake in the profits. This way of explaining the ‘phenomenon’ of Bhojpuri cinema’s growth is partially

accurate, as many of the producers and actors have become quite wealthy through the production of Bhojpuri cinema. However, limiting our understanding of Bhojpuri cinema to the material motives of its producers obscures the ways that these films are actively consumed in ways that speak to and complicate an emergent Bhojpuri identity.

The Hindu, for instance, referred to the films' 'earthy simplicity' (Us Salam) – both in terms of the films themselves and their publics, one can imagine – and *The New York Times* called them 'basic, homegrown fare' (Chopra). These terms – earthy, homegrown – suggest an unprofessionalized, uncomplicated project whose 'village roots' are set in surprising contrast to the money made by the major actors and producers. It is certainly the case that Bhojpuri films have some of their largest audiences in the rural parts of the Purvanchal, the Bhojpuri-speaking region that straddles Western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, often called the 'cow belt' in English language Indian news media. But the presumed ruralness of this area is produced materially, through relations of circular labor migration to the metropolises and back, as well as cinematically.

Bhojpuri cinema's audience comprises not only the large rural Bhojpuri-speaking public in Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and contiguous regions in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkand, but also includes enormous populations of Bhojpuri-speaking migrants in the metropolises, people who often work as day-laborers – as taxi and rickshaw drivers and in the construction industry – and in low-level positions in various service industries. These migrant workers repeatedly explain their desire to hear the sound of the language that they speak at home, even in the city: though most have left their families behind, often several young men from roughly the same area share a flat or at least spend time together, maintaining a Bhojpuri-speaking sphere in their lives. The demographic makeup of Bhojpuri film audiences in the metropolises seems to be nearly entirely men.¹⁰ These men turn up for Bhojpuri films in droves.

Considering these large-scale, constant movements of people and images in the circuit between city and village – Appadurai's 'flows' of ethnoscaples and mediascaples – it is clear that Bhojpuri cinema must be accounted for as a cultural medium which is situated precisely in the circuits between rural and urban, in the spaces in which rural and urban must be taken as mutually constitutive. These circuits are inscribed in the movements of the Bhojpuri language and its speakers, in the narratives and imagery of the films, and in the processes of their production.

As can be seen from the approving reports on the economics of Bhojpuri film above, the rise of the Bhojpuri film industry in the past decade has been meteoric. Only a few Bhojpuri films were made between 1962, when *Ganga Maiyya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo* (*Mother Ganges, I Will Offer You a Yellow Sari*, dir. Kundan Kumar) was released as the first feature-length Bhojpuri film, and the 1980s, when Bhojpuri cinema enjoyed a brief moment of popularity (Tripathy 149). In 2001, the success of a film entitled *Saiyaan Hamaar* (*My Darling*, dir. Mohanji Prasad) marked the beginning of a deluge of new Bhojpuri films, as the number of films produced grew astronomically every year and easily surpassed the number made in the 1980s (Tripathy 149). *Saiyyan Hamaar* provoked silence from reviewers – in fact, Indian film critics and popular film media such as fan magazines have been largely silent on Bhojpuri cinema. Then the output of Bhojpuri films doubled from 2004 to 2005. Seventy-six Bhojpuri films were produced in 2006, with many of them making back their budgets at the box office ten times over, an unusual amount for any mainstream Bollywood film (Tripathy 145). It was with this wave of economic success that the English language Indian and international press began to report on these films, as we have seen. The first wave of enthusiasm also contained within it a germ of already-wistful cynicism – this filmic phenomenon, so profitable for the early adopters, would see

evaporating capital as soon as it was important enough to be remarked upon by the media. Sanjay Mehta, a Bhojpuri film producer, was reported to note that ‘there is over-exposure. Every week a new release means there is over production, and it might just die a natural death’ (Us Salam). This caution seems to have been at least somewhat warranted, as hundreds of films have been listed as ‘in production’ every year, while less than a hundred were released in 2007 (Gupta). Still, after nearly a decade of continuously increasing success, it can hardly be said that Bhojpuri film has ‘died a natural death.’ How can its success be explained?

Reaching old audiences or constituting new ones?

Two structural changes are often cited to make sense of the success of the current wave of Bhojpuri film. However, while each of these factors clearly correlates with the rise of Bhojpuri cinema, neither, on its own, is sufficient.

First, the increasing number of migrant laborers from Bhojpuri-speaking regions in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to metropolises such as Delhi and Mumbai has certainly created a large urban market for Bhojpuri films, which is often cited as the reason for the industry’s success. Compared to increasingly lavish, expensive Hindi films, the lower production costs associated with Bhojpuri film thus far still demand comparatively low budgets¹¹ and can thus be profitably marketed even at the extremely inexpensive prices that laborers can afford – and given these prices, laborers will fill cinema halls, or at least the cheaper seats.¹² The cinema-going audience is quite divided in metropolises like Mumbai, where a ticket to an air-conditioned theater in a multiplex can cost more than Rs.300, and a ticket to a matinee showing at a single screen theater might cost only Rs.15.¹³ Thus, even if mainstream Bollywood films appeal to Bhojpuri-speaking migrants without much spending power, Bhojpuri films are a much more economical choice in metropolitan areas with increasing numbers of multiplexes. Bollywood films might be consumed instead on VCDs or watched on television, but Bhojpuri films can be easily and cheaply seen in theaters.

Another factor necessary to explain the sudden presence of Bhojpuri media is the set of technological changes that have occurred in the last 10 or so years, as digital media and computer editing have become ubiquitous, radically inexpensive, and fairly easy to access. As Peter Manuel documented in the 1980s with regard to the switch from record players to cassette tapes, when recording and playback technology becomes cheaper, more convenient, and more portable, it is more widely used by different sorts of people. Manuel describes the rise of recording industries in various regional dialects, which, according to him, came about due to the new availability of low-cost audiocassette recording technology. According to Manuel, the success of innovative cassette cultures in such dialects as Garhwali (spoken in the present-day state of Uttarkhand) and Bhojpuri demonstrated that Garhwali and Bhojpuri audiences pre-existed these forms of media – that media attention came in to fill a gap where an audience existed with no media to entertain it. But as authors such as Purnima Mankekar have persuasively argued (47–50), media address itself affects its own audience by depicting, defining, and addressing it in gendered, classed, and otherwise politically marked ways. Thus, the sudden rise of Bhojpuri cinema demonstrates not so much the latent presence of its audience, but is in fact the process of an audience coming into existence. The audience exists only because of the reality of its address through Bhojpuri cinema, and is now shaped by cinematic address as much as the purported desires of the audience shape the content of Bhojpuri films.

Thus, these factors accurately describe only some of what is necessary to explain the great arrival of the Bhojpuri cinema industry, but by themselves are not sufficient. The

common explanation that poor Bhojpuri speakers' recent migration to the cities makes for a ready-made urban audience of cinemagoers who desire a certain sort of inexpensive cinema misses the reality that inexpensive cinema comes in many forms, only one of which is Bhojpuri language based. One might substitute inexpensive Hindi language cinema, the action B-movie type that is still popular in many areas of north India, without involving Bhojpuri or any other dialect. Furthermore, cinema with a lower price of entry has always existed in places like Mumbai in the form of alternative regional cinemas such as Marathi and Punjabi cinema, and old Hindi movies that continue to make the rounds of the single screens. The main factor for Bhojpuri film's success cannot be only that it is inexpensive.

Surely these structural changes were necessary for the possibility of Bhojpuri cinema as such to exist, but the crux of the matter is cultural, as Latika Neelakantan notes:

the talk at Bhojpuri cultural events and among film artistes is not focused on economics and industry structure, but on culture and values. Surrounding the phenomenon of Bhojpuri film, after all, is the matter of Bhojpuri cultural revival. (42)

Invoking a very real Bhojpuri cultural efflorescence is not intended to presuppose that 'Bhojpuri culture' exists and must somehow be reclaimed from some corrupting force. Instead of thinking of Bhojpuri cinema as a moment of Bhojpuri cultural revival as such, it is more useful to examine the current moment in the history of the nascent Bhojpuri film industry as a historically specific moment in which Bhojpuri language and culture are actively produced and contested in a public space of cinema and the discourses surrounding it.

What is missing from explanations that stop at changing structures is a sense of the social and linguistic specificity peculiar to Bhojpuri cinema. In addition to inexpensive editing equipment, Bhojpuri film producers need audible and visible details that must be present in Bhojpuri films in order to have the proper amount of *Bhojpuriya* ('Bhojpuri-ness'). These audiovisual products are thus extremely culturally and linguistically specific, but can nonetheless travel indefinitely in time and space thanks to portable and ubiquitous technology. Bhojpuri film brings together, as a public, a disparate group of Bhojpuri speakers 'at home' in the villages and cities of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and the migrants living 'away' in cities from Mumbai to Delhi through the existence of these mediascapes of Bhojpuri film, tracing spaces between urban and rural – spaces that must be negotiated by producers and consumers of film alike.

Producing Bhojpuri culture: Importing authenticity

Just a few years ago, popular Bhojpuri films such as *Sasura Bada Paisawala* were largely shot on location in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, using local film crews and local production and post-production facilities. These films, whose economic success attracted the incredulous attention of the English language media, are often written off for their 'low production values' – poor or variable sound and picture quality, unprofessional acting and dancing, poorly synchronized audio and video, visible microphones and other markers of amateur filmmaking. It would be more accurate to call these films 'low budget' – they were indisputably made with very little capital investment, but the makers of Bhojpuri films clearly have many of the same ultimate aesthetic values as big budget commercial Hindi filmmakers. In search of clearer picture and sound quality, professional post-production facilities, and greater prestige, Bhojpuri filmmaking migrated to Mumbai. In this urban center of commercial Indian cinema production, complexes such as Film City 'rationalize' filmmaking, bringing production close to post-production facilities. Furthermore, human resources that are in short supply in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, such as experienced film editors, light and sound technicians, and make-up artists, are abundantly available in

Mumbai (N. Kumar; Jha). By moving the bulk of the film production process to Mumbai, Bhojpuri filmmakers have gained new access to film technology, production techniques, and specialized expertise, and as expected, production values have risen accordingly. Furthermore, several Bollywood stars and former stars have taken roles in Bhojpuri films as well, further raising the industry's profile (Prabhakar).

However, filmmakers and consumers alike assert that certain filmic elements must be regionally based for a culturally and linguistically 'authentic' look and sound. First, the film's 'hero' – the simultaneously romantic, action-ready and dramatic male lead – must be from a Bhojpuri-speaking background (in contrast, leading ladies nearly always seem to be from elsewhere). Second, the scriptwriter must be a native Bhojpuri speaker – preferably from one of the towns in which a more film-appropriate Bhojpuri is spoken.¹⁴ Finally, crews must also shoot on location in rural areas in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh for at least a small portion of most films. Some sets in Mumbai's enormous film studios enable Bhojpuri filmmakers to shoot footage of the Purvanchal without leaving the Mumbai suburbs. These sets are indexical of 'authentic' images of Bhojpuriya, such as a life-size model of an Azamgarh railway station (Jha). Yet certain images elude capture in Mumbai – geographic features peculiar to the Purvanchal, especially rivers, well known temples, and the *ghats* (stairs leading down to the river) in Varanasi – and these shots force entire film crews out of the more regulated and rationalized world of the film studio.

Thus, the production process of Bhojpuri cinema traces the spaces of Bhojpuri migration and movement, recorded in film: real Bihari agriculture (in Bihar) and constructed Bihari scenes (on sets in Mumbai) are then woven together to create the filmic whole in an attempt to conceal gaps in time, space, and meaning. This weaving together, in the form of post-production work – editing, mixing sound, adding music, and so forth – is now all done in Bombay (N. Kumar; Jha).

Because of the industry's rapid expansion and success, Bhojpuri cinema's production process could not remain planted in the real Bhojpuri 'heartland,' but it also cannot currently be entirely contained by economically determined choices to remain in the metropole. However, increased media attention to the economic possibilities of Bhojpuri film has been accompanied by what is seen as the attentions of outsiders interested only in making money and thus 'bringing down' the industry. Manoj Tiwari, the industry's biggest star, described the fear among producers that 'The "C" grade people from Hindi cinema are gaining entry into Bhojpuri cinema' (M. Tiwari 19). Thus the nascent industry's relationship to commercial Bollywood is conflicted. The industry gains prestige and glitter (as well as media interest) when stars like Amitabh Bachchan join the Bhojpuri film industry, however fleetingly.¹⁵ However, the financial success of the industry is also seen to attract exploitative filmmakers who have no real ties to Bhojpuri culture and only hope to make quick money at its expense, watering down its authenticity in the process. This anxiety over inauthentic Bhojpuri films made by outsiders is emblematic of the overall tension in Bhojpuri cinema between the idealized slick design and professionalism available in the metropolis and the idealized authenticity of a rural homeland. This tension can be seen as a driving force behind contemporary notions of *Bhojpuriya*, as the imaginative spaces of Bhojpuri ethno-mediascapes exceed the boundaries of either urban or rural spaces and must be constantly re-imagined around the realities of constant movement.

'We should not ape Hindi films': Bhojpuri identity crises

Over the summer of 2008, I was able to meet with a well known Bollywood star of the 1970s who is well known as a publicly proud Bihari, and who had starred in and produced

several Bhojpuri films since his Bollywood heyday. I was invited to his ancestral home, which was large and well appointed but moderately decorated, with cool, square concrete rooms that are common across north India. I was repeatedly told that even though he could be staying in a seven star hotel, he always stays here when he comes to Patna, as it is the only place where he can get a full night of sleep in the world. This sentiment was repeated no fewer than four times that afternoon, by the actor's friends and associates and finally by the actor himself. He talked about how Bhojpuri film was in a quandary, how everything that was being produced was of very poor quality, and was very 'rough' and not suitable for viewing by families, echoing my own impression that men comprised nearly the entire audience in most cinema halls.¹⁶

At the same time that he was decrying the state of Bhojpuri film today, he told me of his recent successes in the Bhojpuri film industry. He had recently starred in a big hit, but he assured me that everyone knew why he did it – it was not for money, for he had plenty of money from his earlier career in Bollywood. Instead, he said that he acted in Bhojpuri films as a tribute to his mother, whose only language was Bhojpuri.¹⁷ He did it all for her, he said, not for any monetary gain – though his films were, as it happened, exceedingly popular. The actor's relation to Bhojpuri was, according to him, about return and giving back: a celebration of his natal place and natal language. As he came back to stay in her house when in Patna, so too he came to reinhabit his mother's language in order to glorify not just his own mother, but the Bhojpuri culture she stood for.

I relate this anecdote to demonstrate some of the tensions of being a modern Bhojpuri subject, quite literally mediating Bhojpuri identity through film. The actor above spoke fluent English, Hindi, and Bhojpuri, but we conversed almost entirely in Hindi (the formal language suitable for speaking to a new acquaintance or for an official interview). His interest was in coaxing Bhojpuri film to be more 'authentic,' and less 'vulgar' and 'rough' so that it could demonstrate onscreen the 'real Bhojpuri culture' which, in his own life, comprised such elements as staying in his mother's house and eating *litti-chauka* (a kind of bread and vegetable dish particular to the Bhojpuri speaking region) and other regional specialities.¹⁸

But what is this 'real, authentic' Bhojpuri culture that is here described and, to an extent, lived? What the actor describes as 'Bhojpuri culture' is not a descriptive account of what Bhojpuri speakers do and say – instead, it is a carefully constructed conglomeration of rural and ethical markers embodied and authenticated by a literal pedigree. In this case, knowledge of Bhojpuri, the language, is not as important as being descended from and presumably brought up by a Bhojpuri-speaking woman.¹⁹ The actor's embodiment of this rural, 'simple' Bhojpuri culture does not include other aspects of his jet-setting life, at least not explicitly.

Although I was repeatedly told that the actor always stayed in his mother's house in Patna, the qualification of that statement is equally important: he stays in this simple house, but whenever he is elsewhere, he stays in 'seven star hotels,' according to his friends and staff. His success makes it necessary to define his claims to Bhojpuri in terms of his respect for his upbringing and his affection for traditional rural foods. This is a complication that is lived by many of the directors and top stars of Bhojpuri film, as the tension between desiring a modern urban lifestyle (that is linguistically and ethnically unmarked) and propounding an authentic Bhojpuri culture (that is very specific and very local) is only partially resolved by reiterating the possibility of luxury eschewed for comfortable 'authenticity.'

The shift of the Bhojpuri culture industry to Mumbai prompted some Bhojpuri film personnel to fear a loss of a particular cultural cachet, that of true *Bhojpurīya*, that is imported from some direct, physical connection to the Bhojpuri-speaking areas

themselves. These anxieties surrounding place and authenticity provide one view of the tensions inherent in Bhojpuri cinema – between Bhojpuri and Hindi, city and village, urban and rural – that are currently being played out in movie halls and production studios across north India. The actor/producer described above has one way of negotiating Bhojpuri identity as a part of a global urban persona. He maintains his hold on authentic *Bhojpuriya*, as do other directors and film producers, through assertions about his birth – and continued ties to physical spaces in Bihar. Filmmakers have real concerns about becoming too much like Bollywood, and losing touch with the ‘masses.’ According to Ravi Kissen, another major Bhojpuri star, it is vitally important for Bhojpuri filmmakers to remain cognizant of this: ‘We should not ape Hindi films. Like shooting in foreign locales has not gone down well with the audience. They feel cheated when they don’t get their flavour’ (A. Kumar). These concerns are well enough founded, as the mainstream Hindi film industry’s increasing courting of metropolitan and overseas audiences – as seen in such cosmopolitan, English-heavy films as *Kabhi Alvidha Na Kehna (Never Say Goodbye)*, dir. Karan Johar, 2006) – has led to poor performance in some interior regions of the country and an increasingly segmented market.

Citing the increasing foreignness of mainstream Bollywood cinema to people of rural origin only goes so far to explain why people now watch Bhojpuri cinema, which is generally watched in addition to, not instead of mainstream Hindi films. It cannot be assumed that the difference splits neatly into rural Bhojpuri themes and urban Bollywood. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that Bhojpuri speakers do not find commodities like cell phones, televisions and fashionable ‘Western’ clothes worthy of aspiration, as many Bhojpuri films dwell lovingly on these objects. When Bhojpuri-speaking youth frolic in a romantic story set in a college which seems little different from similar colleges in mainstream Hindi films, the only thing that explicitly marks them as Bhojpuri is their language. Every Bhojpuri-speaking migrant in the metropolises whom I know speaks standard Hindi in public, and only reverts to Bhojpuri in intimate, familial or private situations. However, in all Bhojpuri films I have seen, Bhojpuri is used exclusively – as a public language, a private language, a language for talking to superiors, and a language to use in the city as well as the countryside. This might be the real Bhojpuri aspirational film trope: that the Bhojpuri language, shedding its rural stigma, might become a language of everyday, proud, public use. This linguistic utopia transcends the boundaries of rural and urban, where ‘urban’ commodity culture is already attained by young people marked as Bhojpuri by their language only.

Narrating migration

As the production and circulation of Bhojpuri films work to complicate and intertwine the urban with the rural, many popular narratives used in film equally connect the two imagined spaces. When Raja (played by Manoj Tiwari, one of the reigning Bhojpuri superstars) makes his first appearance in the film *Sasura Bada Paisawala*, it is at the train station in his natal Bihari village, where he is returning after completing an advanced education – in English – in the city. Everyone in the village greets Raja’s arrival with great joy and excitement, but the newly returned Raja does not stand on ceremony and immediately joins in the daily tasks in the village. Notably, he pours dry fodder and water into his family’s cattle troughs, mixing it by hand – something I had never seen on screen before this film, but which I had seen hundreds of times in Uttar Pradesh, where people generally feed their cattle in this way.

Then, a few days later, Raja is driving the family pony cart to the train station with a companion who is identified as a simple-minded and weak-bodied fellow. When a city-dressed lady in shorts and a tank top gets off the train, this small man must lift her luggage but is unable to do it. She becomes angry and yells at him: 'Idiot! Rascal!' To this insult to his friend, Raja retorts angrily, and in English: 'No madam, it is you who are a rascal! You think upon getting a little education you can treat us like insects?' The woman is suitably cowed by his command of the cosmopolitan, urban language. Despite (or because of?) his rural looks, dress, and accent, and their subsequent angry silence blossoms, over the course of the film, into a requisite love story – after we find out that she is also from the same village area, and just needs to be reminded of her real Bhojpuri ways.

This narrative is marked with certain rural signifiers, such as depiction of the physical labor of mixing fodder for animals. But it also clearly depicts the movement of people from village to city to village again. The trope of the train station is loaded with signification as the aspirational site leaving the rural village (in search of better – i.e., metropolitan – opportunities, be they educational or occupational), as well as the equally aspirational return to the village. The train station and the figure of Raja can thus be seen as double-sided aspirational images for both urban migrants longing to go home and provincial dreamers hoping to escape to the city. This image exactly occupies a place of potential movement between urban and rural spaces, which is the space of Bhojpuri cinema as a whole. Furthermore, this image is not a rogue example, but actually a common trope, where a misidentification of a Bhojpuri-speaking, rural-seeming man as a *dehaati* – rustic – buffoon leads to his demonstration of his mastery of English *and* civility.

Thus, the physical circuits between rural, urban, and back again map the routes taken by the physical Bhojpuri films as they are produced and distributed, as well as the routes taken by migrants and capital. These routes are also aspirational circuits of desire that are mobilized in the film narratives themselves. The Bhojpuri culture industry forms a complex that we might think of as a mediascape, which constitutes and is constituted by a new Bhojpuri identity that spans migrants and farmers, integrating rural and urban concerns, sometimes with contradictory rhetoric and practices. By occupying a space that is neither solely urban nor solely rural, but emphatically creating a landscape which can be both rural and urban at the same time, Bhojpuri cinema approximates the positioning of people in the Purvanchal themselves, highlighting the anxieties and the possibilities for resistance in flows between Ballia and Bombay (and, with any luck, back again).

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Notes

1. In addition to full-length films, standalone song compilations in Bhojpuri, called 'albums,' are widely available and very popular. These usually consist of around 10 songs, usually sung by the same person throughout the album. The songs may be entirely original compositions or based on existing songs popular in the community, both folk and commercial. In the most common VCD format, the musical arrangements are accompanied by visual components, usually a choreographed dance which picturizes the lyrics of the song.
2. This is not to imply that the idea of 'Bollywood' in any way exhausts the possible meanings of 'contemporary mainstream Hindi cinema,' or vice versa. See Rajadhyaksha (27–31) for a

- discussion of the relative newness of the current meaning of 'Bollywood' as Hindi film exceeds its own national, linguistic, and industry boundaries.
3. Although global audiences for Bollywood have always existed, the 1990s saw a leap in the number of films that were explicitly made and marketed for the elite diaspora in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia. As Nilanjana Bhattacharjya notes, although Bollywood had enjoyed almost accidental success in a wide range of diasporic and other non-Indian spaces throughout its history, film producers had nevertheless until the 1990s mostly targeted popular Hindi films to Indian audiences within India. Economic reforms, particularly those associated with NRIs and the privatization of the film industry, then motivated Indian film directors and producers to increasingly orient their films toward South Asian diasporic audiences (Bhattacharjya 56).
 4. The latter seems to have been originally published by T-Series as part of a series called *Bhojpuri Lok Git*, or 'Bhojpuri Folk Songs.' I have not yet been able to find legally produced copies of any of these music videos, which may be due to the proliferation of pirated VCDs as well as casually circulating copies made for friends and family members. These VCDs seem to have a short shelf life, and many titles which I once saw in shops are, several months later, said to be largely unavailable.
 5. This paper is the preliminary result of several months of fieldwork over the summer of 2008, undertaken largely in Uttar Pradesh, both in the city of Varanasi and the rural Azamgarh district, as well as in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and in Patna, Bihar. My understanding of attitudes towards Bhojpuri film, as well as Bhojpuri itself, comes from formal interviews and extensive conversations with people who identify themselves as Bhojpuri-speakers as well as those who are involved in the Bhojpuri film industry. This paper is part of a larger project on contemporary Bhojpuri linguistic and regional identity as it is mediated by cinema.
 6. *Ek kos pani, nau kos bani* can be translated as 'every one *kos* the water [changes], every nine *kos* the dialect [changes].'
 7. The movie *Don* (1978, dir. Chandra Barot) is an interesting example set in Mumbai, in which the provincial (migrant?) hero Vijay must give up his linguistic markers as well as his beloved Banarasi *paan* in order to fight a crime cell from the inside, masquerading as the urbane leader of a gang. While the rustic Vijay, played by Amitabh Bachchan, is no doubt a positive character, his way of speaking is part and parcel of his lower class way of life, along with his *lungi*, his poverty, and his Bhojpuri-styled language. At one point, he runs into a group of Bhojpuri speakers who embrace him for speaking 'the language spoken on the river Ganga,' i.e., Bhojpuri. They are eating the marijuana product *bhanga* along with *paan*, both stereotypical Bhojpuri products. They are carefree, raucous, intoxicated – and indexed by their 'Bhojpuri' pronunciations. Significantly, when Vijay becomes intoxicated, he loses his newfound urbanity completely and begins to speak in this way as well, breaking into the well known song 'Khaikhe Paan Banaras Wala.'
 8. For full accounts of this phase of migration, as well as contemporary ethnographies of the Bhojpuri-descended diaspora, see Niranjana and Khan regarding Trinidad, and Eisenlohr regarding Mauritius.
 9. Many young Bhojpuri-speaking migrants with whom I spoke in Mumbai and Delhi (from 16 to 22 years old, and all male) expressed the pain of migration in the form of a deep longing for family members, but many others were living with uncles or brothers, or otherwise had some sense of familial belonging in the city. Several explicitly expressed taking pleasure in urban life, buying jeans and snacks unavailable in their home villages, and many mentioned the pleasures of sending home extra money to their families.
 10. It is likely that this reflects two trends: first, the overwhelming likelihood that a labor migrant from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh will be male and will leave his family behind; second, that the largely male audiences then keep away women who might otherwise attend film screenings. In any case, there is a widespread idea that Bhojpuri films are not 'family friendly' due to the rowdy, sexualized nature purported to be inherent in these films. However, this particular point demands further research on the current gender breakdown of migrant populations as well as filmgoing audiences.
 11. These budgets are currently growing, but are still nowhere near the lavish budgets for high budget Bollywood films. According to director Amit Singh, 'Independent financiers have been pushed out of Hindi cinema. They cannot match the high budgets that have resulted from corporate financing and overseas joint ventures. So they turn to Bhojpuri film, where a film can be made for INR 45 lakh [4.5 million]' (Neelakantan 42).

12. I have attended several film screenings where the front bench section (which is the most inexpensive) is entirely packed, with the rest of the house nearly empty.
13. Although single screen theaters were once the norm in north India, they have fallen out of favor with the wealthy, who were wooed back to public cinema viewing partially by lavish, expensive multiplexes (many of which are part of malls or other large entertainment centers). Multiplexes rarely (if ever) show 'regional' cinema such as Bhojpuri films.
14. Bhojpuri is not currently standardized to any great degree (despite some early efforts to effect this change), and subdialects are quite variable from town to town in the region, with some subdialects being considered by Bhojpuri speakers to be more 'regular' and others more deviant. For instance, I have not heard Banarasi Bhojpuri used in films – this city's dialect avoids the otherwise ubiquitous 'ba' in favor of 'hau' for the verb 'to be.' Other dialects are very regionally specific: the dialect spoken in the town of Ballia, for instance. According to Banarasi Bhojpuri speakers, Ballia Bhojpuri speakers' habit of affixing the particle 'nu' (similar to the Hindi 'na' – roughly, 'isn't it?') to the end of sentences was described with great hilarity as an unusual form. Of course, it is likely that in Ballia, other subdialects are mocked in much the same way. Still, some forms of Bhojpuri are currently more marginal while others are appropriate for film – a forming hierarchy of dialects. However shifting or contingent this hierarchy may be, film production practices construct subdialects as either standard or non-standard, thus privileging some while further marginalizing others.
15. Amitabh Bachchan, one of the biggest stars in Hindi cinema, took part in the Bhojpuri film *Ganga* (Ganga, dir. Abhishek, 2006), allegedly at a much reduced fee, because of personal ties to the producer, Deepak Sawant, who had long been his hairdresser. The film also includes the Bollywood star Hema Malini and both leading Bhojpuri actors of that year, Ravi Kissen and Manoj Tiwari, but failed to cause the major box office returns that were anticipated.
16. While women are certainly rare in public screenings, how many women watch Bhojpuri media at home remains to be investigated. From preliminary interviews and viewing sessions with women at home, I suspect that this segment of the audience is under-represented in estimates that may only consider public viewing practices.
17. This, too, was invoked multiple times during the visit by multiple people – a well-known aphorism among the group of hangers-on and assistants.
18. The ubiquity of this particular foodstuff as a symbol of Bihari/Bhojpuri existence is exemplified by a music VCD entitled 'Litti Chauka Chatni: Bihar Bitamin' ('Litti, chauka, and chutney: Bihar's vitamin,' singer Anil Bawra, n.d.). Under these three words, three women pose suggestively with the tagline 'Bihar bitamin' superimposed across each of their chests, and in the background, a train comes around a bend. Women, food, and a cultural homeland are thus visually tied together and the entire sustaining package is made mobile via the train – and the VCD, which is a highly mobile unit of culture.
19. Issues of the feminization of language and the feminization of Indian culture collide here, where language is one of the preserves of authentic culture. The idea of a 'mother tongue' as cultural birthright and identity category must be more carefully historicized in the case of Bhojpuri. For an illuminating account of the consolidation of Telugu language identity and the origins of the concept of 'mother tongue' in Telugu, see Mitchell 19–25.

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