Media, Indigeneity and Nation in South Asia

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1 Introduction

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1 Introduction

Screening indigeneity and nation

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Media at the fringe

At a weekly market in a remote, rural district of the Indian state of Meghalaya, a vendor is offering bootleg VCDs of the latest Hindi movies for sale. In addition, she sells disks of movies and music videos in Garo, Assamese, Bengali and other local languages. Movies and music videos are also available for download onto memory cards or for wireless transfer via Bluetooth onto smartphones. Prices are low because copyright is not an issue, so even people on a very tight budget can afford to make purchases. Music and films offer the vendor's customers a delightful world of pleasure and entertainment, but also provide them with the opportunity to listen to new voices that are politically engaged and culturally committed. In this locality, accessing music and videos via the internet is also becoming increasingly affordable for a wide public. Audiovisual media have not only become omnipresent as consumable entertainment, often mixed with political messages, but also as a medium of self-expression: important events are captured for posterity on mobile phones, shared among family and friends and sometimes displayed on Facebook.

Not so long ago, watching movies, music videos and documentaries required televisions or projectors that were not necessarily easily available in the extensive rural areas of South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. In large parts of these rural hinterlands, where landlines never gained much ground and electricity cannot be taken for granted, the increasing affordability of video, smartphone technology and internet access constitutes nothing less than a revolution. As advanced digital technology and connectivity become available at ever lower rates (sometimes even apparently free of charge), with mobile networks competing to provide the best services, digital media technologies now reach some of the otherwise least connected parts of South Asia. These technological and commercial developments also create opportunities for new producers to enter the formerly closed arena of the entertainment industry; producers who often have particular political and cultural messages to convey, and who may increasingly challenge the hegemony of commercially produced cinema and documentary (Figure 1.1).

Most South Asian countries are dominated by hegemonic majorities, and it is not uncommon to hear evolutionary notions of 'civilisation' invoked to legitimise their position vis-à-vis groups or communities that are socio-economically and/or

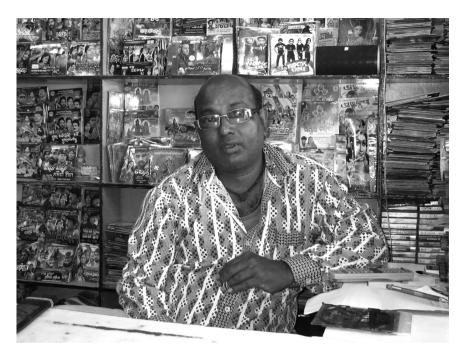


Figure 1.1 Munna Bhai, Santali music video and film producer at Sur Sangeet Films, in his VCD shop

Source: Photograph by Markus Schleiter

culturally marginalised (Bates 1995; Dirks 2001). In attempting to claim 'the nation' for themselves, the former tend to marginalise the latter, if they do not ideologically locate them outside its confines altogether (Chatterjee 1993). Among the most excluded are those whom the language of governance refers to as 'tribal' communities. Such groups may often be perceived as 'first people', the heirs of 'original' settlers and/or 'indigenous'. Economically deprived and socially excluded, these groups have historically not had access to mainstream media. Yet now they are at the forefront of transformations in the media landscape within which, until recently, they had barely been acknowledged as potential audiences, let alone producers. Often numerically relatively small, these communities constitute niche audiences both culturally and linguistically. Economies of scale used to restrict if not preclude the production of media specifically addressing such groups. At the same time, small-scale local media producers in South Asia had to struggle to gain any access to production facilities, as did people belonging to tribal communities. At best, the latter featured as the topic or object of ethnographic documentary films that emphasised their cultural distinctiveness (see Battaglia and de Maaker, this volume) or were depicted by mainstream cinemas as citizens who were not truly part of the nation as imagined by majorities (see Matta, this volume).

In the past two decades, however, the reduced costs of video equipment, editing and dissemination have made the production of movies and music videos that directly address these niche audiences commercially viable. Likewise, it has become economically feasible for people belonging to culturally marginalised communities to shoot and disseminate their own documentary material, which they engage with, challenge, or, at times, more or less paraphrase the kinds of narratives that were formerly almost exclusively constructed and owned by 'outsiders'. How have these new media been adopted and adapted by South Asia's tribal groups, as well as by other communities that perceive themselves as indigenous? And in what ways do these new modalities of representation transform perspectives on indigeneity and its place within nations?

This volume draws its inspiration from perspectives that have developed over the last few decades in media anthropology. These include seminal works such as Bourdieu's (1993) analysis of cultural production, Larkin's (2008) study of the impact of media technologies on cultural form and Ginsburg's (1995a, 2002) work on indigenous media. Methodologically, the volume relies heavily on ethnography; each of the contributions is grounded in qualitative research. Most of the chapters are based upon data that their authors collected while doing long-term research. Typically, such research involves building up lasting relationships with one's interlocutors, learning about their ideas, attitudes and practices by accompanying them in everyday life. Taken together, the various contributions explore how media that is made for audiences deemed indigenous is produced, shared, and viewed or 'consumed'. The chapters explore the social and political impact of old and new media technologies and media content in relation to the (re)formulation, contestation and (re)definition of mediatised representations of indigeneity, and how this bears upon perceptions and conceptualisations of nation in South Asia.

Indigeneity and nation in South Asia

In South Asia, marginalised minority groups that are believed to be descendants of 'original' inhabitants tend to be referred to as *Adivasi* ('first people') in India, *pahari* ('hill people') or *upojati* ('those outside the nation') in Bangladesh, *janajati* ('nation') in Nepal, and 'those of a marginal *qaum*' ('nation') in Pakistan.¹ All in all, these communities comprise no small number of people. In India, the largest of the South Asian states, members of these various groups taken together in 2011 numbered at least 104 million, according to the country's latest population census, which was held in that year (Census 2011). In Nepal, an estimated nine million people come under such categorisation (Carrin, Kanungo and Toffin 2014). Precise figures for other South Asian nations are not available. Across the various South Asian states, the English term 'tribe' is also used to refer to these groups. 'Tribe' was introduced by the erstwhile British colonial administration to label groups that were believed to be marginal to 'mainstream society' and thought to exist outside both caste hierarchies and the pre-colonial states of the subcontinent.

In accordance with a rigid understanding of social structure, the erstwhile British colonial administration sought to chart, enumerate and map the South Asian

population, an endeavour which involved creating extensive listings and descriptions of the various tribes, cataloguing their ethnographic traits and ranking them in terms of 'civilisational hierarchy' (Pels 2000). British colonial policy sought to divide the population along lines of religion, caste and tribe in order to weaken the pre-colonial political fabric and facilitate the imposition of colonial rule (Cohn 1984; Appadurai 1993). Shaken by the events of 1857, known variously as the 'Indian mutiny' or the 'first war of Indian independence', efforts to gather firsthand knowledge about South Asian communities intensified (Dirks 2006). Colonial administrators and army officers alike wrote extensively, describing the physical appearance and cultural characteristics of 'native' communities. These developments coincided with the foundation of anthropological societies in London and in South Asia itself, which disseminated the recently compiled ethnographic reports. In addition to administrative and military personnel, scholars (often former administrators or military personnel) and missionaries contributed their observations and interpretations to anthropological journals, which became the foundation of ethnographic writing on the minority communities of South Asia. Many ethnographic reports were primarily concerned with the identification of cultural traits, including attire, festivities, kinship and group-specific beliefs and rituals. Tribal communities were – at least historically – rarely believed to adhere to mainstream religions, and were often assumed to have a non-hierarchical social organisation (Xaxa 2008; Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011). Current conceptualisations of so-called tribal groups, and their positioning as indigenous people, continue to bear the marks of these early attempts at social categorisation, and this volume explores how such notions are manifested in contemporary visualisations of indigeneity and nation in South Asia.

Throughout South Asia, differences between tribal and non-tribal communities tend to be interpreted in a cultural and a hierarchical sense (Heidemann and Wolf 2014). Construed by South Asia's majorities as 'noble savages' or the living ancestors of 'modern' humans, the tribal groups of South Asia tend to be seen as backward and primitive (Dirks 2001). To this day, people belonging to tribal communities frequently face exclusion and discrimination, resulting in political marginalisation and economic deprivation. In many cases, traits initially identified by colonial ethnographers have become incorporated into the self-identifications of the groups concerned, which in turn find expression in new performative contexts, such as state-sponsored cultural festivals (DuBois et al. 2011). Ancestral rituals become staged performances, divorced from former religious contexts, and photographs showing heritage objects or community members wearing folkloristic tribal attire are circulated as hallmarks of tribalness printed on calendars, T-shirts and other mass-produced commodities. Such reproduction of cultural vignettes may appear far removed from earlier contexts, but frequently offers people from the communities concerned a way of relating their present to their past (de Maaker 2013). Cultural vignettes and customary practices, ever subject to reinterpretation, continue to shape gender roles, social relationships and political networks.

The policies imposed to counter the discrimination faced by tribal communities vary between the distinct South Asian states. Whereas most states do not have

extensive provisions to counter discrimination, the Indian state has devised extensive policies to improve the political and socio-economic status of disadvantaged groups (Middleton 2015). In India, preferential discrimination is allocated according to 'schedules' (listings, hence 'Scheduled Tribes' or 'STs') based on categorisations of communities carried over from the colonial era. The listings are specific for each of the states and union territories of India, and a group that is listed as ST in one state will not necessarily be listed as such in a neighbouring state. Preferential discrimination measures range from reserved 'seats' in education and in elected bodies, exclusive access to a given number of government jobs, and at times exclusive rights to own and trade land as well as reduced tax obligations. Communities categorised as 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) qualify for similar benefits. Scheduled Castes include Dalits or Harijans, who face structural deprivation and discrimination based upon their position within caste hierarchy. The same holds, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, for 'Other Backward Classes'. The implementation of these schemes has given rise to a complex administrative machinery, particularly in regions such as Northeast India or the mountainous areas of Odisha in central India, in which people with a tribal background constitute a high percentage of the population. Given the substantial benefits offered by preferential treatment, these policies have contributed to the fortification and reification of community-based indigenous identities (Van Schendel 2011; Middleton 2015). Elsewhere in South Asia policies of affirmative action bring less concrete benefits, but even there 'tribe' and the 'indigenous slot' have become firmly established political and social categories (Karlsson 2003).

Worldwide, indigeneity emerged as an important notion in the 1980s, with NGOs striving to advance the interests and rights of 'indigenous people' on a global level. Audiences in both the Global North and the Global South seem convinced by claims made on the basis of indigeneity. The concept initially gained traction within discourses on citizenship and nation in 'white settler' countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America. There, descendants of those who had inhabited the land before the arrival of European colonisers began to identify themselves as 'first people' in political struggles over natural resources and citizenship rights. 'Firstness' translated into primordial claims to the natural resources of what were regarded as ancestral lands that were being appropriated by mining companies and state governments. In the extensive lawsuits that followed, cultural bonds to land and landscape expressed in myths and rituals were cited and contributed to the success of substantial land claims. In 2007, the global recognition of indigeneity was testified to in the 'Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' by the United Nations (Merlan 2009).

In India, organisations that represent tribal or Adivasi communities claim that descendants of a region's 'original' inhabitants should have first rights to ancestral land and the resources it harbours (Baviskar 2006; Karlsson and Subba 2006). Often, such claims are primarily advanced to ward off or at least contest attempts made to 'grab' land and resources by the state and/or the neo-liberal ventures it increasingly encourages and facilitates (as in the case of the Niyamgiri Movement versus the Vedanta Resources mining corporation; see Borde, this volume). Yet,

inevitably, claims based upon ancestry implicitly identify other residents of the same territory as the descendants of later settlers, who are then denied equal rights to land and resources (Vandekerckhove 2009; Ghosh 2006). If indigenous claimmaking is successful, as in the parts of India's Northeast that are dominated by tribal groups, it can result in the further political and legal marginalisation of people who are unable to advance such primordial claims to any land (Baruah 2003). Claiming indigenous rights based upon ancestral occupation has proven highly problematic in contexts other than 'white settler' countries, and South Asia is a prime example.

The global rise of indigeneity has been part of broader environmentalist discourse that gained influence from the 1980s onwards (Muehlebach 2001). Earlier, indigeneity had primarily been attributed in South Asia based upon the cultural distinctiveness of tribes. Since then, as a consequence of growing concerns about deforestation, mining and pollution, indigenous people have come to be perceived as ecological guardians (ibid.). In South Asia, this has led to a reframing of tribal groups as people who are intrinsically close to nature (Shah 2007). Political activists contrast such peaceful groups with the brute force of states and neo-liberal capitalism, as can be seen in the video 'We Shall Not Leave Our Village' ('Gaon Chodab Nahin'), the audience reception of which Uday Chandra analyses in Chapter 6. The video presents the Indian state as a brutal aggressor that attacks harmonious indigenous village life, with policemen beating up villagers while unscrupulous politicians enforce their resettlement to make way for mining companies. Yet invoking indigeneity can be a two-edged sword: characterising communities as intrinsically close to nature implies that they are distant from civilisation, apparently untouched by modernity and contemporary society. All too often such groups are represented as the living survivors of an earlier phase of human evolution, isolated and timeless. Rather than debunking stereotypes, political movements that champion indigeneity, tribalness or adivasiness tend to contribute to the reification of all the cultural characteristics typically associated with such groups, not always to positive effect.

The success of indigenous claim-making has triggered new research by social scientists, inspiring new contributions in terms of anthropological theory. The political dimensions of indigeneity have attracted particular attention. It has been noted that the effectiveness of political assertions of indigeneity is to a substantial degree defined by a group's positioning vis-à-vis the state, and the political and administrative mileage that claiming indigenous status may potentially translate into (Murray Li 2010; Kohl 2006). Yet research has also questioned conceptualisations of indigeneity that are limited to distinct, 'closed' groups. In the Caribbean context, Maximilian Forte (2005, 2010) argued with reference to adoptive kin relationships and cosmopolitan forms of a Caribbean global indigeneity that indigenous belonging can create an inclusiveness that transcends narrow definitions of community and nation. Likewise, scholars working in South Asia have cited examples in which indigenous movements have brought together and united multiple groups or communities (Ghosh 2006; Steur 2017).

In South Asia, social science research along these lines sustains an engaged debate on the relevance and implications of the term tribe. Researchers' various

contributions reveal that the debate on tribe is inextricably intertwined with efforts made since independence (and before) by politically dominant groups to define mainstream society in South Asia as a high civilisation, rooted in the courtly cultures of the early states of the north and the south, that is allegedly superior to what are perceived as the folk cultures at its margins. Revealingly, the governments of South Asia's post-colonial states refuse to categorise tribal groups as indigenous people – arguing instead that in principle all their citizens are indigenous (Muehlebach 2001). As mentioned in the previous section, this argument is plausible when considered in view of the notion of indigeneity in states such as Australia, Canada and the USA. As early as the 1940s, G.S. Ghurve (1963 [1943]) argued that the state-defined distinction of castes and tribes could not be justified on sociological grounds. One of his opponents was the self-taught anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who maintained that tribals should be seen as set apart from the rest of society and cherished as the custodians of unique cultural traditions that were not only distinct from but actually superior to both the Indian and European mainstream (Elwin 1988 [1964]). On the one hand, determined efforts continue to be made to argue the case for valorising tribe, emphasising the exceptionality, uniqueness and great cultural value of tribal customs and practices (Singh 2002; Pfeffer and Behera 2005). On the other hand, there has been a steady stream of contentions that tribe in South Asia is ultimately an artificially constructed social category, the product of a colonial worldview. Historians such as Bates (2007) and Misra (2011) have effectively debunked the alleged isolation of indigenous communities, while social anthropologists such as Shah (2010) and Karlsson (2011) have critically examined indigenous peoples' supposed exclusive relationship with nature.

Beyond indigenous media

Before the digital revolution, people who were economically and socially disadvantaged rarely had access to media production facilities, and it was an important emancipatory development when this began to change from the 1980s onwards. Camcorders became available on the consumer market, enabling real-life events to be recorded by people who had never before been able to do so. Anthropologists like Faye Ginsburg heralded the potential of these developments to enable the kind of groups that had traditionally been the subjects of films to produce their own narratives. New media could serve as "new vehicles for internal and external communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination" (Ginsburg 1995a, 256). In this and later work, Ginsburg argued that indigenous filmmaking had emerged globally, in the 1980s and 1990s, as a critical response to films made *about* indigenous communities by 'outsiders'. Thus, indigenous filmmaking was seen to reflect protagonists' desire to tell 'their own story' (Ginsburg 1995b, 2011). This empowerment or agency is also stressed by Wilson and Steward, who observe

the shift in the past few decades to the command of mass media technologies by Indigenous peoples as they have appropriated the technologies of the

dominant society and transformed them to their own uses in order to meet their own cultural and political needs.

(2008a, 3)

These and other publications on indigenous media (for example, Villarreal [2017]), proceed from what can perhaps best be termed a consolidated understanding of such groups, which assumes that all their members have common interests and a shared identity.

Focusing on South Asia, the current volume extends this discourse in two directions. First, it critically assesses the ways in which indigeneity is articulated in the context of encompassing hegemonic nations. Rather than assuming that indigenous groups have been – at least historically – isolated, we approach indigeneity and indigenous (self-)identification as processual, i.e., actively constituted in dialogue with the respective nation-state, wider South Asian understandings of community and global understandings of indigeneity. Here, we also draw on Anderson (1991), whose seminal work emphasised the constitutive role of media in fostering notions of belonging or dissociation, essential to the 'imagining' of communities as cohesive identities. Second, and in line with recent attempts to extend understandings of indigenous media beyond film and video (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994; Lempert 2018), the contributions look beyond vernacular cinema to address music videos, documentaries and social media, all of which are relevant to the production and perception of indigeneity in the South Asian region.

We do not assume that the messages conveyed by media are unambiguous or immutable, or that the ideas and values of a given cultural environment are shared by all who inhabit it. Rather, drawing on Bourdieu's (1979) approach to cultural practice, we consider culture to be the ongoing outcome or 'product' of interactional patterns that continuously serve to confirm, alter or even contradict everyday normativity. This implies that it is less media content, as such, but rather people's engagement with it and interpretation of it that determines what it may bring about (Basu 2005; Bräuchler and Postill 2010). According to Mazzarella (2004), audiovisual media, like rituals, costumes, buildings or behavioural patterns, provide 'projection surfaces' that allow people to express and reflect upon their own conceptualisations of society, whereby they continually reformulate, alter, challenge and contradict their notions of culture anew. In a seminal contribution, Mankekar (1999) showed how viewers of television soaps could simultaneously "submit" to and "resist" representations relating to gender and the nation. Media portrayals can be interpreted in widely diverging ways, as Wagner (this volume) shows in relation to representations of Gaddi people in music videos from Himachal Pradesh, and Mukherjee (this volume) explores in the case of 'Manbhum' videos from West Bengal.

With this emphasis on circulation and interpretation, our volume has three foci. First, it foregrounds everyday practices of media consumption and production, that is, on-the-ground ethnographic engagement with media users as well as cultural producers. How do newly available media technologies transform trajectories of production and circulation of indigenous media? How are conceptualisations of indigeneity visualised? Second, the perspective is widened to provide analyses of the circulation and transformation of media across distinct levels of scale. For

example, how do small-scale or grassroots media feed into global media, and vice versa? What are producers inspired by, and how do they serve as an inspiration for others? Third, this book examines the 'framing' or articulation of culture, community and ethnicity, in order to explore divergent and convergent interpretations or 'readings' of media content. The contributions to this volume engage with these questions through a wide range of ethnographic case studies.

South Asian media as cultural fields of production

In South Asia, the production of music videos, movies, political videos, documentaries and other audiovisual media for and by minority groups can be seen as part of a broader process of the "culturalisation' of media" (Fornäs 1995). Fornäs apparently used this term to refer to "changing conditions of cultural agency" or "new distributions of cultural recognition" (Couldry 2012, 23), i.e., the tailoring of media content to appeal to specific 'culturally' defined audiences, rather than to a more general South Asian public. In Cassette Culture (1993) Peter Manuel showed how the spread of the audio cassette from 1983 onwards led to a boom in regional music production across India. This regional music was disseminated as cassettes of both folk songs and pop music. By 1991, 'regionalised' music comprised a market share of 40%–60%, whereas previously pan-Indian music production had dominated. According to Manuel, cassette technology had managed to decentralise music production because it enabled recording by small-scale "cottage producers", ending the oligopoly of the large Indian music producers. In their pioneering essays (first published shortly after World War II), Horkheimer and Adorno (2000 [1947]) had argued that mass media would always be in the hands of the elite, who would use media at least in part to suppress the political consciousness of common people. However, their analysis was largely rooted in the assumption that the means to produce and disseminate media would always be centralised. Manuel's work showed that the omnipotence of large music corporations was easily broken down once technological innovations made the decentralised production of audio cassettes possible. In a similar vein, Robin Jeffrey (2000) analysed the 'newspaper revolution' that was enabled by the economic liberalisation of India in the 1990s (Rao 2010; Udupa 2015). These developments led to a massive increase in the volume of advertisements included in newspapers, which in turn fostered the emergence of new, commercially viable vernacular language editions of newspapers and led to higher circulation figures for all newspapers taken together. In rural areas, notably, this expanded and democratised the public sphere. Nalin Mehta (2008) has made a similar argument with respect to cable TV and satellite TV channels. Until the early 1990s, India only had state-owned television channels. Their programming was a direct result of media policies formulated by the central government. The liberalisation of television broadcast licensing and the subsequent emergence of satellite and cable TV networks resulted in a tremendous increase in commercial local and regional language shows, reducing the popularity and influence of the previously dominant all-India programmes.

More recently, decentralised or 'small media' (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994) have become even more important. With the gradual but steady expansion

of mobile communication networks, which now increasingly reach formerly neglected rural areas, video and music distribution via mobile phones has gained ground. In addition, and just as significantly, both telephone handsets and mobile data are becoming ever more affordable, even for low-income families. The distribution of digital files via mobile networks or so-called dedicated download shops makes the piracy of copyrighted materials, which was already previously widespread, ubiquitous. The internet also facilitates easy sharing of videos via social media such as Facebook and YouTube, creating yet more ways by which media can circulate. These social media platforms transcend geographical distances, allowing people who have migrated to cities or abroad to stay in touch with their 'home' communities.

Media produced across distinct levels of scale, for local, national or international audiences, do not operate in strictly separate realms. On the contrary - they draw inspiration from each other. Such creative exchange has been the most extensively researched in the field of cinema. Filmmakers have been found to adapt and transpose narratives and visual forms between films intended for regional, national or global audiences. This results in what Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel (2002) have termed, with reference to Bollywood, a hybrid mise-en-scène, in which the traditional and the modern come together. In a pioneering study, Ganti (2012) has shown how filmmakers in India produce adaptations of Hollywood films to suit the tastes of a pan-Indian if not pan-South Asian market. In the process, they 'enhance' and transform the original films' moral framing and add new storylines that cater to their intended audience's expectations regarding multi-narrative story-telling (Brosius and Butcher 1999; Gopalan 2002). Further studies have examined how other successful film formulas have been appropriated by one regional or national context from another. For instance, Hoek (2014) traces how the storylines of Telugu films from Hyderabad have been transferred to popular Bangladeshi films produced in Dhaka. In other words, even when filmmakers target specific regional or national audiences, they derive their strategies and draw inspiration to a large extent from wider South Asian and even global movie-related networks (Pandian 2015; Booth and Shope 2014; Schleiter 2017).

Reciprocal relationships maintained between producers of music videos, movies, political videos and documentaries who focus on indigenous groups in South Asia are evident, for instance, in their involvements with regional, national as well as pan-South Asian and global mainstream media. When these interwoven contexts of production are taken into account, media production processes clearly transcend the kinds of hierarchies between minorities and majorities and their concomitant dichotomies of dominance and resistance that are often perceived as unshakeable. Foregrounding the locatedness of media produced for ethnic and linguistic minority groups allows us to highlight in this volume the regionalisation and 'culturalisation' of media content. At the same time, such a perspective enables examination of how filmmakers' and media producers' locatedness is situated within a wider 'social field' of media production. Social field is understood here in Bourdieu's sense, as a social network that connects professionals across a variety of (media) environments as well as regional zones. The people within such a social field are not only connected by what they share and appreciate, but also by what they reject (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993).

The contributions to *Media, Indigeneity and Nation in South Asia* focus upon media genres that can be broadly divided into three categories. Each of the three parts of the book is dedicated to one of these: (1) popular entertainment, (2) political activism and (3) documentaries and feature films. The first part relates to movies and music videos that have been primarily made for the purpose of entertainment and relate to the self-identifications of the audiences targeted. The second part analyses political videos that have been produced with the aim of highlighting and promoting what are regarded as key cultural themes. The final part deals with documentaries and with feature films that more or less formally engage with cultural classification and categorisation.

Vernacular popular culture: movies and music videos (Part I)

The first part of this book focuses on the production of 'small-scale' movies and music videos, and their circulation among regionally or ethnically defined audiences. Thousands of small-scale production houses have sprung up across South Asia to make movies in hundreds of regional languages such as Bodo, Santali, Oraon and Khasi, catering to audiences totalling at least 150 million people in India alone (Figure 1.2). These regionalised entertainment industries output a great



Figure 1.2 On stage at the regional film festival Jharkhand Cine Award, organised by the All India Santali Film Association (AISFA), in Jamshedpur in May 2013

Source: Photograph by Markus Schleiter

variety of media content, in terms of both narrative style and themes addressed. Nor is there a uniform pattern by which the movies and music videos produced circulate among their target audiences. Gaddi music videos, as shown by Wagner, are specifically created for a single linguistic community and region. The circulation of Santali language VCDs, by contrast, is not at all limited regionally but stretches thousands of kilometres from Northern Odisha and Jharkhand in India to Nepal and Bangladesh (Schleiter 2014). In addition to the ethnic Santali audiences for whom they are primarily produced, the movies reach not only an audience of up to six million speakers of Santali, but are also watched by people from other indigenous groups, such as the Munda and Ho.

The chapters included in this part explore how mainstream and regional media draw on each other for inspiration. As mentioned in the earlier section, in order to increase circulation, producers of small-scale movies and music videos often adapt successful storylines from South Asia's mainstream cinema, elaborating on them in terms of both content and style. In so doing, they take visual markers such as costume, landscape or festivities that are traditionally or stereotypically associated with certain indigenous communities and combine them with recent trends in popular culture – such as hairstyles, fashion or pop music – from South Asia's mainstream or from elsewhere in the world. The authors of the chapters in this part examine how the producers of movies and music videos interpret and shape ideas about indigeneity, and how this can contribute to a reformulation of existing perceptions of ethnicity and culture, while also creating new ones.

How video narratives can contribute to the valorisation of indigeneity becomes evident from Wagner's research among the Gaddi of Himachal Pradesh. VCD albums that feature songs as well as short clips of religious rituals are popular with Gaddi audiences. The videos include visual markers that articulate a Gaddi identity, such as sheep herding and the Himachali mountains. Traditionally, the Gaddi are shepherds, which is how they were classified in colonial ethnographies. Taking on Adams' (1994) concept of 'virtual identity', Wagner argues that these markers are combined to produce a highly condensed and mediatised visualisation of Gaddiness that is seen to be more 'real' and more 'Gaddi' than most Gaddis' everyday lives are. Moreover, this 'virtual identity' opens up multiple possible ways of identifying as Gaddi, from a traditional shepherd's lifestyle to a specifically Gaddi modernity. In addition, images of extensive grasslands or high mountains refer not only to being Gaddi, but also to a sense of belonging to the state of Himachal Pradesh. The VCDs featuring music videos as well as short clips of religious rituals thus inspire various interpretations of indigeneity, rather than a narrow definition of Gaddi culture.

While Gaddi VCDs offer both entertainment and informative content, West Bengal's *Manbhum* videos are of a subversive nature. Manbhum videos, produced by an industry that is spread across Purulia district, are feature length and comprise a series of short episodes interspersed with songs and dances. In her examination of Manbhum videos, Mukherjee argues that they contest both Bollywood

blockbusters and mainstream Bengali cinema by cultivating an often deliberately amateurish stance and a cinematic style of grotesque realism. Mukherjee reads the 'comic' quality of Manbhum video as an attack on social hierarchies comparable to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) readings of 'folk humour' and 'carnival'. According to her analysis, the appeal of Manbhum videos derives at least partly from their ability to challenge the status quo, which implies that as popular media they are certainly more than trivial entertainment.

Shifting towards spectatorship, Schleiter provides an ethnographic analysis of a 'video night' held by a Birhor community in rural Odisha. People attend such events not only for the videos but also because they enjoy spending time with their kin and peers, cementing relationships. Schleiter rejects the idea that the films screened represent the intrusion of 'modernity' into a supposedly passive 'timeless' village, and shows instead how collectively watching movies through the night fills the cultural space formerly occupied by village dances. He shows how village residents have appropriated VCDs to fit established cultural practices, which he takes as evidence of the extent to which the circulation of modern mass media (such as Santali VCDs) has become an integral part of everyday ('modern') Birhor life. The village video nights exemplify how 'modernity' is actively assimilated by a community, creating new forms of spectatorship based upon earlier cultural patterns.

The mainstay of the South Asian entertainment industry has historically been cinema, which has been organised on a linguistic basis. While the Hindi cinema industry (most famous for its 'Bollywood' offshoot) is no doubt the most formidable, and Tamil and Bengali cinema are also well known, there are many other cinematic production realms that are less known internationally but nonetheless well established. One of these is Bhojpuri cinema, which in terms of circulation has always catered to both regional and supra-regional audiences (Tripathy 2012). Kumar investigates its appeal by examining film content and screening infrastructures, as well as their relevance to local politics. The films are regarded as 'vulgar' and are famous for showing 'loose' women, depicting sexuality in ways that contrast sharply with the chasteness of Bhojpuri women upon which family honour notoriously depends. Families, and especially the middle classes, do not consider the run-down cinema halls of rural Bihar in which the films are projected to be respectable places to visit. Consequently, the cinema halls are almost exclusively lower class masculine spaces, in which the explicit content of the films can be consumed outside the realm of the family. The films offer aspiring movie stars the hope of social ascent through stardom. Young men invest in their own videos in return for a chance to act, co-financing the industry. Becoming a singer or dancer means that one has risen above and beyond one's local and rural environment. Film stars are regularly part of larger stage shows that include singers and occasionally erotic dance performances. Kumar argues that by successfully combining vulgarity, stardom and stage to attract a diverse lower class male audience, Bhojpuri cinema reveals itself as something of far more consequence than 'just' an indigenous media undertaking.

Politicising indigeneity: video clips and movies (Part II)

Economic development in India frequently puts pressure on resources owned or managed by marginalised minorities. When companies or government agencies attempt to acquire land, for example for mining, this is often met by protests. If protesters can claim that indigenous rights are under threat, their cause tends to gain legitimacy in the eyes of NGOs, politicians and the general public in South Asia and internationally. In order to mobilise popular support, videos are often disseminated in which the indigeneity of those threatened is emphasised. Such videos, typically produced by NGOs, are circulated via YouTube and other social media sites that enable video sharing. The choice of language (predominantly Hindi and English) used in such videos suggests that these expressions of political struggle typically target South Asia's educated urban audiences, if not a global middle class.

First, to maximise impact, such videos tend to portray indigenous communities as marginalised and deprived, at the mercy of the whims of multinational corporations and of the policy makers who provide the legal and rational framework that enables those corporations to operate. The conflation of neo-liberal capitalism and the state is often illustrated by images of villagers' protests being met by police violence, as in the infamous *lathi*-charges in which protestors are beaten up with long bamboo sticks. Second, in keeping with the global environmental discourse mentioned earlier, such clips portray indigenous groups as eco-spiritual custodians of the 'natural' environment in which they live. This is typically done by contrasting romanticised images of village life in the midst of an untouched natural landscape with footage showing enormous destructive machines of industrial exploitation. One of the most successful protest campaigns conducted along these lines to date has been that against bauxite mining by the Vedanta company in Southern Odisha (Borde 2017). A short video produced by Survival International² was instrumental in convincing general audiences and politicians in both India and Europe that Vedanta's activities should be curtailed, and ultimately legal action was taken (Nicholas 2009). The downside, however, of campaigns that invoke such stereotypical images of 'natural' indigenous people is that they can reinforce preconceptions of indigenous 'backwardness', resulting in further exclusion and discrimination as described in the contribution by Hasan included in this part.

Brandt's contribution shows that an emphasis on people's relationships to place is not only found in videos produced to further indigenous causes, but can also serve visual imaginaries of 'nation'. For example, the movie *Bideśinī – From Bangladesh with Love* (Sadik 2005) showcases the natural beauty of a variety of landscapes of Bangladesh, as well as the ancient ruins located there. Presented this way, history and landscape become emblematic of the identity of the Bangladeshi nation. This should not come as a surprise: after all, the very concepts of indigeneity, ethnicity and nation all centre on the relationships of dedicated groups of people to place.

The audience reception of a political video that achieved high viewing ratings within India, *Gaon Chodab Nahin* (We Shall Not Leave Our Village) (Sasi 2008),

is the topic of the chapter by Uday Chandra. The clip, a sung narrative of the resistance of indigenous people in central India against commercial enterprises and corrupt politicians, has been watched both by people from the minority groups concerned and by activists in a wide variety of settings. The village audiences with whom Chandra watched the clip did not object to its depiction of villagers as indigenous 'eco-lovers', even though they considered it an unrealistic idealisation of their culture. Rather than envisioning a life close to nature, the villagers were looking forward to a share in the benefits of development. By contrast, middle class audiences belonging to the same community were more critical, reporting that they found the romantic depictions of indigeneity 'primitivising' (see also de Maaker, Chapter 11). Furthermore, diverse groups such as NGO activists and even Maoists praised the video, but for very different reasons. According to NGO activists, the clip advocated alternative development strategies, whereas the Maoists saw it as a tool that could inspire resistance and win support for their revolutionary movement. One reason why the video could successfully elicit so many different interpretations was that it did not refer to a single indigenous community, but to a more inclusive aggregate of indigenous and low-caste communities, as well as other marginalised and deprived groups, who it portrayed as collaboratively resisting neo-liberal and state exploitation.

The reception of politically motivated videos is also central to the chapter by Radhika Borde, in which she focuses on the producers of such material. In her contribution, she reflects on her own experiences as the manager of the media cell of an NGO that supports indigenous people in Jharkhand in their struggles to prevent mining companies from taking their land. Borde worked with a trained filmmaker of indigenous origin on the production of a small number of video clips. The filmmaker, of the Ho community, felt uncomfortable with the NGO's approach to using media for political activism. He would have preferred to use the camera to convey the beauty of the everyday lives of members of his community, showing activities such as dancing or the pleasure taken in drinking rice beer. His interests proved irreconcilable with the tasks assigned by the NGO, however, which proceeded from its director's conviction that the most emotive images would be ones that documented the repression of indigenous people by state forces such as the police. Borde recounts how the filmmaker was too intimidated to stand up to his colleagues - many of whom had a background in the caste population and did not belong to the Ho community concerned – and therefore withdrew from the job. The NGO's explicit decision to hire an indigenous filmmaker ultimately created a situation in which rather than giving subalterns a voice, as it claimed, it simply dictated what that voice should say.

Visual narratives that portray indigenous communities may fall in line with, reinforce or counter stereotypes held by the general public. This pertains not just to carefully crafted videos created by trained professionals, but also to postings on Facebook and other social media. Through these social media, Hasan explores audiences' engagement with events relating to India's Northeast. India's majorities primarily associate the Northeastern region with indigenous communities and cultural traits that are often summarily denigrated with reference to rumoured

practices such as the consumption of dog meat, or the 'loose' character of women. Representations of the region in social media can reinforce existing stereotypes about indigenous communities, but more often result in their redefinition. Following McDuie-Ra (2012), Hasan argues that a shared Northeastern identity is gaining ground as a new kind of cosmopolitanism, most notably among people from the region who now reside elsewhere in India. Social media thus facilitate the emergence of a public sphere that enables identities to be refashioned and shared, and counter-hegemonic discourses to be formulated.

Concluding this part, Brandt explores the visualisation of the Bangladeshi nation in the movie Bideśinī: From Bangladesh with Love. The film never circulated outside Bangladesh although a foreign release had originally been planned. In this Bengali language film, in which Brandt was the lead actress, a Bengali man introduces a foreign woman to the country and its people. The movie attempts to offer an alternative to the global image of Bangladesh as a nation of poverty and underdevelopment. Rather than encountering such issues, the female lead character meets people who are satisfied, confident and happy, despite being poor. These attributes stand in sharp contrast to the egoism and lack of interpersonal connections that she and another foreign character in the movie are accustomed to in the USA. In short, the movie contrasts a simple, good and harmonious Bangladeshi village life with the loneliness and lack of commitment to social relationships deemed characteristic of the Western world. As such, the film can be perceived as self-orientalising, i.e., the Bangladeshi producer orientalises Bangladesh for a Bengali audience, and the visual nationalism used to do so shares commonalities with stereotypical representations of indigenous communities.

Documenting and fictionalising indigeneity (Part III)

Filmmakers have been attracted by indigenous cultures and traditions since the early years of cinema, as seen, for example, in Flaherty's Nanook of the North (1998) [1922]). In South Asia, ethnographic documentaries have shaped mainstream audiences' imaginations of people that appeared not only different, but also 'simple', 'pure', 'timeless' and hence traditional (Béteille 1998). Audiences' self-identifications as 'modern' in opposition to such portrayals reinforces a cultural hierarchy that has almost unavoidably been part and parcel of the reception of ethnographic films worldwide. Ethnographic filmmaking, as well as ethnography more generally, has its roots in attempts to explain exotic 'others': often people who lived in nonindustrialised societies that utilised technologies considered analogous to those employed in Europe's stone ages (Fabian 1983). In the colonial era, this perspective provided the 'scientific' basis for an evolutionary theory of culture that positioned Western civilisation at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of development. Hence the colonial powers presented themselves as 'naturally' superior to the people they subjugated, while indigenous societies were regarded as the least developed of all. This evolutionary perspective on culture was instrumentalised to present colonial rule as more paternalistic than exploitative and has remained an undertone in the post-colonial era, informing government policies geared towards the 'upliftment' of 'backward' indigenous communities (Xaxa 2016). Cultural evolutionism is now increasingly dismissed as misguided and politically incorrect in South Asia and worldwide, certainly by anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers. Nonetheless, its tropes continue to be alluded to in films and journalism that emphasise a contrast between the postulated 'modernity' of viewers and the traditions that are foregrounded in order to mark a portrayed group or community as indigenous.

Documentary films differ from fictional ones in that viewers generally expect them to represent 'reality' rather than imaginative stories. Documentary filmmakers use certain techniques to establish their authority and convince viewers that the narratives presented are factual and based on real life (Nichols 2016). Ethnographic filmmakers have, at least historically, often extended such an aura of factuality by claiming that their films are rooted in scientific research. Non-professional videographers using consumer equipment tend to mimic documentary film conventions if they make recordings intended to represent aspects of their own lives (Wilson and Stewart 2008b). Dissemination of such amateur videos via the internet has radically changed and extended the kinds of audiences the videos can reach, making them available to growing diasporas within South Asia and abroad (Wettstein, Chapter 12). Audiovisual material can be shown and shared on social media such as YouTube and make a vital contribution to the visibility of minority cultures, both for the self-identification of members of such communities and for outsiders. Even though this does not necessarily debunk existing stereotypes, it does imply a change of format and voice, if only because these new forms of audiovisual documentation are first and foremost created for people belonging to the communities concerned.

The technological developments of the last decade have also made the production of fiction films a financially viable enterprise for new categories of producers, who cater specifically to audiences considered too small or 'niche' by larger industrial players. Parallel to the spread of literacy and the emergence of written literature in minority languages, fiction films set in indigenous societies have also become increasingly common. While such movies can put forward alternative perspectives, it proves almost impossible not to refer to stereotypical notions of indigenous culture, if only to help mainstream audiences relate to the cultural content. The contributions to this part reveal that local audiences do not necessarily seem disturbed by such cultural stereotypes, which may even be seen to provide necessary cultural and political affirmation of their communities' existence (de Maaker, Chapter 11).

Analysing the development, over time, of films identified as ethnographic in India, Giulia Battaglia shows that modes of funding and of dissemination have been formative for contemporary understandings of anthropological documentaries. In the eyes of critical filmmakers, she argues, the close association of at least some ethnographic filmmakers with government-sponsored agencies has discredited the genre. On the one hand, anthropologists working for government-funded institutions view such films primarily as a continuation of practices of 'documenting' indigenous cultures that have developed over the last century. On the other

hand, some independent documentary filmmakers, especially those from South Asia itself, argue that makers of ethnographic films that foreground performative and material culture are complicit with government policies, since they fail to show the exploitation and deprivation inflicted upon indigenous communities. In other words, it appears impossible for documentary filmmakers in South Asia, as elsewhere, to avoid abetting certain preconceived agendas. For those who make documentary films that explore the lifeworlds of indigenous people, it seems difficult not to strengthen existing stereotypes. This holds both with respect to emphasising cultural distinctiveness and to exposing the effects of exploitation by corporations and the state, which may lead to portrayals in which communities appear to be hapless victims of 'modernity'.

Documentary films are not just made 'about' people; they also involve their protagonists. In his chapter, de Maaker analyses how members of Northeast India's Garo community engage with being the subject of documentary films. He notes that even though public intellectuals have critiqued documentary films about indigenous communities for exoticising and othering those portrayed, people who belong to the groups themselves have rarely voiced such criticism. In the case of the Garo, ethnographic films produced several decades ago continue to be screened and contribute to shared ideas about what constitutes Garo culture. Typically, such films focus on village life and imply that 'the Garo' are a unified, 'traditional' community, rather than representing the substantial differences in terms of class, education and religious background that have come to characterise the community. Some urban, educated, middle class Garo, however, express ambivalence towards these ethnographic films. But even those who are apprehensive about being 'traditionalised' value the films as cultural records of 'past' Garo customs. Given that the individuals who represent what urban Garo regard as their cultural past are alive and well today, the reificatory and objectifying approach towards culture that typically characterises such documentary films ends up challenging the extent to which Garo modernity has actually been attained. The protagonists of the films, by contrast, are proud to consider themselves the guardians of 'true' and 'ancient' Garo culture. They do not mind whether the films reinforce existing stereotypes. While acting out the roles designated by filmmakers is a source of amusement and not taken too seriously, both protagonists and the wider Garo audience acknowledge the (political) need to produce 'objectifications' of customs that can effectively communicate the cultural distinctiveness of the Garo to audiences within India and worldwide.

Creating audiovisual documentary records is common practice these days, as it is among the Rai of Eastern Nepal and Rai diaspora who feature in Wettstein's chapter. Over the last decade, hundreds of professional and amateur filmmakers have made video clips of the circular *sakela* dance, which is performed in a group as part of a ritual festival and, recently, also in other contexts. Sakela videos are shared on social media such as YouTube, where they are becoming increasingly popular, both in Nepal and among the Rai diaspora. Wettstein observes how non-ritual performances of the dance in competitions and staging it for the camera has led to certain elements being emphasised, and notes the standardising effect of

video records against which subsequent performances may be judged. The growing popularity of sakela is due, in part, to the mobilisation of ethnicity sparked by separatist parties in Nepal. Rai political actors use videos in which sakela dancing plays a prominent role to emphasise the cultural distinctiveness of the Rai and to rally support for demands for the creation of an autonomous Kirat Rai homeland within Nepal. The messages that viewers of these clips read in their visual content are revealed by the comments posted beneath the clips on YouTube. Wettstein argues that the YouTube videos and the comments posted contribute to a reinterpretation of the sakela dance, as well as to the broader political discourse on Rai ethnicity.

Shifting from documentary narratives to the documentary quality of feature films, Ara's contribution analyses a change in the way that props are used in two filmed adaptations of the Assamese legend *Joymati*. Over the past century, identity politics have come to dominate Assamese politics. The popular Assamese legend of Joymati tells the story of a princess who sacrificed her life to save her husband and his kingdom. Comparing two versions of the historical drama filmed in 1935 and in 2006, Ara notes a shift between the films' subtexts from pan-Assamese nationalism combined with an implicit anti-colonialism to the assertion of a more narrowly defined indigenous Tai-Ahom identity. Ara traces how the symbolism of the objects used and costumes worn in the films subtly underscore these agendas, and in doing so she draws attention to the non-verbal dimensions of cultural narratives and how these can be conveyed through objects and their stagings.

In South Asia, it is not uncommon that the honour of an entire family, if not a community, is seen to depend upon the chastity of its women. Where the legend of Joymati is a historical example of this trope. Mara Matta's contribution focuses on contemporary interpretations of female gender and sexuality. The first feature film made among the Brokpa of Arunachal Pradesh tells the story of a woman named Sonam. The film, which was shot with non-professional actors, focuses on the polyandric practices of the Brokpa. Brokpa women are presented as naturally inclined to 'indulge' in sexual intercourse with more than one partner. But rather than depicting polyandry as a culturally embedded relational arrangement, the film's narrative sentences Sonam to an unfortunate and untimely death, which viewers are implicitly directed to interpret as a just punishment for her 'sinful' life. In this way, Matta argues, interpretations of female chastity and monogamy as virtuous, which go virtually unchallenged among the South Asian mainstream, are projected by the filmmaker onto the Brokpa community. Such a misrepresentation of the lifeworlds of indigenous women is, according to Matta, by no means exceptional in cinema, but rather a further disappointing example of the extent to which mainstream normativity is projected onto cultural minorities.

Reinterpretations, fragmentations, divergences

The contributions to this volume reveal how new digital media technology has extended the scope and reach of media production to include people belonging to deprived and marginalised communities. The transformation of trajectories of production and circulation has been radical; for example, social media enable the

creation and maintenance of online transnational communities that bring together 'home' communities and national and global diasporas. Such processes of change are ongoing, and as the coverage and affordability of internet access in the rural hinterlands continues to increase, ever more opportunities emerge for accessing and sharing audiovisual media.

The changing dynamics of media production and dissemination have redefined interactions between producers and audiences across different levels of scale. Although technological change has been game changing, the research presented here indicates that current tendencies towards the 'culturalisation' of media are grafted on processes of transformation that have been long since underway. The recent transformations of the media landscape follow patterns reminiscent of the vernacularisation of music cassettes in the 1980s, as well as the 'newspaper revolution' and the diversification of TV networks in the 1990s. In these examples, narrowing products' linguistic and cultural framing enabled producers to reach out to new (niche) audiences. The contributions to this book suggest that media producers who identify with indigenous groups draw inspiration from mainstream music, cinema and documentary production. Global influences become most visible in the strategic framing of politicised indigeneity, for example, when parallels are drawn between South Asia's indigenous communities and other such groups worldwide.

The transformation of the media landscape has contributed to reinterpretations of notions such as culture, community and ethnicity. In South Asia, marginal and deprived groups, notably 'tribals', increasingly identify themselves in terms of indigeneity. Inherent to the notion of indigeneity are two assumptions that have contradictory implications for the politics of representation. On the one hand, the privileged relationship to nature attributed to indigenous communities places them on a (moral) ecological high ground vis-à-vis mainstream communities. On the other hand, the postulated archaic origins of indigenous knowledge and isolationist social organisation characterises indigenous communities as primitive and nonmodern, and hence inferior in terms of social hierarchy. In other words, vulnerability and victimhood are set against magnitude and agency. In this way, indigeneity appears in implicit opposition to an imagined hegemonic cultural 'mainstream', which in South Asian contexts tends to be equated with the respective nation. Indigeneity, as it is manifested in movies, music videos, political video clips and documentaries, is subject to a variety of interpretations. Political video clips generally emphasise the marginalisation, deprivation and proximity to nature of indigenous communities, while entertainment media tend to allude to stereotypes that have their origins in colonial era ethnography. Stereotypical representations that were once rejected for being outdated and inaccurate are now increasingly embraced, since they can prove vital in substantiating politically (and economically) motivated claims to unique tribal identities. Yet the various contributions also show that seemingly stereotypical visualisations of indigeneity are open to interpretation on behalf of consumers as well as producers. We hope that the explorations of media production, circulation and appreciation provided in the chapters that follow will help to inspire rethinking of the ever-changing complex interrelationships between media, indigeneity and nation in South Asia.

Notes

- Parts of this paragraph have been based upon "Indigeneity as a Cultural Practice: 'Tribe' and the State in India"; the introduction to a focus section of the IIAS Newsletter on 'Indigenous India' written by de Maaker and Schleiter (2010).
- 2 Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain (Nicholas 2009), a 15-minute film produced by Survival International in support of a campaign by Dongria Kondh of Odisha to prevent Vedanta Resources Plc from acquiring a concession for an open-pit bauxite mine on their ancestral land. Narrated by the well-known British actress Joanna Lumley and distributed via the internet, the film appears to have made a significant contribution to the exceptionally successful campaign. See www.survivalinternational.org/films/mine. accessed on 9.12.2018.

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