# Toward a New Frame for Regional Films: *Manbhum* Videos and the Other Side of (Indian) Cinema

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the production and mass circulation of locally produced videos in and across socially marginalized areas of Bengal. It emerges from the research conducted on the video industry located in Purulia District, West Bengal. These videos, known as "*Manbhum* videos," signifying both place and idiom, are connected to video cultures proliferating across the Global South since the last decade. While new media cultures have become a crucial part of contemporary cinema studies, production of *Manbhum* videos (and videos produced in other local languages) point toward a new understanding of both cinema in India and categories like regional films. It raises questions regarding the ways in which "regional cinema" has been described so far, and the manner in which it may be redefined in the new media context. Such small-scale and localized video production in West Bengal and its circulation across disparate districts of India and Bangladesh, inform us that frameworks like "Bengali cinema" are deeply fragmented. Therefore, by studying the videos and its growth, this article shows in what way alternative settings and landscapes, narratives tropes, styles of performance and speech become pertinent in these videos, which effectively address a longer history of marginalization and political tussle.

## Locating Video Cultures

Rodowick's (2007) work on the "virtual" and afterlife of celluloid-films, as well as specific interventions such as Sundaram's (2010) *Pirate Modernity*, on the reception and circulation of pirated videos in India, have analyzed the present-day media practices and its implications.[1] Indeed, cheaply produced consumer items, including DVD players, consumer cameras, and cellular phones, and their easy availability in the suburban and rural market (of India) during the last decade has played a crucial

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role in the manner in which media scenes have altered rapidly. Moreover, during this time, production of celluloid-based film production dwindled drastically (including in Bollywood and in big-scale regional industries like Tamil film industry) as technological setups changed precipitously; consequently, the growth of video industries in India indicates a paradigmatic shift within film practices.[2] In addition, quick accessibility of video cameras and home video systems since the late 1980s, and more recently, the flow of assembled computers, cheap cellular phones and cameras, downloadable software, and media files, have created a pool of images, which float between the Internet, television, and cinema, along with a viewership that consumes images via multiple platforms. Furthermore, the very nature of film image (in terms of formats, tonality, textures, and lensing) has altered noticeably. Besides, by mainly operating outside the structures of the film industry, in terms of industrial control over production and distribution, and on the bordering districts of several states/provinces, the videos accentuate the complexities within contemporary media industries. This article, thus, considers the video and the digital turn as a decisive moment for cinema studies, and examines the wide spread audiovisual practices as a significant channel, which directs us toward new definitions of both the regions as well as what can now be figured as "cinema."[3]

The attempt here, therefore, is to locate *Manbhum* videos, produced from Purulia district, West Bengal, within the expanding map of Indian cinema studies. While *Manbhum* signifies both "location and language" (or "*bhasa*," also implying dialect), production and consumption of these videos overlap with videos produced and circulated across different districts of Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal, and draw attention to the shifting audiovisual field. For instance, *Manbhum* videos travel across Purulia and Bankura districts, and are produced from both Purulia and Kolkata. A quick overview of the emergent video scene brings forth two significant aspects of contemporary audiovisual cultures. First, such material presents a new cultural cartography. In fact, such video practices, which are growing forcefully in "backward" places, underscore, as the article will illustrate, the tussle over borders, languages and cultural homogenization.[4] Second, the research brings forth a fresh understanding of the social history of cinema, and shows how the framework of regional cinemas (by and large, explored along the lines of official maps) may be revisited through new technologies and texts.[5]

Presently, the film scene in Bengal is marked by the production and reception of films and/or videos in at least three different dialects, and in other languages including Hindi.[6] On one side, Santhali—officially recognized as a tribe and as a language—music videos and narrative films produced from Odisha are easily available in the southern part of West Bengal; on the other, Rajbangsi videos—signifying community and their *bhasa* (speech)—produced from North Bengal and Assam, travel across the borders into Bangladesh (see Figures 1 and 2). In West Bengal, the growth of such videos function in dynamic relationship to political turmoil[7]: for the large number of immigrants in North Bengal, primarily from Bangladesh, a cheaper medium like video may be accessed to address problems of representation and marginalization, and to narrate contemporary political–cultural re-figuration. Both Santhali and Rajbangsi video industries, for instance, support their own local "film" festivals in an attempt to legitimize and institutionalize this specific practice. Besides, while

**Figure 1.** A Santhali Video CD: *Jibon juri.*

Santhali script and language have been officially included in the eighth schedule of the constitution (in 2008), Rajbangsi video cultures are unambiguously connected to the political movements for a separate state, and to the demands for more power to northern areas and hills.[8] Likewise, the circulation of Nepali films in Darjeeling, West Bengal, contributes toward the reshaping of popular notions regarding Gorkha and Nepali identity. In addition, Epsita Halder's (2010) research on popular Karbala narratives in 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, demonstrates how media files from Middle East as well as recordings of local performances and songs, drift among (Shia) Muslim communities, specifically amongst women, via cellular phones in order to reinvent a new Islamic identity.[9] Consequently, what appears like an explosion of video-digital films may be regarded as a tool for asserting cultural and political identity as well as a means of negotiating existing images of *Manbhum* in film and television, and the rampant appropriation of local musical forms by the "folk" music market.

**Figure 2.** A Rajbangsi production: *Sona badhuya.*

Thus, one argues that *Manbhum* videos need to be read against the grain of existing cinema histories, and ought to be placed in the vortex of contemporary digital cultures and audiovisual practices sprouting across the Global South. For example, Ali Nobil Ahmed's (2011) work on contemporary Pashto pornography, Farida Batool Syeda's (2012) research on Mujra dance video CDs and Lotte Hoek's (2015) ongoing study of Bangladeshi video films involving crime stories and folk forms, examine the new media ground. Such studies of the local video industries show that there are curious intersections between the global flow of technologies and media texts, genres, styles, and shifting patterns of reception. Therefore, *Manbhum* videos, and videos from the neighboring states, present another audiovisual culture, which provoke innovative research questions and methods, point toward a new historiography of regional films, and also interrogates the very materiality of cinema.[10]

Academic engagements and popular interest in video industries proliferating across the margins of Indian regions became especially pertinent with the recognition of locally produced videos from Malegaon, Maharashtra.[11] Documentaries such as *Supermen of Malegaon* (Dir. Faiza Ahmad Khan, 2008) underline how Malegaon's proximity to Mumbai, its cinephilia, along with a strategic and self-conscious distancing from Bollywood (through spoofing) have generated a large body of videos, which is supported by a self-sustaining distribution–exhibition network. Such infrastructures have various possibilities. Thus, Hasan's (2010) work illustrates how around 2007 art filmmakers in Manipur, North-East India, quickly deployed cheaply available digital technology, in a media context also throbbing with popular music videos. Hasan (2010) captures how the situation was defined by manifold tendencies, and that "contemporary commercial entertainment in the North-East, then, appears to combine several cultural influences strategically" (p. 42). Similarly, Neikolie Kuotsu (2013) has examined the massive popularity of South Korean films in North-East India. Koutsu looks at how digital technologies facilitated media travels between non-Western settings. Political tensions between the nation and the regions, as well, and issues of identity, of caste, religion, language, and location also become crucial in Ratnakar Tripathi's essay on "Bhojpuri cinema," which analyzes the cultural undercurrents within "backward" sections of India. The growing phenomena of local circuits and assemblies of media products help us to relate transformations at the local level to a different figuration of the region, and draws attention to the correlation between cultural and political desires and assertions and audiovisual fantasies.

In a comparative register, Haynes (2000) underscores how ideas about national and regional cinemas in Africa are reconstituted by emergent video practices. Pointing out the crucial differences between "Nigerian" *videos* and "African" *cinemas*, based on shifting technologies, modes of address, and circulation, Haynes urges a reconsideration of pan-national frameworks common to discourses about Africa. Haynes also notes how these videos are products of tiny budgets and minimal skills, and yet have a narrative energy that captures key conflicts in the process of historical change. Larkin (1997) anticipated these arguments in writing on Nigerian videos, and also noted the importance of transnational circuits, especially the itineraries of Indian films such as *Mother India* (Dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957) across Nigeria.

Larkin (1997, p. 407), after Arjun Appadurai, describes such practices as "parallel modernities" and insists that, "I use the term 'parallel modernities' to refer to the coexistence in space and time of multiple economic, religious and cultural flows that are often subsumed within the term 'modernity'." He (ibid., p. 410) also suggests that

> Media figure prominently in creating interconnections between different peoples who can now consider alternative lives based not on experiences in their own locality but on a range of experiences brought to them through international mass media. As more people throughout the world see their reality "through the prisms of possible lives offered by the mass media, Appadurai argues that contemporary ethnography must now expand to find ways of understanding the social reality of imagination: fantasy is now a social practice, it enters in a host of ways into the fabrication of social lives." (Appadurai, 1991, p. 198)

Therefore, in the light of these perspectives on coexisting media terrains, I take "parallel modernities" as an effective category to analyze *Manbhum* videos produced from

Purulia district, in the western part of West Bengal. I read such videos as powerful expressions of political–cultural struggles. Such audiovisual material, new kind of "films" created in the absence of celluloid, flow outside cinema theaters, global and national copyright regulations, and deploy narrative and performative techniques different from mainstream narrative forms. These so-called "other" cultural practices and "sub"-cultural forms subsist in "parallel" zones, across territories, and function as meaningful registers of our sociocultural conflicts.[12] The videos and interviews with music composers and producers suggest how widely circulated cultural products encourage a reconsideration of the terms of subjectivity grounded in region, community, and language, and in relation to the structures of the state.

The study brings forth two pertinent concerns. First, it shows how the problem of *Manbhum*—meaning both place and idiom—is addressed by these videos. The subject of topography becomes imperative in *Manbhum* videos primarily because of the manner in which Bengal has been widely imagined and epitomized in cinema, as verdant and riverine, despite the fact that the Bengal landscape varies enormously. Second, what emanates both from the videos and the interviews are issues specific to *Manbhum* people, their speech, their dialect, and modes of performance, as well as *pran shakti/* life force of everyday *Manbhum,* all notably absent in mainstream cultural portrayals. I argue that such performances in the "vernacular" become a way of performing the local as a site of the political. Moreover, what is evident from the videos is not merely a desire to be included within larger media scene, but an energetic intention to produce parallel accounts. New digital conditions have put such media practices into forceful dialogue with mainstream media practices, and bring forth alternative narratives about social change and posit *Manbhum* video cultures within the broader debates on cinematic forms.

## The Infrastructure of Manbhum Videos

My interest in these videos developed through the research conducted under the Media Lab, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University. There was a primary survey, entailing collection of material (VCDs) and conducting interviews with Shankar Tara (composer) and Kuchil Mukherjee (singer–composer), by Sadhan Mahato. This was followed by my documenting production details (year, location, and personnel), genre, and information about reception. The second phase of the work involved field trips, visits to specific locations like "video halls" and to the production offices, including Choice Videos, Kolkata and others.

*Manbhum* videos, which came into circulation around 2003–2004, commonly have a meager budget of less than ₹50,000, and mostly between ₹20,000 and 40,000, employ local talents—along with some popular performers from the locality—and often shoot on outdoor locations that include local parks, hillsides, lakes, paddy fields, local market places, temple premises, near factories, and use the houses of crew members for interior shots. The videos are commonly shot in available light, with easily accessible props, and by using locally sourced costumes. While initially the videos were edited like wedding videos, that is, by means of two VCRs, more recently they have been shot with (semi-) professional cameras like PD 170, or with a digital handy cam, and are

edited on the PCs with the help of freely downloadable editing software. Every month, about two to three new videos become available in the local (tea) shops, bazaars, and in the *mela*s, and often appear on the TV monitors used in long-distance buses.[13]

Interestingly, production details, for example details of the format, names of the producers, distributors, Technicians, and others, and the year/date/time of the production are often inscribed on the frame. Therefore, production information float on the skin of the videos along with the phone numbers of the camerapersons, directors, producers, and so on, as publicity device to attract newer producers, music composers, event managers and so on. This practice may also be read as an attempt to activate social mobility, since a number of the technicians and actors hope to migrate to Kolkata and work in mainstream Bengali productions. The production–distribution–exhibition mechanism of *Manbhum* videos function on a small scale, through informal networks, and tends to have no records about the films or details of production process; both *Manbhum,* as place and culture, and the videos exist in a state of flux.

As interviews indicate, production of these videos took shape through economic and cultural negotiations with mainstream Bengali cultural products, including films and music albums, and against the background of the mass distribution of different musical forms marketed as the all-encompassing "folk." It was an attempt to reclaim both cultural products and its audience as well as create a channel for the existing cultural modes like *Jhumur* and *koutuk naksha* (traditional comic modes). Therefore, while Kolkata-based production houses such as Choice Videos, which also produces Santhali films, play a crucial role in the reshaping of local cultures, companies based in Purulia, like MVM (Malati Video Movies), control a large section of production and distribution networks.[14] The production of such *Manbhum* videos is traceable to the making of music videos of various local musical forms such as *Tusu, Bhadu,* and *Jhumur*. Our explorations into contemporary *Jhumur* videos also indicate how canonical musical forms may be recreated as trendy Bollywood-style dance numbers.[15] Like other video film cultures, *Manbhum* videos unsettles a unitary understanding of cinema, both as technology and cultural forms, by illustrating how digital films may be produced through informal networks and amateur techniques, and circulated amongst small groups and communities, through home viewing systems, screening on TV sets in local clubs, tea shops, local gatherings, and so on. In effect, the material outlines elements toward a new historiography of Indian films, in terms of linguistic, technological, and industrial–cultural categories.

As I will show, the texts display an uneven comic mode that comprises a series of popular stories, short skits and comic performances, interspersed with song and dance sequences. While, the comic episodes mostly emerge from locally circulating comic stories or *koutuk naksha*, the inclusion of Bollywood style dance sequences within these short episodes indicate their porosity to contemporary media scenes. In the absence of any strong, linear, and structured plot, comprising a beginning–middle–end, or any definitive directorial style, as well as due to the absence of powerful stars, the disparate composition of such videos gesture to the shifting technological ground of media assemblage (cinema/television/video/file sharing), and cultural practices. Porosity of media form is complemented by porosity of cultural and territorial boundaries. As Stephen Hughes' (2010, p. 214) notes, "regional language-based cinemas" have by and large been studied as "self-contained units... which collectively constitute

Indian cinema as a whole." "However," Hughes asserts, "linguistic/ethnic boundaries between the various cinemas of India have always been much more porous and contested than has been adequately recognized by scholars." Briefly, this article traverses such porosities of cinema cultures in order to understand contemporary video forms, and also why *Manbhum* requires its own video industry.

## Regional Fantasies: My Favorite Tomato

*Le samla sadher tomato* (Kaji Amjad, probably 2009, VCD no. 001) opens with a sequence which involves two drunkards performing in the village, while cows, ducks, and cycles cross the streets and the video frame. The camera appears to be setup in a village street recording the enactments in a straightforward manner. Often such framing speaks to the portrayal of the place and its people in the local TV news. Therefore, the address is conventionally frontal, images occasionally involve wide-angle distortions and the background at times appears bleached out. The opening sequence is followed by another in which one of the comedians squats next to a well of an ordinary house, which is not a "set," crying and singing as he washes his clothes. Afterwards, he bursts into a song narrating his woes, as his wife has made him wash clothes, which is intercut with images of the playback singer performing the same song in open fields. As a matter of fact, the video *Sadher tomato* (Favorite tomato, see Figure 3) produces a unique pattern of enunciation by connecting three disparate acts including the performances by the comedian duo, that of the playback singer, and faces of the audience who are either directly watching the performances or watching these videos on television and on VCD players. Such a multilayered pattern of narration, which includes local stories and performances, as well as evidences of emergent technologies and the shifting terrains of reception, creates thick and activated texts with multiple accounts of social transformations and negotiations.

One particular scene of *Sadher tomato* opens in a paddy field, and offers a curious story of a peasant couple whose young boy is sick. Shot conspicuously through an engaging, albeit grainy and unstructured framing, the story then shifts to their house. It transpires that this young boy has not eaten since the previous night. The camera functions like a recorder, involving limited camera movement, though zoom-out is a common feature. A shaman enters, examines the boy and declares that he has been struck by a terrible malady. Nonetheless, this possessed young man quickly recovers as the shaman whispers to him. The shaman enquires, "Tell me what is on your mind?" To this, he replies, smiling, "I want a CD player."[16] The shaman laughs and assures him that he will certainly get one, just as the shaman will get his fees. The shaman exclaims, "[so] this is CD spirit!" This sequence is followed by another in which the father, Ali and the young boy buy a VCD player, priced ₹1,500, along with a VCD for ₹60 from the local market. This sequence draws our attention to the popularity of video cultures, and to the location of Purulia, which is neither a vast landscape of plentitude nor an untainted cultural space; instead, Purulia is squarely placed at the crossroads of many borders and thereby encounters circulation of a variety of cultural products.[17] More importantly, this "CD fever" points toward new modes of consumption in places which are generally described as idyllic villages in mainstream cinemas.[18] The videos

**Figure 3.** Dharani Mahato and Viswanath Mahato: Local performers in *Le samla sadher tomato.*

also underscore a wide range of subjects, which include issues of social change, contemporary political anxieties, and present manifold cultural dialogues.

Another popular video *Huchke niye puchke dili re* (roughly "You promised but did not deliver" by Swapan Hujuri, VCD no. 016) which circulated around 2005, also entails a series of comic sequences, and opens in the interiors of a house (see Figure 4). While a mirror hangs against a decorative curtain, a teenaged boy hums a popular number ("Pereet kore ne go sajani/shomoye chole gele aar to pabi ni"/Fall in love my dear/Let not the time pass by). There is a cut to a composite shot, which shows the young lad with his sister, who teaches him the entire song. Later, as they break into a dance, the song resonates the "room tone" in which it was initially recorded. Such sound tracks—involving noises and incongruities—present a parallel trajectory to the digitally cleaned soundscape of mainstream cinemas.[19] A single voice is deployed to dub both the mother and the daughter, producing a discordance, bearing thereby
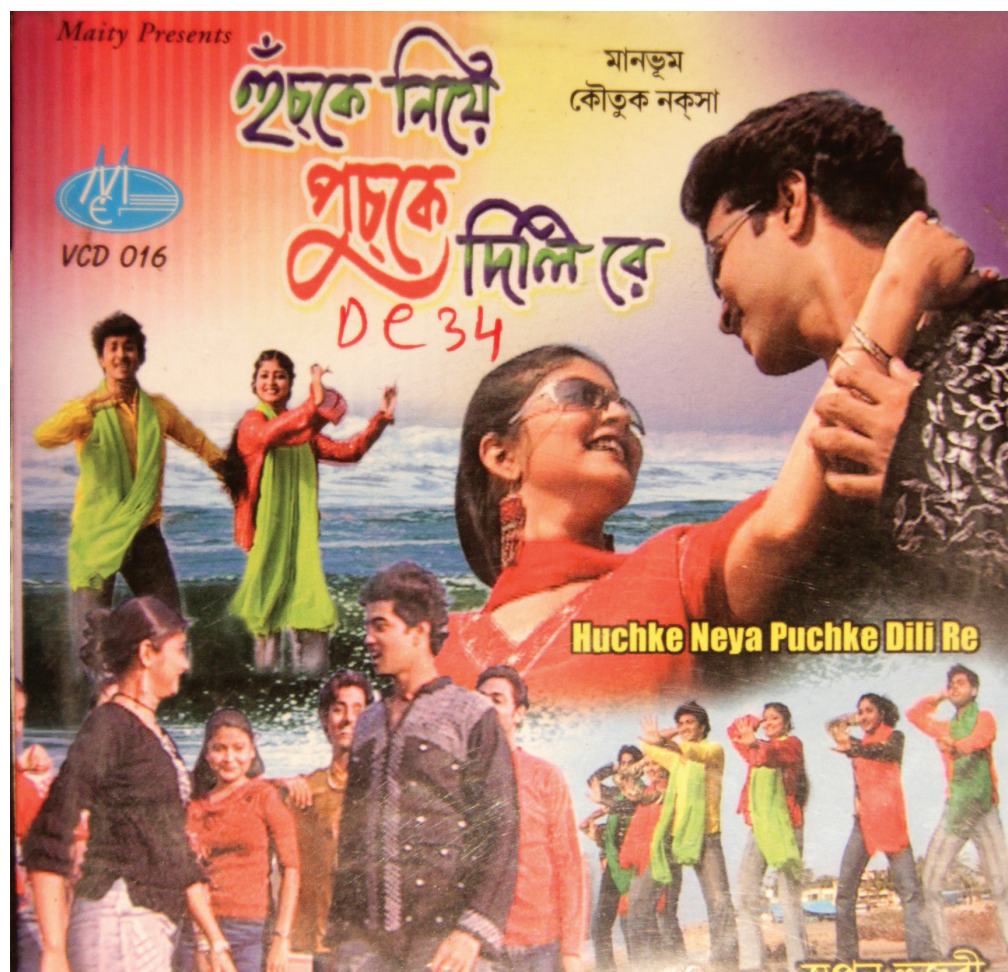
**Figure 4.** The local hit: *Huchke neya puchke dili re.*

resonances of another space, other than what is visible, and may be considered a curi-ous unsettling of the established cinematic aesthetics. Such deployment of sound, which may not be oppositional in a self-conscious way, nevertheless, includes "noises" of multiple orders. It draws attention to the conditions of production and to the man-ner in which such sound designs draw from the cultural experiences of live perfor-mances, and accentuate a different circuit of consumption. But, what follows is even more striking. Framed in long shot by a static camera, the boy's father enters the scene and enquires about his studies. Thereafter, the father asks him to frame sentences with the word "cow." "My father is a cow," replies the young man. Boisterousness, uses of popular jokes, stories and various kinds of subversive elements mark *Manbhum* videos, suggesting diverse cultural registers brought to the cinema in India.

The latter part of the video includes a song, without any narrative continuity with previous sequences, in which a young man declares his love in a market place.

He hums, "Shampoo chul/khopaye phul… ('She has used shampoo and put a flower/ she has applied tika and powder/she has used shurma…[and] colour on her feet and hands [with henna])." Apart from the use of comic elements in these scenes, the lyrics display an ironic tone, calling attention to the overlaps between disparate practices, commenting upon an evolving consumer culture. This scene effectively lampoons narrative cinema, and quickly shifts from the market place to a seaside, which acts as a setting for the song sequence, and portrays a group of dancers attempting a Bollywood-style dance number. Such random evocation of popular tropes shows how the videos exist on the edge of many cultures and practices with which they coexist in what Larkin (1997) describes as parallel "space and time."

Ratnakar Tripathy (2007), writing about Bhojpuri music videos and its resonances in the Hindi heartland, points out how this growth is connected with the desire for social mobility, and therefore, the videos seem to stage fantasies in the "vernacular." However, he makes a somewhat contrary point (Tripathy 2007, p. 259) when he notes:

> [However] What is striking here is not the situation itself, but the depth to which it is uncovered…Even if we see Bombay and Bhojpuri films as part of a continuum, the moments of discontinuity and thematic magnification reveal unexplored terrains….

In my estimation, such discontinuities reflect cultural–political assertions, generating new sites for the political quite distinct from the earlier and continuing history of ultra-Left political struggles in Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Rather, the videos generate archetypal performative modes, plots, and elements that forcefully refigure and articulate accounts of tribes, caste, and communities, along with disparate facets of enjoyment and leisure, which have remained marginalized so far.[20] *Sadher tomato* for instance, ends with a sequence, which shows a gathering watching videos on a TV set, and, thereafter, eating in a feast. This sequence, shot in the style of home videos, appears to be a recording of an actual feast, which may have been attached later to the primary video. Such shots of the "backward caste" laborers eating *biriyani* (meat and rice) in an open field are captured against a powerful backdrop, which is parched, and draws attention to the *Manbhum* "everyday" that is, by and large, an absence in mainstream films. *Manbhum* videos, thus, become an exceptional mix of documentation and fiction, as well as a tapestry of actualities and fantasies that uncover a range of "unexplored terrains."

## Contexts, Contents, and Contested Landscapes

Commenting on the subject of *Manbhum* videos veteran singer–performer–producer Kuchil Mukherjee and composer–producer Shankar Tara draw our attention to issues of language, specificities of dialect, and popular forms, as well as the processes through which these have been usurped by the more powerful and widely accepted Bengali cultures (see Figure 5). For instance, Shankar Tara conveyed the following during his interview (conducted by Shadhan Mahato):

> Shankar Tara [ST]: Uttam Kumar was a big artist, yet he failed [to perform the Manbhum dialect]… though Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay [Indian People's Theatre Association activist, actor],

**Figure 5.** *Didir dewar dome sataiche*: A typical Manbhum comedy.

who acted in *Hate Bazare* [Tapan Sinha, 1967]… he was from Jhalda [town]… he performed beautifully… but, now nothing is original….

Sadhan Mahato [SM]: Is the situation ["nothing is original"] same in North Bengal [Rajbangsi videos] and Jharkhand [Santhali videos] as in Purulia [Manbhum videos]?

ST: Yes, everywhere… what do you expect? These are poor people [the audience], they do not earn more than fifty-sixty rupees [per day]… they drink and watch these 'quickies'….

Indeed, Shankar Tara builds a pertinent argument about the ways in which *Manbhum* location and speech has been unauthentically rendered in Bengali films. Truly, while attention has been paid to the complex functions of the star persona of Uttam Kumar in the context of post-colonial histories and Bengali modernity, cinema poses key problems in the way state formation and Bhadralok hegemony, the domination of the upper-caste Hindu, bilingual, urban, middle classes, have obscured the broader social history of peoples located in Bengal.[21]

Nevertheless, Shankar Tara's point about the "poor" watching "quickies" may be critically reviewed through Markus Schleiter's (2014) work on video nights.[22] In his short commentary about viewership for Santhali films, Schleiter shows how such practices are connected to "meaningfulness of a 'traditional' dance night, and [how] this has led villagers to celebrate these films as a means of enjoying time together." "At the same time," Schleiter argues that,

> the villagers do expose the enduring nature of "traditional" dances by comparisons with (the unworthiness of) "video nights." As such, film watching and "traditional" practices in a village stand in a *reciprocal reference to each other* [italics added], and such media practice becomes part of supporting "new media usage" as well as "traditional" dance forms.

Schleiter's work highlights the contradictory nature of engagements with new media practices, which by now is more than a decade old. Furthermore, Hasan (2010) has also discussed how such "local" media products are not exempt from local cultural purism, and "were also banned for corrupting local culture" (Hasan, 2010, p. 33). She notes that film/media experience in Manipur ranges from nationally acclaimed films made by film institute graduates, and somewhat ineptly produced music videos. Clearly, we need far more critical formulations to engage the desire for mobility and political change, which is being articulated through digital cinema and popular music videos. I suggest the phenomenon underlines the way popular cultural products have critically linked the often discordant, seemingly incoherent, and unpredictable logics of democratic assertion.

A close reading of Tapan Sinha's *Hate Bazare*, featuring Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, heightens perception about *Manbhum*'s unexplored landscapes, and specific forms of dialect and local expression. For instance, while *Hate Bazare*, set in post-colonial times, narrates the story of a reformist Bengali doctor, Anadi Mukherjee (Ashok Kumar) the milieu of the borderlands complicates the plot. Hence, in a particular scene which introduces Chhipli, played by Bombay star Vyjayanthimala, the deployment of different languages and dialects (Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Bengali, and the specific accent of Purulia district) lays out a range of social complexities, which encompass subjects of class, work, gender, and community. For example, the relevant scene opens with Chhipli, a laborer, entering the hospital in order to collect free medicine offered by the philanthropic doctor. Chhipli speaks in broken Bengali laced with Bhojpuri, and says the following after being harassed by the Bengali compounder who assists the doctor.

> Chhipli: Thik acche, humi jaichi. Doctor babu ke paas. Humhi bhi dekhbo, koto boro marder baccha tumhi.
>
> [Okay, I am going to the Doctor. I will see whether you are a man or not.]
>
> Compounder: Dara dara… jaichi Doctor babu ke paas ei ne…

[Wait, wait! Going to the doctor… take this!]

Chhipli (laughs and retorts): Tumi boro darpok admi accho babu, magar paaji bhi accho, biccho accho.

[You are a coward Babu, but you are sly. You are dangerous, like a scorpion.]

Compounder: Ja ekhan theke, ja!

[Go away from here! Go!]

In response, Chhipli stands squarely at the counter, and tells of how she had hit a man who was being forced on her.

Chhipli: Humhi ki korle jano? Usko uthake ekdam patak dilo.

[You know what I did? I just picked him up and tossed him].

At this point, the exploitative local, played by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, enters the frame. One hears him enquire (off screen):

Kaake patke dili re Chhipli? Kake patkan dili re? hyan Chhipli? Kake?. . .

[Who did you toss Chhipli? Whom? Yeah, Chhipli? Whom?]

The deployment of the same word through three different idioms—that is, as patak/ patke/patkan—is a significant marker that draws our attention to the problem of *Manbhum*'s location and language, key to the videos we have discussed so far. As the sequence continues Chhipli rushes from her unpleasant encounter with the manipu-lative local to be accosted by a driver who sings a Hindi song to her. The man croons, "sari tera ghumghumaiya, choli butidaar/jetne tere choli mein buti utna tera pyaar/ Chhipli tararara/… [Your sari is dizzy and your blouse has dots/your love is as much as the dots on your blouse…]," to which Chhipli replies "apne behan ko jake bol! [Go and tell this to your sister]." The sequence ends outdoors with Chhipli meeting the doctor's chauffer (Ali Bhaiya) who enquires (in a mix of Urdu and Bengali), "…tu to abhi jawani ke pani mein ucchal ti hai, shadi-wadi korbi na? [You are young, aren't you marrying?]." This sequence sets up a situation for the upcoming violence in the film, and the eventual health reforms conducted by the upper-caste Bengali doctor. While toward the end of the film Chhipli is elevated to the status of a (trainee) nurse and in time becomes the caretaker of the clinic after the brutal killing of the doctor, for my argument, the density of languages and dialects addressed in the film, throws up dilemmas regarding what constitutes cinema from Bengal linguistically and cultur-ally; and, who speaks for the sub-terrains of the regions.[23]

One may, therefore, posit *Manbhum* videos as a mode of speaking to and about local or "sub" regional issues. Indeed, only a handful of films from Bengal have explored these territories, and perhaps, one of the few examples is *Ajantrik* (1957) by Ritwik Ghatak, which reconnoitered such "backward" places, or dry and hilly topographies. Ghatak also writes about the problem of landscapes, which were lost through parti-tion, and about the representation of the terrains of Bengal in his short article on making films.[24] While, his films like *Subarnarekha* (1962) and *Titas ekti nadir naam* (1973)

demonstrate the strong connection between landscape and political histories, regarding *Ajantrik* and the question of topography Ghatak (1987, p. 32) specified that, "the story is laid in a terrain which is one of the least-known to normal Bengali film-goers.... The different planes and levels are refreshingly unusual to the plainsmen of the Gangetic delta."[25] These landscapes are not just unusual, they are the source of narratives of political–cultural uncertainty played out across Bengal borders, and the *Manbhum* videos become an edgy aide-mémoire of the unaddressed topics concerning landscape, idioms, and class/caste differences. *Manbhum* videos effectively produce "parallel" narratives and bring up significant subjects concerning what mark the regions, which are seemingly fragmented in terms of places, peoples, languages, dialects, communities, work, gender, political histories, and cultural practices. These videos accentuate the fact that there are many regional cinemas speaking to global trends, and any thorough reading of "regional" films ought to include accounts of *Manbhum*, Santhali, Rajbangsi, and other video industries, which circulate in parallel sectors outside the frameworks of established industries.

## Return of Mythologies and Narratives of Discontent

Partha Chatterjee in his book *Politics of the Governed* (Chatterjee, 2004) uses the landmark Bengali novel *Dhorai charit manas* (Satinath Bhaduri, originally published during 1949–1951) in his endeavor to demonstrate the ways in which political accounts in India are marked by dynamics of heterogeneity. Chatterjee (2004, pp. 12–13) illustrates how:

> Dhorai is uprooted from the narrowness of his home and thrown into the world. The new metalled roadway, along which motorcars and trucks now whizz past ponderous bullock-carts, opens up his imagination. "Where does this road begin? Where does it end?" [Dhorai] doesn't know. Perhaps no one knows. Some of the carts are loaded with maize, others bring plaintiffs to the district court, still others carry patients to the hospital. In his mind, Dhorai sees shadows that suggest to him something of the vastness of the country….

The virtuosity of Bhaduri's "modernist retelling of the epic" is indeed compelling, especially because of Dhorai's location and his social position in relation to the vastness of the country. The novel uncovers the glaring lack within Bengali cultural discourses, and the absence of issues concerning castes and marginalized localities, particularly the districts. Truly, the matter of caste and tribe, or the question of Dalits and Adivasis as well as the everyday of Muslim communities, have by and large, slipped away from films of West Bengal.

Therefore, exploring the reworking of mythologies within contemporary times appears to be a crucial tool to understand current political events of Purulia and Bankura. For example, narrative videos like *Desh ta gelo jahanname* (*The country has gone to the dogs*, by Tota, probably completed in 2010, VCD no. 0040, see Figure 6) locates mythological stories of Yama (God of death) and his messengers within the current context. This story is interrupted by contemporary song and dance sequences, accompanied by phone numbers of the producers who may be contacted for "stage shows," and by the parallel story of Goddess Durga, her Puja, and the many affairs which the Gods have with the locals. The film also uses television news reporting style to invoke mythologies and to comment on the intensities of present-day politics.

**Figure 6.** *Desh ta gelo jahanname*: ₹25 only.

The story of Yama's trip to earth is strung together in television newsrooms which portray Narada (the mischievous sage, traveler, narrator) as news reporter, standing against the backdrop of the Great Wall of China, and reflecting on the contemporary scene. He reports how the situation in this world is grave, and that this world is hell or *jahannam*. "There is bombing everywhere and landmines are laid all around!" he exclaims, agitatedly. Remarkably, a clip from a Bollywood movie supports this "report." Such styles of narration, assembling the "wonders of the world" and scenes of recent political disorder refracted through Bollywood action films suggest a startling, politically charged media awareness. Eventually, Narada interviews Yama, who is placed against the image of the Colosseum in Rome.

Narada [N]: Why are you picking up people without intimation?

Yama [Y]: That's not possible…

N: During Aila [cyclone, 2009], Tsunami [2004], and other cases….

Y: …That's the fault with the weather forecast….

N: What about Taj Bengal [Taj Hotel Mumbai attacks, 2008]?

Y: It takes seven days to arrive at Mumbai from Pakistan by the sea… so, what happened to your Radar? Satellite? Were your men sleeping or were they on leave?

N: And tell me, those who are making and using bombs… or those who are letting them go… why aren't you picking them up?

Y [stutters and replies]: But I am scared of them… who knows when they will tie a landmine to my buffalo's tail….

Issues of violence and political disquiet, presented in the comic mode, are broached in a different, epic register, as Narada, Yama and his men encounter the ravaged Mother Earth running through the landscape.

Mother Earth: Immediately get a permanent solution for me…

Narada: What's wrong with you mother?

Mother Earth: Can't you see? Shameless creatures!...

There were riots…and now there are bullets, gunfire, pistols, bombing, I am all wrecked…

Eventually, the film shows the heavens falling apart, and protests growing in Yamalaya (abode of Yama/Hell).

Ghost [protesting and pelting slogans]: We cannot be picked up without notice… you cannot keep thieves and police in the same cell…. The deceased seek justice….

Narada: How many dead souls are here [protesting]?

Ghost: Numerous…from Bihar, Bengal, Odhisa and of course Jharkhand. But we are mainly from Bengal, Bankura [neighbouring district]…. We will be [eventually] successful if *Ma, maati, atma* [italics added] come together. S/he is everything, we are following her/him….

Produced around 2010, and paraphrasing the Trinamul Congress election slogan—Ma, Maati, Manush/Mother, Earth, People—the video participates in the populist political cultures of Bengal.

The video also displays a knowing projection of the technology through which it is made and which is part of the everyday life of its viewers, addressing audiences as technologically mediated and engaged in transactions of media files. Thus, as I have pointed out, the video repeatedly displays technical details, such as phone numbers of the camerapersons, directors, and producers, information regarding which camera has been used, along with shots of Yama using cellular phone or his subordinate recording the events with a handy cam (which eventually fails because the battery has not been charged). Moreover, while recounting political shifts the video also narrates the transition from video to digital through its mise-en-scene, by unmasking the deployment of a range of technical devices, and by drawing attention to the back projection or by highlighting the special effects. However, *Manbhum* is not an isolated or unique case. In fact, both *Malegaon ke Superman* and *Out of Thin Air* (Shabani Hassanwalia & Samreen

Farooqui, 2009), which is a story of Ladakh rendered by its local film movement, emphasize the intense drive for self-projection, and the manner in which marginal groups are participating in broader transformations. The showcasing of technological mediation is a key motif in these proliferating local assemblages. Thus, *Desh ta gelo* connects narratives of violence across Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha through self-conscious digital strategies; it also illustrates how the peripheries are positioned through larger technological set-ups like the "radar" and the "satellite," even if it is to be deprived of such possible links. Through such videos the margins speak through a new technological awareness about their situation.

Chatterjee (2004, p. 11) notes that, "Satinath Bhaduri's intricately crafted account of Dhorai's upbringing among the Tatmas in the early decades of the twentieth century could be easily read as a *faithful ethnography* [italics added] of colonial governance and the nationalist movement in northern India." In my understanding, *Manbhum* videos achieve similar ethnographic significance, in the ways in which they traverse unexplored rugged territories of Bengal, portray the "rough and coarse" speech of *Manbhum*, and present laboring bodies, which remain startlingly absent in middle-class cinemas. In point of fact, the fragmented plots and technological foregrounding of *Manbhum* videos may be read as a material engagement with our political–cultural histories, not only making visible marginalized experience but also highlighting how such media acts are shared by a wider population.

*Manbhum* videos may be understood as "sub" regional media practice, accorded only secondary status because of their locations of production and circulation, and because of the low quality of the videos in relation to celluloid and digitally enhanced films. However, I suggest they introduce us to a new set of questions with which to frame the historiography of Indian and regional films. Such audiovisual practices, which thrive at the edge of many categories (traditional oral forms/regional films/narrative cinema/music videos/new media practices/industrial structures/viewership) demand innovative research questions. For instance, Vivian Sobchack (2000) has analyzed how the filmic object has transformed considerably in the recent years and, therefore, film history should be studied as a multilayered "mystery." Thus, to use Sobchack's (2000, p. 313) words, "[c]ontemporary history is practiced and written not in the certitude of concentrated 'historical facts' but rather in the productive unreliability and partiality of lived and invested memories, murmurs, nostalgia, stories, myths and dreams." The sprouting of so many industries within the oeuvre of Indian cinema (and across the Global South) demands a new historiographical agenda that incorporates the shifting ground of the media technology which produces and circulates cinema. "Parallel" media cultures, or what flows boisterously and seditiously alongside larger production conglomerations, even when it has gone unheeded, or will wither away with the advent of newer technological forms, present an alternative historical map of cinema and the mediatized social world it is part of.

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## Notes

1. Also see Vasudevan's (2013) recent essay "Notes on Contemporary Film Experience: Bollywood, genre diversity and video circuits" and his reading of the "pirate economy" which he argues "provides an alternate picture of globalization from that provided by the spectacular end of the economy."

2. Anand Pandian, in his paper "'No Blue': On the Colour of Sensation in Tamil Cinema", discussed processes of the making of the Tamil film *Quarter Cutting* (2010). *The Many Lives of Indian Cinema* Conference, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, January 2014. Pandian mentioned that this film was in all probability the "last" Tamil film to be shot on celluloid, and worked on a specific kind of color saturation, which is remarkably different from digital films.

3. In the introduction to the 50th anniversary issue of *Screen* (Spring 2009), Annette Kuhn (2009) discusses how, "[t]oday, moving image works and artists mix genres, formats, platforms and venues…." *Screen*'s attempt to revisit "Screen Theory" becomes particularly crucial in the context of "after cinema." Also, see the articles published in Part 3 of this issue.

4. By "backward" community, I am referring to the official category used to identify groups for government welfare support.

5. Radhakrishnan (2015) in his article "Thiruvithamkoor, Malabar, Kerala: Speculations on the Regions in 'Regional Cinema'" critiques the framing of the regions through language, culture, and geography and discusses the tussle over unification of Kerala and the dynamics of "aggregation and disaggregation."

6. Hindi films like *Piku* (2015) and *Kahani* (2012) were not only extensively shot in Kolkata, there was substantial involvement of the Bengali film industry in terms of both cast and crew. These films were accepted as "Bengali" films by the press because the directors were Bengalis; but more importantly because the industry considered these as their production.

7. For an official record of political unrest, see *West Bengal District Gazetters, Puruliya* (1985). However, such videos are in no way connected with contemporary political movements, and as mentioned by Sadhan Mahato and others, it is actually disapproved of by the Left and political activists.

8. As evident from the work done by Tanusree Dey, research student, 2000–2015, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University.

9. See http://www.indiaifa.org/epsita-halder.html (last accessed on 19 August 2015).

10. Moreover, Vasudevan (2010, p. 95) in his article on the "Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema" analyses the "formal constraints of territorial polities" during the 1940s and 1950s, and discusses the "possibilities for cultural flow beyond the territorial state."

11. While Bhaskar Sarkar discussed the production strategies of Malegaon videos in his paper "Malegaon Video Cinema and the Antinomies of Participation" presented at *The Many Lives of Indian Cinema* Conference, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, January 2014, Ishita Tiwari (2015) in her recent article on "The Discrete Charm of Local Practices: Malegaon and the Politics of Locality" presents a detailed study of such local and parallel industries, and the ways in which local industries may be appropriated by more formal industrialized networks including television. This is true for Bhojpuri narrative and music videos as well, which are now being produced both from Mumbai as well as from disparate locations in Bihar.

12. In her well known speech at the *Cannes Film Festival* 2000, Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf argued that,

    [t]hree modes of external control have historically stifled the creative process for a film-maker: political, financial and technological. Today with the digital revolution, the camera will bypass all such controls and be placed squarely at the disposal of the artist….

    For further discussion on the "digital revolution," see the following: https://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/makhms.htm (last accessed on 23 May 2015).

13. My own experience comprises viewing these videos inside the bus (during a trip to Jhalda town in 2012) and during night shows in shops, which also operate as "video halls."

14. Likewise, the widely held theatrical form *Jyatra,* which is enormously popular across rural areas, are in fact produced by companies located in the city, and also involve well known film stars.

15. See Shresthova (2008) for a study of Bollywood dance styles.

16. "CD" or Compact Disc Player is a standalone mechanism, which is attached to the television sets and through which discs are played. This appliance is still used in many rural and suburban sectors. The *Manbhum* films also show people watching films on TV connected to a View CD player.

17. Moreover, in the recent times, Purulia has been in news for gathering and circulation of arms, and huge quantities of ammunition.

18. A recent mainstream Bengali film *Proloy* (Raj Chakraborty, 2013), based on a true story, was shot extensively in the interiors of Purulia and deployed local dance forms in the climax. The film narrates a plot about rape and revenge.

19. See Sarrazin's (2014) analysis of *Roja* (Mani Ratnam, 1992), A. R. Rahman's sound design, and new digital sonic cultures of Bollywood. Nevertheless, Sneha Khandwalkar, the music director of *Gangs of Wasseypur* (Part 1 and 2, Anurag Kashyap, 2012), has used the digital recorder and mixer in a reverse way by mixing disparate noises, sounds of local instruments, and voices of untrained singers to produce a heavily treated soundtrack.

20. See Debesh Roy's mammoth novel *Barishaler jogen mandal* (Bengali, 2013), which is based on issues of caste and lack of political change. It features the life and political journey of Jogendra Nath Mandal. Also see Sen's (2013) essay on Jogen Nath Mandal.

21. Especially see Biswas (2000) "The Couple and Their Spaces: Harano Sur as Melodrama Now" for an analysis of post-colonial modernity, and Madhuja Mukherjee (2014) for a study of the ways in which middle-class cinema was canonized.

22. Moreover, Kuchil Mukherjee, the veteran *Jhumur* performer, stresses the contexts and contents of such media products, and the matter of "vulgarization" of *Manbhum* culture. Mukherjee laments:

    These CDs [videos] sell like 'hot cakes'…my son once got me one; I could not watch it at all…. *These are so cheaply made that, even piracy of the songs does not effect the business* [italics added]… but [previously] our culture was endangered, [and] we needed new forms to survive….

    Presently, we are working with small cameras, without reflectors or lights. For the night sequences, I just used bulbs… we shot in front of our houses…. [But] You see *Jhumur* was never a dance form… yet, and we have to contemporize it now….

23. I would like to recall Spivak's (1988) landmark article "Can the subaltern speak?" in this context.

24. See Ghatak (1984) "Chhobi kora."

25. In my essay on "The Story of Arri…" (Mukherjee, 2011) I analyze how the idea of a "green and fecund" landscape of Bengal was charted through influential novels and short stories

of Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay and others. This *roop* or imagery of Bengal, I argue, was drawn into Bengali cinema particularly via Satyajit Ray's films.

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