



VCD Crossovers

Cultural Practice, Ideas of Belonging, and Santali Popular Movies

This article considers the role Santali movies play regarding the Santal indigenous group's perceptions of their community as unified throughout India. Using participant observation I describe the differing ways people engage with these movies, which are prevalent in the Kolkata metropolis and in two villages in Assam and Odisha. I argue that the way people articulate their identity in the respective settings evolves from the specific everyday culture there, showing that this mediatized identity-building relates to the identity practice of a wider society and the political situation for Santal people. In a recent academic debate on indigeneity in South Asia, scholars discussed from a critical viewpoint the effects of calling communities "indigenous"; they see this as presupposing the conformity of their cultural identity. Based on my observations, I suggest focusing on the diversity of individuals' understandings of their belonging as an assertive device.

KEYWORDS: indigeneity—popular movies—media practice—everyday culture—Santal

VIDEO-CD (VCD) movies in Santali, the indigenous language of the Santal people with six million speakers (LOTZ 2007), target the rural population of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, and reach to further, distant destinations across borders, namely Assam, Nepal, and Bangladesh. From the past decade onwards, self-made moviemakers in India have produced an estimated 120 popular movies and 350 music video albums. These developments are, however, not a unique phenomenon; throughout South Asia, the distribution of popular movies has evolved in an estimated 100 different indigenous languages. The success of indigenous media in South Asia coincides with two other important developments. The UN has successfully fostered indigeneity as a concept to assert political and economical entitlements for indigenous communities on a global level, while indigenous and ethnic movements have gained political importance in many regions of South Asia (MERLAN 2009; MCCORMACK 2011; VAN SCHENDEL 2011; KOHL 2012; SHAH and SHNEIDERMAN 2013). Simultaneously, technical advancements in digital camera and video editing technology have made it possible for small-scale moviemakers to shoot and produce VCDs with a modest outlay of funds (HU 2005; LARKIN, 2008; HASAN 2010).

During my ethnographic field studies in the village of Durdura in North Odisha, movie viewers told me how deeply they enjoyed the artful, twisting stories in Santali movies, the beautiful allegories of the movies' songs, and emotional depictions of love and sorrow. In contrast, a state income officer of Santal origin in Kolkata revealed to me his distress at Santali movies' dance sequences: "This is nothing more than the breakdancing of Michael Jackson." Breakdancing has, in India, become the name for a frisky, almost comedic dance style in movie songs with over-pronounced, extensive body movements. As such, when Santali movies reach audiences in different regions of South Asia, reactions to them vary strongly. In spite of this, I will argue that Santali movies are a medium of major importance to the Santal in imagining themselves as a unified indigenous community (MANUEL 1993; PARKIN 2000; HASAN 2010). Although scholarship on indigeneity in South Asia discusses the effects of such perceptions of the conformity of indigenous communities from a critical point of view, I will draw attention to the fact that at the same time, there are a great diversity of ways in which individuals understand themselves to be part of the community. Specifically, I will explore the differing ways the Santal articulate their cultural identity by discussing Santali movies and

their reception in three settings, namely in metropolitan apartments in Kolkata, in a village in Odisha, and in villages in areas of prevailing ethnic conflicts in Assam.

The major centers of the production of Santali movies are the towns of Asansol in West Bengal, Tatanagar in Jharkhand, and Baripada in Odisha, while two of the big distribution companies are based in Kolkata.¹ The decentralized film industry consisting of small-scale production companies is commercial first and foremost, but at the same time operates on an extremely low budget in the range of 100,000 to 500,000 INR (approximately USD \$1,600 to \$8,000). A majority of professionals in this young industry have an urban background, and a lot of them are not of Santal origin. The storyline of Santali films is close to the narrative style of South Asian popular films in general (THOMAS 1985; GOPAL and MOORTI 2008; MORCOM 2011). In this sense, a Santali film usually follows a multi-narrative storyline, shedding light on a social topic such as injustice by a landlord towards his laborers, which is combined with a love story. Twists in the tale incorporate family members, kin, and others related to the lead actors, who negotiate the topic of the movie according to their societal role. A film will include four or five songs, which are presented in dancing sequences. These songs are in the form of a deliberate interruption of the storyline and enable the narration to branch off (GOPALAN 2002). Characters in a film are in most cases consistent. The male and female lead roles are the main focus. The hero upholds the moral order while protecting the lead actress. A film then requires an antagonist to counter the hero—the villain—and also a comedian. The former is expected to die in the revenge scene at the end of the film (see for example *Chando Likhon* 2003; *Chorok Chikan* 2005; *Achchha Thik Geya* 2008; *Bonga Kuli* 2009; and *Haire Arichali* 2011).²

Military officers and administrators of the British colonial empire wrote the first accounts on Santals in the nineteenth century. They refer to the Santal's strong sense of loyalty to the British administration and see them as primary settlers and rice farmers by occupation. The latter skills were of great importance to the colonial administration, as it was colonial policy to incite communities to populate barren land by declaring such areas tax free for an initial period. A majority of the early ethnographic descriptions also focused on the Santal insurrection in Jharkhand in the years 1855 to 1857. The authors focused on the pacification of the rebellion as an example of successful colonial governance (SHERWILL 1851; DALTON 1872, 207–18; GUHA 1983; RYCROFT 2006; LOTZ 2007).

Research work on the community from the 1950s onwards—often adopting colonial presentations of their culture—highlighted the Santals' strong inner sense of identity (ORANS 1965; ARCHER 1974; DEVALLE 1992; RAO 2005). In contrast, in a deconstructivist article on Santal identity, Marine Carrin and Harald Tambs-Lyche showed the role of Norwegian missionaries in inspiring the invention of Santal folkloristic “traditions,” including fairytales and proverbs, as far back as the nineteenth century (CARRIN and TAMBS-LYCHE 2008). Research further raised the position of the Jharkhand movement, supportive of an *ādivāsī* uprising in the region, by again encouraging a revitalization of Santal “traditions” from the 1970s onwards. In this period, members of newly founded cultural associations popular-

ized village theater and boosted the use of the Santali script, Ol Chiki, invented in the 1940s (LOTZ 2004, 131; GHOSH 2006; SHAH 2010). Besides a research focus on the Santal's strong sense of identity, interestingly, from the time of colonial reports until the present day, a wider consent on the Santal being a "modern" community has also prevailed (GAUTAM 1977; RYCROFT 2006). In this context Robert Parkin underlined the popularity of Santali video movies and pop songs in Odisha as part of invoking a "modern" Santal identity (PARKIN 2000; LOTZ 2007, 261).

To understand Santal identity with a take on people's individual roles, I will empirically focus on identifying everyday cultural practices. Cultural practices are specific and recurrent interaction patterns within everyday culture. Therefore I assume, following BOURDIEU (1990), that it is the performing of ideas and viewpoints within everyday interactions that continuously shape and reconfirm a setting's culture. At the same time, however, everyday practice is the space which opens a culture to changes and impacts by individuals—when, for instance, members of Santals articulate their specific understanding of belonging to the community. To analyze the role of the media within this approach, I draw further on the thoughts of William MAZZARELLA (2004), who argues that media themselves, and media content—like rituals or the above-mentioned everyday practices—are all projection screens. People themselves are the ones who reflect on such projection surfaces as their cultural ideas and continuously formulate, negotiate, deny, or reify their cultural realities as part of cultural practices (see LARKIN 2008; RAO 2010).

The research presented in this article is based on fieldwork conducted between February and April 2011, including four weeks of field research each in Kolkata and in the village of Durdura in Mayurbhanj in Odisha, and a ten-day field trip to Assam. During those trips I applied the anthropological method of participant observation to identify and analyze interaction patterns, and to describe the everyday culture of the respective settings. Above all, I conducted semi-structured interviews to enrich my understanding of the specific situations. Especially in regard to my field studies in the village of Durdura, I was able to draw on existing networks and previous findings based on former field stays totaling eighteen months in the past ten years. During my field studies I worked with Shyamranjan Hembram, an English-speaking research assistant of Santal origin, to enable deep conversation, and could draw on my own knowledge of the languages Odiya and Birhor and to some extent Santali.³ I furthermore conducted interviews with people working in the Santali movie industry in Kolkata and the district towns of Tatanagar in Jharkhand and Baripada in Odisha.

METROPOLIS (DIS)ENGAGEMENTS

In Kolkata I carried out ethnographic studies with middle-class government employees of Santal origin. In the prestigious suburban area of Santragacchi, members of different indigenous groups, a majority of them Santal, had founded a home owners association and jointly built an *ādivāsī* apartment block with twenty-four apartments. I planned to do interviews in this apartment block and was

invited there. It has to be mentioned at this point that this setting solely reflects upper-class Santal society in Kolkata. Together with other indigenous groups, Santals form a significant part of the daily labor force of Kolkata, working for example in the building sector for extremely low salaries. Furthermore, a lot of Santals join lower and mid-range government positions, especially within the police.

When I reached the apartment block in Santragacchi on a Sunday afternoon, thirty people—all male and aged forty to sixty—were already waiting in the common hall to welcome me. I had a brief glance at the wooden hand drums on the walls and was quickly guided to the biggest chair in the room. Taking my place there put me at the head end of the long (and only) table in this hall, which was mainly decorated in white. All other people present assembled around the table, according to their position within the association. The chair, the person sitting next to me, welcomed me. He then asked everybody to introduce themselves to me. Of them all, a federal tax office employee, who mentioned that he was an amateur comedian at a Santal theater group, attracted my immediate attention and was to become more important later on. Finally, the chair turned back to me and happily prompted me—with the maximum number of the society's members present—to take the opportunity to deliver my speech. I thanked him, and, not knowing of these expectations beforehand, I hastily thought about what to say.

Within a second of a comprehensive introduction to my research on Santali movies, the comedian began to discuss my talk: "I have only seen a few Santali movies in my life," he began, and he continued for a long time with rare interruptions by me or the other participants. I tried but failed to make clear that I was not a moviemaker coming to ask for their views and suggestions in order to produce a Santali movie. They all agreed that so far most Santali VCD movies have been badly made and are not worth watching and felt that it would be better if Santals, especially those in the countryside, stopped watching them. Other points they made were that the movies are commercial and moviemakers are aiming to do business by profiting from the innocence of the youth in rural areas. Young people are easily influenced by modernization, and by being exposed to these movies, they consequently forget about their Santal "traditions." When Santali movies are produced, they should depict "traditional" elements such as drums and flutes or Santali costumes.

By around the third hour of the meeting, the participants were increasingly expressing their feelings about being deprived of their own roots by living in the metropolis. The tall comedian rose to speak again: "Almost all of us grew up in villages where we enjoyed Santal dances and festivals throughout our youth. For more than ten to twenty years, however, we have stayed with our families in Kolkata for our jobs." He continued in a loud voice and appeared quite bold, and could easily stop for a rhetoric break before presenting an important point: "Through spending our childhood and youth in the villages we still carry a bit of our culture in us. But, here, in the city we are unable to keep our customs alive." The discussion became intense by this stage, and a man stood up to speak. Seemingly touched by the views of the others, he turned to me: "You understand, it is so sad for us to see our own children growing up while being unable to engage with our culture anymore."

During successive interviews and observations, I confirmed that administrative officers and their families in Kolkata do—despite their statements above—watch Santali movies. However, I came across only a few people who felt pleased by the movies. In Kolkata members of the Santal mainly discuss these movies in terms of their wrong depictions of Santal “traditions,” the lack of “traditional” elements they contain, and their technical failings. For example, when I visited the family of another tax office employee, he told me about the incorrect depiction of a marriage in a Santali movie. The movie showed the groom sitting on the shoulders of a person who had a *tenjang*⁴ relation with him and spreading a line of vermilion into the hair on the forehead of the bride while she was carried in a large round basket above people’s heads by the elder brothers of her groom. In the movie the ceremony occurred during the night, but my informant said that according to Santal culture this moment has to take place in the morning as the sun must witness this key act.

Santals in Kolkata often join the many Santal cultural associations and Santali writers’ associations at work.⁵ They organize meetings, similar to the one described above or larger, to discuss topics of importance to Santal culture. At present they are concerned about introducing Santali as a subject of primary education in West Bengal. A number of debates on this center on the question of whether school instruction should be based on Ol Chiki (LOTZ 2004, 131), or whether the Bengali and Roman scripts would be adequate. Apart from this, members of writers’ associations note down oral songs based on interviews with old people and publish them in cultural journals. Furthermore, serious discussions on the exact spelling and terminology of Santali words, evaluating books, novels, articles, and poems in Santali or about Santal culture, and selecting those to be honored with awards take place at such meetings. Many Santal in Kolkata also participate in “traditional” music groups where they rehearse songs to be performed at cultural events on stage.

The outlined practices of preserving traditions with a strong focus on meetings and written accounts are, however, not specific to the Santal community in Kolkata. Instead, I see the ways members of Santal signify their culture as determined by a widespread valuation of tradition as part of a Bengali identity in West Bengal society at large. Likewise, cultural associations and literary societies play a major role for the Bengali population in the state, and people identifying themselves as Bengali emphasize the idea that their high appreciation of debate (Bengali: *adda*), their intellectuality, and their interest in writing reflects their cultural identity (see CHAKRABARTY 2000; BHATTACHARYA 2005; DONNER 2011).

In addition, I regard the state administration to be influential on the ways Santal preserve their culture. For example, when Santal activists aspire to cultural recognition by demanding the introduction of Santali classes in primary education, they tend to forward such pleas to governmental officers and politicians (LOTZ 2004). Referring to the existence of cultural associations, stage shows, and journals thus becomes a means to display the wider participation of community members in preserving their tradition, the latter being a way of making the existence of their culture accountable to state institutions (DAS and POOLE 2004; GHOSH 2006; SHAH 2010; NAYAK 2010).

RURAL ENJOYMENT

I will now refer to a one-month stay with members of the Santal and the Birhor, another indigenous group (DALTON 1872; ROY 1978; SCHLEITER 2005; 2008), in the village of Durdura in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Let us consider the following interview with an old couple, residing in the Santal sub-village.⁶ Chandra Tudu (the husband), together with two others, founded the sub-village in the 1960s when they moved there from their original villages 10 kilometers away and cut the forest. A few days before this conversation a video show was presented in their courtyard that they shared with their neighbors. When I asked the woman about the movies screened at the video show, she said:

I did not join in when our neighbors were playing video movies that day. They celebrated the Chhatiar ceremony as their daughter had given birth to their grandson a few days before. This is one of the rare occasions to dance in Dong.⁷ We should have danced all together, but this could not take place due to the video show.

Wanting to know more of her views on movies, I asked her if she liked to watch Odiya or Santali movies. However, the women did not take up this thread:

All of the movies are bad, whether they be in Odiya or Santali, but to Santals all of them are bad. Dance is the main thing for Santals, it is the sole form of joy for us. Video will put an end to dance.

Her husband, who is almost seventy years old, generally agreed with her except for the last point and took time to elaborate on his view of cultural change:

Dance will continue, it will never end. Some people may prefer video to dancing, it depends on them. Only the Birhor are presenting a large number of video shows. It is a time of freedom—whatever one wishes to do, one can do. Before, we had not seen tobacco, pants, or underwear. All these things have come just as video comes now.

He added:

If the Birhor forget to remember their songs, only they will know.

The interview appears to confirm a similar rejection of Santali movies in the Kolkata setting. However, there are striking differences to be noted. In the village of Durdura, the majority of the village members appreciate Santali movies on the basis of their interesting story, and village inhabitants watch them collectively on video nights.⁸ On these occasions an audience of up to two hundred people of all ages and genders gather until the early morning hours. Most of these are staged as small village events organized by the youth and take place at the dancing place of the respective sub-village. Furthermore, in the Santal sub-village a lot of screenings are connected to family ceremonies and then take place in the family's courtyard (SCHLEITER 2014).

Such video nights have meaning for village inhabitants far beyond the aspect of movie watching. The staging of a video night is embedded and framed within further

cultural practices prevalent in this setting. First and foremost, a video night occupies the space of collective dances. Village members perceive a dance night, and there with a video night, as an occasion to be enjoyed with people they share a relationship with (Hindi: *rishhta*; Birhor, Santali: *sagai*), and thus to strengthen these relationships (SCHLEITER 2014; VATUK 1992; HARDENBERG 2009). In addition, a dance night is traditionally seen as being a place for the youth to court. Consequently, a video night also becomes more attractive as it carries with it the sense of an occasion for (hidden) courting (SCHLEITER 2014; BROSIUS 2005; ORSINI 2006; MODY 2008).

In the village of Durdura, movies thus gained cultural valorization in connection to the specific practices of watching them, for instance as a means of enjoyment. This positive value placed on movies within the Santal community, and also by further indigenous groups of the region, enables members of the Santal in rural areas of Mayurbhanj to refer to Santali movies when they articulate the strength of their traditions. During interviews Santals stressed their beneficiary position—unlike other indigenous groups in the area—of there being a booming movie industry in their own language. People explained to me in detail that their folk songs and their traditional music, poems, stories, and village theater are the cultural basis of this success.

In contrast, the interview with the old couple reveals a further mediation pattern on movies, confirming the value of Santal traditions in a reverse way. In talking about the insignificance of new things such as video or underwear, and thereby disavowing the watching of movies, the couple obviously intended to reappraise their traditional dances. The man did not shy away from attributing excessive movie watching to the Birhor, who are regarded as being sleazier than the Santals, thus expressing the comparative worth of Santal culture and dances. Interestingly, while officers in Kolkata feared a loss of Santal traditions to modernity as a consequence of these movies, in the village setting I identified manifold interaction patterns based on the coexistence of video nights and further meaningful cultural practices such as dances, which have played a part in continuously reconfirming the value of Santal traditions.

“EVERYBODY HAS KEPT THEIR GUNS”

Being Santal is very different in Assam. Both the wider society of the district and indigenous groups disdain the Santals as not being indigenous to Assam. Moreover, the Santal do not hold the official status of being a Scheduled Tribe, which entitles tribes to governmental provisions such as places in education. Above, the term *ādivāsī* (Hindi: first inhabitants), favored by many leaders of “indigenous” movements in Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal as an assertive self-designation, has a highly derogative connotation in the region. In Assam the term, together with the even more pejorative synonym “tea-tribes,” refers only to the migratory groups from central India but not to the “indigenous” population native to Assam. From the perspective of the wider society of Assam, the *ādivāsī* have entered the region as indentured laborers in the tea gardens and then eventually settled illegitimately on the land of the communities “indigenous” to Assam. Even now many violent

conflicts against these communities still persist in the region. Consequently I stress that the contempt and exclusion of migratory workers prevailing in Assam should be criticized (KARLSSON 2006; VANDEKERCKHOVE and SUYKENS 2008; VAN SCHENDEL 2011). However, Santals I spoke to in West Assam—unlike other indigenous communities reaching from central India to Assam—focused above all on the fact that people in Assam falsely accuse them of having descended from former tea-garden workers. In turn, they insist that their forefathers were primary settlers in the areas where they began cultivating rice on former barren forest land.

In February 2011, I visited Santal villages near Kokrajhar, the district town that shares the name of the district. A movement of members of the Bodo, an indigenous group of Assam, regards the region as their homeland and fights for the area to be given independent status.⁹ Since 1993 Bodoland has been an autonomous district, and in 2003 after signing a peace treaty, the Bodo Territorial Council, located in a massive building 10 kilometers from Kokrajhar town, gained the administrative and political power of the Bodo Territorial Area District (VANDEKERCKHOVE and SUYKENS 2008; VAN SCHENDEL 2011). When I conducted interviews in the area, members of the Santal would instantly come to talk about the events of 1996 as the topic of greatest concern. That year, members of the Bodo militant movements expelled the Santal from their villages, looted the houses, and killed several hundred people of Santal origin. Around 250,000 people, many of them Santal, took refuge in resettlement camps, which the state of Assam set up to provide them with protection. Many Santal continued to live there in corrugated tin shacks until recently (VANDEKERCKHOVE and SUYKENS 2008). During my stay the district was under a ceasefire deal; however, several militant wings of the Bodo movement and the Assamese Independence movement together with militant forces of the Santal, continue to operate there. I was told that one of the aspects of this was that “the groups are threatening politicians and wealthy people. If they don’t pay, they will take action.” Members of the Santal stressed that they were in a constant state of fear. Even today Santals living in places dominated by Bodo continue to shift to villages in areas with a high Santal population, claiming that they are safer there. A few weeks ahead of the state election in April 2011 an inhabitant of a Santal village told me, “Although it is a ceasefire, everybody kept their guns at home. A small incident can trigger violence, which could erupt at any moment.”

In the villages in Kokrajhar district, as in Odisha, collective video shows are a popular way of viewing movies and are mostly connected to village and family festivals. There are also a few families who own a TV set and a VCD player and watch Santali movies at home. As there are no electricity networks in most of the villages, the inhabitants run their TV sets on truck batteries, which they recharge when empty for 20 INR (approximately 30 US cents) in a store. In interviews and during my participation in movie shows in Assam, audiences mainly expressed an appreciation of the movies. They described the highlight as being able to enjoy a movie due to an interesting storyline. Interestingly, audiences in Assam prefer modern Santali movies, which include, for instance, catchy Santali pop songs, “model-type” heroines in jeans, and urban settings. However, unlike in the village in Odisha, there is only a

small selection of Santali movies available in Assam, meaning that movie consumers usually watch Bollywood and Assamese movies. However, I see this as indicating that a person choosing a Santali movie in Assam strongly emphasizes the fact that they are viewing a movie of Santal origin.

Within Assam, there are only three major VCD stores with a good selection of Santali movies, and these are all located in Srirampur, a small town with a high Santali population near the border of West Bengal. The storekeepers bring them from wholesale dealers and distributors in Kolkata. While two of the stores are general video-CD outlets and sell Santali movies together with Bollywood and Assamese movies, the third store, combined with a kiosk, also offers books and journals in Santali. Its storekeeper additionally attends weekly markets and Santali cultural events with a small mobile sales stall. Further distribution within Assam then depends on private, semi-commercial sellers who get small discounts from the store owners, and then offer the movies within their networks of neighbors, friends, and kin, or sell them—mostly combined with another business—at weekly markets or sometimes in stores. As such the lack of a regular supply of Santali movies by commercial distributors to Assam reveals, conversely, the role of consumers and their longing for movies in building and shaping an informal distribution infrastructure.

At this point, I wish to note that Santal costumes, houses, dance steps, and folk songs are not unified throughout the regions. As there is no production and shooting of Santali movies in Assam, most of the markers of Santal culture in Santali movies—despite being criticized as falsely visualized by Santals of Kolkata—again differ strongly from the look of Santals in Assam. For instance, in Odisha Santal women wear a white sari with red check while Santal women’s traditional dress in Assam is a skirt in blue with black and white lines. The Santal in Assam thus do not regard the saris of Odisha as a traditional Santal dress and even disdain them as indecent clothing for women as the skirt is missing. In contrast, the Santals in Odisha are amused that the “traditional” skirt of Santal women in Assam looks like the skirt worn by men (*lungi*) throughout South Asia. But also, within a given Santal village in Kokrajhar district, the approach to tradition can be highly diverse as believers of multiple religions live together. Around 50 percent of the Santal population are Christian and thus do not participate in most of the annual Santal festivals, instead observing Christmas, the New Year, and Good Friday. Also, many people in the region are followers of a new Santal sub-religion, Ramsadhu, which is inspired by Hinduism. Adherers of this religion reject “traditional” animal sacrifice and worship Hinduistic deities with incense sticks and the burning of resin. Finally, there are Santals who claim to be “true Santals” (*bidin Santal*). Only the latter group acknowledges the high importance of preserving Santal traditions and they take part in activities such as organizing Santal dance shows or writing down traditional songs.

To summarize the situation in Assam, I argue that in its response to the present and past ethnic violence and the consequent fear of further incidents the idea of belonging to the Santal tribe has a very different emphasis than that of Santals in other regions. In Assam, belonging is framed by practices of availing support networks within the wider Santal community, especially from central India since the

violent eviction of Santals in 1996. Consequently, references to Santali movies in the villages in Assam did not focus on the display of tradition, and interview partners would not tend to come forward with a strong opinion on the importance of Santal traditions. Expressing strong views on Santal cultural traditions—as is prevalent in Kolkata—would even counter the aim to connect further, as the traditions displayed are only meaningful regionally. Focusing on them would above all hinder interaction across religious divides within any given village in Assam. Movie watchers instead express their liking of depictions of large, wealthy Santal villages, indicating the Santal's peaceful embedding in the wider surroundings there. By this they are articulating the dream-like idea of a far-reaching, prosperous, and recognized Santal community that approves of them. The very emotional way that the Santal articulate belonging on the basis of Santali movies in Assam thus focuses foremost on extending to an imagined community reaching up to the central parts of India.

INDIAN “INDIGENEITY,” POPULAR MOVIES,
AND MEDIATIONS OF BELONGING

Studies on tribes, *ādivāsīs*, or indigenous groups of India have largely ignored the questions central to this article: What determines the formation of such communities? And, more specifically, what role do the indigenous popular media play in shaping the outlook of their cultural identities? For a long time, research on the topic instead presupposed “indigenous” culture and ethnic belonging as primordial given and thus focused on the ethnographic description of varying tribes (DALTON 1872; ORANS 1965; PFEFFER 2009). Only in the 1990s did an alternative, deconstructivist view emerge and focus on the role of reports by colonial administrators, military officers, and missionaries in defining and constituting India's tribes as different from society at large (BATES 1995; GHOSH 1999; WOLF 2005; HEIDEMANN 2010). In this line of research, it was shown that a shift towards firsthand observations in identifying differing “tribal” communities was intended to strengthen colonial governance in the late nineteenth century. At the time, ethnographic traits, language, and customs gained importance as a means of classification, and the categorization of the colonial administration then eventually resulted in a factual consolidation of differing “tribes” and their cultural identities (PINNEY 1990; DIRKS 2001). After Independence, within the administration of the postcolonial state these categories lived on and have served to this day—described as Scheduled Tribes—as the basis for granting development and welfare entitlements to these communities (SCHLEITER 2005; 2008; DEMMER 2008; NAYAK 2010; SHAH 2010).

Recent research on the communities concerned has avoided the existing preoccupation with either a primordial or deconstructivist stance by bringing a globally influential research paradigm on “indigeneity” as a concept of global advocacy into the discussions (KUPER 2003; BARNARD 2006; KARLSSON and SUBBA 2006; GHOSH 2006; MERLAN 2009; SHAH 2010; MCCORMACK 2011; RYCROFT and DASGUPTA 2011; SHAH and SHNEIDERMAN 2013). Indeed, a debate produced the idea that due to the multiple migrations of the communities discussed in India, any claim to a

literal “first” settling in an area hardly holds true for any of the groups there. This is even more so as the central criteria used to define differing tribal groups in India for more than a century was customs and language, but not origin (BÉTEILLE 2006). Above all, in response to these concerns, the authors proposed that future research should admit that being indigenous does not necessarily connect to a factual nativeness but a focus on indigeneity as a political, assertive concept, which has successfully been used by deprived indigenous communities worldwide in claiming their rights, and as such became a social fact (BARNARD 2006; KARLSSON and SUBBA 2006; KARLSSON 2006; SHAH 2010). Besides, the concept of indigeneity, even though indicative of the nativeness of a group, does not necessarily involve an essentialist notion of their culture. Instead, by focusing on research on the various cultural identities of indigenous communities, scholars have helped overcome the effects of earlier primeval and sometimes derogative representations (RYCROFT and DASGUPTA 2011).

The new view has thus inspired research on the performing of indigenous politics itself, which has especially identified the use of various ways of articulating indigeneity depending on the levels of political advocacy, namely local politics, national or state governments, and global institutions and networks (GHOSH 2006; MERLAN 2009; MCCORMACK 2011; RYCROFT and DASGUPTA 2011). At the same time, strong criticism of the new category developed, hinting at the drawback of such campaigning (SHAH 2010). Scholars have outlined the idea that claims of a community’s indigeneity positions that community at the margins of the nation-state, which deprives its members of being regular citizens of this state (DAS and POOLE 2004). In addition, demands for land and autonomy, which are made on the grounds of being indigenous, easily result in cruel and violent outcomes, such as the Bodo’s expulsion of the Santal in the northeast, when multiple indigeneities and other land rights in ethnically diverse settings are legitimate and collide (VAN SCHENDEL 2011).

In the 1990s, scholarly interest intensified concerning the role of popular movies in enforcing Indian nationalism. Scholars focused on modern interventions in South Asian movies and identified hybrid identity claims as a fundamental and persisting visual strategy. For instance, a movie would depict a modern, globally successful Indian who remained “traditional” at heart (RAJADHYAKSHA 2000; DWYER and PATEL 2002; GANTI 2012). Consequently, in one of the rare publications on South Asia’s popular indigenous movies, Daisy Hasan highlights the adoption of Bollywood elements within Khasi movies as part of building a “modern” identity for the community in Meghalaya (HASAN 2010; LOTZ 2007). However, a major theoretical shift in media studies on India—which moves away from the former preoccupation with movie content—supports a perspective on diversity within an audience and on wider societal and cultural factors as part of shaping media developments, and thereby enables scholars to revisit consumers’ connections to popular movies (MEHTA 2008; HOEK 2010; VASUDEVAN 2011; JEFFREY and DORON 2012; JEFFREY 2012). In this regard, research on Bollywood movie reception in South Asian diasporas contributed to new insights into the different ways popular movies became a means to constitute concepts of morality by members of South

Asian diasporas, or are even part of expressing a dis-identification with “Indian” values (GOPINATH 2005; BROSIUS 2005; OONK 2007; MORCOM 2011).

In terms of their ideas and stylistic devices, Santali films are often related to other Indian movie productions, especially Telugu, Odiya, and West Bengal popular movies, and, to some extent, Bollywood movies. This explains why presentations of a hybrid Bollywood version of Santal identity permeate a lot of movies and clips. For instance, moviemakers include “traditional” Santal musical instruments such as a wooden transverse flute, but then in the next cut, depict a hero with sunglasses and a guitar (DWYER and PATEL 2002; HASSAN 2010). However, my findings challenge the importance of these depictions for the formation of the Santal community. Indeed, villagers in Mayurbhanj usually enjoy depictions of a modern hero or heroine in fashionable jeans, but they are not given any prominence in claims to Santal culture besides somebody reflecting the insignificance of new developments in opposition to the value of tradition. In Kolkata, “high-up” Santals even thoroughly rejected trendy fashions within the movies, and such depictions became part of reconfirming tradition only through viewers’ negative criticism. However, the feedback on Santal traditional culture in the movies was also highly disputed amongst members of the Santal, and in the end such references did not contribute to the formation of community in a direct way. In Kolkata, indeed, members of the Santal said that such depictions of Santal tradition were essential for building a Santal community, but so far hardly any mediatized version of Santal culture present in a Santali movie has received feedback as being correct. In Assam, debating the display of traditions in the movies even proved to be a hindrance towards mediating a belonging, as countless regional visual variations of traditions exist within the Santal community.

I have shown that the ways members of Santal articulate a sense of belonging to their community varies fundamentally in each setting. In the metropolitan apartments of Kolkata, members of the Santal felt an urge to put Santal tradition into writing and to institutionalize their culture through associations. This, I argued, evolved both from forms of preserving a Bengali tradition coexistent in the wider society of West Bengal, and from everyday negotiations on Santals’ cultural recognition addressed to governmental officers. In the village in Assam, everyday responses to the conflicting situation have become of foremost importance in framing ideas of belonging. There, belonging aims to extend to a Santal community reaching far up to the central parts of India, and through this members of the Santal keep alive a more dreamlike idea of being Santal. In the village in Odisha, people have reflected on and mediated their strength and the value of their “tradition” on the basis of manifold everyday expressions of Santal culture, such as village theaters, dances, and festivals, whereby movie watching in the form of video nights has been embedded in these preexisting cultural practices.

I wish to stress that imagining a Santal community in connection with Santali movies mainly derives from regionally specific ways of mediating a Santal belonging and does not follow a unified pattern throughout the regions. What is most influential on the matter, I suggest—as members of the Santal articulate a sense of belonging through the popular media in each of the cases—is the settings’ (wider) everyday

culture. Within this context, very different key aspects of a sense of belonging are prevalent—namely, the need to preserve cultural tradition, a desire to extend to the community at large, or everyday joint village activities. The specific interaction patterns of engaging with movies described in this article consequently evolve from the particular everyday culture existing while, through peoples’ articulations in reference to movies, they play a part in continuously constituting and reconfirming respective ideas of belonging, leading to the Santal being perceived as unified.

Research on indigenous communities in India currently makes extensive use of the research paradigm of “indigeneity” as a global advocacy category. Though I mentioned the drawbacks of the category, I agree that a well-working assertive category should be further developed. I would counter, however, those positions within the debate that refer to political pragmatism or claim that adoptions of the concept of indigeneity have already become real presentations due to its widespread use (KARLSSON and SUBBA 2006; KARLSSON 2006). I see such viewpoints as unintentionally ignoring an anchoring of representations of a specific indigenous community with both individuals’ opinions within the community and the existing social and cultural realities of a community’s everyday life. Instead, I have highlighted the fragmented mode of the formation of an “indigenous” group in connection to popular media. Therefore, I truly see myself in a position to counter at firsthand those representations of “indigeneity” that presuppose that there is a uniform indigenous community, and with this further destabilize the credibility of politics in the name of “indigeneity.”

However, I will take this contradiction as a starting point for building further on the scholarship in the debate that has been critical of the effects of presenting indigenous groups as “primitive” or “indigenous,” and suggest that less essentialist notions of indigenous identity should be upheld. In particular, I wish to attract interest in those “common” members of an “indigenous” community who do not take part in “indigenous” politics. In this regard, the outlined deviations from community consistently draw our attention to the point that members of indigenous communities have differing viewpoints and aspirations. Hence, I suggest that including these voices from the indigenous population in campaigning before an increasingly detached and imagined form of indigeneity deprives the category of its assertive power (SHAH 2010; STEUR 2010). In this light, focusing within the article on the manifold nature of mediations at work—which are the basis of a unified Santal community—substantiates a fragmented, but possibly even more sustainable presentation of the Santal as a diverse community, constantly emerging. Apart from this, through this perspective I have been able to focus on examples of very emotional evocations by individuals that underline what is again a very factual sense of belonging to the Santal community.

NOTES

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1. Some of the major Santali film distribution companies include Gold Disc and Choice in Kolkata, and OmmVideo and Sursangeet Films in Baripada.
2. The Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt am Main, provides an internet database on Santali films and music videos at <http://film.frobenius-katalog.de>.
3. Santali holds a high lexical conformity to the Birhor language.
4. In Santali, this refers to the elder sister's husband.
5. Most prominent of them is the Adibasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association (ASECA), West Bengal.
6. See another interpretation and a short version of this interview in SCHLEITER 2014.
7. This is a Santal style of music that is usually used for village dances at weddings.
8. In my ongoing research I am working on a more detailed analysis of a video night. An essay on this is currently planned for publication in a volume by Madhuja Mukherjee and Lotte Hoek provisionally entitled "vcd Visions/ Video Landscapes."
9. Given the ongoing dangers to individuals' security in the area I omitted those facts and names in the following descriptions that would allow people to be identified.

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