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Popular music as popular expression in North India and the Bhojpuri region, from cassette culture to VCD culture

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In the 1980s the Indian popular music scene was revolutionized by the advent of audio cassettes that dramatically decentralized production and precipitated the rise of syncretic folk-pop hybrids aimed at diverse regional audiences. In the years around 2000, the new medium of the VCD, or video compact disc, came to exert a similarly prodigious impact, enabling inexpensive popular music recordings marketed to diverse audiences to have visual as well as audio components. Song picturizations came to display a variety of approaches, from low-budget Bollywood imitations to new formats evolving in response to local sensibilities. This article outlines some of these developments, looking in particular at VCD production in North India's Bhojpuri region as a representative case study.

The century-long history of Indian commercial popular music, from the early 1900s to the present, illustrates how control of the means of musical production – especially as conditioned by the nature of the medium itself – dramatically affects music's form, orientation, and associated social practices. The most striking revolution occurred in the 1980s, when the spread of inexpensive audio cassette technology radically democratized and decentralized the music industry, spawning hundreds of 'cottage-cassette' producers who collectively undermined the hegemony hitherto exercised by Bollywood and HMV. In my 1993 study, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, I attempted an expansive socio-musical study of this transformation. In the two decades since I wrote that book, digital technologies have come to largely eclipse cassettes in India, to some extent lending my book the character of a snapshot of a bygone era. The time has come, indeed, for a new monograph, on 'VCD culture,' which could explore the phenomenon in much greater depth than this article attempts to do. In this essay, however, I merely proffer an overview of some of the major developments in the Indian music industry since the 1980s, summing the impact of the cassette boom, and suggesting some effects of the advent of VCD, MP3, and Internet technologies of the last decade. I look in particular at the Bhojpuri popular music scene as a representative case study of a regional folk-pop VCD culture. I argue that digital technologies have largely reinforced the democratizing effects of cassettes while adding distinctive new dimensions.

The cassette revolution in retrospect

The history of the Indian popular music industry can be categorized as a series of stages, each conditioned by patterns of media type, control, and, last but not least, content. The first

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three decades of the twentieth-century would constitute a sort of pre-history, during which a proportionately small but not insignificant infrastructure of record producers and urban phonograph owners was established. If 'commercial popular music' is defined as music whose style can be seen to have evolved in connection with its marketing as a mass mediated commodity, the music disseminated on 78-rpm records during this period would constitute at most an incipient form of popular music. More typical of this era were light-classical *ghazals*, *dadrās*, and short classical items, although pre-composed theater songs would have comprised an important precedent for the filmsongs that emerged in the 1930s. The advent of sound film in that decade inaugurated a new chapter in Indian music and generated a true commercial popular music, in the form of songs whose compositional structure, ensemble accompaniment, and microphone-bred crooning style marked them as products designed for production and dissemination by the mass media. Specifically, the media in question were popular Hindi cinema and the commercial record industry that came to function largely as an appendix to it. While filmsongs could be listened to independently of film, audiences preferred to view them in their cinematic contexts, such that the songs were generally associated with the actors who 'sang' them in lip-sync, and with the scenes in which they were embedded. By the latter 1940s a mature filmsong style, cognate with much of today's output, had emerged, along with the consolidation of an oligopolistic production infrastructure that was dominated by a single record company (Gramco, with the logo HMV), and a small coterie of playback singers and producers. The extraordinary concentration of ownership and production paralleled a degree of linguistic and even stylistic homogeneity, in which a mainstream, corporate-produced Hindi filmsong style tended to marginalize regional-language musics and tastes by superimposing a mass common-denominator product embedded in escapist cinematic fantasies.

The spread of cassette technology in the 1980s precipitated a dramatic restructuring of the Indian music industry, which I will merely summarize here, having discussed it more fully in my *Cassette Culture*. The cassette revolution had commenced in the 1970s in countries like Egypt and Indonesia, but had been delayed in India due to restrictive import regulations. In the 1980s, the relaxation of such curbs and a general liberalization of the economy opened the door to cassettes, which soon replaced vinyl records and undermined the hegemony of HMV/Hindi film music production. Cassettes and cassette players are cheaper and more durable than records and record players, and have simpler power requirements. Perhaps more importantly, cassettes are less expensive to produce than vinyl records. Consequently, while cassettes served to increase dissemination of Hindi film music, they also precipitated the emergence of hundreds of grassroots cassette producers, large and small, whose output largely consisted of regional-language folk and folk-pop musics, aimed at diverse audiences, some of them quite specialized. Many of these audiences – from Vaishno Devi pilgrims to Punjabi truck drivers – had never been targeted before by the oligopolistic, corporate mass media, and now came to constitute lively niche markets. In the process, control of the means of music production became radically democratized and decentralized, and an unprecedented variety of musics came to be represented, disseminated, and in many cases, created by the grassroots cottage-cassette producers orienting their output toward audiences of diverse tastes and backgrounds.

In many respects the cassette revolution generated an extraordinary enrichment of Indian popular music culture. Regional hybrids emerged and flourished, with some artists, like Punjabi singer Gurdas Maan, delighting audiences with dynamic folk-pop songs, at once innovative and grounded in tradition, with artful lyrics on contemporary themes. Members of regional languages, religious sects, and specialized taste cultures previously neglected by the one-size-fits-all Hindi film fare were able for the first time to enjoy

a variety of mass-mediated musics oriented toward their particular sensibilities and preferences. The Indian listener was finally offered genuine alternatives to 'His Master's Voice,' and to the shrill, girlish soprano of Lata Mangeshkar and her sister Asha Bhosle. In some cases, a remarkable revitalization of regional cultures occurred as local songs, narrative ballads, and syncretic hybrids were marketed for the first time in the media. Meanwhile, political parties made good use of cassettes as vehicles for entertaining partisan songs, like those in the 1989 elections, which effectively pilloried Rajiv Gandhi for his corruption and unscrupulous opportunism.

Despite such positive developments, disparaging perspectives on the cassette scene abounded. While a Gurdas Maan might appeal to city sophisticates as well as rustic villagers, educated listeners have tended to bemoan the fact that much, or perhaps even most of the regional-language product consisted of smutty ribald *masala* (literally, "spice") aimed at lower-class men and at young urban migrants torn between traditional notions of honor and shame, on the one hand, and fantasies of glamour and sexual freedom proffered by the entertainment industry on the other. And as for the notion that decentralizing control of the means of production make cassettes a progressive *vox populi*, the most conspicuous and notorious socio-political use of cassettes was by the militant proto-fascist wing of the Hindutva movement, which in the years around 1990 used tapes to disseminate hate-mongering songs and speeches, provoking riots and massacres in which thousands of Muslims perished.

Indian popular music goes digital: From cassettes to CDs and MP3 discs

Since the late 1980s the Indian popular music scene has entered the digital age – unevenly and idiosyncratically, but with prodigious effects. The impact of digital technologies on Indian popular music culture has been diverse and profound, and merits expansive scholarly treatment; this essay will limit itself to a few cursory observations, relating in particular to the core themes of decentralization and democratization.

In India, as elsewhere, the initial presence of digital consumer technology came in the form of music compact discs. By around 1990 CDs had become the dominant audio format in the developed West, replacing both vinyl and audio cassettes. Since that period audio CDs have occupied a stable niche in Indian music culture; however, their fragility and relatively high expense have tended to limit their domain to upper- and middle-class milieus, and to its associated music genres, such as classical music, high-end Hindi pop, and of course, film music. CDs never established much presence in the realm of regional folk-pop hybrids. In effect, CDs, like vinyl records of the early twentieth century, constituted a sort of preliminary stage of a technological revolution.

Instead of standard music CDs, two new digital formats came to dominate the Indian popular music scene, with diverse sorts of effects. One of these is the audio CD containing MP3 files of songs. MP3, as most readers are aware, is a digital audio format in which audio files are compressed without an excessive loss of fidelity; an MP3 disc can contain as many as a hundred songs – several times as much music as a cassette or audio CD, and its audio is considerably superior to that of cassettes. Moreover, its production and duplication costs as well as consumer playback equipment costs are even lower than those of audiocassettes. A typical MP3 disc might retail for the equivalent of around 60 cents (in 2012 US exchange rates). The discs are playable either on a computer or a portable MP3 player available for around \$16. Like cassettes and standard CDs, MP3 CDs are particularly hospitable to (ab)use by pirates. Accordingly, MP3 discs have increasingly come to replace cassettes, and many cassette companies (e.g., 'Gathani Cassettes') have switched to MP3 production,

while retaining their original names. Audiocassettes are still marketed for purchase by consumers who own cassette players, but the diminishing amount of cassettes, relative to digital products, on vendors' shelves strongly suggests that they are going the way of vinyl. MP3 discs can be seen essentially as occupying the place formerly held by cassettes in the market, and being equally conducive to industry decentralization. In that sense their effect has been to reinforce and intensify the democratization and diversification of the music industry that were precipitated in the 1980s by cassettes.

Enter 'VCD culture'

The first decade of the new millennium has witnessed the extraordinary spread of another new medium, the video compact disc or VCD, which, like the DVD, accommodates moving pictures and sound, but is considerably cheaper than a DVD. VCDs, using MPEG compression format, can contain around 75–80 minutes of content. Like the technologies discussed in the previous paragraphs, VCDs have not constituted an entirely new performance format but rather have made this entity less expensive and thus suitable for production and dissemination on an unprecedented scale. In fact, a particularly distinctive feature of VCDs is that despite being a modern digital technology, they are common primarily in the developing world, and especially in association with lower-class genres within those countries. (Due to the ease with which VCDs can be copied, their adoption in the developed West and Japan was actively suppressed by entertainment corporations in the 1990s, during which period the DVD format became more firmly entrenched.)¹

While the music video format per se may not be new, VCD technology has served to stimulate music video production among genres that were never previously marketed in such fashion, including Nigerian *jùjú*, Andean *chicha*, Thai-Malay shadow puppetry, and Cuban *timba*.² Despite their importance in developing-world entertainment industries, the role of VCDs in music culture has only recently begun to be investigated by music scholars.³ Of research outside India, the only specialized studies seen by this author are two regrettably unpublished essays on VCD culture in Indonesia. One, by Philip Yampolsky, presents a comprehensive and cross-culturally applicable typology of possible relations between audio and visual content.⁴ The other, by R. Anderson Sutton, explores Indonesian viewing behavior, the role of pirate production, the relation to music television, and typical picturization conventions, especially the way the video track often consists of a seemingly random pastiche of unrelated scenes and images.

In India, as in Indonesia and some other countries, VCDs exist alongside a number of music-and-video formats – including commercial Bollywood cinema, whose extravagant song-and-dance scenes constitute a precedent, and one sort of model, for VCD productions. Another format is the music video, comprising both Western productions exhibited on MTV and their South Asian counterparts. Music videos, in India as elsewhere, are produced by record companies to promote sales of selected recordings. Finally, the belated deregulation of Indian television in the 1980s led to the emergence of private TV networks featuring live music performances, including 'Indian Idol'-type amateur competitions, often of regional music. Meanwhile, the Internet, and especially YouTube, has become an important site for all such productions, from vintage Bollywood song-and-dance scenes to music television programs like *Juno*.

VCDs spread dramatically in the early 2000s and rapidly replaced cassettes as the preferred medium for commercial popular music consumption, especially among the lower classes. In the process, they became the core of a 'VCD culture' – in many ways akin to the preceding cassette culture – with its own characteristic genres, content conventions,

distribution locales, and consumption practices. One might think that video production costs would significantly impact retail prices, but surprisingly, such has not been the case; rather, VCDs market for roughly the same prices as MP3 discs, typically Rs. 30–50, under a dollar; vendors also rent them for as little as 5 rupees a disc. Thus, for example, a low-end regional popular music VCD might involve a video production cost of the rupee equivalent of around \$1.700, with editing done on a used PC available for \$350. As Tripathy (60) notes, many aspiring singers are obliged to finance their own VCDs, whose production expenses are thus not passed on to the consumer. Further, while cassette duplication is cheap, that of VCDs is even less expensive, with a CD writer available for \$20 and blank discs for around five cents. The finished discs are sold wholesale to shopkeepers for around 10 cents and retail for about 60. Alternately, shopkeepers in centers like New Delhi's Palika Bazar do their own duplication, retailing for widely varying costs depending on customers' skill and tenacity at bargaining. Consumers can listen to the discs on boom boxes, or on portable personal players which sell for around \$16; for basic video viewing, a patch cord can be connected from these units to a black-and-white television, which itself can run off a car battery. VCDs can thus entertain viewers in villages without regular electric power, and where television, if available, might consist of dreary Doordarshan (government-produced) programming. Essentially, video producers have been able to take advantage of desktop production techniques, cheap labor, and the minimal storage requirements of VCDs (marketed in paper or soft acetate sleeves) to produce discs so inexpensively as to make piracy largely unremunerative. While discs can be damaged by being scratched, both they and players are tolerant of dust and high humidity and are generally well-suited to Indian climate and conditions. Like cassettes and MP3 discs, VCDs thus lend themselves well to decentralized, democratic production by diverse regional and religious 'cottage' industries. A VCD production company, indeed, might consist of no more than a producer with a mobile phone, who contracts performers, rents studios, and orders mass duplication of discs, colorful paper labels, and the like. Tripathy quotes a young Bhojpuri singer's account of producing her first VCD, including having to spend Rs. 7000 for the video shoot:

Since we had just enough money to pay for the crew and the girl dancers, we hurried through the shoot and completed it in two days. We hired four girls from the town and four friends of mine filled in for male roles. I got myself some new clothes and tried out some acting. (61)

A typical lower-end producer is 'Sonic Enterprises,' whose headquarters and retail outlet consist of a modest shop in Meena Bazar, the warren of humble stores clustered in front of Old Delhi's majestic Jama Masjid. As the owner explained to me when I visited in 2008, he had been in business since around 1990, first producing cassettes and then switching to VCDs from around 1998. Reflecting how both producers and consumers readily adapt to new media formats, he added, 'And if the medium changes again, then I'll switch along with that.' Sonic's specialty is qawwali; particularly popular in recent years has been child singer Rais Anis. The typical practice is to produce a cassette of an upcoming artist, followed by one or more VCDs if the first venture proves successful. The qawwali 'party' is generally filmed in one day in a studio, singing (in lip-synce to a pre-recorded audio track) in front of a black background suitable for digital editing effects. The latter are done on a computer, adding varied backgrounds and inter-splicing the studio scenes with stock footage of appropriate shrines, celebrations, scenes of Mecca, or Muslim calendar art. The VCDs are then retailed primarily around shrines and mosques, selling especially as souvenirs during *'urs* celebrations. As qawwali is not broadcast much on radio or television, VCDs constitute the genre's primary consumption format: as the owner explained, customers might play the VCD at home, or at work, whether listening to it or watching it. In general, VCDs

are consumed primarily by lower and lower-middle classes. The VCD videos are not shown on television, and aside from VCDs of Bollywood films, there is relatively little overlap between the music they proffer and that heard on the radio.

VCD culture in India exhibits many affinities with counterparts elsewhere in Asia, along with some conspicuous differences, especially as documented by Sutton (n.p.) in relation to Indonesia and Korea. In those countries, many VCDs are designed for karaoke, with the lyrics presented in subtitles, the vocal track capable of being switched off, and the video content often serving as 'wallpaper' that may bear little relation to the soundtrack.⁵ While I hesitate to generalize about India as a whole, I have never encountered Indian karaoke and believe it safe to say that its existence would be marginal at most. A second distinction involves the centrality of piracy to Indonesian VCD production. As Sutton relates, the vast majority of Indonesian VCDs are essentially pirate products, created by producers who add visual content of one sort or another to commercial recordings, without any input or even authorization from the musicians themselves. Again, as far as I have been able to ascertain, this sort of pirate production of original VCDs is foreign to India. Whether or not musicians have any creative input in picturizations, and whether they receive any sort of remuneration for the VCDs, the latter are generally created by 'legitimate' producers either identical to or collaboratively linked to the music producers. (Pirate producers may, of course, market unauthorized duplications of extant VCDs, although legitimate copies are so cheap that their profit margin would be inconsiderable.)

Just as cassettes could reinforce and revitalize diverse, specialized forms of Indian vernacular music, so have VCDs enhanced this trend by adding visual dimensions; thus a regional-language folksong tradition, unprecedentedly disseminated on cassette, may now be marketed with visuals portraying local garb, dances, and scenery. VCDs, like cassettes, are at once appreciated as democratic, decentralized forms of cultural expression while disparaged for their shoddy quality and vulgar orientation.

In other respects, however, the ramifications of music video format inaugurated by VCDs are new. While Bollywood song and dance scenes might constitute a sort of ideal model for many VCD producers, most of the latter operate on shoestring budgets obliging them to be more modest in their picturizations. As might be expected, most VCDs, especially on the lower-budget end, follow what has become a set of familiar norms. A few VCDs present live performance footage, but their quantity is limited by audience's preference for studio-recorded audio tracks. More standard is to have the singers, or more photogenic dancers and models, mouth the lyrics in lip-sync. Hence, a regional-pop video may portray the vocalist 'singing' in various picturesque sites. Often, the video shows the one or two supposed singers cavorting in a park, perhaps while accompanied by dancers gyrating predominantly in Bollywood style, though perhaps with some choreographic elements more typical of regional tradition. Dancers' attire might vary from traditional to contemporary Western, depending on whether the VCD is a 'family-oriented' production or not. Particularly engaging and evocative are the various videos that dramatize lyrics' narrative content, e.g. 'amorous newlyweds chafing under the lack of privacy in their village home.

Appreciation of the role of VCDs in modern Indian culture may be enhanced by a more focused look at a particular representative region, where Bhojpuri Hindi is spoken.

VCDs and Bhojpuri music

India's Bhojpuri region, a linguistic rather than geopolitical entity, straddles western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh and is home to some 70 million people. The Bhojpuri

dialect of Hindi has no status as a literary language, is generally not written at all, and is in formal and especially urban bourgeois contexts marginalized by the North Indian lingua franca of standard Hindi. However, Bhojpuri Hindi, in regional variants, predominates in much rural discourse and has gained new legitimacy through the rise of Bhojpuri cinema and popular music, although the dialect is still strongly redolent of rural discourse.

Most North Indians may have rather mixed images of Bhojpuri culture, associating it with the notorious corruption and backwardness of Bihar, and with the tide of under-educated Bhojpuri migrants who populate slums in Delhi, Kolkata, and other cities. Bhojpuri traditional music, in its diverse forms, is rich, although arguably lacking some of the melodic variety and other features that have attracted international audiences to such genres as *qawwali*, Punjabi *bhangra*, and Rajasthani Langa and Manganhar music.⁶ Bhojpuri folk-pop music, however, has emerged in recent decades as a thriving genre whose appeal has spread to lower-class consumers throughout the Hindi belt.

Bhojpuri commercial popular and folk-pop music can be said to have emerged with the cassette boom of the 1980s. Prior to that era, Bhojpuri music had little mass media presence, aside from local radio broadcasts of folk music and the several dozen Bhojpuri commercial films produced between 1963 and 1981. As such, a distinctive Bhojpuri commercial popular music scarcely existed. With the advent of cassettes, a flourishing market developed for narrative *birha* (see Marcus), tasteful newly composed songs in neo-traditional style by Sharda Sinha and others, and an abundance of playfully erotic '*chat-pate*' ('sweet-salty') fare aimed at lower-class young men (see Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 165–8, 174, 188–9, 233; Rawlley). Although precedents for such ribaldry existed in *nautanki* folk theater and women's songs (such as whimsically abusive *gâli* wedding songs), they came to occupy a disproportionate share of the cassette market. As Rawlley notes,

The young Bhojpuri man in the city, indulging in his new found social and economic independence, was more prone to demand the raunchy album as he explored taboo ideas and chased big city dreams.

Since the years around 2000, the Bhojpuri music scene has undergone a second boom. Television shows like *Junoona* (commencing 2008) offer a considerable amount of artful neo-traditional Bhojpuri music, especially as represented by the honey-voiced, Assamese-born songstress Kalpana Patowary, reigning queen of Bhojpuri song (and of several Bollywood soundtracks), and Manoj Tiwari, a singer of more modest talent. For its part, Bhojpuri cinema has experienced a rebirth, with an exponentially expanded output and audience, although with a *masala* orientation primarily toward lower-class men, and is now enjoyed throughout much of North India.

From around the year 2000, VCDs established themselves in the Bhojpuri region, inaugurating a new era in the region's popular culture. Bhojpuri 'VCD culture,' like its counterparts elsewhere in India, merits intensive scholarly study; my own cursory review here is based primarily on research tangentially conducted in visits to the region in 2008 and 2009, on relevant YouTube postings, and on two insightful articles by Rawlley, and by Tripathy.

As I have suggested above, much of the impact of VCDs, in the Bhojpuri region as elsewhere, has been in the nature of intensifying and reinforcing trends already established by cassette culture. VCDs, like cassettes, are inexpensive, democratic media well suited to production for regional markets. Hence Bhojpuri VCDs are marketed by labels like T-Series, the former fledgling cassette family business that grew into a megalith, medium-sized firms like Ganga Cassettes, and a variety of smaller and often ephemeral local enterprises. Bhojpuri VCDs, like cassettes, have been able to affirm and legitimize

Bhojpuri culture, while effectively creating new dimensions of that culture – whether these dimensions are seen as dynamic enrichments or kitsch and sexist debasements. If cassettes celebrate local culture via dialect, lyric content, and musical style, VCDs enhance that celebration with picturizations of specific or characteristic locales, garments, dance styles, and short skits.

Another development established by cassettes but dramatically intensified by VCDs has been an expansion of the regional entertainment industry as a whole, supplementing the existing network of musicians and producers with miscellaneous models, dancers, cameramen, graphic artists, and computer video editors. As Rawlley notes, a few singers, like Guddu Rangeela, Manoj Tiwari, and Dinesh Lal Yadav, have gone on to become Bhojpuri cinema stars, with Yadav acting in a variety of non-Bhojpuri films as well. But Rawlley also observes that,

Although Bhojpuri media in the form of films, stage performances, television channels, magazines and newspapers and lately online content, continue to grow, the music album [including the VCD] is still the dominant form in which this regional culture is available for mass consumption.

As Tripathy points out, while the VCD and MP3-disc industries appear to be considerably larger in revenues than the Bhojpuri film industry, all three are surpassed by the live-concert circuit. Up-and-coming performers generally expect little or no profit from the sale of VCDs, due to piracy and unremunerative arrangements with producers. In fact, as mentioned above, so many aspiring singers seek to record VCDs and CDs that producers often require them to finance the projects and to sell many of the discs through their own networks. For the artists, the VCDs and CDs are useful primarily as promotional tools to generate live shows, where they will hopefully be showered with tips that may far exceed the engagement's fee (Tripathy 59–61). While most concerts may be small in size, some, whether in the Bhojpuri region or to migrant-worker audiences in Mumbai, can attract as many as 10,000 people.

As song-and-dance picturizations, Bhojpuri VCDs can be seen to draw from a number of sources. Primary among these are the typical song scenes from the numerous Bhojpuri films dating from the 1960s to the years around 1980, after which production essentially ceased. Song scenes in such films, rather than emulating lavish and palatial Bollywood sets, typically depict settings closer to regional and especially rural life, where the protagonist might be shown singing (in lip-sync) with others, perhaps seated, playing *khanjri* frame-drum; or the heroine sings while carrying a clay pot (*gagri*) on her head (as in *Dharti Maiya*'s 'Are re re ee ka' of 1981); or the amorous lovers sing and dance in the fields, typically gyrating in the callisthenic Bollywood studio style rather than the graceful regional style. Other dance scenes are presented as nautanki traveling theater, with the trademark *nagâra* drum-pair typically visible, and less often, audible (as in *Bidesiya*'s 'Hamre Duniya Karela Badnam' of 1963). Lyrics sometimes depict typical themes of rural music, such as the woman pining for her husband who is working far away (as in 'Chadhte faagun jiara gaile' of *Balam Pardesia*, 1979).⁷ In musical terms, many, if not most songs, are in a fairly standard mainstream filmsong style, lacking any particular regional signifiers. Several, however, use typical Bhojpuri folksong features, including characteristic tunes, 7/8 meter, and the responsorial group style that, although not unique to the region, is basic to many genres there.

Bhojpuri cinema, after its initial chapter eclipsed, revived dramatically from around 2000, in tandem with VCDs. Most films of this current vogue have been in the nature of action-oriented B-grade *masala*; a trademark of the new style is the 'item song,' that is,

a dance scene featuring a sexy 'item girl' dancer who is otherwise incidental to the film. Music is typically more derived from the Westernized pop/disco side of modern Bollywood songs rather than seeking to evoke rustic rural culture.

Many Bhojpuri VCD scenes, as discussed by Rawley and visible through viewing the fare sold in regional stores, can be seen to resemble earlier cinematic counterparts, although clearly produced on the barest of budgets. Some scenes, in updated nautanki format, are actual stage shows, or more commonly, studio 'stagings' of supposed concerts, with 'item girls' singing in lip-sync, sometimes to a vocal track sung by a former nautanki-style songstress like Tara Bano Faizabadi. Many song settings picture village scenes – perhaps the housewife lamenting her beloved's absence – in ways that may appeal to the nostalgia of city dwellers displaced from the countryside. Such *bidesia* ('gone away') songs are particularly popular because of the extraordinarily high percentage of men who migrate elsewhere in search of work. Other songs are explicit in their celebration or documentation of rural customs or promotion of religious events,⁸ while others foreground rural tradition for its own sake.⁹ Some of the latter seem to be oriented toward relatively discerning urban viewers who appreciate traditional culture, while others appear to be marketed at specific lower-caste audiences; *birha*, for example, is especially associated with Yādavs, while several VCDs consist of *dhobi gīt* (washermen's songs).¹⁰ Other tracks portray the singers as village 'revelers,' perhaps celebrating Holi or some other festivity. Most songs in such VCDs are newly composed, although with traditional elements. Perhaps most typical are routines showing an amorous couple, often with other male dancers, cavorting in a park, in a dance style mixing Bollywood, contemporary pop, and local folk moves (such as the typical Bhojpuri-region pose with one hand behind the hips and the other gracefully tuning aloft). The 'protagonist' portrayed might be the actual singer, in the case of a male star like Manoj Tewari, but often he or she is a model; hence, star vocalist Kalpana, despite being as photogenic as any 'item girl,' generally does not appear in VCDs using her songs, though she has been featured many times on TV shows like NDTV Imagine's *Junoon*. In contrast to the tasteful and professional presentations on that show, many productions clearly reflect their shoestring budgets, often portraying only one or two bored and homely dancers wiggling gracelessly in some muddy field until the song mercifully ends.¹¹

Many VCD picturizations present scenes that appear more recent in origin, although already acquiring the nature of conventions. The 'item girl,' as Rawley notes, is often portrayed as modern in such a way as to suggesting that she is accordingly tantalizing and perhaps 'loose'; a popular image is the 'mobile-*wāli*,' that is, the girl with a cellphone, who is ogled and perhaps teased by a group of young men as she walks through a field chatting on her 'mobile.' Another popular theme (as in Manoj Tiwari's 'Sahar ki titli' [the urban butterfly]) is the recently arrived country bumpkin marveling at, and then befriending, the motorcycle-riding urban girl wearing a 'two-piece' outfit. Another format, essentially innovated for the VCD, is to have the song prefaced by a whimsical skit. Often such videos dramatize the ever-engaging theme of the interaction of tradition and modernity, or of village and urban lifestyles and attitudes. Several videos, as in the *Bhojpuri Tufani Muqabila* series, or the *Nirhua Satal Rahe* series featuring Dinesh Lal Yadav, loosely perpetuate the nautanki-type stage format. A typical example alternates playful saucy dialog between Yadav and a female dancer with responsorially sung verses in *dhobi gīt* style, and insertions of stock footage showing a massive audience in an amphitheater at some other event. Yadav earned great popularity with such songs, and viewers' comments are accordingly appreciative.¹²

As with the regional-music fare marketed on audiocassettes from the 1980s, many Bhojpuri VCDs are ribald, ranging from the playfully suggestive to the downright smutty. In accordance with hoary vernacular poetic conventions now disproportionately exploited, the lyrics, dance scenes, and sleeve covers of such productions often feature foodstuffs – especially eggplants, tomatoes, bananas, carrots, or pieces of sugarcane, or perhaps juicy fried snacks like *jalebis*, intended variously to connote male or female body parts, or perhaps a generalized sensuality. Others rework the perpetually titillating *devar-bhabhi* or *jīja-sāli* relationship between the attractive young bride and her husband's younger brother. As Rawley notes, such songs may be relatively genteel and are perhaps sung by a respectable artist like Kalpana, in which case the VCD cover may identify it as *parvarik* ('family-oriented'), and the video itself may be preceded by the familiar censor-board approval form that prefaces feature films. VCDs, indeed, are often viewed collectively, and in that sense are less oriented toward private consumption than audio recordings. In other cases, the cover photos, title, and presence of an 'A' (for 'adult') stamp mark the VCD contents as unfit for family viewing, and oriented instead toward young men – typically village migrants, liberated from restrictions on comportment, exposed to new mass media images, and yet still retaining aspects of their regional culture and language. Comments on such songs by YouTube viewers, who are generally relatively cosmopolitan South Asians, are accordingly disparaging, as in the case of a video showing two women brandishing *jalebis* and dancing artlessly above subtitles evidently advertising a pimping service, whose telephone number is provided:¹³

'i loved jalebi before watching this song'

'very ugly face of bihar'

In some cases, the respectability of a song scene may be more open to interpretation, as suggested by comments on another video:¹⁴

... this kind of bullshit song and dance will keep the retarded image of Bihar alive ... the whole obscence songs culture is a crap from the past and Bihari should get rid of it.

It's a song ... it shows the fun love nature of devar-bhabhi relationship if can not see the humour then its your problem of intellect.

A few general comments can be made about the music in VCDs. Traditional folk genres are represented in only a minority of VCDs, while others present newly composed songs using folk elements, such as typical Bhojpuri tunes, or alternating sections in 7/8 and quadratic meter; the instrumentation of Bhojpuri popular song typically consists of light ensemble backing (e.g., clarinet, flute, *taisho-koto* 'banjo'). However, much of commercial Bhojpuri music, in accordance with the region's traditional music, conforms to a more or less 'mainstream' North Indian melodic and rhythmic style indistinguishable from that of Bengal, the Braj region, or other parts of the 'Hindi belt.'

It may be instructive to look at a few representative videos in more detail. For an example of a video that is at once popular and what I would consider tasteful,¹⁵ one may view the song 'Hamra lage saram,' sung by Kalpana, and produced by T-Series, which generates many of the most appealing VCD albums. This video opens whimsically, showing an elderly, evidently handicapped man in a humble *chârpâi* (rattan cot), shouting to his son, in thick village Bhojpuri, to bring him his bedpan so that he can relieve himself after his night's sleep. We then see the son and his comely, fair-skinned wife (actress, model, and dancer Gunjan Kapoor)¹⁶ in bed; the wife rises to go help her father-in-law, but the son detains her, wanting her to return to bed with him. She sings, 'Let go of my arm, it's morning. I'm embarrassed' (*bainyân chor do, bhor ho gai bâlāmwa. hamrâ lâge*

saram...). Linguistically, the lyrics to this refrain/*mukhra* could be seen as a blend of Bhojpuri (*bālanwā, hamrā*), a pan-regional 'standard vernacular' Hindi (*saram*, in place of *sharam*), and the sort of *Braj bhasha* (*bainyān, bhor*) that, although more common to the west of the Bhojpuri region, would nevertheless have been familiar in that area through *thumri* and other light-classical songs presented in nautanki theater and other contexts. As a sort of pan-regional colloquial Hindi, the lyrics could appeal to Bhojpuri speakers as well as other villagers of the Hindi belt. As sung poetry, the lyrics constitute a contemporary reworking of an utterly conventional theme in thumris and classical songs, in which, after an amorous night, Radha, concerned about appearances, beg Krishna to let her leave, or the cowgirl fetching water begs her pestering but charming suitor (quintessentially, Krishna the cowherd) to leave her be. For its part, the picturization eschews the typical Bollywood fantasy world of cabarets and mansions, instead portraying a domestic scene non-descript in terms of social class but clearly suggestive of rural life.

The musical aspects of this song are at once idiosyncratic and typical of modern Bhojpuri song. The tune, rather than deriving from local tradition, would be recognized by many Indians as deriving from a melody used in two popular filmsongs, 'Dil laga liya' (in *Dil Hai Tumhara*, 2002), and the title song in *Hum tumhare hain sanam* (2002). However, as a more knowledgeable viewer pointed out, the tune's original source was a Punjabi Pakistani song, 'Boohey Barian,' by Hadiqa Khan (1999).¹⁷ Its recycling as a Bhojpuri song is typical of the 'parody' phenomenon in Indian folk and popular music (see Manuel, *Cassette Culture* ch. 7). Like most tunes that circulate widely, it lacks features that distinguish it as a particular regional (e.g., Punjabi) melody; in fact, this tune has a turn that is particularly common in Bhojpuri (and Braj) melodies (the phrase ending Ni-Ga-Re-Sa, or 7b-3b-2-1) and thus lends itself well to refitting with Bhojpuri lyrics. Although there is no dancing in this video, in another representative one by the same T-Series team, the wife (again, Gunjan Kapoor) begs her husband not to go away for work, and attempts to entice him to stay by coyly dancing, in a style suggestive of suave Bhojpuri folk dance.¹⁸

It remains to consider the extraordinary impact of the Internet on popular music culture. While the vast majority of Indians cannot afford computers or even access to them, a significant minority – constituting tens of millions of Indian and NRIs – are as enthusiastically 'plugged in' – often via Internet cafes – as any consumers in the world. Like other global music scenes, Indian popular music culture is now enlivened by innumerable websites, on-line fanzines and chat groups, P2P file-sharing networks, and global distribution outlets. Collectively these serve to promote musical micro-cultures while adding a new dimension of unity to Indian culture; in the case of Bhojpuri music, the Internet, and especially YouTube link the long-lost cousin communities of Bihar to its diaspora communities in Fiji and the Indic Caribbean. YouTube, indeed, has come to constitute a quintessential new medium, characterized by multi-vocal interaction, decentralized input of content, and a level of diversity that is not only unprecedented but until a few years ago inconceivable.

Comments that viewers have appended to YouTube uploads articulate how Bhojpuri VCDs have provided a new visibility for regional culture, a new vehicle for its creative rearticulation, and a new sense of pride and legitimacy. While Biharis have long been sensitive to the image of their state as a cesspool of corruption and poverty, videos like the T-Series productions instill a new kind of regional pride, voiced in various ways (and typically in English rather than Romanized Hindi):

so nice song after listing this song i am felling proud wow
Bihar, where I come from, is full of hot chicks like that
Bhojpuri songs are improving!

Several comments illustrate how the YouTube postings can provide a forum for the far-flung diaspora communities and individuals.

Jai [long live] Bihar n UP! F—k all the rest! We're keeping traditions all over the world (france, india, mauritius, fidji...)!n we're hard worker!!!

When you are out from your country long these songs keep you update

Am proud of my heritage and also that in MAuritius we are able to keep Bhojpuri alive...

it is not mindblowing but it boils heart for our villege soil... great i heard it and remembering my villege and my people

I'm in London for some time now... almost every day i have heard this song, amazing, mind blowing fantabulous song. Proud to be Bhojpuriya.

Concluding thoughts

From one perspective, the advent of VCDs has served to extend the format of song picturizations beyond the capital-intensive medium of cinema to the level of decentralized grassroots producers. Insofar as so many South Asians prefer their music to have a visual setting, the cassette era represents, in retrospect, a distinctive and passing phase in which music was marketed and consumed merely as sound. At the same time, while we may hesitate to unequivocally accept Marshall McLuhan's celebrated equating of medium and message, there is no doubt that the VCD has introduced a dramatically new form of media culture in India and elsewhere, with its own characteristic forms of content, consumption, and meaning. By adding a visual dimension to mediated music in a low-cost, easily produced format, it has precipitated a dramatic explosion of creative output. VCDs have clearly increased the sheer amount of popular music production, while enriching it with a visual element that can serve as a vehicle for local, decentralized creative expression, as in the case of the Bhojpuri region.

In my field work on Bhojpuri folk music,¹⁹ I repeatedly hear from elders and others laments about the decline of innumerable folksong traditions, under the inexorable impact of urbanization, modernization, and Bollywood culture. I am sympathetic to these complaints and think that the loss is especially acute when it involves a displacement of diverse local expressions by the assembly-line fare generated by remote tinsel town studios and embedded in cinematic fantasies with their alienating fetishes of glamour and wealth. Yet there is no doubt that VCDs, in all their unevenness and variety, have been able to offset much of the damage, providing a dynamic new vehicle for all manner of grassroots musical and now visual creative expression.

Notes

1. Before around 2005, VCDs were incompatible with standard DVD (and CD) players, and required dedicated players; however, since that time, most DVD players (including those marketed in the West) accommodate VCDs.
2. For input on VCD uses worldwide, I thank Amy Catlin, Rebecca Bodenheimer, Joshua Tucker, Richard Miller, Anna Stirr, Julie Strand, Kayla McGhee, Kevin Miller, Lawrence Ross, Andrew Weintraub, Scott Marcus, Ravikant, Ravi Sundaram, Ravi Vasudevan, Bhagwati Prasad, and other members of the SARAI collective in Delhi.
3. Studies of VCDs in non-musical contexts include Davis, Davis and Yeh, and Hu. I thank Richard Miller for calling the latter two essays to my attention.
4. E.g., if the video is closely related (as opposed to unrelated, or only vaguely related) to the audio, the relation could be through music images (of the same performer, or of different performers).

through dance (of the same genre, or a different genre), through images visualizing the lyrics, or approximating the scenery or ethnic groups etc.

5. Sutton relates how the visual background to several Korean karaoke videos consisted of random scenes from the film *Blade Runner*.
6. The scholarly study of Bhojpuri folk music commenced with two remarkable articles by George Grierson published in 1886. More recent studies include those by Henry. Marcus, Prasad, and, in Hindi, Tiwari. Aspects of Bhojpuri music in the diaspora have also been documented by Arya, Myers, Miller, and myself (see Manuel, *East Indian Music*; "Transnational Chowtal").
7. All these songs can be viewed on YouTube.
8. E.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCd4uwfV_cI This video has been posted by the producer to promote VCD sales; the caption states:

Please find our Bhojuri Album promotional Vedio. This is based on Deoghar – Kawaria activity. 2 month called August (Sawan) and September (Bhado) there are a lot of people goes to this place to offer Ganga Jal (Holi water of Ganga). This Whole Album is based on the real activity which happens during this whole journey. The importance of this religious journey from Sultanganj to Deoghar. . . The whole journey to deoghar is very difficult but kawaria use to go without any problem becuase of lord Shiva grace. The whole episode has been picturize to highlight the importance of Lord Shiva prayer. How a normal people can able to get shiva grace by completing this journey and offer holi water from sultanganj – Ganga River holi water to Deoghar. There are 8 song which is sung by Kumar Bijay and Indu Sonali (Bhojpuri Singer), Written by Binay Bihari and picturize for all those difficulties which a normal person facing while going to Deoghar. Songs are melodious and picturized in good and natural location. All songs are very hit and I am sure people from UP and Bihar would like this.
9. E.g., <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGgLi3e10fU>, whose posting bears the notice:

A traditional Bhojpuri song sung by ladies to welcome the newborn. Mother of the newborn is dressed in her best and sits with the baby on her lap. Members and relatives of the family shower their blessings on mother and her child. Gifts and cash is presented to the mother as a token of love. Everybody in the family shake their leg around the baby's cradle. Traditional songs are sung and other rituals are performed. . . Enjoy !! And say JAI BIHAR [Long live Bihar].
10. E.g., a VCD purchased in Banaras, 'Mobile-wâli Dhobiniya (*Dhobiya gît*),' that is, 'Cell-phone Washerwoman,' featuring newly-composed songs using the standard *dhobi gît*, sung responsorially with characteristic long-held tonic notes concluding its simple stock tune phrases.
11. See, e.g., fn 14.
12. Kevin Miller relates that the *Nirhua Satat Rahe* videos have been especially popular among Indo-Fijians, who adapt the tunes of these and other Bhojpuri VCDs to their own kirtans, wedding songs, qawwalis, and other genres.
13. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-CrMHNuJc>. 'We also organize dance by hot dancers at any home/private place on request.'

Although the identity and geographical locale of those who post comments on YouTube are generally unknown, clues are certainly provided by language and diction, which vary from fluent English, to broken and flawed (though often expressive) English, to Romanized Bhojpuri.
14. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPGIHTQGzo8&feature=related>
15. As of October 2011, the YouTube posting of this item had some 1,600,000 hits (although many of these are by this correspondent). Among other sites, it is posted at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpSa9d59QYI&feature=related>
16. One YouTube commentator relates, 'She is Gunjan Kapoor a Dehli Base model who Struggled hardly 2 become a actress since 1999–2000. But aborted like all non-filmy family struggler.'
17. These songs, with their picturizations, are all viewable on YouTube, with comments featuring the usual 'flame wars' between Indians and Pakistanis: a few appreciative comments by Pakistanis are gainsaid by an unappreciative compatriot: 'She is a black spot on the face of Kayani clan who r otherwise well respected since ages. She is a rebel to her parents and relatives.'
18. 'Jâtâra pardes balamwa, chorke âpne balamwa.' Vocalist Kalpana makes a cameo appearance near the end.
19. The primary focus of this field work was on the roots of Indo-Caribbean traditional music.

Notes on contributor

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