

Between *Ramgarh* and *Bambai* The Leftover Geography of Bhojpuri Cinema

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In the days of All India Radio's *farmaish* program, Jhumri Telaiya –a small town in what is now Jharkhand had acquired mythical status for sending in relentless song requests. For most of the listeners of the program, it may not have been a real place on the actual map. Why would such a remote small town be so overenthusiastic in its participation on a 'national' radio program? What does it mean to be addressed on behalf of a place, somewhere far away, that one cannot even place approximately? What sort of national-regional community does such an address tie us within? Could the mythical place, and its resident body within an imagined map, help overwrite/redraw the 'actual' map and places one knows the location of, but not much beyond it? What if we were to concede that it is a mere coincidence that Jhumri Telaiya is an actual place? The idea of Jhumri Telaiya, in any case, referred to a provincial remoteness of the kind that anchors the cartography of the nation constituted by great civilizational diversity. The only information one could vaguely infer from the name would be that it should be located somewhere around the Gangetic plains.

For a long time, this routine vagueness of location has anchored the provincial configurations of Hindi cinema, as in *Sholay's* (1975) Ramgarh. It is not essential to identify Ramgarh at length, which resonates with the generic north Indian village of *Ganga Jamuna* (1961) and *Mother India* (1957). For a long time, the audience of Hindi cinema has been served an idea of provincial north India which draws upon certain generic constituents, representing a vast region, collapsing the difference among sub-regional cultures and suggesting the cultural contiguity of north Indian floodplains. Even in a Bhojpuri film *Bidesiya* (1963), the site of unfolding action seems indistinguishable from that of *Ganga Jamuna* or *Mother India*, except via registers of language. More crucially, though, the films are not preoccupied by the specifics

of their regionality, landscape or geography. This is however not to discredit the films' a-specific location and their attendant inexactitude of 'realism', but to point out a broad regional sweep which never quite needed to be broken down into its specifics. What distinguishes contemporary Bhojpuri cinema, then, is its explicit desire to address its regionality under a specific nomenclature, however difficult or impossible that quest may be.

What I thus want to pose is the address to a region as a political formation to address a political purpose. Jhumri Telaiya and Ramgarh were never places on the political map as much as generic sites of affective solidarity under certain specifics of demographic community – in this case, the north Indian village. Lalganj of *Dabangg* (2010) could be mentioned in the same vein, as a non-place, which serves the purpose of aggregating a region, signifying a geography– not only physical geography but a geography of mannerisms, habits and temperaments. Unlike the process of region-formation in peninsular India, where British Presidencies and Princely states went through linguistic reorganization, north India escaped any commensurate churning on account of which the administrative and cultural regionality would converge upon similarly meaningful boundaries. Also, in peninsular India, the regionalist configurations of male stardom, aesthetic as well as political representation via cinema, developed in concurrent historical shifts with the new states.

In this process, which is fascinatingly analyzed by Madhava Prasad in his book *Cine-Politics* (2014), administrative reorganization of political regions had to be reaffirmed by the aesthetic-political configuration of film stardom, which deployed the linguistic resources of an imagined region within a consistent formal vocabulary. Srinivas (2013) makes a similar point about Telugu films produced in Madras (now Chennai), which were instrumental in the emergence of an integrated film market. The films thus produced in Tamil Nadu made cinema the 'first cultural form in modern times to

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be made at least notionally available to Telugu speakers across social and regional divides' (2013: 12). This meant that the market 'laid the grounds for the emergence of a populist aesthetics'; of which the unintended consequence was that cinema could 'claim to speak for the Telugu nation' (ibid.). Radhakrishnan (2015) also discusses the Malayalam film industry's reconstitution from a southern focus (Thiru-Kochi) towards addressing the Kerala state (particularly, by including Malabar) and its 'mass' audience.

On the contrary, apart from Punjab, north Indian states (Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand) have been aggregated by an imagined Hindi in spite of their significant linguistic and geographical variations. In this vast region, which contains great diversity, Hindi has been a placeholder, not very different from Ramgarh or Lalganj. Not quite an actual language, but a language-complex – which could appropriate Awadhi as well as Urdu – to suggest a universalizing force far too significant to be diminished by 'minor' particularities. This constitutes a particular inflection of regionality, which cuts across variations instead of amplifying them, deploys vague signatures instead of identifying with particular tonalities. However, a reference to the generic north Indian village has no urban equivalent. The grid of intelligibility in which Ramgarh, Lalganj or Jhumri Telaiya were woven, was anchored by its urban counterpart in nowhere but Bumbai (Bombay/Mumbai). One could instantly recall Amitabh Bachchan in *Don* (1978), dressed as a provincial urchin with distinctly oily hair, dancing in front of the iconic Taj Hotel and at Juhu beach in Mumbai, singing *E hai Bumbai nagariya tu dekh babua* [This is Bombay city, watch out kid]. This Bumbai is Bombay as refracted via provincial north India, a non-place within a place – Bombay, later renamed as Mumbai. Bumbai is a subjective reassembly of iconic Bombay, cleansed of an everyday banality, and marked by extremes of wealth and squalor. This mythical Bombay continues to survive to this day, as in even a web-series released on Netflix, *Sacred Games* (2018), which features several characters repeating that 'anything can happen in this city' because this is Mumbai, and this sudden turnaround is its enduring charm, character, and promise.

It may be useful to revisit *Don* to consider how the figure of Bachchan, playing a gangster called Don, fuses the provincial urchin with a suave gangster in a double role. The film effectively begins after the gangster's death, when the migrant slum-dweller is borrowed by Bumbai and is trained and re-dressed into the dead Bombay gangster. Fusing the two, the film presents Bombay city as split between the provincial imaginary and the dark metropolitan world of smuggling, fashion and parties.

Yet, it offers the slum-dweller a shot at transformation for the sake of his lucky resemblance. *Don* magnified the symptoms of a possibility that anchored much of Hindi cinema before the new millennium – the possibility of provincial access to Bumbai, so that the place and non-place would converge upon each other. The slums and the high-rises would thus discover an otherwise invisible bridge between provincial north India and its urban counterpart – Bombay city, as iconized by its permanent ally, Hindi cinema. At the point of inflection in the film, the provincial urchin is made to keenly observe Don's archival footage in a dark room – as if in a film theatre – so as to train himself in the mannerisms and rhythms of high society life. The moment captures a desire far more pervasive than its narrative inflection. Indeed, the history of cinema is saturated with films implying the journey from provincial north India to Bombay, in search of mythical Bumbai, whether it is *Shree 420* (1955) or *Gaman* (1978). Yet, it is not so much a quest originating in provincial north India as much as the film industry's own quest for a doubling effect which has crystallized this arc of interest from one mythical place to another.

In contrast, let us consider *Dhoom* (2004), also set in Mumbai, but not the city of *Don* split by inequities of access which may yet be glossed over, but a city consolidated by the thrills of speed, style and fashion. *Dhoom* shares a lot with *Don* – both the films revolve around a similar plot about the Mumbai police trying to nail down a criminal gang via spectacular trickery. The plots are designed in such a way as to force the state to converge upon role-playing the criminal – not only does it evaporate the distinction between right and wrong, but also, in effect, fetishizes the attributes of the criminal protagonist. Remorseless, unsparing and singularly committed to the tricks of his trade, the protagonists represent a value system untethered to emotional belonging of any sort. In a similar way, then, the two films of different eras, foreground the fantasy of capitalism: that the freedoms of capital must be endless and unregulated, while personnel remain tied to emotional entanglements of many hues. The criminal, therefore, is not so much an outlaw as beyond the grip of the state apparatus because he transforms into the purest form of thuggery – capital itself. Provinciality, in this grid of social relations, is one of the many afflictions of the traditional social order. Yet, while *Don* endorses the capacity of the provincial urchin to relinquish his mannerisms without conceding its moral essence to the contingent and strategic occupation of the ruthless capital-form, *Dhoom* exceeds the final frontier of hesitation and celebrates this capital-form, particularly in the climactic sequence where the criminal biker protagonist flies off the cliff into the unknown waters. *Dhoom* underlines repeatedly that the purest object of our

fetish must be the fugitive force unchained from any of its locations, for it truly belongs everywhere and nowhere in particular.

The mist of capitalist utopia into which the capital-form vanishes is at critical variance from the universality of *Don's* Bumbai, I would argue. The trope of a boundless and hyper-libidinal capital-form that was inaugurated by *Dhoom* later became the signature of the franchise, which particularly exploded on the transnational stage with *Dhoom 3* (2013). However, *Dhoom* was the inaugural moment of the hubris of capital, finally unchained and thus unleashed upon the world, as it were. Its consistent nemesis within the porous contiguity of the *Dhoom* franchise remains an abstracted state-form, diminished by its technological destitution and provincial/national hang-ups. As opposed to this, *Don* celebrated the fugitive and transnational capacities of the capital-form it fetishized, but the mighty defiance of the gangster was yet far too discreet. *Don* is a smuggler, after all, who defies the control of a weak and ineffective state over trade tariffs across its borders. The capital-form tricks the state, exposes the porosity of its information network and its inability to rein in the desire of capital to break free. My argument is that we witness across these two moments, between late 1970s and early 2000s, a landmark shift in the tussle between capitalism and geography. This is not an innocent tussle primarily because it entirely reworks the dominant imaginary of regionality – along with its attendant inflections which frame clusters of communal affect – within popular culture.

Capitalism and Geography

Capitalism thrives on the conquest of space, as laid out in historical geography, for an aggregate economic model deeply invested in the temporal regulation of labour (Harvey 1997). This conquest then renders space in the new units of differentials that constitute an aggregated system of exchange. For capital, therefore, geography as a generative force poses a problem, which needs to be reconfigured. The abstractions of the sort we discussed above – Jhumri Telaiya, Lalganj, Ramgarh and so on – constituted a sign system with limited capitalist penetration, where places, as archetypes, signified a cohesive order of social relations spread across a vast geographical expanse. Bumbai, on the contrary, was the fixed lens via which this sign system was anchored and mobilized within popular culture. The vague open-ended geographies of this sign system were predicated upon a paucity of conviction as well as resources. The somewhat disinterested allusions to a town located nowhere but everywhere served the lazy aggregations of an industry tethered to the spectre of the 'mass audience'. This

vagueness without well-defined bearings was antithetical to advanced capitalism. For the Mumbai based industry, after being granted 'industry status' in 2001, capitalist reorganization was critically linked to the production of new differentials, to offer new genres conventions, stylistic modulations and geographical vistas (Kumar 2017).

What emerged alongside the capitalist reconfiguration of film business within Mumbai based media industries is the increasing penetration of cultural analytics. The data from television rating points (TRPs), measured primarily for the advertising revenue dependent television industry, began to segment Hindi television dramas across its regional inflections (Gujarati, Marwari, Bihari and Punjabi being the key segments). This was a new segmentation of 'national' regionality – not necessarily based on exactitude or sophisticated detailing, but deploying certain signatures of interior domesticity to establish differentials. The development and spread of these cultural analytics, and their tethering to revenue generation via quantified consumer attention data sold to advertisers, introduced new capacities within the media industry (Kumar 2018). However, the representation of geographical differentials in capitalism, as discussed above, is never innocent of the vagaries of monetization. While television thrived on the bouquet of regional differentials, for cinema they were relayed not via middle class domesticity – the site of the televisual apparatus – but the multiplex-mall, the incumbent site of urban leisure (Athique and Hill 2010). Two kinds of relay of regional inflections found roots in the multiplex – i) transnational flows of capital, personnel, style and leisure, as explored by the *Dhoom* franchise, among various others; and ii) a marked provincial imaginary offered in the service of north Indian migrants of the Information Technology industry, mainly based in peninsular Indian metros (Kumar 2013).

Both the luxurious and stylish vistas of Western modernity and the rundown, lawless and endlessly rapturous eccentricities of north Indian 'small towns' are therefore woven together in an economy of strategic differentials. The represented difference between Cape Town and Mauritius remains as minor as that between Bareilly and Dhanbad, because what anchors them is not so much the materiality of everyday life as the gigantic desire of a capitalist re-aggregation anchored by the relay of locales at the multiplex. This may not appear to be fundamentally different from the earlier moment, but there are certain key distinctions we must grapple with. In the most popular moment of *Don*, Bachchan dances memorably on the Awadhi song *Khaike paan banaras wala* (Chewing the betel-nut from Benaras), which marks the restoration of *Don's* lookalike to the audiences,

reaffirming that the makeover is only performative and his provincial credentials are firmly in place in spite of the makeover. The song stages the overlap between provincial and cosmopolitan personas as mere inflections. The reference to Benaras here is to a placeholder for north Indian provinciality. It is a performative reference for consuming *bhang* (cannabis-laced milkshake) and shaking a leg with utmost abandon with a 'village in the city' sort of provincial community, as in the song *Ramaiya Vastavaiya* of Shree 420 (1955). To that extent, it is evidently the Benaras as seen and imagined in Bamba, akin to Ramgarh being depicted as a prototypical north Indian village.

The disinterest in the specificity of the material environment of the town or village is also a way of making a generic reference, alluding more to the regional vessel addressed via a vague nomenclature than the town/village itself. In the transnational or small-town genres of this millennium, however, the specific material environment of Bareilly, Dhanbad, Lucknow, Allahabad, Mauritius, Cape Town, Sydney or Berlin is indeed the object of fetish. The multiplex audience is thus served a new cuisine on the vast geographical menu every weekend; also, in numerous films – such as *Agent Vinod* (2012) – we are served a dizzying whirlpool of geographical reassembly, a collage-like spatial order in which whole cities or nations are squeezed into a fleeting image of a bazaar or a roadside café (see Kumar 2017). What is the locus of this spinning wheel of geographies dunked in the speculative frenzy of finance capitalism? I would argue that the collage of geographies is propelled by the fugitive horizons of neoliberal capital, making a relentless bid for de-regulation of state control and showcasing its defiance by shrinking lived geographies to their fleeting footprints.

However, even as the Mumbai based industry made increasing geographical concessions to accommodate this hypermobile capital-form, the revulsion of the latter for stubborn neighbourhoods of relative insularity complicated affairs. In the realm of sonic practices too, resonant patterns could be identified with respect to voice. Particularly in film songs, there was a remarkable shift between the mid 1990s and mid 2000s – the clear declaratory voice was gradually submerged within a metallic soundscape relaying the heavy orchestration of Western pop music. The vicissitudes of voice also reflected the shifts within language practices of the time, as an Urdu-inflected Hindi was conceding space to Hinglish. In this period of capital's measured but sustained conquest of imagined geographies, as relayed by the Mumbai-based media industry, provincial north India in particular began to re-order its own destiny.

Bhojpuri Cinema and the Soft Underbelly

I discuss the case of Bhojpuri cinema for it exemplifies the most formidable constellation of popular culture addressing provincial north India. Indeed, the rise of Bhojpuri films within the rundown exhibition sector began as an extension of the roaring success of Bhojpuri songs and music videos, which became popular since the late 1980s via audiocassettes and later VCDs and DVDs. The films were also able to enter theatrical exhibition because of the emergence of the multiplex as a privileged site of Hindi film exhibition, and the resultant textual reorientation of genre films. However, even as Bhojpuri films have continued to flourish outside the rundown theatres' dwindling audience, whether on original as well as pirated DVDs, or on YouTube, or as offline data downloads onto SD cards, their enduring form remains epic melodrama lasting over 150 minutes, drawing upon the cinematic idiom Hindi cinema abandoned in the late 1990s. The bulk of Bhojpuri film audience comprises of construction labourers, rickshaw pullers, coolies, loaders, and various other hues of the working class trades, whether in metropolises of towns across India, particularly those with a thriving industrial sector (Ludhiana, Nashik, Haldwani, Noida, Siwan, Ballia, Gorakhpur, Vapi, Surat etc.). The spectre of working class 'Biharis' – a casual reference to classify the poor north Indian migrants – thus anchors a peculiar crisscrossing of the geographies of labour migration and those of rundown film exhibition. Therefore, Bhojpuri film industry rose within peculiar folds of time: the rundown single-screen theatres in the heart of old towns, as residues of an older form of capital – when jewelers, small industrialists or transporters invested money in a film theatre to showcase their wealth – investing in the residues of an 'expired' film form in a language, which is acknowledged merely as a 'mother tongue' by the Census of India – not quite a language, as those listed in the eighth schedule.

Bhojpuri cinema alerts us to the underbelly of neoliberal capital, where the spinning wheel of geographies as an endless menu celebrating consumer choices is halted. This is where, yet again, we are brought back to a world in which Mumbai becomes the only city worth sincere representation. The idea of the city otherwise tethered to the imaginary of Bhojpuri cinema is that of an antagonistic space of moral destitution and emasculation. The city is thus a placeholder for modernity and individuality, not an actual geographical space with its own complications. The route from rural Bihar to Mumbai may pass via a Patna college or a street in Chhapra, but this is most often to stage the unlimited libidinal prowess of the rural Bhojpuriya, before moving on to realize his true potential in Mumbai (Kumar 2016). However, the Bhojpuri

speaking region is not convergent upon an existing political-administrative unit. Bhojpuri is spoken across parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Nepal, and Chhattisgarh, and with the migrant labourers, it travels to every nook and corner of India. Political identification is thus an extremely slippery task for Bhojpuri cinema. If one were to ask which cultural unit Bhojpuri films appear to address – then the answers vary from *uttar bhartiya* (north Indians), *Biharis*, *UP-Bihar-wale* to *poorvanchali/purabiye* (easterners). The regionalism of Bhojpuri cinema turns further skewed when we consider that many working class people from outside the Bhojpuri speaking region are its regular consumers, particularly Awadhi, Magahi, Santhali and Maithili speakers. The inability to pin down its narrative and political geography also has a lot to do with the fact that Bhojpuri films are produced in Mumbai, shot mostly in and around Maharashtra and Gujarat, and funded by numerous non-native financiers.

How do we then settle the question of geography for Bhojpuri film and media? I would argue that on one end, it remains tethered to the old Mumbai-based Hindi film industry and its floating references to Ramgarh or Lalganj anchored in Bamba; at the other end however, Bhojpuri cinema struggles to find a stable plane of political self-identification, on behalf of which its addressees could be summoned as a community. Yet, the shifting address to an imagined Bhojpuri public takes place in the shadow of the spinning wheel of neoliberal capital. It is important to acknowledge that even if the actual geographies are abandoned in representation, media itself constitutes a relatively contiguous realm of languages, platforms, genres, technologies and devices. One of the most popular Bhojpuri songs, therefore, offers an insightful arrangement of these tendencies. The song *Lollypop Lagelu* (You look like a lollypop) makes a mention of most of the districts in the Bhojpuri speaking region (Ara, Mohania, Deoria, Balia, Gorakhpur etc.), which have been enthralled by the beauty of the female dancer. The song thus stages a reassembling of the geographies of Bhojpuri media audience without naming it as such. Even though a riot of ‘contemporary’ aural and visual effects is mounted on the video, it draws upon the idiom of a so-called folk classic *Ara hile Chhapra hile, Ballia hilela* (Ara shakes, Chhapra shakes, Ballia is also shaken). The artists of the region have variously covered the song in numerous films and stage performances. Here too, the female dancer’s waist anchors the reconstitution of the Bhojpuri community by identifying the integral political-administrative units of its unstable geography.

The boundaries, after all, mean little unless affirmed by the political sanction of statehood. The formless, shapeless administrative absence of a Bhojpuri communal geography thus remains speculative outside of the

recursive ratification of capital as well as state. The trap of an unstable geography for provincial north India in general, and the Bhojpuri speaking region in particular, is so acute because it finds no direct attention. The references to Ramgarh, Lalganj or Jhumri Telaiya actually reveal that provincial north India can only be addressed indirectly, as a vessel for general tendencies and afflictions. Both the state and the marketplace of high-bandwidth popular culture can only afford this shapeless province a generic gaze of mis-identification, which it duly returns in its own fascination with Bamba. Even when the migrant working class interest upholds the vernacular underbelly of the state-capital alliance operative exclusively for the urban pockets – where multiplexes mushroomed on account of tax exemptions – the mode of production of the Bhojpuri film industry disables any possible investment in the material life of provincial north India; instead, we witness an apparent assertion of ‘traditional’ society at the most perfunctory level of engagement. This assertion may revolve around an endorsement of banal objects – such as *gamchha* (stole), *litti-chokha* (roasted bread and mashed vegetables), or *ghoonghat* (veil) – as if they were central to the emotional cartography of the Bhojpuri community. I would suggest looking at such assertions as constituents of a scaffolding, while the main structure itself is closed off for being under repair.

Conclusion

Let us consolidate our case of capitalism and geography. One of the enduring promises of capitalism has been to enable us to escape the geographical and cultural constraints of our world, either by remaking it or transporting us elsewhere. It is not my argument that contemporary Bhojpuri cinema displays a fundamental aversion to the charms of capitalism or to moving away from its own quest for a political geography. For decades, Hindi cinema offered most of provincial north India a coalitional form, which may not have paid any particular attention to geographical, ecological or cultural specificities, but it gestured towards an inclusion, however hollow. The rigging of this coalition by the fugitive capital-form nullified the gesture and discredited the coalition. The soft underbelly began to find its own feet as a regional-political counter culture not because it aspired to give a voice to an existing political regionality, but because geographies can come into existence by obliteration. The story we have hurriedly recounted in this essay alerts us to the production of an unstable geography of the Bhojpuri speaking region, which began to reassemble itself on account of its erasure from the inexact but coalitional imaginary of Hindi cinema.

One of the key sites of digital media is the Google-owned free online supermarket of YouTube, which remains a flourishing archive of Bhojpuri songs, music videos, films and various concert recordings. Increasingly, the world of Bhojpuri cinema, among various other vernacular media industries, has been aggregated at YouTube. From cassettes, VCDs/DVDs and offline data downloads, we have now stumbled upon the new bargains of neoliberal capital. If the user is connected to the Internet, access to a 1980s song or a 2007 film would most likely be as easy as accessing a new release, without having to negotiate the infrastructural constraints of lived geographies. To that extent, YouTube marks the ultimate triumph of capitalism over geography, by not only obliterating its material limitations, but also offering such an unprecedented freedom at no cost. Has capital then poached the assertive quest for Bhojpuri cinema's political geography? Not quite, but herein lies a critical concession that we must attend to.

For the longest time, the working class migrants bought portable media from the thriving media markets, and later downloaded songs, videos and films onto the SD cards at mobile shops (Mukherjee and Singh 2017). The crucial turnaround happened 2015 onwards when Reliance Jio entered the telecommunication market as a network operator with rather generous Internet data pricing. Not only did it force other market players to drastically reduce costs, it revolutionized the market in the low-income segment. Online video watching became a habit overnight and YouTube was one of its biggest beneficiaries. Capital may appear to be acting against its own interests here, but it is compensated by a long-term perspective: i) Jio is harvesting a mountain of consumer data, to build its own empire within what Pasquale calls the black box society (2015); and ii) Google has been greedily hoarding a major chunk of the overall advertising revenues from across the world, which allows it to accumulate enormous consumer analytics and an endless pile of freely uploaded content (producers trade attention for copyright). The algorithmic prowess of capital demands big data accumulation – with their focus on complete monopoly, Google and Jio offer a case

study in how neoliberal capital's 'generous' belligerence propels it. The last leg in the story of Bhojpuri media, unfolding within a long-term battle between capital and geography, therefore alert us to a digital variant of primitive accumulation – a story better told at length, elsewhere.

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