

# Music for the Migrant's Soul: Blending the Traditional with the Topical...

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the Bhojpuri music industry is catering to the needs of north Indian migrants in Mumbai, India. Bhojpuri is the dialect spoken by large numbers in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The influx of Bhojpuri speaking migrants to different parts of India has led to a demand for music that helps them remain anchored to their region. This study examines the content of music videos, CDs and cassettes, to show how tropes from the collective memory of migrants are embossed in the lyrics, while their aspirations are interwoven with an idyllic image of the home states. Ribaldry, folk music and topical issues are melded to create a familiar world. The result is a distillate of the region's socio-cultural values. Meanwhile, the industry is creating a global identity for the migrants, connecting them to Bhojpuri diaspora across the world.

## KEY WORDS

migrants; music industry; regional roots; identity; Bhojpuri

The middle-aged swain gyrates to the accompaniment of a raunchy beat and croons to his lady love: *Navka yug ke hain deewana, Tohar lehenga utha dem remote se* (I am the new age lover; I shall use a remote to lift your long skirt). He presses a knob on a remote control device... lo and behold! In a scene that smacks of the surreal, the long, voluminous skirt of the heroine is lifted above her knees. As she recoils in mock horror and struggles to keep her modesty intact, the all-male audience in the cinema theatre erupts in a roar of approval. It is 2012 in Mumbai, India. The men are Bhojpuri speaking migrant workers who have gathered in a run-down theatre to watch an action-romance starring Ravi Kishen and Naghma, a popular screen pair.

The audience's enjoyment of these media offerings owes much to the cultural bereavement they experience when severed from their rustic moorings. A complex web of socio-economic factors has led to an influx of people from the two north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar to different parts of India in search of a livelihood. This in turn has fuelled an upsurge in the demand for music in Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi), the lingua franca of this migrant population. While the songs in contemporary Hindi cinema (also known as Bollywood) have increasingly started catering to the tastes of urban audiences, the song and dance sequences in regional language cinemas in India retain some semblance of 'regional specificity' (Shresthova 2004, 91) and therefore continue to remain an expression of identity.

Songs in Indian cinema have not merely been used to evoke the element of fantasy, but as expressions of everyday emotions and situations, for ‘music contributes a vital ingredient in the cultural reconstruct of emotion’ (Chatterji 1999, online). Music and dance become a form of ‘cultural memory’ (Shresthova 2004, 100) in language specific cinema, and interruptions in the form of songs and dances are crucial components of an alternative narrative system (Gopalan 2002, 18). Because notions of community permeate cultural practices, regional music and dance evoke strong nostalgia among geographically dislocated people. Mishra (2002, 237) describes how Bollywood films have ‘become mediators of “key translatable signs”, that are crucial in bringing the “homeland” into the diaspora, as well as creating a culture of imaginary solidarity across the heterogeneous linguistic and national groups’. Similarly, the music in Bhojpuri films and video CDs facilitates the expression of perceived cultural similarities for this internal diaspora<sup>1</sup>.

Tripathy and Verma (2011, 107) cite the results of a pilot study at the Asian Development Research Institute, Patna, to indicate the ‘centrality of vernacular music’ in the everyday lives of the Bhojpuri speaking populace. While ‘Bhojpuri cinema with its fourth-fifth rank among regional cinemas in India is seen as the public face of Bhojpuri, the Bhojpuri music industry forms its real muscle, blood and bones [...] the Bhojpuri / Maithili / Magahi music industry is at least ten times the size of the Bhojpuri cinema industry’ and ‘the live show industry with the CD technology at its core [...] spread over small and big towns and the remotest villages [is] at least ten times bigger than the CD industry’ (Tripathy & Verma 2011, 106). Filmmaker Surabhi Sharma’s documentary *Bidesiya in Bumbai* (2013) demonstrates how Bhojpuri music is ‘more than just a cultural artefact. It is now viewed as a carrier and capsule of that very culture from which it emerges.’ (Gupta 2013)

This study is embedded in research that explores the role of Bhojpuri media in nurturing and nourishing the imagination of north Indian migrants in Kandivali east, a suburb in the northern stretch of Mumbai, that has large habitations of migrants from UP and Bihar.<sup>2</sup> The paper endeavours to show how ribaldry, rituals, folk themes and contemporary issues are melded in popular Bhojpuri music to create a world that is reassuringly familiar to the migrants in Mumbai. It examines how the purveyors of Bhojpuri music fuse the traditional with the topical to remain in tune with the sensibilities of the present generation. Research methods employed for the study included a combination of content analyses, observation, and in-depth interviews with research participants. The respondents included 37 north Indian migrants residing in Kandivali east, as well as 7 media executives. The research also included a survey through a questionnaire to understand media preferences and viewing habits of a small, but focused sample.

The selection of 25 music videos, CDs and music cassettes<sup>3</sup> for content analyses was based on the data gathered through the survey and the interviews, as well as the information

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<sup>1</sup> Internal diaspora are members of a group who, in search of better opportunities, have voluntarily left their homeland for different regions under the same government (Arbaji 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The Mumbai Human Development Report published by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) along with the United Nations Development Programme, states that according to the 2001 census, 24.3% of the migrants in Mumbai are from Uttar Pradesh. As against this, the percentage of Biharis entering the city stands at 3.5 (Siddhaye 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The songs selected are from the albums *Bagalwali* (2009); *Purab ke Beta* (2009); *Miss Call Mareli* (2008) and *Jaalidaar Kurti* (2007) sung by the popular singers Manoj Tiwari, Dinesh Lal Yadav, Pawan Singh, Kalpana and Sharada Singh. Some have been accessed through youtube.

obtained from secondary sources such as books, newspaper articles and the film trade magazine *Bhojpuri City*.<sup>4</sup> Selected media products were examined in order to identify formulaic plots, structures, stereotypical characters, recurrent themes, iconography and setting. Relationships and patterns were identified not just in cultural artefacts but also in the responses of the research participants. Throughout, the focus was on the intentionality and the implications of the media messages. In tune with Dermot McKeone's (1995) definition of Open Analysis, dominant messages were identified in the subject matter of the cultural texts to assess whether recurrent patterns and motifs in them reinforce notions of the 'Bhojpuri' identity amongst migrants. The interpretations drawn from the content analyses of cultural texts were further corroborated by the interviews and the results of the survey. When describing the representation of social mores, attitudes and issues related to cultural identity, a descriptive research design was employed, whereas an exploratory design was adopted when open-ended questions were asked to elicit responses on the migrants' media practices. The findings are reported below in the form of a narrative that groups observations under recurrent themes which embody the core beliefs of the Bhojpuri sensibility.

### 'Eve-teasing'

Bhojpuri songs and music videos exemplify the multiple ways in which folk themes are appropriated in popular Indian culture, ensuring a seamless connect with traditions. Pauwels (2010) describes how movies have employed folk and mythological material by focusing on *panaghat-lila*, the term used to describe the mischievous antics of the Hindu god *Krishna* on the banks of the river *Yamuna*. Krishna sported with the milkmaids (*gopis*), waylaying them as they returned after filling their pots from the river, in the rustic, idyllic setting of *Brajbhumi* in Uttar Pradesh. In literature as well as in folk art, such capers are often depicted as harmless flirtation, redolent as they are of *panaghat-lila*. It is noteworthy that 'eve-teasing' is the peculiarly Indian euphemism for forms of sexual harassment that could range from sexually loaded "appreciative" comments to actually affronting the dignity of a woman, and even outraging her modesty. (The phenomenon has been attributed to the rising socio-economic disparity and resultant class and cultural conflict in Indian society. The problem is further compounded by the patriarchal mind-set that views "liberated" women in western wear as easily "available"<sup>5</sup>). The entire situation is imbued with the belief that such youthful play is most natural; men tease, and women delight in being teased. Even as they appear to disapprove and complain, they actually are pleased to receive attention from men. Pauwels observes

There is a set of assumptions about women's subjectivity: that women enjoy eve-teasing, even ask for it, just by appearing in a public space; that when they say 'no', they actually mean 'yes', proven by the fact that they do not really protest it so they must actually like it (2010, 2).

The devotional poetry of the sixteenth-century poet Surdas, as well as the folk songs of the region, describe how Krishna breaks the water pots of the milkmaids and makes overtures to them; however such is the enchantment of the dark-skinned god that they are in his thrall. They miss his pranks when he is away, pine for him and eagerly hasten for secret

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<sup>4</sup> *Bhojpuri City* is a film trade magazine published by Nouveau Multimedia Ltd. in Andheri, Mumbai. Kishen Khadaria is the founder and editor.

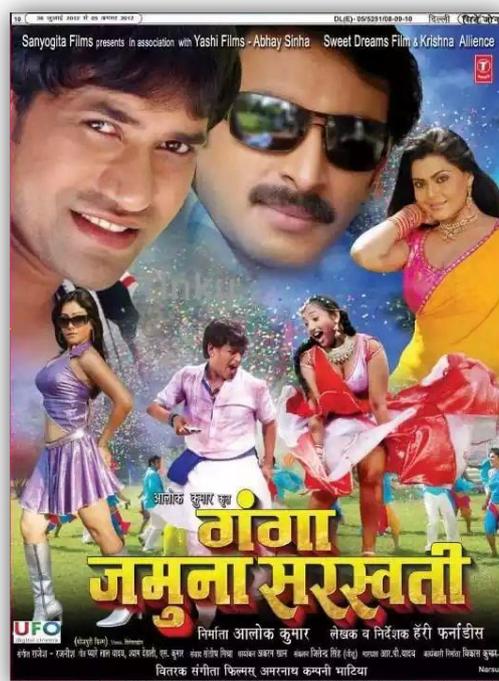
<sup>5</sup> Bunch states that 'in developing countries, violent practices against women are often recognized and defended as strands of the cultural weave' (1997, 43).

assignments with him, abandoning fears of compromising their name and the family honour, unaffected by the norms governing the behaviour of women in a patriarchal setup. Significantly, the god Krishna is never to blame... for the women's complaints conceal their actual enjoyment of these experiences. 'What is striking is that the desire for the harassment is squarely located within the women' (Pauwels 2010, 9). These perceptions, are deeply embedded in the psyche of both men and women. Whether in a dream sequence, or in his actual attempts to woo the damsel, the hero feels free to harass the heroine. It is the custom approved ritual of romance that immediately finds acceptance among the primarily male audience of Bhojpuri cinema and music videos. The identification of Krishna with the eve-teaser absolves the latter of all blame. As always, voyeuristic pleasure is on offer, but the sequence is contextualized differently: the cavorting hero and his beloved have societal sanction because their love will culminate in marriage. The eve-teasing song sequence is therefore stock-in-trade of all Bhojpuri films. The sizzling number usually has ribald lyrics, for the purpose is to tantalize the men in the film, and of course, in the audience. Songs which depict good humoured badinage between the sexes are a huge hit. Film makers find it extremely convenient to use the eve-teasing situation because it lends itself to innumerable depictions of sexual relationships. Moreover, it ensures commercial success without drawing flak for obscenity. Besides, such is the power of the theme's association with Krishna's playful pranks that it resonates even today in the collective imagination of all Indians, not just the speakers of Bhojpuri. The theme of eve-teasing is turned on its head when the girl transgresses societal boundaries, is unabashedly wanton, and challenges the hero to prove his masculinity. He flinches in mock disapprobation, playfully suggesting that she refrain from physical demonstrations till after the knot has been tied (for instance, in the song *Chumma se chalina kaam* which, when loosely translated, means 'a kiss will not suffice'). She is admonished not to forget *lokraj* (shame of public opprobrium) or compromise her family *izzat* (honour). The very same belief set that celebrates frolicking in men is quick to place the onus of maintaining decorum on the woman's shoulders.

The earthy metaphors in the folksongs of north India have often veered towards the martial (phallus symbols such as the bow and arrow, loaded pistol). However today, the analogies are drawn from contemporary themes, and life in the metro cities. The lyrics wax eloquent at the beauty of women, using the most innovative, and often risqué imagery to convey the intensity of the woman's impact on the beholder. So the nymph looks like a delectable "lollipop" as she shimmies (*Lollipop Lagelu*); the lady love's lipstick can shake up the *distik* (district); she whizzes past on a mo-ped, this *Saher ki Titli* (the city butterfly), lightning strikes wherever she goes; the girlfriend is like a 'Safari' jeep or a 'Ranger' bicycle and looks like 'danger' (from the music album *Ei Pinky*); in the song *Jeans dhilakar* (loosen your jeans), her beauty is like *Gangaji ki Leheren* (the waves of the river Ganges).<sup>6</sup> The damsel gives the hero a missed call, blowing a kiss into her mobile phone (*Missed Call Mare*). The mobile phone is of course, almost a constant – having entered the far reaches of India. Tripathy (2012, 64) points out that the success of a song based on missed calls has spawned a series of songs woven around small-town romance in the context of cell phone technology. However, the incorporation of contemporary technology and symbols of westernisation are not to be taken as adulterations of traditional media (Narayan 1993). This, in fact, is one of the many ways that folk and modern media have coalesced, thus maintaining an unbroken continuity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ganga* is the most common word in Bhojpuri film titles, having figured in over 25 movies (Ghosh 2010); a clear indication that the sacred river Ganges that flows through UP and Bihar has a special place in the Bhojpuri psyche.



Publicity poster for Bhojpuri film *Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati* (2012)  
 Courtesy: Harry Fernandes, writer and director of the film.

### ‘Englis-ispeaking’<sup>7</sup>- the Mark of Modernity

A major source of anxiety for the migrant in Mumbai is his inability to speak in English; hence the multiplicity of songs peppered with English words – all reflective of the desire to be seen as one comfortable with the language of upward mobility<sup>8</sup>. The young bride fondly remembers the way her husband used to address her as ‘darling’ (*Bulawa kahin ke darling saiyan hamar*); the hero rues having said ‘I love you’ to his beloved (*Upar wali ke chakkar mein*); popular singer-actor Manoj Tiwari speaks of ‘feel good’, and taunts those who quaff pepsicola ‘in style’ (*Style Mara Tiya*); a father boasts that his son has taken admission in Master of Arts, and will now appear for a competitive exam (*Bachwa hamar M.A. mein lekar admission competition deta*). The ‘English speaking’ aspirations of the Bhojpuri masses are in evidence when singer Kalpana croons *Dekh Hamari sexy figure Kahe kareja phatla, babua rahiyo tanik ‘cool’* (Why does your heart burst on seeing my sexy figure? Dear, stay ‘cool’). The Bhojpuri viewers happily straddle two worlds: switching from folk tunes to ‘Bollywood style’ fusion music. The writing on the wall is, ‘We can be rustic and raunchy, even as we flaunt our new found comfort level with all that is “western” and modish in the metros’.

<sup>7</sup> The word ‘English’ is pronounced by many north Indian migrants as ‘Englis’. It is also common for unlettered Bhojpuri speakers to say ‘ispeaking’ (as in the word ‘isthmus’) when uttering English words that begin with ‘s’. For instance, ‘school’ becomes ‘ischool’, ‘smile’ becomes ‘ismile’.

<sup>8</sup> In India, the ‘formal perpetuation of English was merely a reflection of post-independence India being a linguistic extension of the colonial period. English continues to be the language of the elite and is indeed more entrenched than ever, partly due to the demands of modernization and globalization.’ (Khare 2002, 4993)

## 'Devar-Bhabi' Dynamics

A perennial favourite is the song that depicts the raillery between two affinal relatives. In her study of *Nautanki*, the folk theatre of north India, Hansen (1992) explains that the closeness between the husband's younger brother (*devar*) and his sister in law (*bhabhi*), has been termed by anthropologists as a 'joking relationship' in north India. They are each other's confidants, and the relationship often borders on intimacy. Generally of the same age or a little younger, the brother-in-law in a patriarchal, feudal setup is often the *bhabhi's* best friend. While the husband is away earning a living, the young brother-in-law's meals are often provided by the *bhabhi* who takes charge of the kitchen. He teases her, banters endlessly with her, indulges her, willingly puts up with her occasional tantrums, and is supposed to respect her just as Lord *Rama's* brother *Lakshmana* deified his sister-in-law *Sita*.<sup>9</sup> In everyday practice however, if the age difference is negligible, the *bhabhi* and the *devar* are co-conspirators against the elderly in the household. Folk theatre and music across north India abound in references to this relationship. Warij (1984, 12) describes how in folk drama, the sister-in-law attempts to seduce her unmarried *devar* with arch comments replete with symbols such as a river in spate and a loaded pistol:

*Madh Joban ka Mrig khada hai, Bhar Pistaul maariye*  
*Ishque nadi Mallah ban, Nauka paar Taariye*  
 (The deer of heady youthfulness stands yonder, fire the loaded pistol,  
 Love is like a river, be the boatman and steer the boat to the shore).

The modern day representations of these folk songs are seen in music videos such as '*Kaanche Kasaili ke* (the taste of raw betel nuts) and *Devra mud garam kare* (brother-in-law heats up my mood). Though the metaphors keep pace with the telecom revolution, they are equally suggestive. The underlying message is unequivocal: the *bhabhi* may feign anger and exasperation, but she is secretly flattered, and more than willing. In one of the songs by the singer Guddu Rangila, the *devar* pleads with his elder brother to return from the *rajdhani* (capital city), for his *bhabhi* can no longer stand the separation; while yet another has the *bhabhi* empathising with a love-lorn *devar* who claims he is suffering from 'lovlitis' (afflicted by love).

## The Item Song

The badinage between the *devar* and *bhabhi* may serve as an entertaining diversion, but the item number, a stand-alone performance, is the *piece de resistance*. Rita Brara (2010, 67) describes it as 'a cine-segment comprising an item-girl / boy, a racy song, a vivacious dance and a surround of erotic and immanent exuberance [that recreates] the cinesexual in social life' allowing the audience to override the constraints of repressive societal injunctions, and take pleasure in 'transgression and excess through the cinematic medium'. The item number draws from a medley of dance forms, blending popular western styles with folk and classical, to create a *mélange* that is typical of Indian films. She traces the genealogy of the item number, showing how it 'reworks the performance traditions of India such as the *nautanki*' (Brara 2010, 69), which presents similar self-contained song and dance performances. The term "item" figures in the menu card of eateries, and generally denotes a "dish" that is spicy

<sup>9</sup> *Rama* is an *Avatar* [incarnation] of Lord Vishnu and the *Ramayana* is a story that projects the Hindu ideals of life. *Rama* is the perfect man, *Sita* is the perfect wife, and *Lakshmana* is the perfect brother... The original text of the *Ramayana* was written in [...] Sanskrit language (Vishwanathan, 1998,79)

and tempting; the kind of food unlikely to be served at home. The dancer is thus commodified into an item to be devoured with the eyes through the ‘intersemiotic associations between these domains’ of food and sex (Brara 2010, 68-69). In the item song a voluptuous woman dances suggestively, while the hero matches her dance movements with his own. The locale could be a dance bar, a *nautch* girl’s boudoir, a *nautanki* performance, or a wedding celebration. The audience is always comprised of men, inebriated and slaving; the hero remains unmoved; his imperturbability reminiscent of the legendary ascetics whose penance was disrupted by *apsaras* (celestial nymphs in Hindu mythology). The woman here is sexually aggressive, and often seen in western apparel, a fact that underscores yet another area of anxiety: the disquieting presence of the “modern”, city-bred Indian woman.

Avijit Ghosh (2010) points out that the essentially conservative audiences for Bhojpuri media offerings accept ribaldry because it is a part of the folk tradition, but are uncomfortable with nudity or explicit scenes. This accounts for the abundance of titillation, but the surprising absence of open depiction of physical intimacy. Most songs do not go beyond the hero / heroine demanding a kiss (*Eego Chumma de da Rajaji*), although the camera does play voyeur and there is a considerable degree of exposure of the female anatomy.

### Reinforcing Regional Roots

The songs underscore the social and cultural mores of the region, subtly reinforcing norms that underpin the Bhojpuri way of life. However, in the wake of agitations stoked by identity politics in Mumbai, north Indian solidarity is being espoused aggressively by lyrics that take on the host population. A case in point is the music video *Hum Bihari* (from the album *Purab ke Beta*, 2009)<sup>10</sup>, in which singer Manoj Tiwari challenges a group of rowdies, warning them not to mess with Bihari youth. Further, *International Leetti Chokha*<sup>11</sup>, he sings paeans in praise of *leetti chokha*, a staple dish of wheat-flour cakes and potatoes enjoyed by the rustics in Bihar and UP. The lyrics go on to describe how the spirited forefathers of present day Bhojpuri people, brought up on this strength-enhancing diet, have made their mark in far-away Surinam and Mauritius (*Ihe Khai dada pardada, maati ke saan badhailo ho, Surinam Mauritius Jhanda, Bhojpuriya laharailo ho*).<sup>12</sup> The music industry is thus forging a global identity for the migrants, connecting them to the Bhojpuri diaspora across the world, and reaffirming the community’s cultural distinctiveness.

The Bhojpur region’s folk traditions abound in musical compositions associated with the celebrations that punctuate the Indian calendar. Folk music tends to be collectivist, tied as it is to rural life, where celebrations are communal and songs are sung mainly in groups (Kucharska 2007). In fact, the essential purpose of folk music is to glue individuals into a group for the performance of ritualized functions. The repertoire of all the reputable singers in Bhojpuri, whether it is Manoj Tiwari, Kalpana or Sharda Sinha, includes a range of

<sup>10</sup> *Hum Bihari* is a song by Manoj Tiwari. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8yAY8FEzrs>. Accessed 25 November 2014

<sup>11</sup> Song from the Bhojpuri film *Daroga Babu I Love You* (Police Officer I Love You), 2004. Available at: <http://youtu.be/UiKyYJSv5g4>. Accessed 15 July 2012

<sup>12</sup> In the late 19th and early 20th century indentured labour from the hinterland of Bihar and UP were taken to British and European colonies such as West Indies, Surinam, Mauritius and Fiji. To date, around 200 million people in these lands, descendants of labourers from the Hindi heartland, speak a variation of Bhojpuri. They form a bulk of the patrons for Bhojpuri films and media products.

devotional and ceremonial songs. Live performances by well-known artistes have become an integral part of the *Chhath* celebrations in the settlements of north Indians, to invoke *Surya*, the sun god, and his consort *Chhathi maiya*. Come *Holi* (the festival of colours in spring), and *phagua* folk songs can be heard not just on television, but in locally organized functions. As drumbeats resound to the refrain of *Jogira Sararara*, men in drag dance to the words of ribald compositions belted out by folk singers. In keeping with the importance accorded in India to the marriage ceremony, *lagan geet* (wedding songs) are in high demand. While the jaunty number *Sarpe Sehera* describes a young lad springing up from a sickbed to dance at his best friend's wedding, the traditional song *Sakhi phool lorhe chalu phulawariya* dwells on Lord *Rama's* consort *Sita*, eagerly awaiting her union with her husband. Notably, *rasiya geet* with lyrics such as *Bin Gavne ka* that hark back to another era, are still relevant, for *Gavna*, the practice of sending the young bride to her husband's home after she has attained puberty, is prevalent even today in rural UP and Bihar. In the world of Bhojpuri music, the old and the new, the secular and the devotional, rest cheek by jowl.

### Blending Bollywood with Birha<sup>13</sup>

Popular modes of recreation are a barometer of change, and have always enriched and updated themselves with references to social realities. Since migration is a common socio-economic phenomenon in the Bhojpur region (Rai and Singh, 1999), it is scarcely surprising that *birha* is a hit on the cassette, CD and video circuit. The earliest reference to *birha*, (separation), dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when immediately after marriage, economic compulsions led Bhojpuri youth to leave for the city. The lament of longing among the womenfolk of the village resulted in the birth of *birha*. Even today, migration is the norm, rather than the aberration in the Bhojpuri speaking community, and *birha* continues to hold sway over the hearts of its displaced and dispersed patrons. Mobile technology may have bridged the distance between newly-weds, but the departing worker does leave behind a void in the lives of his people.<sup>14</sup> That is why, even in the age of Bollywood beats, the by-lanes of Kandivali, Mumbai, resonate with Sharda Sinha's rendition of *Koyal bin bagiya na shobhe Raja* (without the cuckoo's voice the garden holds no joy, O my king) as she describes the loneliness of a woman pining for her beloved.

In a large number of folk music traditions across northern India, there are no new melodic compositions;<sup>15</sup> new lyrics are simply set to pre-existing melodies (Marcus, 1992-93). This enables immediate identification of a song as belonging to a particular genre, besides preserving the continuity of the tradition. Tunes are reserved for life-cycle rituals and for specific seasons e.g., *Kajari* for the monsoons and *Sohar* for childbirth. Also, 'melodies are associated with specific castes'<sup>16</sup>: '[...] cowherders, washermen (dhobis), and boatmen all have their own melodies (*biraha and khari biraha, dhobi git, and mallah git, respectively*)

<sup>13</sup>*Birha* is a popular north Indian folk song genre.

<sup>14</sup>Tripathy (2012, 65) draws attention to the psychology of the 'vicarious migrant' who is riven by 'the big emptiness in his household' due to the long absences of loved ones.

<sup>15</sup> In 1886, George Grierson, an official in the British civil service and an avid researcher of North Indian folk music culture, wrote, 'there seems to be a certain stock of melodies readymade, to which the words of every new song must be fitted' (Marcus 1989, cited in Marcus, 1992-93).

<sup>16</sup> 'India has a unique social division, the [endogamous] caste system. Caste is class at a primitive level of production, a religious method of forming social consciousness...' (Kosambi 2009, 59)

[...] Melodies helped reflect and reinforce the caste system, the calendric cycle, life-cycle rituals, gender roles, and communal and regional identity' (Marcus 1992-93,102). However to overcome the threat posed by modern-day music, folk artistes have been skillfully interweaving popular film melodies into a traditional genre like *birha*.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere and in Mumbai today, devotional songs are sung to the tunes of Bollywood chartbusters, and the raunchiness of the original in no way diminishes the pious zeal of the devotees. The amalgam ensures attendance at live performances and speeds up sales of music cassettes. Music thus fashions the migrant's self-image as a member of the 'dynamic North Indian subculture that is both modern and yet intimately linked to its traditional and ancestral roots' (Marcus 1992-93, 108). Drawing upon popular tunes is viewed as an act of empowerment, rather than an act of dilution or subjugation to the dominant culture. Besides, the incorporation of film melodies enables the artistes to weave the aspirations of their audiences into traditional music. Music videos make these performances accessible to migrant populations across the country and beyond.

### Preserving "Little Traditions"

Another reason for the enduring popularity of Bhojpuri music cassettes, especially among the migrants, is the monotonous uniformity of Bollywood music at any given time. Despite its all-pervasive presence, the stylistic similarity of the music that caters to urban audiences often leaves the migrant populace yearning for folksy tunes from north India. Singers like Kalpana, Malini Awasthi and Sharada Sinha, with their throaty renditions of familiar tunes, bring into their homes the robust earthiness of the homeland. The melodies and the singing styles, the mannerisms and the references are imbued with regional flavour. The vocal styles of these folk singers are distinctly different from that of the Bollywood singers; this in itself, serves as 'an identity marker' (Manuel 1991, 190). Moreover, the format employed by the Bhojpuri artistes draws directly upon the fusion of narration and rendition commonly used by folk singers. The singers evoke the context, tell jokes laced with innuendos, and then embark on their songs, thus enveloping the audience in a circle of familiarity. None of the Hindi film songs that top the popularity charts carry this 'appeal of intimacy' (Tripathy & Verma 2011, 112) that Bhojpuri music provides to its consumers.

Despite the technical superiority of Hindi film music, it lacks the 'affirmation of a sense of community, whether on the level of region, caste, class, gender or ethnicity' (Manuel 1991, 190). Conversely, the cassette 'cottage industry' produces and preserves regional 'little traditions'. The low expense of cassette technology enables the cassette companies that had mushroomed after the 1980s to cater to niche, regional markets. They have stepped in to fill up the gap created by the monochromatic Bollywood music. Fundamentally, folk songs with their identifiable melodies, allusions and use of dialect, re-establish the core beliefs of the community. Unerringly, the producers zero in on the tastes of the lower middle-class consumer, being from the same background themselves. The consumer is thus offered the voices of his own community. Manuel points out that the sale of cassettes has helped the

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<sup>17</sup> A case in point is the growing popularity of Chutney Music, the Soca-Samba version of *birha* in the Caribbean Islands. In the mid-nineteenth century, following the migration of people from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to the Caribbean as sugar plantation labourers, the genre witnessed an increase in popularity. The descendants of the labourers who now constitute a sizable population in Caribbean, still love this song genre. (bharatonline.com, n.d.) It has mutated into a variant that retains the pathos of the original, even as it takes on the garb of its new homeland.

'non-filmi' (not typically associated with films) music styles of north India flourish. In the process, relatively new genres of stylized, commercially popular music have arisen. Folk genres are embellished with modern instrumental music and songs in varying regional styles are on offer. In fact, live performances of folk forms like the ever popular *birha*, *Devi Geet* (songs of the Goddess), *Jagaran* (night-long renditions of devotional songs), *Muqabla* (contests) and renditions of epics (*Bhojpuri Ramayan Lav Kush*) by artistes such as Tapeswar Chauhan and Vijendra Giri, (Spicebhojpuri 2012), have flourished alongside the cassette and video industry, invalidating all fears that the traditional art forms would be ousted by the electronic media, and that communal social life would be adversely impacted.

### **Rooted in Bhojpuri Ethos**

Apparel, stage settings and décor, all play a significant role in preserving the value systems associated with cultural identities. In the music videos, the choice of attire for the artistes reflects a similar blend of conventional and contemporary tastes. The men are either attired in traditional wear or in jeans and flashy shirts; but invariably they wrap the '*gamchha*' (a towel of checked cotton material) round their necks, since it is inalienably associated with the Bhojpuri rustic. The women in several of the 'eve-teasing' videos are in jeans / skirts and skimpy bustiers, the apparel associated with the city girl, whose desirability is in direct proportion to her inapproachability. On the other hand, the *bhabhi*, the mothers, sisters, dutiful daughters and wives are always traditionally dressed. The cinematic representations of the rustic milieu are in alignment with the migrants' memories of his native village. The depiction of recognizable rural sights and sounds is juxtaposed with mobile phones and computers, the trappings of new age technology. And it is Bhojpuri music that best projects the north Indian migrant's new persona: it encapsulates not only his emotional attachment to the ethos of his homeland, but also his aspirations in the host city. The end result is an enhanced picture-perfect product. The presentation of this idealized culture is equivalent to 'packaging and performing cultural nostalgia [and] enacting ethnic identity' (Marr Maira 2002, cited in Shreshtova 2004, 97). It serves as the audio-visual version of fusion cuisine: the pungency of home-grown fare remains intact, albeit the Mumbai garnishing lends 'class'!

The study of recurrent patterns and themes in the content of Bhojpuri music thus offers insights into the migrants' continuing engagement with media offerings. The analyses of media products popular with the research participants seems to indicate that the Bhojpuri media are rooted in the ethos, the culture that the north Indian migrants are most easily able to identify with. The urban middle and upper classes may prefer the slick, westernized cinematic renderings of life as it is lived in the metros. But the communities of migrants in Kandivali east draw comfort from the music cassettes and videos that portray the world they are familiar with: a world which reassures, because its values, social stratification and its clearly defined gender roles hark back to what they have left behind. Auto rickshaw and taxi drivers, the working classes, vegetable and milk vendors... these are the people most comfortable with the rustic feel of Bhojpuri media. The research underscores that Bhojpuri music 'belongs to the quasi literate or illiterate masses with access to modern media, whether in small towns or in metropolises among the migrant populations' (Tripathy & Verma 2011, 102-103). It adds 'new dimensions to the construction of migrant identities and the role of former homeland images therein' (Manuel 1997-98,17). Tropes from the collective memory of the migrants are embossed in the lyrics: bonds of kinship, restrictive patriarchal mores, repressed sexuality that manifests itself in innuendos... every facet of the semi-rural society

they have left behind is imbued with nostalgia. ‘The alchemy of love and hate, and the subtler emotions directed at the place of origin and the destination, together form a complex web characterizing the deep ambivalences of a mobile population’ (Tripathy 2007, 146). The educated upper class ‘reacts by disowning, purging and wishing away’ Bhojpuri music, but its appeal lies in the melding of working class aspirations with idyllic images of home. The result is a repackaged distillate of the socio-cultural values of the region; a cultural product that finesses the migrants’ dreams of success in Mumbai’s urban setting whilst anchoring them to the traditions and customs of the Hindi heartland.

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