

Bhojpuri Cinema

Reasserting the 'Bhojpuria' Roots of Migrants in Mumbai

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Abstract

Using Cultural Studies as the framework, this article attempts a content analysis of selected Bhojpuri films to determine how the media help maintain the regional identity of migrants from UP and Bihar residing in Kandivali (east), Mumbai. The Bhojpuri media are closely entwined with the migrants' everyday realities and social interactions; they reinforce notions of ideal gender roles, alleviate anxieties associated with acculturation, gratify desires vicariously and are instruments of pseudo-empowerment. Familiar images embossed in the media texts ensure continuity with folk traditions, feeding the resurgent pride of the community. The study examines how certain conventions and formulas in Bhojpuri cinema strengthen perceptions of the 'Bhojpuriya' identity amongst the migrants, ensuring that the cultural offerings reflect their perspectives on social and cultural issues. Media representations delve into the cultural memory of the migrants, providing them emotional and cultural sustenance in their host city.

Keywords

Migrants, cultural identity, Bhojpuri cinema, content analysis, *nautanki*

The narrative analysis of films is invaluable in assessing how notions of community or nationhood permeate institutions and practices. The reproducible images of cinema are invested with the power of generating wider horizons of experience and constituting a new sense of the self through 'extended imagining' (Vasudevan 1995). Discourses circulating on mass media provide a large-scale, anonymous audience with common linguistic reference points, which can then be the focus of active engagement and re-contextualization. When a 'mass-produced communication form... is distributed, it is simultaneously participated in and almost automatically produces a feeling of a shared collectivity because of specific textual features' (Spitulnik 1997). In a particular ethnic and social setup, conceptions about language and ideological representations of 'the assumed ancestral and refined qualities' of particular linguistic forms forge allegiances, consolidate issues of political power, generating ideas of 'nativeness' and of community bonding (Eisenlohr 2004).

In India, 'Bhojpuri' functions as an umbrella term for a range of non-standardized regional dialects of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The spectacular growth of the Bhojpuri cinema industry in the last decade (Chatterjee 2006; Ghosh 2010; Tewary 2005) is attributed to socio-economic factors that have seen the growing presence of migrants from UP and Bihar in towns and cities across India. The Bhojpuri

identity is daily being shaped as a reaction against the political agitations targeting this efflux to various parts of the country (Nandal 2008; Sahajwala 2008). The revival of the Bhojpuri media can be viewed as the outcome of layered, complex factors, often at odds with each other (Ghosh 2010), not the least being ‘the “cultural” restiveness’ seen in the dialects of Hindi of late, and the phenomenon of ‘incipient identities... becoming stronger when they are embattled’ (Tripathy & Verma 2011, p. 100).

Demand for Regional Connect

Owing to large-scale migration, today Bhojpuri cinema runs to packed houses not only in metros like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata, but in tier two and tier three cities of Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Outside of UP and Bihar, Mumbai alone accounts for 15 per cent of the monetary collections from the movies (Ghosh 2010). The unprecedented success of these films draws attention to the markedly different aesthetic sensibilities that the industry is catering to. Hindi cinema no longer has a pan-Indian appeal on account of its inability to connect to the non-urban viewers. Ghosh (2005, 2007) points out that Bollywood and ‘Bhojwood’ (a term he uses) represent disparate worlds: ‘India Shining and India Invisible’. Bollywood now abounds in ‘gel-and-cologne film-makers’ who ‘bypass middle and lower India,’ depicting a world ‘culturally aseptic and unreal to all except mawkish expatriates’ (Ghosh 2005). Chatterjee (2006) attributes the ferment in Bhojpuri cinema to ‘Bollywood’s continuing apathy towards the rural yarns that were once commonplace in Hindi cinema’ (*Naya Daur, Ganga Jamuna, Mera Gaon Mera Desh, Sholay*, and so on). The reigning heroes of Bhojwood, Ravi Kishen and Manoj Tiwari, who transformed a moribund industry into a profit making venture, have repeatedly projected themselves as dyed-in-the-wool ‘Bhojpuriyas’. ‘*Mitti ki khushboo ani chahiye*’ (one must get the fragrance of the soil) says Manoj Tiwari ‘Mridul’, the popular Bhojpuri superstar, claiming that Bhojpuri audiences like personalities they can identify with in real-life (Kumar 2006). Ravi Kishen too has been quoted on an Indian website as saying Bhojpuri cinema is like ‘home-cooked food’ (Tewary 2005), wholesome and satisfying in its very familiarity.

Tewary (2005), reporting from Patna, quotes Vinod Mirani, the editor of a Bollywood trade journal, ‘Bhojpuri movies are not about Technicolor fantasies. The thrust is towards home-grown subjects. The concerns are largely to do with marriage and family. There’s lot of emotions’. Besides, ‘the audience wants familiarity of locations,’ says Sudhakar Pandey, the producer of hits like *Daroga Babu I Love You*. This accounts for locations in eastern UP around Gorakhpur turning into the most favoured destinations for shooting (Ghosh 2007).

This article attempts a content analysis of selected Bhojpuri films to determine if and in what manner cinematic representations of Bhojpuri ethos strengthen the regional identity of the migrants and provide them emotional and cultural sustenance in Mumbai, their host city. It examines how certain conventions and formulas in Bhojpuri cinema maintain notions of the Bhojpuri identity amongst migrants, addressing their distinctive needs in terms of recreation and ensuring that the world-view that emerges from the cultural offerings reflects their perspectives on social and cultural issues. The textual analysis in the article is embedded in research that sought to offer insights into how north Indian migrants in Kandivali (east), Mumbai, utilize the media to negotiate between integration in the new city and sustenance of links with the culture of the Hindi heartland. It endeavoured to examine how the Bhojpuri media is responding to the contemporary socio-cultural developments in Mumbai, to understand the dynamics of changing

societies and to study the role of the media in facilitating the preservation of a distinctly North Indian cultural identity in Mumbai.

Research Methodology

The research approached the issue of media and migration from a cultural studies perspective. The study was primarily qualitative, premised on the basic assumption that through an inductive process the researcher can arrive at a pattern of meaning and interpret the way others view the world (Creswell 2003). The research involved content analysis of media popular with Bhojpuri speaking audiences and in-depth interviews with media producers and executives. The research design used was exploratory when seeking responses on media practices and preferences; a descriptive design was employed when describing the socio-cultural values and attitudes concerning cultural identity.

The methods adopted for data collection included in-depth interviews, group discussions, observation and content analysis. The research method also included a survey through a questionnaire that enabled collection of demographic details of the sample and examination of habits of media use and media preferences. The purposive (judgement) sampling strategy was adopted, and the sample size was restricted to a focused sample of 120. A subset of purposive sampling, the snowball sample, was also used. The field sites were selected through purposeful sampling, ensuring a fair representation of the population.

This article focuses on the content analysis of Bhojpuri films to illumine how the reassertion of the 'Bhojpuriya' roots is effected through recognizable leitmotifs that delve into the collective memory of the migrants. The selection of media products for analyses was based on the data gathered through the survey and the interviews, as well as the information obtained from secondary sources. In tune with Dermot Mc Keone's (1995) definition of open analysis, dominant messages were identified in the subject matter of the cultural texts to assess whether recurrent patterns in them reinforce notions of the Bhojpuri identity amongst migrants.

Cultural Capital

All cultural products comprise conventions the audience is familiar with, as well as inventions, topical references and images that have gained currency in that age. While conventions ensure continuity and constancy of cultural traditions, inventions reflect the evolution of cultural practices, their adaptation to changed socio-cultural circumstances (Cawelti 1969). 'Cultural capital', that is, generic knowledge of cultural products, is therefore, a prerequisite for readers to make sense of cultural texts. One such form of knowledge that helps easy identification is genre, a complex of themes, narrative structures and styles that groups of individual films have in common (Ang 1985).

Barthes (1991) argues that events in media texts make sense only in relation to other texts within a genre; hence familiar incidents acquire meaning chiefly with the help of structural conventions. While 'conventions are social and ideological, a formula ... is an industrial and economic translation of conventions' (Fiske 1987, p. 221). A formula is akin to the shared repertory of cultural practices generated on the basis of the chief concerns of the cultural group to which it caters. This study explores how the

formula's comforting predictability provides a euphoric high and generates solidarity among migrants far removed from their home states.

The selection of media products for analyses was based on three criteria:

- Top grossers at the box-office, such as *Nadia Ke Paar*, *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Rickshawala* (Bhojpuriya Cinema n.d.; brandbihar.com 2012; Ghosh 2010).
- Most popular films on the basis of audience recall.
- Films featuring the favourite stars of Bhojpuri cinema: Manoj Tiwari, Ravi Kishen, 'Nirahua' Dinesh Lal Yadav, Rani Chatterjee, Pakhi Hegde and Pawan Singh.

Palimpsest Text

A quick sojourn through the terrain of Bhojpuri cinema indicates its close kinship with the melodramatic traditions of Bollywood family dramas of the 1960s and 1970s. Villainous patriarchs and crafty crooks thwart young lovers; family, traditions, honour and sacrifice complicate the plot till finally, after innumerable twists and turns, the path of love runs smooth. The analysis of the textual features of Bhojpuri films also reveals that the strongest likenesses are with the folk theatre tradition of *nautanki* and *svang*, rooted in the peasant society of pre-modern northern India. *Nautanki* theatre, which is known for its stylized acting, entertains its audiences with tales of valour, romance and family honour, interspersed with ribaldry, lively dancing and singing. Although live performances are infrequent today, the essence of *nautanki* is captured through the electronic media that refashion the spirit of folk theatre to appeal to changing tastes.

Justyna Kucharska (2007), in her analysis of filmmaker Deepa Mehta's cinema, suggests that a diasporic postmodern text is an example of what Gerarde Genette, in his essay 'Palimpsesty: Literatura drugiego stopnia' (1992) calls 'palimpsest reading'. A palimpsest is a text written on a previous, not completely erased text, so that the earlier one is visible while reading the subsequent. When different elements from diverse cultures are used to create hybrids or collages, the hypertext, that is the new entity, is the palimpsest implanted on the hypotexts, the borrowed elements. She further elaborates that palimpsests are based on Kristeva's notions of intertextuality (Kristeva & Moi 1986), which state that a text is a mosaic of quotations, and is nothing but the absorption and transformation of another. Kucharska goes on to discuss how in the books *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) and *The Literature of Replenishment* (1982), John Barth reflects upon a distinct trend in postmodern cultural practices. He argues that artists are hamstrung by increasing inability to innovate, as everything worth saying has already been said. The only way they can resolve this problem is by delving into the past and creating a pastiche of old themes and forms. Bhojpuri films are thus an illustration of the 'replenishment' of contemporary works of art by infusing into them the artistic traditions of the past. Deriving inspiration from diverse cultural sources, Bhojpuri cinema reflects a dialogue between these two complex hypotexts, between two modes of cultural practices: the *Nautanki* tradition and Bollywood mainstream cinema of the mid twentieth century.

Melodramatic Excess

Most of the plots of popular *nautanki* hinge on love relationships, family feuds, social relationships, economic conditions, the autocracy of those in power, valour, the evils of modernity and the travails of

innocence. The script is often loose and flexible, allowing for various interpolations and improvisation, and the chief means of depicting desire and emotions is through songs (Warij 1984). As indicated in the following section, there is a marked similarity between the subject matter of the *nautanki* and the storylines of popular Bhojpuri films selected for analyses:

- Love relationships: Every one of the films selected for content analyses hinges on the theme of romantic love.
- Family feuds: *Kanyadaan* (Ritual of giving away of daughter in marriage) 2003; *Santaan* (Progeny) 2011; *Devaa* 2007; *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho* (No one is like you, you are matchless) 2009; *Hum Bahubali* (I am the Strongman) 2008; *Sasura Bada Paisewala* (Father-in-law is a Wealthy Man) 2005.
- Social relationships: *Nadiya ke Paar* (Across the River) 1982; *Devaa*; *Rangbaz Daroga* (The Flamboyant Police Officer) 2009; *Nirahua Rickshawala* (Nirahua Rickshaw Driver) 2007; *Hum Bahubali*; *Bhumiputra* (Son of the Soil) 2009.
- Economic conditions: *Devaa*; *Rangbaz Daroga*; *Nirahua Rickshawala*; *Hum Bahubali*; *Kanyadaan*; *Santaan*; *Bhumiputra*.
- Autocracy of those in power: *Kanyadaan*; *Santaan*; *Devaa*; *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho...*; *Hum Bahubali*; *Sasura Bada Paisewala*; *Rangbaz Daroga*; *Nirahua Rickshawala*; *Bhumiputra*.
- Valour: *Kanyadaan*; *Santaan*; *Devaa*; *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho...*; *Hum Bahubali*; *Sasura Bada Paisewala*; *Rangbaz Daroga*; *Nirahua Rickshawala*; *Bhumiputra*.
- Evils of modernity: *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho*; *Sasura Bada Paisewala*.
- Travails of Innocence: *Kanyadaan*; *Santaan*; *Devaa*.

The narratives are replete with features that are the stock-in-trade of the classical melodramatic plot.¹ Poor boy meets rich girl, against a backdrop presented in flattering hues; they fall in love; a dramatic event (almost always external) thwarts their union; the protagonists are helpless; eventually, after several ordeals, they are united. Subtleties are eschewed, and in tune with classic, linear narratives, the ‘hermeneutic code’ consists of obstacles, deceptions and misunderstandings. Everything that defers the ultimate reconciliation is decoded and conquered in the revelation of complete truth at the end (Modleski, cited in Ang 1985, p. 74). In *Nirahua Rickshawala*, for instance, the journey takes on a picaresque quality. Unsavoury characters attack the beautiful heroine; the brave hero assures her she is safe in a *mard ka ricksha* (a macho man’s rickshaw) and thrashes the assailants; while the disparity between the rich and powerful tyrants and the good hearted, honest but humble folk is constantly reinforced.

Sensational incidents that generate heightened dramatic tension are not just an element of *Nautanki*, but also a salient feature of the melodramatic structure of contemporary Bhojpuri cinema. Whether it is the sister-in-law tumbling down the stairs to her death (*Nadiya ke Paar*), or the heroine attacked by goons (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Devaa*, *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho...*) or the hero beaten up by the heroine’s tyrannical brother (*Nirahua Rickshawala*), the story moves from one outrageous event to another, each leading to a twist in the plot that reverses the protagonist’s fortunes. The power of such melodrama emanates from the spectator’s emotional involvement in the vicissitudes of the characters’ lives.

The comic situations in the films, as in the *nautanki* plots, often revolve around mistaken identity, (*Devaa*, *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Kanyadaan*), a device rich in double entendre

and slapstick humour. Exaggerated histrionics is the accepted mode of depicting the perfidy of the villain who persecutes the pure hearted victim. The purpose is to overwhelm the audience by the pathos of the representation and induce intense indignation at the shocking treachery perpetrated on the hapless victim, who is both vulnerable and good (*Kanyadaan*, *Devaa*, *Rangbaz Daroga*, *Santaan*). The films ‘morally validate, a kind of primal bloodlust, in the sense that the villain is so despicable, hated so intensely, that there is no more urgent gratification than to see him extinguished’ (Singer 2001, pp. 38–40).

Moral Absolutism

Conflict has always been an integral part of the *nautanki* plot (Warij 1984); but the conflict is the outcome of coincidence and is not engendered by the inner workings of the character. In accordance with this tradition of story telling, in Bhojpuri cinema, truth is shown to triumph, virtue is rewarded and poetic justice meted out. The Indian worldview prefers to believe that truth will be victorious, the good will be rewarded in the end and the evil punished.

In *Mythologies* (2009, p. 170) Roland Barthes describes how:

in passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back on what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth, a world which is open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by them-selves.

Reinforcing the ‘salience’ of situation or ‘incident’ in melodrama, Clayton Hamilton (1911) explains that ‘life is more frequently melodramatic than tragic... ultimately, we are all governed by random forces of happenstance... Much of our life—in fact, by far the major share—is casual instead of causal’. Hence in melodrama the incidents determine and control the character, unlike in both tragedy and comedy where the characters control the plot. It has been suggested that in a world where moral ambiguity has overshadowed the reassuring black and white dichotomy of the past, where religion and tradition are no longer able to provide reassuring answers, melodrama offers the comforting certitude of virtue’s victory over vice. Melodramatic cinema serves as the pacifier that ameliorates the anxiety caused by moral ambiguity by upholding a world of clearly demarcated ethical choices. Round characters would beg a sensibility more subtle than the one popular cinema caters to. Singer (2001, p. 49) states:

Nearly all the good or ill that happens to us is drifted to us, uncommanded, undeserved, upon the tides of chance. It is this immutable truth—the persistency of chance in the serious concerns of life and the inevitable influence of accident on character—that melodrama aims to represent.

The continuing hold of such stories hinges on the significant role chance plays in the lives of the working classes lacking agency over the forces that shape their fortunes.

Melodrama may seem imbued in improbability, but to the average slum dweller, the situations are a reflection of quotidian reality. Observing that a suitable metaphor for popular Indian cinema is the urban slum, Nandy (1998, p. 2) states that

Both cinema and the slum in India showed the same impassioned negotiations with every day survival, combined with the same intense effort to forget that negotiation, the same mix of the comic and the tragic, spiced with elements borrowed indiscriminately from the classical and the folk.

Further, such is the law and order situation in the small towns and villages,² that even today the petty power play of local goons and politicians has its hold over the lives of people. The sensationalism of Bhojpuri films thus realistically mirrors the unpredictability of life as it is actually lived by the migrants, in the host city, and in the homes they have left behind.

Because melodrama stirs up emotions through contrived events, it privileges the sensational incident over realistic characterization. Ang (1985) argues that this sensationalism is the distinctive strength of the genre, the fundamental reason for its appeal with the audience. The yardstick of originality, which she refers to as a bourgeois literary value, cannot be applied to melodrama; the genre, according to her, has a myth-making function, wherein the ‘psychological credibility’ of the characters is subordinated to ‘imagined situations’ surrounded by myths and fantasies with strong emotional underpinnings. These metaphors are effective only on account of their lack of originality and their frequent recurrence in popular narratives; they are therefore easily recognized and comprehended.

Types, Not Individuals

As the *nautanki* draws inspiration from the collective needs of society, the emphasis is not on individuals, but on social types. Hansen (1983) speaks of the ‘flatness and exaggerated virtue or villainy of *nautanki* characters’, which precludes psychological identification. The characterization in popular Bhojpuri films retains this simplicity: complexities are side-stepped in favour of direct delineation. Elaborating on film maker Shyam Benegal’s remarks on Hindi cinema, Shoma Chatterji (1999) says that the films:

... externalize an inner psychological conflict and handle the inner passion generated by social and political processes as problems created by events and persons outside. These events and persons are both ideal types and representatives of different aspects of a fragmented self. These fragments are separately controlled and the Hindi mainstream seeks to sustain this control by sharpening the focuses of these differences between the hero and the anti hero, the heroine and the anti heroine, the large hearted father in law and the middle aged don. The Hindi mainstream does this because integration of these separate fragments into a unified whole would highlight the gray elements of characterization which it does not wish to adhere to.

Regional cinemas likewise steer clear of moral ambiguities, choosing to portray sharply polarized characters, perhaps as external manifestations of the divided self; or as projections of disparate, conflicting internal drives.

Every Hero is a True ‘Mard’ (Alpha Male)

The hero is therefore brave, action oriented, dutiful, always triumphing over adversity. He would rather sacrifice his life than compromise his honour. He can be as tender hearted to the gentle and the good,

as he can be merciless to the perpetrators of evil (*Devaa, Nirahua Rickshawala, Rangbaz Daroga, Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho, Bhumiputra*). Interestingly, it has been observed that *nautanki* heroes, and by extension, the heroes of popular Bhojpuri cinema, have all the traits that are characteristic of the society from which this art form originates (Warij 1984). Accordingly, love, courage and adherence to a code of honour are the abiding qualities of the hero. Always a man sketched in gigantic, larger than life dimensions, his courage in decimating his enemies is matched by his flamboyance as a passionate lover. In *Grounds for Play*, Hansen (1992, p. 21) states that this ‘association of blood lust with sexual lust goes back at least to the Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala*’, where King Dushyanta’s prowess as a hunter is matched only by his passionate wooing of the sage’s daughter.

Typically, the hero is ‘completely sure of himself ... this certainty forms an important ingredient of his invincibility: he never doubts, knows precisely what he has to do and never dwells on his own insignificance’, states Ang (1985, p. 69). For instance, in *Nirahua Rickshawala*, Nirahua is a cult like figure: his stunts and the acts of deliverance are played out against a background chorus chanting out ‘Nirahua’, akin to the way a deity’s name is chanted in mythologicals when miracles are performed. In film after film, (*Devaa, Rangbaz Daroga, Hum Bahubali, Bhumiputra*), we witness the supreme confidence the hero has in his powers, and his belief in the righteousness of his cause. He is therefore never plagued by self doubt, a fact that reaffirms his worth in the eyes of the viewers. Hollywood directors have often spoken half enviously of this willing suspension of disbelief on the part of viewers, the ‘little secret contract the director makes with the audience, they know that it is all fantasy... [the hero] can deflect bullets simply because he is the hero’ (Singh 2011). The world of make-believe that is conjured up is accepted unquestioningly, unlike in Hollywood, where elaborate explanations and carefully constructed milieu precede the making of a world inhabited by superheroes, such as in the film *Immortals* directed by Tarsem Singh.

All the plots in Bhojpuri cinema abound in clichés about masculine prowess and honour. A harridan, who all but ruins her son and daughter-in-law’s life by imposing her will on them, is slapped by her hitherto meek husband when she persists in her domineering ways (*Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho*). Surprisingly, she submits to his authority, bemoaning the fact that he hadn’t earlier thought fit to assert himself thus! In *Nirahua Rickshawala*, the henpecked father of the heroine likewise asserts his position as head of the family when goaded beyond endurance by his son’s excesses and his wife’s treachery. In *Kanyadaan*, the pusillanimous husband is rid of his fears and transformed by the love of his wife. There are repeated references to his lack of manliness and physical courage prior to his transformation.

Friendship and fraternal loyalty, forms of male bonding, are upheld as the supreme virtues of life. The hero’s friend is often willing to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of his brother or his friend (*Nadiya ke Paar, Sasura Bada Paisewala, Rangbaz Daroga, Devaa*). The friend often serves as the confidant, but on occasion, he also provides comic relief in the plot. Schramm (1968–69) had noted that the buffoon plays a pivotal role in *nautanki*; so is it in Bhojpuri cinema. There is usually a comedian whose dialogues, costume, mannerisms are so crafted as to elicit laughter. His jibes, his flubs and foolhardiness, his often inept attempts at courtship are a perfect foil to the hero’s courage and his confident assertions (*Sasura Bada Paisewala, Devaa, Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho, Bhumiputra*).

Dream Girl/Virangana/Pativrata

The heroine is always the prototype of the traditional Indian woman, displaying undying fidelity to the chosen paramour, while remaining chaste and beyond reproach. As in the *nautanki*, idealized representations of gendered conduct are offered. The overriding concern is that women's sexuality should be reined in, for the sanctity of family and caste depends on her inviolability.

However, pushed beyond the brink of endurance, the lady assumes the stance of the *virangana*, the warrior woman who takes on the might of her oppressors to protect her loved ones, or to safeguard her honour. She is the very embodiment of *Shakti*, the Eternal Feminine Principle. Both North Indian history and folklore offer several instances of a beleaguered woman metamorphosing into a *virangana* at a critical juncture, the Rani of Jhansi being only one of the many such instances of righteous wrath that have captured the popular imagination. In continuation of this tradition valorized by folk drama, Bhojpuri cinema frequently depicts the otherwise subservient woman challenging her adversaries on being driven by extreme circumstances. In *Hum Bahubali* the widowed sister-in-law attacks her husband's murderer, goaded and encouraged by a cheering crowd; in *Devaa* the meek heroine turns her fury upon the hero for having resorted to violence; the heroine beats up her assailants in *Nirahua Rickshawala*; in *Kanyadaan* the oppressed girl displays exemplary courage by taking on her avaricious affines and step brothers; the spirited protagonist in *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho* staunchly opposes the arbitrariness of patriarchal norms. In *Bhumiputra*, the heroine is the intrepid, honest police officer, who fearlessly attacks lumpen elements.

These paradigms of womanhood are upholders of traditional values; they are also, in most cases, defenceless creature in need of a saviour (*Devaa*, *Hum Bahubali*, *Santaan*). Their honour is inalienably linked to that of their spouses, fathers, brothers and affines (*Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Devaa*, *Hum Bahubali*, *Nadiya ke Paar*). Even when the heroine is a law-keeper (*Bhumiputra*), she still needs the hero for her deliverance. When faced with an obdurate father and a husband who is smarting under humiliation, she chooses to fast and pray to *Bholenath*, Lord Shiva (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*). Patriarchy is the norm; hence sisters and wives are expected to obey brothers and husbands. The overtly sexual woman is evil incarnate, and the westernized woman (albeit fascinating), has to be tamed into submission, as also reoriented towards values befitting her gender. Once won over by the hero, she is the epitome of Indian (read North Indian) traditions (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Firangi Dulhaniya*).

All Roads Lead to Conjugal Bliss

In keeping with the custom of *nautanki* performances, and that of popular Bollywood romances, the story culminates with the hero and the heroine attaining their heart's desire, winning the object of love and legitimizing the union through marriage. Marriage, and its confinement of the woman within the limits prescribed by patriarchy, offers the reassurance of maintaining the status quo, restoring order and 'domesticating' the unruly woman. (*Devaa*, *Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Nadiya ke Paar*). A wedding not only brings together the two young people in love, but also offers a socially sanctioned closure to the courtship and brings two families together, thus strengthening communal bonds further. By placing the woman in

a position that has the approbation of elders, it re-establishes order after the upheaval caused by their romance. The dream sequences, the mandatory arch comments by the supporting cast, dialogues revolving around conjugal matters—all hint at the realization of marital dreams. That it is pivotal to the storyline is evident from even a cursory glance at the names of some well-known films: *Kab Hoi Gauna Hamar* (When Will My Gauna Happen), *Sindurdaan* (Vermilion Box), *Kanyadaan*, *Panditji Batai Na Biyah Kab Hoi* (O Priest, When Will I Be Married), *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Chalal Sasuraal* (Nirahua Goes to His In-Laws).

Male Gaze: Female Body as the Locus

Bhojpuri cinema, like its forebear the *nautanki* theatre, is redolent with metaphors that accentuate both the bewitching comeliness of women, as well as the dangers of their sexuality. Both the traditional and the modern genres constantly draw attention to the conflict between desire and fear that the woman arouses in the man. In fact, the *nautanki/svang* tradition is known for its suggestive, symbolic and rather ornamental description of beauty and amorous adventures. Notably, the analogies have become contemporary, but there is no compromise in the explicitness of the message. The lady is a bolt of electric current ('Current Mareli' from *Sasura Bada Paisewala*); she is likened to a 'powerhouse' in *Nirahua Rickshawala*, delectable eye candy who has an electrifying impact on men. The woman's attractions are described in terms that connote both the danger and the magnetism of female sexuality. She is repeatedly presented as the Other, the object of the male gaze that constantly seeks to control and possess her. As Mulvey (1975) states, the woman on display functions at two levels:

...as erotic object of the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium... As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.

All attention is perennially focused on the female form; she challenges the masculinity of both the hero and the male spectators. She segues easily from seductresses to *pativrata* (one who worships her husband), longing for *chudi* (bangles), *mahavar* (red colour used to adorn feet) and the feminine adornments associated with her marital status (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Devaa*, *Hum Bahubali*). In every one of the films, the villain and his cronies are regaled by *nautch* girls who gyrate to raunchy numbers, reminiscent of the risqué folk songs of this region. The hero and the buffoon too, are often spectators; albeit the hero remains unperturbed by the attempts at titillation, often getting the better of the dancing girl in the game of seduction. Hansen (1992, p. 23) speaks of the:

obsession with the otherness of woman... the erotic dancing, the facial gestures and articulation during singing... guide the spectator's interest unerringly to the women on public display... *nautanki* theatre revolves around this seductive image of woman. Beguiling, beckoning creature, caricature of men's own craving, she commands the attention of her admirers and dares them to approach.

Even today, dance performances, especially for visiting wedding guests (*Baraat*), are *de rigueur* in most affluent rural households of North India. The spectators, both in cinema and in real-life, are

predominantly male, the songs are suggestive, alcohol flows freely and the atmosphere is decidedly uninhibited.

Depiction of sexually unrestrained women seeking out men is stock-in-trade of Bhojpuri cinema. For example, in *Devaa*, concerted efforts are made by the village doctor's wife to arouse 'the man' in her husband. Her aggressive overtures and come-hither dances are all in keeping with the formula for success. In *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, the comedian's wife is explicit in her gestures and speech, making advances in no uncertain terms. In films such as *Sasura Bada Paisewala* and *Rangbaz Daroga* it is the young heroine who unabashedly makes overtures. She sings of her longing, much in the manner of the traditional *nayika* (heroine) of both folk and Sanskrit drama, and the camera lingeringly depicts her attractions. Even a 'clean' family film like *Nadiya ke Paar* has a nubile village belle making a play for the hero, and a sharp tongued, attractive village woman who flirts with the middle-aged widower, the hero's uncle.

The point of view is always that of the man's; the gaze is that of the voyeur; the male spectator is invited to view the woman as an object of desire and a trophy to be won. There are scenes in which the hero is literally a peeping tom (as in *Nirahua Rickshawala*), and along with the child actor, peers through the keyhole at the heroine in her room, while the audience derives as much voyeuristic pleasure as does the protagonist.

Family Reigns Supreme

Every film underscores the importance of family and kinship. Unquestioning obedience to parents, especially in matters of marriage, is the norm rather than the aberration. In *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho*, the hero says to his mother, 'Why didn't you ask me before fixing my marriage?' She retorts, 'Did I give birth to you after seeking your permission? Did I rear you after you had granted me permission?' Right from *Nadiya Ke Paar* in the 1980s to *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho* in 2009, the heroine almost always stitches up her mouth, swallows her pride, sacrifices her desires to save the family honour, and marries against her wishes to please her parents. Much is made of the mother-son, sister-brother, brother-in-law and sister-in-law relationship. The heroine of *Kanyadaan* acquiesces to her marriage with a cowardly man at the behest of her step-mother; *Nirahua Rickshawala* is not just the breadwinner in the family, but also the protector of his widowed sister-in-law and surrogate father to his nephew; in *Sasura Bada Paisewala*, the hero's elder brother swallows all insults in order to ensure his brother's happiness. At times, a half-hearted plea is put forward for consideration: for example, when a woman caught in the crossfire between two warring men, each of whom stakes a claim over her life, is in a pitiable condition (*Nirahua Rickshawala*). But in the final analysis, it is the family that is privileged over the individual; personal interests are always subordinated to the welfare of the *parivar* (family), and by extension, the *biradari* (community) and the *samaj* (society). The films reinforce the close bonds between kinsfolk, the unquestioning obedience to elders, the respect accorded to the patriarch, that are the brick and mortar of the essentially communal Bhojpuri ethos. Considerable pride is taken in sacrificing individual desires in deference to the requirements of the family. In a staunchly feudal and agrarian set up, kinship amongst brothers and amongst members of a community is of fundamental importance for social and economic survival. In an alien society, it is this very network of relationships that enables the migrants to hold on to their moorings when faced with the onslaughts of a bewilderingly dissimilar culture.

Heralding Change... Tentatively

Attempts at reform are limited to safe issues unlikely to invite opprobrium: dowry, domestic violence, marrying for love. Change is embraced cautiously and always within the framework of conventionality.

The film *Nirahua Rickshawala* underscores the reformist message that times are changing—one can't take the law into one's own hands, eve teasing cannot be condoned, the difference between high and low status (caste is never overtly referred to, but hinted at) is now being obliterated. But the old order prevails. The *vidhayak* (Member of Legislative Assembly) thunders out in anger '*chamdi sunder lapetne se pagdi na bane*' (if you wrap leather beautifully around your head, it does not necessarily turn into a turban, a symbol of upper caste male supremacy).³

Again, *Devaa* may seem to have a reform agenda, but it stays strictly within the norms acceptable to its viewers. The widow is a virgin. Her husband having died in an accident on her wedding night, the marriage has remained unconsummated. She is considered inauspicious, decries her fate, and prefers death to dishonour; all her notions thus being an integral part of the community's general bank of beliefs.

In *Rangbaz Daroga* all the women, including the sister of the wayward bully, (she is a victim of dowry harassment, and her brother has turned to crime to preserve her honour and the family name), are beaten down by a social system that gives men absolute control of their lives. The hero threatens her avaricious husband, shaming and scaring him into accepting the wife he has ill-treated in the past.

In yet another multi starrer, *Hum Bahubali*, tiny sparks of rebellion augur change. The elder brother's willingness to go out on a limb for his lady love at the risk of his father's wrath and the younger brother's desire to make it big as a singer (a profession considered taboo for the well-heeled upper classes), are harbingers of the change that the 'Bhojpuriya' youth wish to see. The film reflects the changing hues of a society impatient to clamber up to the level of the 'modern' Indian metros.

In many of the recent releases the heroine is bold enough to question meaningless customs (*Nirahua Rickshawala*) and is an educated, working girl who protests against parental arbitrariness in matchmaking (*Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho*). In *Bhumiputra*, the courageous heroine is a police inspector and her spirited mother works for the railways. It needs to be noted, however, that these women are shown to be Maharashtrian, not natives of UP or Bihar. They are true-blue Mumbaikars, whose ways are *sehari* (of the city). In *Kanyadaan*, when the daughter proves her worth by turning the tables against her father's tormentors and restoring his dignity, a clear message is sent out to audiences who privilege male progeny over the girl child. These signs of change are balanced with conventional dialogues to appease conservative patrons. For instance, the feisty girl in *Tohar Naikhe Kavno Jod Tu Bejod Badu Ho* eventually succumbs to emotional blackmail by her uncle, and once married, she even advises her errant, prodigal cousin that her father knows best, and would never take a decision that would harm his daughter. This behaviour seems only a sop for the older generation, for, in the film, the very same man denies his daughter permission to marry her paramour, for a reason that appears outmoded to the present generation.

As always, the reformist message is not belted out stridently. Hence we see that girls may seek to work in offices and want an education, but family honour is not compromised. They may be modern enough to be employed, but are traditional enough to censure their cousins for wearing clothes that are unbecoming of women from respectable families. An uneasy balance is thus attempted—precarious, but necessary, given the diverse sensibilities being catered to. The younger generation must identify with the young protagonists, but the older audiences must not be alienated by aggressive advocacy of women's emancipation. In *Kanyadaan*, a family friend's daughter is training to be a pilot and there are references to women like Kiran Bedi and Kalpana Chawla, who have done the nation proud. But the average girl

is still expected to be the dutiful, a submissive daughter and daughter-in-law, confined within the pale of the *lakshman rekha* (boundary) drawn for her by parents and affines.

Subjugation of the ‘White’/‘Modern’ Woman

The current spate of successful Bhojpuri films has led to greater financial investment in the genre (Ghosh 2010), which in turn, has led to several recent films adding song sequences shot in exotic foreign locales to the narrative (*Kab Hoi Gawana Hamar*). Eager to shed its rustic image and remain in step with the growing self-esteem and aspirations of migrants, the Bhojpuri industry is wooing foreign talent as well. *Firangi Dulhaniya* (Foreign Bride), a Bhojpuri film featuring Tanya, a model-turned-actress from Ukraine, was released in 2005. A landmark in Bhojpuri cinema, it had viewers flocking to the theatres, as it was the first Bhojpuri movie featuring a foreign actor (Sahay 2005).⁴

This is in line with a trend in Bhojpuri cinema and music videos that portrays urbanized and/or western women being totally in thrall of the hero with a ‘Bhojpuriya’ heart. The men in these films are repeatedly depicted as embodiments of authority, always in control of women’s sexuality and their lives, which is an accurate reflection of the realities of a patriarchal setup. There is a deliberate attempt to demolish the stereotype of the gauche country bumpkin, ill at ease in the presence of aggressive femininity, and to reconfigure the perception of inadequacy that plagues the rustic from the hinterland (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*, *Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Bhumiputra*). The hero now cavorts around with ‘white-skinned’ heroines and junior artistes, who by their vulnerability to his charms, buttress not just the Bhojpuri man’s identity, but his new global persona and presence.

Interestingly, in his studies of Chinese popular soap operas produced in the nineties, Sheldon H. Lu (2000) indicates how issues of cultural identity loom large in the age of trans-nationalism and globalization. He analyzes the political dynamics underlying representations on television of romantic relationships between Chinese men, and Russian and American women. Frequently, Chinese men are depicted as successfully winning over white women, whether American or Russian. An aggressive and confident image of Chinese masculinity is constructed through the foreign woman in the ‘global cultural imaginary’.

Lu describes the ways in which ‘foreign women are the “subalterns”, subject to the men’s gaze and desire’ (2000, p. 35). The subjugation of white female sexuality is the direct outcome of deep seated masculine insecurity, while the male conquest of the ‘other’ woman is ‘a defense mechanism’. He refers to Frantz Fanon (pp. 41–42), who in his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), speaks of the psychosexual dynamics that underpin the black man’s need to be loved like a white man in order to overcome his feelings of inadequacy. Likewise, by conquering the modern, anglicized, urban young woman and reducing her to a submissive, ‘tame’, domesticated girl besotted by his masculine charm, the hero of popular Bhojpuri films is able to reaffirm his manhood. He alone, among all his friends and compatriots is not intimidated by the glamour and confidence of the city-bred girl; his irresistible looks, the goodness of his heart, all reduce her to putty. The ‘masculinist, patriarchal discourse’ is fortified, the predominantly male audiences of Bhojpuri cinema have their ‘collective ego’ bolstered, while their unarticulated feelings of insecurity are assuaged by the vicarious satisfaction derived from the socially superior woman’s subjugation by the rustic hero. As in the Chinese context, the relationship between race, refinement and sexuality is foregrounded, since in popular perception the migrant’s North Indian

persona is frequently seen as lacking in sophistication. The white woman, or her *desi* counterpart, the 'modern' Indian girl, is thus transmogrified from 'an object of the gaze' into an achievable object of desire, one who also serves as 'a vehicle for the self-aggrandizement of the male ego' (Lu 2000). Thus do media assist in fashioning a new identity that is air brushed and divested of its rough edges, even as they churn out tales of wish fulfilment.

The City vs. the Village

Thus we see that the Bhojpuri film, modern day mutant of the *nautanki*, retains the flexibility as well as the distinctive features that allow it to lend the flavour of the folk form to its celluloid projections. Further, it faithfully interpolates imagery and issues that reflect the transformation wrought by urbanization.

Tripathy and Verma draw attention to the fact that Bhojpuri cinema handles the theme of urbanism in a manner very different from today's Hindi cinema, so that 'the rural urban tension is its main staple as also the unchanging backdrop for all its narratives' (2011, p. 104). The contrast between the Hindi heartland and the westernized urban ethos is sustained throughout. The films also reflect the yearnings of the quasi-literate migrants: the heroes speak English, are 'first class first' (*Nirahua Rickshawala*, *Sasura Bada Paisewala*) and possess every quality that the Bhojpuri viewers aspire to in order to gain an edge in an urban setting. The educated hero plies a rickshaw to earn a living in both the films mentioned above; a fact that immediately strikes a chord in the large percentage of rickshaw drivers/pullers among the migrant population.

The films are punctuated with songs, redolent of the folk music of the north. The sequences are typically drawn from the everyday life of village folk—for instance, a toddy drinking session with a drag queen dancing to a raunchy number (*Sasura Bada Paisewala*), or a boisterous bunch of village youth singing to a bevy of passing beauties (*Devaa*). The double entendre in the dialogues and lyrics are hugely entertaining to the all male audience. Wedding rituals and festivities are depicted at length and are peppered with traditional folk songs. The reinforcement of exemplary love between members of a joint family underpins all the films. The message is driven home that the family and its honour, kinship and its obligations override all other considerations. Duty to the extended family, self sacrifice and adherence to the norms of the community are of paramount importance. In short, all attempts are made to recreate the social setup left behind in UP and Bihar, so that the sights and sounds of the home state, the reassuring 'Bhojpuriya' way of life, are always available at a 'sanima hall' (cinema hall) in the host city.

The setting and the backdrop are carefully constructed to reflect *ghar* (home) as the North Indian migrant remembers it. The walls and doorsteps of the houses depicted are decorated with traditional motifs; the sacred *tulsi* (basil) plant is ever present in the *aangan* (courtyard); open fields, cattle shed, the village well; the bucolic ambience is faithfully recreated. The films may not always present an accurate and authentic picture of the lives of common people (for media offerings acquire saleability only when images are enhanced), but they certainly do tap into their need for familiar sights and sounds from their home state; and when offered in the language they speak, the impact on the migrants' imaginary is both reassuring and empowering. The ubiquitous presence of mobile phones, motorcycles and sleek four wheelers, an occasional computer in an urban office setting are further affirmations of the fact that the 'Bhojpuriya' identity comfortably straddles both worlds—that of the rustic at heart who is at home with the accoutrements of the twenty-first century.

Bhojpuri cinema is thus a manifestation of popular culture that impacts the process of identity formation among the North Indian migrants in Kandivali (east), Mumbai. It offers insights into the manner in which the media consolidate the migrants' connect with the home states by creating aspirational images and role models, cobbling together remnants of their cultural memory with newly acquired understanding of the metropolis. The study supports the argument that films do not simply project identities that already exist; they construct and consolidate identities that match the varied needs of people on different points on the socio-economic axis. Media discourses create the concept of what it means to be a 'Bhojpuriya', interpellating their subjects so as to reflect what is of significance to them.

Notes

1. Significantly, many popular films of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were also performed as *nautanki* on stage. Warij (1984) mentions *Dhool ka Phool*, *Nagin* and *Nau Do Gyarah* as belonging to this category. This is a clear indication of the symbiotic relationship existing between folk theatre and its modern day cinematic incarnation.
2. In parts of Bihar and UP, owing to 'wide spread unemployment, underdevelopment, poverty, the continuing feudal order and growing cases of corruption among local politicians and bureaucrats, combined with socio-political and economic disparities, nexus between landowners and the police, tussle over political domination and caste and class conflicts... violence is gradually becoming a common strategy' (Hindwan 2010).
3. Distinctions based on *varna* (class), *jaati* (caste) and traditional perceptions about *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* continue to hold sway in Bhojpuri society (Rai & Singh 1999); this is 'a divisive-caste society' (Tripathy & Verma 2011), although in the metros these rigid categorizations are constantly under attack and the lines separating them are often blurred.
4. Ukrainian model Tanya plays a Russian girl in love with a Bihari boy in *Firangi Dulhania*. 24-year-old Cambridge-educated British actress Jessica Bath too has signed for Bhojpuri films (Tewary 2005).

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