

Language, Region, Regionalism And Question Of Nation: The Issue Is Bhojpuri Cinema

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Abstract

Language, its growth path and social value in the new context of disappearing and then aspirational languages are a matter of intense academic debate today. The capacity to speak separates us from other species and helps us dominate this earth in most monopolistic manner. In rapid urbanization and digitization, many dialects and languages are not able to evolve to adapt to the demands of new vocabulary, phonetics and word processing or computing requirements and hence are not suitable for teaching learning at schools and colleges. Many local dialects are extinct due to one or many of these reasons.

Introduction

One major reason for diminishing of dialects and languages is their inability to become languages in which TV software and films are being made. There could be many reasons for that. First and foremost could be the very small number of speakers/users of such dialects and language making any commercial venture like TV soap or film unprofitable. Though cheaper digital technologies can make TV broadcast and film making somewhat possible, the lack of advertising and subscriber revenue would render them unviable. Not All speakers and user of local and small languages actually subscribe to their language TV or watch films in their languages. Mostly then they are consumed by the lowest denominators of the society with less or no purchasing capacities leading to very low revenue generation. The advertising is directly proportional to the buying capacity of its viewers. A casual look at the quality of advertising on local and small towns advertising on cable TV would prove that. The little revenue that they generate is not enough to sustain programming. They can only relay but not sponsor or commission programmes.

Films are even more difficult a medium. Unlike TV or cable, its mega investment enterprise and that requires heavy investment with all income dependent single event return. What I mean is that film is an individual business vehicle that must earn for itself from ticket sales, music rights, overseas distribution, TV rights, DVD sales and now internet downloads. Unlike TV where one programme may not earn well and channel can still pay by earning from other components of TV programming, films have to earn for its makers all by itself. Then in films made in small languages catering to lower income groups and smaller regions, the income from TV sales, music rights or even less, the overseas distribution may be less or negligible.

Naturally the size of speakers would determine the size and quality of the cinema in that language. Hollywood with its reach and international domination attracts hundreds of million dollars in its ventures, even their TV programmes can attract mega money that can attract Indian super stars like Priyanka Chopra! In Indian context Hindi is the biggest player attracting big money and reaching, at least geographically, to the most of India. Same can be said at least financially about cinemas in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam which are smaller in geographical reach than the Hindi Film industry but financially are as large. The film viewing cultures in these language states assures the films made in those languages get huge returns. The whole logic and dialectics of cinema financing depends on the size of viewership and the entry charges they can afford besides the theatre density.

Small or very small languages lose out. I am talking comparatively here about the sizes of languages. In India we can take Hindi as the language spoken or at least used and understood by the largest number and all other cinema would be in comparison with that. Naturally then Tamil, Telugu and other cinemas will be smaller compared to Hindi and perhaps can easily be called regional. Now compared to these national and regional cinema there are many small and very small cinemas that are made in languages that are spoken by a small and very small number of people. The whole logic of cinema in such languages is matter of great academic interest that needs to be studied. How a dialect which is not a language yet because it lacks a written grammar and verifiable literature aspires to get a cinema and infact in few cases gets too? Many such dialects and languages have higher aspirations to be included in the list of nationally accepted languages in the constitution and their representatives are vocal in the parliament about it. And yet the question remains paramount in our mind if such aspirations are justified? Is parliamentary nod important for survival and growth of any small and very small languages that gets no respectable literature and not taught in school or colleges of its usage region? The answer may get mired in emotional outbursts but thanks to technology that seems to be possible. To discuss that, I shall very briefly take the case of Bhojpuri for your suggestions. I don't claim to be a linguist or an expert of cinema, but as a social historian I feel obliged to look at some of the possibilities.

Bhojpuri is spoken by more than one hundred million people in eastern UP and Bihar and parts of other places in India and even abroad where these migrants were sent by the colonial government. Though many think that it is coterminous with the state of Bihar, it is not true. In Bihar itself people speak various other established dialects and languages like Maithili, Angika, Magadhi etc. but definitely Bhojpuri is most widely understood of all these languages and has some economic value. Politically too the Bhojpuri speakers were and are in decisive positions and that must have helped. In fact the first Bhojpuri film "Ganga Maiyya Tohre Piyari Chadhaibo" was made By Nazir Hussain (1963) was made because of first President of independent India Dr. Rajendra Prasad who himself was a Bhojpuri speaker and felt the political-cultural need to make films in the language. Hence we can argue that the beginning of films making in Bhojpuri was a

political move of sub-national consciousness leading to a sub-national political identity. We need to take this development in its context of nation building where a small language plays a role in identity creation through the art and process of film making. The making of films then becomes a political cultural tool that must be employed to bolster an underdeveloped language, which is not a dialect and yet not become a language. President Prasad was aware of the cinematic push that Bhojpuri needed. This thesis can be developed further for universal application.

The Bhojpuri cinema witnessed three distinct phases beside a phase of Video CDs. The first phase was from 1960 to 1970s, then 1979 to 1990 or so and then final and most successful phase from 2000 with the making of *SasuraBadaPaisewala* (My In-laws are rich). First phase was marked with the making of *Ganga MaiyyaTohrePiyariChadhaibo*, then the next phase had *BalamPardesia* and *Dangal*, and finally films in final phase like *DarogaBabu I love you*, *KabHoibeGawanwaHamar* and of course *Nirahua* series. The Bhojpuri cinema seems to have come of an age with own reason and commercial formula.

During my survey I asked an Auto wala in Varanasi as to why they watch Bhojpuri cinema, his reply was educative. He said we don't identify the world and the visuals and the world shown in the Hindi films like *DilwaleDulhaniya Le Jayenge*, while they do enjoy the emotions in these films the locales, the dialogues, houses, dresses, food and also mannerisms are alien to them. They want to hear same stories in their own language and familiar lingo.

The popularity of Bhojpuri cinema has largely been attributed to the migrants from UP and Bihar who while working in other parts of India and were nostalgic for homely fare and made Bhojpuri films popular. A whole lot of scholarship has solely argued on this line that the success of Bhojpuri films were result of migrations from the state. According to Planning commission almost 22 percent of entire intra-regional migration are from Bihar and UP and that certainly makes it most dynamic and visible migrant community in the country. Most of these people were living away from their families and preferred to watch Bhojpuri films to relive the world they had left behind.

Despite more than 100 million people speaking the language, Bhojpuri has failed to get a respectable literature. People are zealous about the language but still it does not get a literature. Few reasons can be cited:

The dominance and prevalence of Hindi with its powerful literature and popular cinema created a condition that was not conducive for the growth of any cinema in allied language like Bhojpuri whose viewers had been viewing and enjoying Hindi cinema for decades. The cinematic idioms of Hindi films were well understood by the people of Bhojpuri regions and the linearity of language and thus created hurdles for the growth of local films in Bihar and UP. The exhibition theatres were unavailable to local films, the audience was not prepared to spend on what was not seen as upper class. The Bhojpuri films made in the post 2000 were lacking in story line, connect with local realities, production value was low, and the sheer large number of films made meant loss of filmic quality. And yet this phase became most successful due to its

robust music and the fantasy that it wove. The first two phases of 60s and 80s were rooted in the social problems of the area and were received well. The steady economic backwardness of the two Bhojpuri states caused disruptions in the cultural complex of the region. The educated and literate people in these states had both moved to Hindi and English languages for communication and also stopped patronizing even Hindi literature. The shrinking base of educated people compared to rising numbers of uneducated or less educated people created a space for alternative cinema. Earlier either they did not have access to films or simply entertained with some form of group singing and some form of folk performances. The AlhaUdal, fag (Holi songs) and songs for Chathetc filled the cultural void. The poverty and uneven development in the states had created a cultural apartheid that successfully made possible a musical subculture that led to rise of many singers and a vibrant audio-video CD culture. Nourished by cheaper technology, this CD industry catered to rural and non-urban listeners who were severely entertainment deprived. Poverty finds its solution in technology and then technology serves the poor people by becoming cheaper, offers less frills and yet acquires a mass following. It has happened in the case of mobile telephony and before that it had already happened in the case of Bhojpuri cinema. But the scholars were not attracted to a very important churning due to its low economic output and very low social consumption. A few that attempted to understand the Bhojpuri cinema always did so either casually on some websites and newspaper articles or some book that was heavily loaded with idioms of world or larger Hindi cinema that generally failed the small cinema of Bhojpuri and created a false web of academic explanations.

One such explanations coming out of such flawed and misguided assumptions based on assumed social data is that the factor for success of the current phase of Bhojpuri cinema in Post 2000 is the massive migrations to other regions from Bihar and UP, the two most populous Bhojpuri speaking states. Their nostalgia for home left behind made them go for cinema in their own language which allowed them some moments of village and familiar language. But how then this theory explains roaring success of Bhojpuri films in their own states. Almost all theatres of a Bihar and eastern UP states exhibit only Bhojpuri cinema and sometimes even big budget films like Tare Zameen Par and Jab Takhai Jan get only morning show slots! Most halls in a small town of these two states would stage only Bhojpuri films. So most certainly the migration being explain all does not work.

Also there seems to be a caste and gender divide with upper caste almost not patronizing the Bhojpuri cinema. My own Facebook page "Bhojpuri Film Industry" gets 100 percent likes from men and all from non-upper castes and even Muslim men. Neither a single upper caste person nor single woman has ever visited my page. It kind of suggests a social divide and total gender seclusion with the social reality that one gets to witness in theatres, no woman can ever be found watching Bhojpuri film in cinema halls. While it does confirm the general argument about vulgarity in Bhojpuri films that keeps women out but that's not all. The family outing to watch a film and repeat viewing both are upper class and caste economic behavior that low

income Bhojpuri audience cannot afford as few members in the family would mean a few extra hundreds. Hindi and other language films thrive on this twin factors: family event and repeat viewings that ensures mega bucks to them. Bhojpuri cinema lacks both and yet the cheaper entry charges ensure group viewings. Here male groups effectively replace the family groups and bring in the much desired viewers to the theatres. The male groups effectively replaced the family groups that constituted the huge crowd that showed up at screenings of Bhojpuri films. Interestingly the bawdy songs and unnecessary show of skin by female characters ensured the repeat crowds. The new formula for Bhojpuri films was born.

To talk of debilities, Bhojpuri cinema suffers from huge infrastructure issues. It was located in one of the poorest regions of the country, with lowest per capita income and agriculture being the primary vocation and little spare income to spend on entertainment. With traditional mediums of entertainment like nautanki and theatres dying the cheapest way to entertain them were Video CDs on cheap Video CD players. They could be hired in villages along with TV for group viewings or marriages and such social events. Unlike other cinemas, Bhojpuri films were initially made and released only on CDs as the low theatre density made screens unavailable to low budget Bhojpuri films. Also most theatres were reluctant to screen them and lose up market Hindi viewers. There was a class divide and that exists even now in cities like Mumbai and Delhi but in Bihar and UP Bhojpuri cinema has crossed that line and has become revenue earner with the advent of CD and DVD, early release of Hindi films on TV and now things like Prime Video and Netflix. The savior of theatres came in the form of Bhojpuri cinema. These halls managed on low margin as they did not give much attention to maintenance and upkeep. What started as a VCD revolution came to become a theatre savior.

And still there was no infrastructure like studios to shoot these films, no recording studios, and no institutions to train artistes and technicians. Initial phase of Bhojpuri cinema in 1960s and 80s, it could attract the low paid artistes and technicians from Hindi film industry but slowly they proved to be costly and the declining revenue attracts no stars from Mumbai. The existing stars of Bhojpuri had been ageing and the 'cottage industry' of Bhojpuri could hardly afford the ambitious artistes of Mumbai. The natural progression was from the thriving Bhojpuri song video CDs. The musical stars with some popularity and very low price tag could be tapped and they found easy acceptability among the people who were already familiar with their faces. Their fee was low and the makers could easily afford them.

Conclusion

Now we must answer one pertinent question: will Bhojpuri cinema replace the cultural need of a respectable literature? The language used in web based journals and blogs does not inspire confidence. Most are written in Hindi and some in Bhojpuri are scanty and poorly drafted. Bhojpuri does have a spoken vocabulary but when comes to the written language, it certainly fails the test. The reason must be sought in absence of Bhojpuri in school and college curriculum

that never allowed to be standardized and robbed it of universal applications. The Bhojpuri language spoken in Films confuses more than solves the language puzzle. To appeal to the cross section of Bhojpuri speakers scattered in many states it makes a hotchpotch of all. The Bhojpuri spoken in Bihar and UP are distinctly different but so much ignorance is there about the language used in the films that even an Awadhi- Bhojpuri mixed film NadiyaKePaar is touted as Bhojpuri. As it is the Bhojpuri spoken in the films has no geographical fidelity leading to vulgarization of the language. As of now there seems to be no hope for these films leading to any good literary culture. Though it has potentials but only if good writers come forward to write good screen plays and dialogues and lyrics.