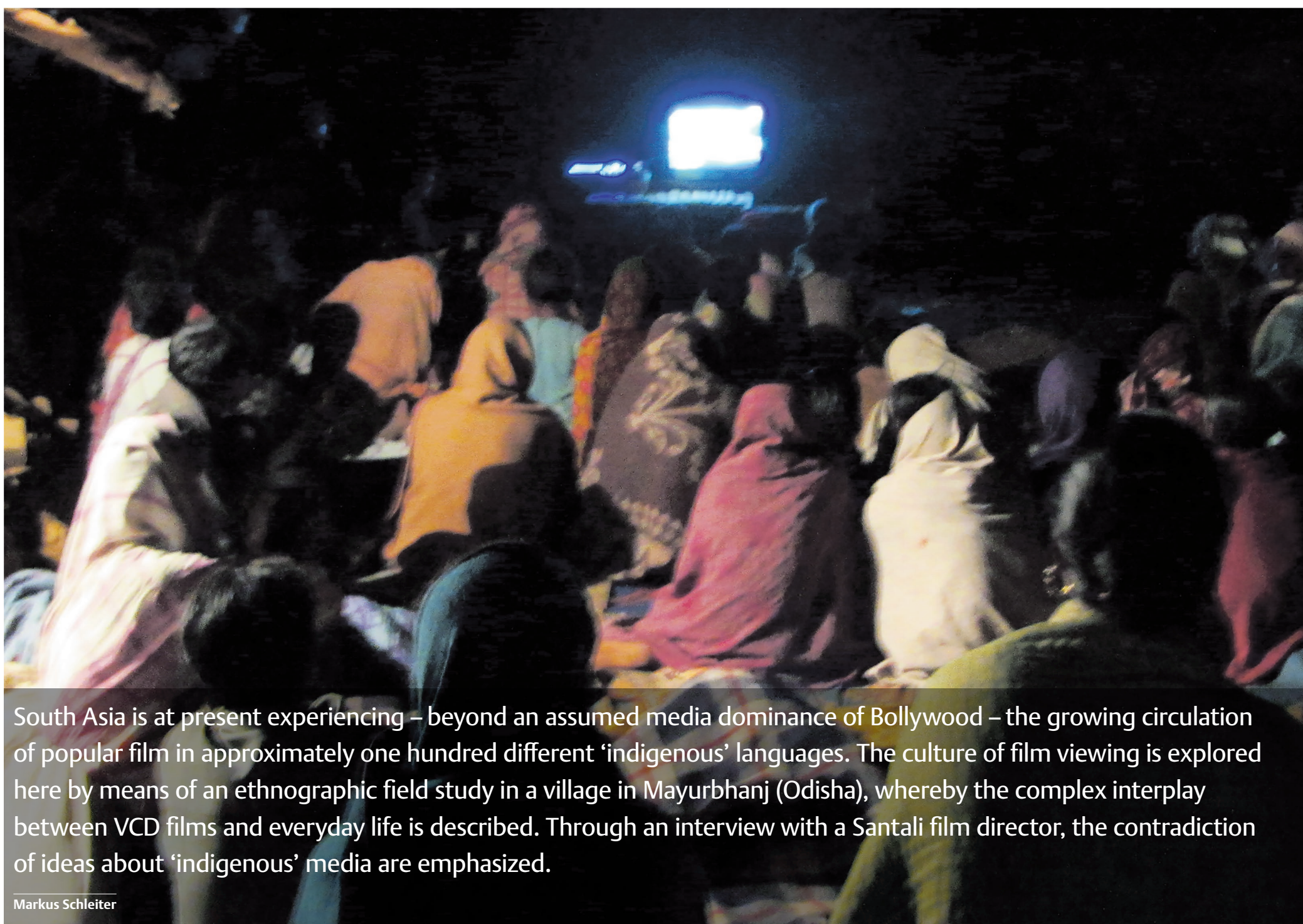


# India's 'indigenous' cinemas



South Asia is at present experiencing – beyond an assumed media dominance of Bollywood – the growing circulation of popular film in approximately one hundred different ‘indigenous’ languages. The culture of film viewing is explored here by means of an ethnographic field study in a village in Mayurbhanj (Odisha), whereby the complex interplay between VCD films and everyday life is described. Through an interview with a Santali film director, the contradiction of ideas about ‘indigenous’ media are emphasized.

Markus Schleiter

POPULAR FILMS AND MUSIC VIDEOS in Santali, the language of the Santal, are highly enjoyed in villages and small towns of Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal (India). A single film can get an audience of up to 5 million viewers, if one considers all means of distribution, namely cinema and VCD sales, but also pirated VCD copies or mobile downloads available in countless shops. The present success of indigenous media, such as Santali films, concurs with a strong reappraisal of ethnic claims in many regions of South Asia as well as a support for indigenous groups by NGOs and the UN on a global level.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the wide availability of and accessibility to consumer range film making tools – digital cameras and editing technologies – have facilitated the professional making of films and music videos at extremely low costs.

In the intense academic debate on the success, but also ambivalence, of ‘indigeneity’ as a global assertive concept, Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart have drawn attention to the role indigenous media plays in negotiations for political and economic entitlements of indigenous communities. They state that such media is of major importance within politics of identity, as well as for a resistance of indigenous communities against their subordination. The appropriation of new media technology by indigenous artists would be a means of fostering local traditions and values, while the use of media simultaneously points to the fact that indigenous culture is a “living, dynamic organism”.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in Santragacchi, a prestigious suburban district in the vicinity of Kolkata, a high-level officer of Santal origin told me: “Popular Santali films will lead Santal in the villages to succumb to modernity and forget about their own tradition”. Below, I will focus exemplarily on the ways indigenous media and village everyday culture are intricately intertwined, and suggest on this basis that conjunctures of media and village life are open to very differing and unprecedented outcomes, which defy both of the takes on the cultural effects of indigenous media mentioned above.

## A film director's view on indigenous media

So far, around 120 Santali films, and an estimated 250 music video clip compilations, have been produced by small scale film entrepreneurs. The main centres of Santali film production are Asansol (West Bengal), Tatanagar (Jharkhand) and Baripada (Odisha). Two major film production companies of this industry

are located in the latter town, namely Maa Ambika Studio of Sanjib Dwibedi and Raja Mishra's film studio. Both of the owners have a small team of employees, and about 200 freelance artists and film technicians, of whom half are of Santal origin.

Raja Mishra, an Odiya high caste film director, not of Santal origin, also runs a photo studio on the 2nd floor of a market building close to Baripada railway station. Waiting to interview him, I sat in the back room of his photo studio. The tiny, bright green room serves as the office of his film company and – equipped with two computers – also functions as the editing room. Whilst sitting there, I could observe an employee editing images, routinely whitening the face and blackening the hair of a photo studio customer. Finally, Raja Mishra came in, wearing a half opened branded shirt and a golden necklace. Surprisingly, he turned out to be utmost humble and friendly, and at the same moment, outspoken and rather self-confident man:

“I am a self-made director. When I started fifteen years back, nobody would invest in my company. Now we are doing films with a budget of 500.000 Rupees (approx. €6000) in this studio. When I did my first album, I had no equipment, I just owned a small camera. Back then, I could not even afford to rent a car to reach outdoor locations. First, I would bring my assistant on my bike to the shooting location. Then I would return in order to pick up the star actress. She and her mother sat on the backseat of my bike together, and I drove the whole way again.”

“Is it important to show ‘traditional’ culture in Santali films?” I asked him.

“I am always keen on doing stories related to Santal customs. I will give you an example. Usually a Santal would marry outside his own lineage group (*gotra*). However, members of the two *gotras* Kisku and Marandi are not allowed to intermarry. Just now I am planning a film about two childhood friends, one a Kisku, and the second a Marandi, whose children have fallen in love with each other. We always bring in some of their traditions in a film, such as their dances or their rice-beer. I love the culture of Santals a lot, and have visited Santal villages often. Still, people of the villages want to see up-to-date films. They also want to watch dressy dance sequences, for example. You cannot deny it to them. Just recently, I made a video for a Sufi song in Santali, which became a big success.”

“So, you love shooting fashionable films?”

“It's not about choice. I would do a silent film with long shots, if I could make a film based on my own likes. Just an intense screenplay with very long shots, like in films by the off-beat Bollywood director Ram Gopal Varma. Nobody speaks in them. One, two minutes, just silence. But these kind of films I cannot sell. If I do fast cuts and put in a whole load of sounds and effects ... ‘Bum bam bum’ ... Only then people say, ‘Oh, Raja Mishra has made a good film’.”

Santali films are indigenous films in the sense that they are in an indigenous language, that they cater to indigenous target audiences and that indigenous people are part of their production. The director's words, however, illustrate the complexities of defining indigenous media as ‘indigenous’. In Raja Mishra's work a variety of ideas concur that show a love for indigenous tradition, even though he is not of indigenous origin himself; but above all, his self-identification with cinematic artistic endeavours and his assumptions about audience demands are omnipresent. Thereby, he believes that the indigenous target audiences favour up-to-date cinematic fashions. Integrating depictions of ‘indigenous tradition’ in Santali films is thus part of a multi-faceted assemblage, in which a variety of very differing viewpoints on the making of films – not necessarily indigenous viewpoints – are negotiated.

## A Santali video night

In 2002, I did my PhD research in a settlement of a Birhor ‘tribe’ in the multi-ethnic indigenous village Durdura in Mayurbhanj/Odisha.<sup>3</sup> Staying there, I came to experience the people's fondness of Santali films. Especially the male youths in the village would consistently plead with me to make a donation for a video night. At that time I tended to argue that they should instead enjoy a night of dancing together. In April 2011 I returned to the village for my present research, only to find that not much had changed. One late morning I was sitting with a quick, but, in equal measure disgusting cup of instant coffee on the veranda of the small one-roomed house where I was staying, when Raja, a young guy from the village, showed up. He said to me:

“Hey Markus, you have already stayed so many days here with us. I would like to ask you to do something for our Birhor sub-village now. You see, everybody wishes to watch films

Above: Village video night Durdura.



# A village video night and the future of Santal 'traditional' dances

tomorrow. Could you give us just 300 Rs (around 4 Euro), so that we could rent a TV-Set tomorrow evening?"

To his astonishment, eagerly in search of film audiences, I promptly agreed. And so, the following evening shortly after sunset, a video night started. Roughly 200 people, comprising all ages and genders, assembled at the dance area in the village. The video night started with an album of Santali music videos. Thereafter, the screening of films began, and throughout the hours of the night three Santali films were shown without interruption. Each film delivered a twisted love story embedded in a societal topic, like the exploitation by a gruesome landlord. Thereby, the hero of the film, a young guy with sunglasses and fashionable jeans, protected his heroine against the villain. The latter usually did not survive the revenge scene at the end of the film. Each film included five dance sequences of popular Santali songs. The majority of viewers, warmly wrapped up in their blankets, stayed the whole night, intensely and silently following the stories – though a few of them did fall asleep in front of the TV. With the start of dawn Raja put a last music video album into the disc player.

A close look at such a video night reveals that the act of joining becomes meaningful to village inhabitants far beyond film watching. First and foremost, a video night as a collective event occupies the same space as 'traditional' dances – which is an occasion to enjoy with people with whom one shares a relationship (Hindi: *rishta*; Birhor, Santali: *sagai*), and thereby to further bond these relationships. Likewise, village dances are a traditional opportunity for romance, and a video night consequently carries the exciting possibilities for (hidden) courting between youths.<sup>4</sup>

It became clear that the filmmaker's ideas about his target audiences proved insightful. First of all, except for a few youngsters, no one in the village appeared to be interested in watching a Bollywood film. In Santali VCDs, village inhabitants stressed that they particularly enjoy the story (*kahani*) of a film. They are eager to know in how far and for what reasons characters are hindered in fulfilling the demands of differing family, kin and societal roles. Especially the complexity of the story and the web of interrelated moral dilemmas, so I was told, make a film worth watching.

However, Santali films are not enjoyed by everybody in a village. Conducting an interview on Santali films with an elderly couple living at the Santal subvillage, the woman began venting her anger about films.<sup>5</sup> A few days ago, she lamented, the 'traditional' dances after the *chhatiyar* ceremonies for a baby's birth could not take place, because the host of the ceremony screened Santali films for his guests throughout the night. The women gnashed her teeth in vehement displeasure and continued: "All of the films are bad, may they be in Odiya

or Santali, but to Santals all of them are bad. Dance is the main thing for Santals, it is the only thing that gives pleasure to us. Video will put an end to dance."

Her husband, nearly 70 years old, though in line with her argument, disagreed on the last point, and elaborated on his more laid-back view on occurrences of cultural change in the village: "Dance will continue, it will never end. Some people may prefer video to dancing, it depends on them. Only the Birhor are doing a maximum of video shows. Now it is everyone's freedom, whatever one wishes to do, one can do. Before, we had not seen tobacco, no pants and no underwear. All these things have come, and also video comes now."

## Conclusion

In the village Durdura the culture of viewing Santali films refers to the meaningfulness of a 'traditional' dance night, and this has led villagers to celebrate these films as a means of enjoying time together. At the same time, 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, and such media practice becomes part of supporting 'new media usage' as well as 'traditional' dance forms. This, however, contradicts forecasts cited at the start of the essay, that the appearance of 'indigenous' media would respectively predetermine either a dissolution or a revival of 'indigenous' culture in these communities. In the village Durdura as such, 'video' and 'traditional' dances have co-existed already for more than a decade, of which the persistency can be interpreted paradoxically to have resulted from the simultaneous presence of the various and contradictory engagements with 'indigenous' media outlined above.

Wilson and Stewart have built their argument for *Global Indigenous Media* to a large extent on the assumption that 'indigenous' media is an expression of 'indigenous tradition'. However, on the basis of the interview with Raja Mishra, the Santali films he makes have been shown to be influenced by the filmmaker's multiple self-identifications and viewpoints that go much beyond depicting 'indigenous' culture. At the same time, the 'indigenous' audience in a village proved to be not in need of depictions of 'indigenity' in Santali films. As such, I would suggest to laud 'indigenous' media for much more than its references to 'indigenous tradition', which are not necessarily part of Santali films. This would allow one, in addition, to overcome prevailing (partly derogative) preconceptions of 'indigenous' communities, artists and media foremost to be an outcome of an 'archaic culture', and much more to coequally recognize such 'indigenous' peoples' media as contemporary popular films.

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## Notes

- 1 Kohl, K. 2012. 'Die Rechte der Indigenen: Seltsames in der Deklaration der Vereinten Nationen', *Merkur* 758(7):581-591
- 2 Wilson, P. & M. Stewart (eds.) 2008. *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 3 Schleiter, M. 2008. *Die Birhor: Ethnographie und die Folgen: Ein indischer 'Stamm' im Spiegel kolonialer und postkolonialer Beschreibungen*. Heidelberg: Draupadi.
- 4 Find an detailed analysis of such a video night in Schleiter, M. (forthcoming) 'Santali Video Nights: An Exploration of the "Cultural Margin" of a VideoCD Circulation in a village in India', in Mukherjee, Madhujā & Lotte Hoek (eds.) *VCD Visions/Video Landscapes*.
- 5 Find an extensive version of the interview in Schleiter, M. (forthcoming) 'VideoCD Crossovers: Cultural practice, ideas of belonging and Santali popular films', in Wolf, Richard & Frank Heidemann (eds.) *Indigenity in South Asia*.

Below left and right: Behind the scenes during the shooting of Ambika Studio.

Centre top: VCD cover.

Centre middle: Muna Bhai (producer Sur Sangeet Films).

Centre bottom: Santali Film Awards 2013.

