

# From Single Screen to YouTube: Tracking the Regional Blockbuster

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**S. V. Srinivas**  
**V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam**  
**Raghav Nanduri**  
**Vasundhara Singhal**  
**Vishnu Dath R.**

## Abstract

Recent developments related to production, distribution and viewing of movies point to the need for research projects that examine multiples sites and formats simultaneously. This article outlines an ongoing project whose primary objective is to track the migration of movies across geographical spaces as well as screens. Our starting point—the pretext rather—is the ‘regional blockbuster’ that is the name we have given to big budget productions made by Chennai- and Hyderabad-based film industries. The regional blockbuster, being an all-India form that circulates in multiple language versions, offers opportunities for comparisons across regions in India and also between theatrical and other spaces of movie consumption. In the current phase, the focus of our project is the transformation of single screen cinema halls on the one hand and dubbing on the other. These, we suggest are among the necessary conditions for the emergence of the blockbuster. We present here the initial findings of fieldwork carried out by us simultaneously in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Delhi.

## Keywords

Tamil cinema, Telugu cinema, Hindi cinema, Hollywood, dubbing, digitisation,

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**S. V. Srinivas**, School of Liberal Arts, Azim Premji University Undergraduate Campus, B.Hosahalli Road, Off Sarjapura Road, Bengaluru 562125, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: [srinivas.sv@apu.edu.in](mailto:srinivas.sv@apu.edu.in).

**V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam**, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: [meghashyam.v17ug@apu.edu.in](mailto:meghashyam.v17ug@apu.edu.in).

**Raghav Nanduri**, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: [raghav.nanduri17ug@apu.edu.in](mailto:raghav.nanduri17ug@apu.edu.in).

**Vasundhara Singhal**, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: [vasundhara.singhal16ug@apu.edu.in](mailto:vasundhara.singhal16ug@apu.edu.in).

**Vishnu Dath R.**, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: [vishnu.dath17ug@apu.edu.in](mailto:vishnu.dath17ug@apu.edu.in).

## Backstory

The countrywide success of the *Baahubali* franchise in 2015 and 2017 draws our attention to significant changes in the entertainment industry as well as film culture. The most important of these is the increased importance of dubbing for the entertainment industry as a whole and cinema in particular. In India, dubbing from one Indian language to another is almost as old as the sound film. Indeed, for over half a century, it has been the lifeline for distributors and exhibitors in South India where up to a third of the films released in the local language were dubbed from another—usually South Indian—language.<sup>1</sup> However, the scale of dubbing and its economic consequences for the domestic entertainment industry as well as Hollywood, is surely unprecedented.

The catapulting of dubbing out of the B circuit into the heart of India's leisure economy is back-ended, among other developments, by the digitisation of distribution and projection. Digitisation and satellite distribution of films not only reduced 'print and publicity' costs but also made it possible for saturation theatrical releases across distribution territories and exhibition circuits. However, digitisation itself required investments that the already distressed single screen managements could ill-afford. While several hundred single screen theatres closed down, hundreds of others were taken on lease by a small number of powerful companies (including producer-distributors) who underwrote costs of digitisation and, in some instances, remodelling and air-conditioning of theatres as well. The parallel growth of the multiplex segment of exhibition and leasing of theatres resulted in the effective control of exhibition in the hands of a relatively small number of players.

While none of these processes began in the past decade, the convergence of multiple factors created the conditions for the emergence of the blockbuster in the sense that Hall and Neale use the term: 'unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money' (2010, p. 1). The most striking evidence for the blockbuster phenomenon in India comes from films that were originally produced in Telugu or Tamil and English, respectively, but earned most of their revenues from other language versions: *Baahubali: The Beginning* (Rajamouli, 2015) and *Baahubali: The Conclusion* (Rajamouli, 2017), *The Jungle Book* (Jon Favreau, 2016) and, more recently, *2.0* (Shankar, 2018). According to Shobu Yarlagadda, one of the producers of the *Baahubali* franchise, between 35% and 40% of the revenue for the *Baahubali* films came from Hindi. Not surprising, considering the fact that 80% of all available screens in the country screened *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* during its opening week in April–May 2017.<sup>2</sup> *The Jungle Book* was released a week ahead of its US premiere 'in over 1,600 screens across 357 cities' in India. The three Indian language versions of the film grossed 58% of the total revenue (FICCI-KPMG, 2017, p. 126).

## The Project

Although the blockbuster is a global form, the category itself has rarely been used in critical writings on Indian cinema. We use the term 'regional blockbuster' to refer to a relatively small number of expensive productions made in Tamil and Telugu that point to new marketing as well as production logics at work. These films are dubbing-ready

in that (a) there is a judicious choice of stars—especially female stars—directors and other creative workers who are likely to have a cinematic profile that exceeds the language territories of the original production, (b) they are made in genres, or have stories and ‘attractions’, that are not culturally specific and instead invite comparison with Hollywood and East Asian blockbusters. They are thus positioned for markets beyond not just the states in which they are made but also South India as a whole where there is already a long history of dubbing or remaking films from neighbouring industries. In terms of production, these films are characterised by their investments in visual effects, sets (prosthetic) makeup, extras and other expense heads that are categorised as *below-the-line* (i.e., production costs, not the creative team). This is regardless of whether or not major stars are cast in them.<sup>3</sup>

The first phase of this project involved five researchers working in different parts of India to document recent developments in distribution-exhibition in order to gain insights into some of the conditions of possibility of the regional blockbuster. The purpose of this round of field work was, firstly, to collect evidence, often in the form of stories narrated by individuals in the film business, and information about events (a particular film’s career, e.g.) and institutions (cinema halls, production and distribution companies). Interviews by and observations of researchers was supplemented by the collection of ephemera—including posters and photographs—we came across during fieldwork. We also tracked the circulation of dubbed films in single screen and other formats but did not examine the practice of dubbing itself. What follows is the report of our initial findings based on team members’ visits to Vadakkencherry (Kerala), Chennai, Vijayawada, Hyderabad and Delhi.

Literally and figuratively, we present snapshots that tell us something of the unfolding scenario across the country—and perhaps other countries as well.

## In Single Screen Country

The regional blockbuster has close and complex linkages with the transformation of film exhibition in India, as also the proliferation of movie viewing on smaller screens (mobile phones in particular). To say the least, any attempt to market films has to factor in these changes, and the blockbuster is evidence of Tamil and Telugu industries’ ability to do precisely this.

Lakshmi Srinivas (2016) notes in passing the large-scale transformation of film exhibition as also modes of film viewing in her study of audiences in Bengaluru city. Other students of the cinema too have drawn our attention to transformation of exhibition. The drastic reduction in the number of single screens from the 1990s, and the impressive growth of multiplexes in the more recent past has been widely reported by the media and industry bodies. According to estimates, some 5,000 single screens closed down since the beginning of the century. As of late 2016, there were 2,500 multiplex screens in the country, as against an estimated 6,000 single screens (ICRA, 2016). A more recent report states that the multiplex to single screen ratio is 2750: 6780 (Ernst & Young-FICCI 2018, p. 80). Interestingly, there has been an overall *decline* in the number of screens in India because the increase in multiplex screens has not quite kept pace with the closure of single screen cinema halls (FICCI-KPMG, 2016, 2017).

While exhibition is changing across the country, we are yet to fully understand its implications for both production and film viewing. The changing face of exhibition in India impacts Andhra Pradesh (and Telangana that does not yet figure as a separate state in industry reports), Tamil Nadu and Kerala far more immediately than the rest of the country because these states are home to over half of India's single screens (ICRA, 2016). Historically too, these states had a larger number of cinema halls than the rest of the country.

It is only upon closer examination that we realise that narratives of decline, which appear frequently in popular media these days, do not quite capture what is happening on the ground. The arresting photographs of Haubitz and Zoche (2016) offer us valuable insights into the extent of decay but, more importantly, also the phenomenal *resilience* of South India's single screen cinema halls. Shot over the four-year period between 2010 and 2014, the Haubitz + Zoche collection—expectedly—includes images of cinema halls that were either closed, demolished or converted into furniture stores and so on. But the collection also documents the regionwide attempts at remodelling and upgrading single screens, including some which were in an advanced state of disrepair, or even closed.

In her 'micro-analysis' of the demolition of Chanakya theatre in New Delhi, Ipsita Sahu (2018) shows that the single screen cinema hall was a space of sociality and leisure of a kind that is no longer available in the multiplex era. Sahu's approach, which foregrounds the singularity of Chanakya and the special place it occupied in late twentieth century Delhi's urban history, throws open a host of opportunities to researchers. We came across several theatres that had either lost their pride of place as public institutions but, as pointed out above, it was not demolition squads all the way. Some theatres had been refashioned into multiplexes, or multiplex-like islands of luxury. Others were managing to survive, albeit without much dignity and only just about.

In our interactions with theatre staff and managements, we focused on survival strategies of single screens. We were aware of the importance of digital projection for the continued survival of single screens.<sup>4</sup> Even loss-making theatres, such as Moti Cinema in Delhi's Chandni Chowk, have digital projection (see Figure 1). However, digitising projection came at a cost which most single screens could ill-afford. Therefore, one of the questions we went to the field with was where was the money for upgrades coming from?

In the past decade, there have been several reports on leasing of single screen theatres by large production houses, distribution companies and even studios. Reports suggest that this in turn has resulted in the cartelisation of the single screen segment—in parallel with multiplex chains—and the effective control of exhibition by a small number of players.<sup>5</sup> Our hunch was that funding for remodelling and digitisation was closely linked to leasing of single screens by larger entities, or *new investments* in exhibition from *activities unrelated to the cinema*.

Fascinating insights into the churning in the single screen segment are offered by Vadakkencherry town in Palakkad district, Kerala. Vadakkencherry has five theatres (with a total of six screens between them). They are all categorised as 'A Class' (air-conditioned) theatres. Three of the town's six screens are owned by the same family, which entered the exhibition business with a theatre called Jayabharath in 1983. The



**Figure 1.** Moti Cinema goes digital.

**Source:** Author's collection (provided by Vasundhara Singhal).

family had other businesses in the same town, including a rice mill. In 2009, even as theatres were shutting down across the country, the family constructed a second theatre—Jayabharath Movies (Figure 2)—equipped with air conditioning, Dolby sound systems and digital projection. The success of their new venture encouraged the owners to remodel and upgrade the older Jayabharath in 2014, by splitting it into two smaller theatres Jayabharath Screen 1 and Screen 2 (277 and 160 seats, respectively, see Figures 3 and 4). The renovation included substantial investment in sound and projection equipment, and was funded by a bank loan.<sup>6</sup>

The catalogue of films released in the three Jayabharath screens suggest that they are much sought after by distributors. From 2014, these theatres have screened the latest English, Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam films as well as films dubbed from Telugu.

Bucking the countrywide trend yet again, another new theatre—KAM Movie Max Aashirvad—was opened in 2010 in Vadakkencherry. The theatre is nested in a shopping complex. The auditorium (but not the rest of the complex) is leased by Aashirvad Cinemas, which today manages a total of eight single screen theatres in Kerala (see Figure 5).

The Aashirvad Cinemas is a well-known production company that is closely associated with the Malayalam star Mohanlal. Among the films, the company made with Mohanlal is the super hit *Drishyam* (Kamat, 2013), which was remade into Telugu, Tamil and Hindi. It is public knowledge that the company's founder Malekudy Joseph Antony, better known as Anthony Perumbavoor, is one of the key stakeholders, along with Mohanlal himself, of the distribution company Maxlabs Cinemas and Entertainments.<sup>7</sup> Expectedly, KAM Movie Max Aashirvad screens all newly released Mohanlal films.



Figure 2. Jayabharath Movies.

Source: Author's collection (provided by Vishnu Dath R.)



**Figure 3.** Jayabharath Screen 1 and Screen 2.  
Source: Author's collection (provided by Vishnu Dath R.)



**Figure 4.** Plush interior of Jayabharath Screen 1  
Source: Author's collection (provided by Vishnu Dath R.).



**Figure 5.** Shopping complex that houses KAM Movie Max Aashirvad.

**Source:** Author's collection (provided by Vishnu Dath R.)

Although air-conditioned from day one, the theatre was renovated and seating upgraded in 2016, apparently in preparation for Mohanlal's *Pulimurugan* (Vysakh, 2016).<sup>8</sup>

Vadakkencherry also had two 'B Class' theatres, Sobha and Sri Rama, which closed down. It is possible that the owners of these theatres did not have access to resources for upgrades and, by implication, an extended lease of life for their theatres.

It is not only in Kerala that the success and failure of theatres is at least partly dependent on the extent to which they fashion themselves after multiplexes, with their promise of variety of programming and high level of comfort. In Vijayawada city, once considered the heart of the Telugu film market, Raghavendra theatre stopped exhibiting films in the summer of 2018. The owner of the theatre, whose family was in the businesses of jute bags, cement and lorry transportation, informed us that it was going to be converted into a convention centre (read wedding hall). Ironically, the theatre was air-conditioned when it was inaugurated in 1989 but was *downgraded* to keep ticket prices low enough for its downmarket customers. Income levels of the neighbourhood increased substantially in the intervening years and the theatre had become too downmarket for the locals who had access to over a dozen well-equipped single screens and the three-screen Inox within a three-kilometre radius.<sup>9</sup>

Among Vijayawada's remodelled theatres is Ravindra Cinemas, which was constructed in 1989 as a single screen. When the theatre was opened, the neighbourhood was largely inhabited by poor and lower middle-class people. Over the next 15 years, as rents in the city increased, middle-class families moved into the neighbourhood. In 2016, the single screen was renovated and remodelled into two smaller theatres with 397 and

263 seats, respectively. Remodelling apart, Ravindra's appeal to its customer base, which now extends beyond the neighbourhood, depends on the possibilities opened up by digital projection. Depending on demand, Ravindra's screens exhibit a film for anywhere between one and four shows per day. Films are often changed mid-week, instead of Fridays. In a typical week, therefore, Ravindra Cinemas screen four or more films that could be Telugu, Hindi or English originals, or films dubbed into Telugu from other South Indian languages.<sup>10</sup>

Digitisation of projection was one of the necessary conditions for the creation of a more or less integrated countrywide market for films. But it was not a sufficient condition because, with the advent of sound in the 1930s, *language* had restricted (although it did not stop) the movement of films across linguistic regions. From the 1990s, dubbing has been chipping away at that hurdle. We have now reached the point when multiple dubbed films compete with each other for screen space and the box office alike.

## The Face Off Between Blockbusters

In late May 2018, news of the advancing of the release date of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (Bayona, 2018) by one day (from 7 June to 8 June) was presented as a face off between this Hollywood blockbuster and the Rajinikanth starrer *Kaala* (Ranjith, 2018).<sup>11</sup> Some weeks later, the face off narrative was replayed on the streets of South Indian cities as the main attractions of these films—'Superstar' Rajinikanth and the VFX dinosaur—appeared ready to attack each other, thanks to clever juxtaposition of posters advertising these films (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** The battle between Dinosaur and Rajini on the streets of Vijayawada

**Source:** Author's collection (provided by V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam).

How did we arrive at this situation, when the biggest releases of the week are dubbed from other languages, and that too in regions which are served by vibrant production centres making films in local languages? Hollywood's investment in, and profit from, dubbing was noted by Govil (2015) who points out that *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) was the first major Hollywood film to have been dubbed into Hindi. Apparently, 82 out of the 110 prints screened in Indian in 1994 (when it was released) were in Hindi (Govil, 2015, p. 126). Between *Jurassic Park* and *The Jungle Book*, the two films showcasing the importance of dubbing for the health of Hollywood in India, came *Enthiran* (Shankar, 2010), which was positioned for a countrywide release on the strength of dubbing. Current poster face off on the streets recalls the earlier watershed, which also happens to be closely associated with the stardom of Rajinikanth.

In 2010, the phenomenal success of *Enthiran* in multiple language versions established the star Rajinikanth's pan-Indian credentials. In hindsight, we could interpret this film's success as an indicator that *regional* industries were positioning their big budget vehicles for the national market. As we pointed out elsewhere, *Enthiran* did not just compete with the big releases in different language markets of India. Its earnings were reportedly *higher than the sum total of Hollywood's takings in India that year* (see Srinivas, 2013 for a more detailed discussion). This was an uncanny literalisation of the typical Rajinikanth joke: a single release of his was enough to beat several dozen Hollywood releases, with all their creatures and superheroes bundled together.

*Kaala* was not as commercially successful as *Enthiran* and proved to be far less successful than *Jurassic World*, let alone the year's Hollywood catalogue. According to media reports, distributors may have lost 50% of their investment (Hooli, 2018). These reports were of course countered by a somewhat misleading statement by Dhanush, the film's producer and Rajinikanth's actor son-in-law, that it was 'a successful and profitable project for Wunderbar Films [his production company]' (*The Indian Express*, 2018). It turned out the film was pre-sold to distributors following the well-established practice of cashing in on stars' popularity. In this model of distribution, the producer is 'safe' regardless of the box office performance of a film. On the other hand, distributors (and possibly exhibitors, who pay an advance to them) absorb the shortfall. However, our point is not about the box office collections of *Kaala* but the fact that dubbing has transformed market dynamics of the cinema in India.

While there is no denying that Hollywood has made considerable inroads into the Indian market over the past decade on the strength of dubbing, our conversations with industry representatives show that dubbing into multiple languages has also expanded the footprint of Tamil and Telugu cinemas considerably. So much so that dubbed South Indian films are the staple of the B and C exhibition circuits in Hindi cinema's traditional markets in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. The phenomenon is no longer limited to the occasional Rajinikanth hit. We were informed by a Delhi-based distributor that Delhi and UP distribution rights for some dubbed 'South Indian films' are available for a modest 1.5–4 lakh rupees. While Hindi dubbed versions of Telugu and Tamil blockbusters have access to the best of screens, inexpensive ones are likely to be screened during weeks when there are no major Hindi releases.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of films dubbed into Hindi is discussed in a separate section below.

## Dubbing and Problems of Translatability

Dubbing, and countrywide distribution facilitated by digitisation, do not fully account for the emergence of the regional blockbuster. *Kaala's* failure in multiple languages suggests that, superstars and auteur directors notwithstanding, the blockbuster is not just about dubbing and distribution but also about form and format. Given dubbing, what kind of films travel? What factors are seen by the industry as contributing to a film's *translatability* and, therefore, mobility across linguistic and film cultures?

Some years ago Tejaswini Ganti raised the question of translatability, albeit with reference to unofficial Hindi remakes of Hollywood films (Ganti, 2002). Translatability assumes additional significance for the discussion of Indian cinemas due to the torrent of dubbed films from across India and the rest of the world. Anthropologists working on Indian cinema point out that film industry representatives—for close to a century now—have had a rough and ready 'theory' of what kind of films work with a particular kind of audience (see, e.g., Hughes, 1996). What insights do these findings offer in the current scenario when attempts are being made to not just domesticate international films but also launch local productions on the national and global scale?

One industry perspective on dubbing in general and 'South Indian films' in particular was elaborated upon by Venkat Somasundaram, Chennai-based producer of Telugu and Tamil films, who has also distributed *Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011) in Tamil Nadu. He felt that while there is a 'huge market for South Indian action films' in the Hindi dubbed version, most South Indian films are in fact *not* dubbed for theatrical release. Instead, films are being *dubbed for television channels and YouTube*. He observed that formulaic set pieces, 'commercial elements' in his words, which include spectacular, well-choreographed song and dances sequences and fights but also comic sequences, are popular among Hindi cinema's audiences. As a result, two genres, namely, 'pure love stories' (as opposed to those with elaborately choreographed action sequences) and 'family stories', which are locally popular but do not have commercial elements, are not dubbed into Hindi.<sup>13</sup> We were able to verify Somasundaram's observations in our examination of YouTube.

The opportunities and challenges presented by dubbing into Hindi were brought into sharp focus by Shobu Yarlagadda, one of the two producers of the *Baahubali* films. According to Yarlagadda, the non-Telugu versions of the *Baahubali* did well in other languages because it was a fantasy, a genre that could be relatively easily trimmed of the comedy track and some other formulaic elements that would have a limited appeal beyond the Telugu market.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, dubbing into other Indian languages is not merely a windfall gain accruing from clever marketing. Dubbing overdetermines *creative decisions* related to genre and narrative organisation as well.

The blockbuster, understood as a commodity that is made for wide distribution, then *cannot* be rooted in any particular film culture. On the contrary, it has to be shorn of those elements that are perceived to be either unfamiliar or unacceptable beyond the home industry's traditional markets. The 'Dinosaur versus *Kaala*' battle in the summer of 2018 therefore can be read as evidence that the blockbuster is not just about star value but has to do with narrative form and format of presentation as well.

## Other Screens: Where Allu Arjuns and Chinese Mohinis Rule

While evidence of the spread of dubbing—of Hollywood, Hindi as well as regional cinemas—is plentifully available in trade reports and roadside film hoardings or posters, the paucity of reliable trade data makes it difficult to get a sense of its economic consequences. Anecdotes apart, not much is known about the impact of dubbing on viewing practices.

A decade ago, inexpensive dubbed films—imported as well as Indian—had already become the lifeline of 24-hour satellite television movie channels, especially in Hindi language. In the more recent past, there have been media reports indicating that (a) Telugu and Tamil films dubbed into Hindi constitute up to 30% of the content on Hindi language movie channels, including Sony Max and Zee Cinema, (b) these films are more popular than their Hollywood counterparts on television and (c) the overall popularity of Hindi movie channels is being impacted by the dubbed films they screen.<sup>15</sup> Regrettably, we were unable to locate detailed studies on the market for dubbed films on Indian television channels. We turned to YouTube to gain some insights into the world of dubbed films because conversations with industry representatives as well as new research points to its status as the go-to place for film-related content.<sup>16</sup>

For starters, our searches for ‘Hindi movies’ or ‘Bollywood movies’ on YouTube, sorted by view count, threw up films dubbed from Tamil or Telugu among the first ten results. We will only be exaggerating slightly if we declare that on YouTube, the biggest star of Indian cinema is the Telugu actor Allu Arjun. Dubbed versions of Allu Arjun’s films have far healthier average monthly views than any of his Hindi film industry counterparts. This in spite of the fact that, for reasons that are not yet clear to us, some films, including the Hindi version of Allu Arjun’s *Sarrainodu* (Srinu, 2016), were taken down after they crossed 180+million views. They were then uploaded afresh, only to rapidly gain viewership all over again. The crackdown on piracy cannot be the reason because the URLs we kept tabs on were *not* of bootlegged versions uploaded by individual YouTubers. On the contrary, most of the YouTube channels featuring dubbed films were created by their official distributors including major ones like Goldmines Telefilms and its several subsidiaries.<sup>17</sup> According to Noxinfluencer, which analyses YouTube usage, Goldmines is among the top 1% of YouTube channels with 1.83 billion views. On an average, each of its videos receives a little over 643,000 views.<sup>18</sup>

In order to get a sense of the scale of the phenomenon, we searched YouTube for the most popular Hindi dubbed versions of Telugu and Tamil originals over a four-month period (May–August 2018). Our keywords included Hindi cinema, Hollywood, dubbing into Hindi as well as names of Telugu and Tamil stars we knew were popular in Hindi. We realised very soon that view count is difficult to tabulate because there were multiple URLs for the same film. Further, as noted earlier, scores of films with impressive view counts were taken down by their distributors. Nevertheless, noting view count allowed us to confirm that dubbing has increased the visibility of films made in all the four major South Indian languages, regardless of stars and production budgets.

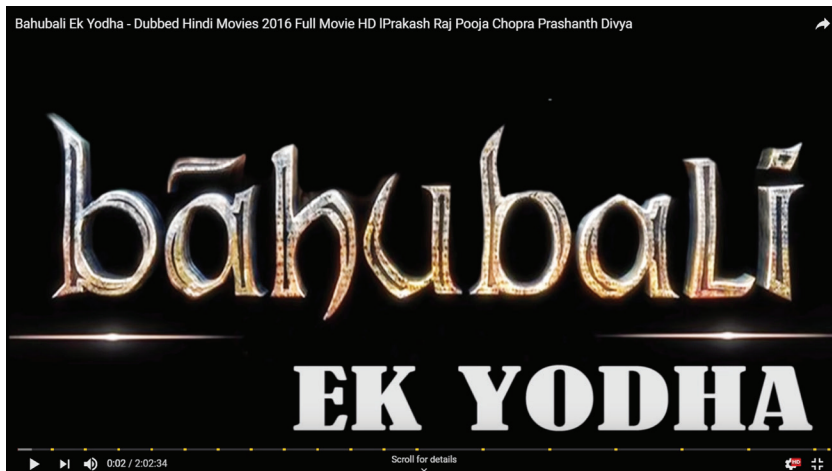
During the period under consideration, we were able to identify 76 Telugu films whose Hindi versions had more than 10 million views—an arbitrary threshold that we thought was a reasonably indicator of popularity. A total of 200 Telugu films had a million plus views. We were also able to identify around 150 Tamil films whose

Hindi dubbed version had a million plus views. During this period, we also found 30 Telugu and Tamil films whose Bhojpuri dubbed versions had between 100,000 and 5 million views.

What is striking about Hindi dubbed films on YouTube is the gap—or at best an uneasy fit—between viewer preferences on this platform in contrast to the large screen. Another way to put this is to measure the gap between YouTube view count and box office figures (however, unreliable and dubious *both* might be). Several films, and even genres like the goddess film, that do well on YouTube are apparently not released theatrically at all in their Hindi versions. And, there is no doubting that action, creatures and horror are preferred genres, regardless of place of origin. Take for example the channel Dishoom Films, whose catalogue includes genre films from Chennai and Hyderabad but also Hollywood and East Asia alike. It has a million plus subscribers.<sup>19</sup>

Delhi-based distributor Sanjay Mehta, whose Bobby Art International has been in the business from the 1970s, allowed us to note the high degree of overlap between the catalogue of Dishoom Films and other channels specialising in dubbed films, and the preferences of B circuit film audiences.<sup>20</sup> Mehta observed that ‘action-based films [that] have North Indian stars [as heroines and villains]’ produced by Telugu and Tamil industries and ‘animal films’ from everywhere are among the categories of films popular in Delhi and UP.

Our interview with Venkat Somasundaram suggests that YouTube *is virtually a distribution territory today*. He told us: ‘Releasing these [low-budget dubbed] films in the theatres is not good business for them. To release a movie in North India in theatres, you will have to spend at least 5 crores on print and publicity which is just not worth it for them’ (interview, cited above). The direct-to-YouTube release of films is a development that bears close resemblance to the theatrical B circuit in terms of the brilliant (and legally dubious) strategies used to promote films. For instance, *Baahubali Ek Yodha* borrows not just the title but also the font used by the official franchise (see Figure 7).<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 7.** Misleading titles.

**Source:** Frame capture of the film uploaded on Youtube. Uploaded by SEPL Video on 23 March 2018. Details of the original untraceable. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnjNgMs2hNQ>.

Offering further evidence of shared distribution practices in the B circuit and YouTube is *Chinese Mohini*, which is the Hindi dubbed version of the Hong Kong sex comedy *Yu Pui Tsuen III* (Lai, 1996). Uploaded by Cinecurry, one of the older YouTube distribution channels (joined on 4 November 2009) on 20 April 2013, this poor-quality digital copy is sourced from a VCD whose watermark is clearly visible. The film had an impressive 52 million views. Comments by viewers suggest that this was because it was presumed that the film contained sexually explicit sequences.<sup>22</sup>

Based on comments left by viewers, it is possible to suggest that one of the reasons for the popularity of Hindi dubbed films (whether of films originally produced in India or abroad) is the *non-availability* of their original versions on the same platform. Typically, films of major Tamil and Telugu stars appear on YouTube earlier in their Hindi version than in the original language.<sup>23</sup> Viewer comments also suggest that Hindi dubbing, has allowed Tamil, Telugu and even the occasional Kannada or Malayalam film, to reach viewers who may not be aware that these film industries even exist. Instead, the productions of regional industries are comfortably embedded in categories such as Bollywood and even Hindi cinema. Similarly, the tag Hollywood encompasses everything from the Hollywood blockbuster to East and South East Asian genre film.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of YouTube for students of Indian cinema, and the importance of film related content for YouTube in the Indian context came into sharp focus in 2018. One of the widely reported developments on YouTube during that year was the 'rivalry' between PewDiePie and T-Series for the highest number of subscribers. The ascendant position had been held by PewDiePie since 2013. There were media reports, videos and internet memes on the rivalry as well as campaigns in support of one or the other channel. By late December 2018, there were several live streams of subscriber counts of PewDiePie and T-Series, respectively, enabling YouTubers to keep track of the competition.<sup>25</sup> Hype aside, the rise of T-Series on YouTube is among several indicators of the steady increase in Indians' access to the internet, arguably on the strength of inexpensive smartphones and data connections. The evolution of YouTube into the default platform for Indian film-related content is a closely related development. Even before the prices of smartphones and mobile data crashed, the mobile phone had begun to be widely used for viewing films and related content. Rashmi (2018) points out that purchase of downloaded data on SD cards and side-loading via Bluetooth had made content sourced from the internet accessible to some of the poorest mobile phone users in urban India (see also Tanvir [2018] on the use of SD cards and downloaded content).

Surely, dubbing is among the factors determining high levels of film viewing on YouTube. However, YouTube is not yet a distribution platform for the regional blockbuster. Landmark countrywide hits from Tamil and Telugu industries, including *Enthiran* and the *Baahubali* films, are either not on YouTube, or are behind paywalls. Without access to hard data, which unfortunately we did not have access to, it is impossible to draw significant inferences on the viewership of the blockbuster on the platform.

Even so, YouTube is a pointer to the decoupling of *regional* cinema from both *language* as well as *location of production*. Territory–language–identity linkages that are often taken for granted in the study of Indian cinemas need to be fundamentally rethought not only in the light of new (film) historical research but also platformisation

of media consumption. Sriram Mohan and Aswin Punathambekar draw attention to how 'South India' becomes an important construct for content producers who address urban, English-speaking audiences through videos that are often set in Chennai and/or in Tamil language (2018, p. 13). We pointed out above that both Hindi language and Bollywood cinema acquired interesting new resonances on YouTube. But our most important takeaway is that 'South' is a marketing category, drawing viewers to films that promise such attractions as brilliantly choreographed action sequences, high doses of melodrama and slapstick comedy.

Moving forward, we recognise the importance of the analysis of form and textuality, that the current phase of our project does not concern itself with. Among the questions that countrywide theatrical releases as well as film viewing on YouTube throw up is that of *mobility*: of stars and other creative workers, of genres and money. The regional blockbuster is coeval with the increasing presence of Hollywood majors in India but it has so far remained *regional* in not just its preference of male leads and directors but also sources of funding. That story, however, needs a lot more work before it goes to print.

Finally, we hope that our project will encourage other researches to carry out collaborative projects across multiple locations and formats. With specific reference to the blockbuster, we look forward to work on Zee Studios' role in the creation of a national market for Marathi cinema, which promises to complement developments in Chennai and Hyderabad.

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### Notes

1. For a detailed study of the history of dubbing into Telugu, see Paidipaala (2015).
2. Shobu Yarlagadda, interviewed by S. V. Srinivas, Hyderabad, 14 June 2018.
3. For a history of the regional blockbuster, see Srinivas (2016 May).
4. See, for instance, Pillai (2016) on how digital projection transformed distribution in Tamil Nadu and also led to the collapse of A, B and C centres of exhibition into a single network.
5. See for the example the report by Chowdhary (2011) suggesting that just four people controlled access to theatres pre-bifurcation Andhra Pradesh.
6. Based on an interview with Mohammed Ghani by Vishnu Dath R., Vadakkencherry, 17 July 2018.

7. The Wikipedia entry on Maxlabs ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxlab\\_Cinemas\\_and\\_Entertainments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxlab_Cinemas_and_Entertainments)) lists Mohanlal and Perumbavoor among the three key people associated with the company.
8. Information on KAM Movie Max based on an interview with Midhun Lal K. B. by Vishnu Dath R., Vadakkencherry, 18 June 2018.
9. Information based on an interview with proprietor Kundepu Raghavendra Kumar by V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam Vijayawada, 12 July 2018.
10. Information based on an interview with M. Srinivas Rao, Manager, by V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam on 17 July 2018 in Vijayawada.
11. See, for instance, *The Hindu* (2018) report titled 'Dinosaurs to take on Rajini'.
12. Information based on an interview with 'Mr. Sandip' by Vasundhara Singhal, New Delhi, 10 July 2018.
13. Interviewed by Raghav Nanduri, 30 May 2018, Chennai.
14. Interviewed by S. V. Srinivas, 14 June 2018, Hyderabad.
15. Culled from reports on television including Indian Television (2014) and Jha (2017).
16. Subba (2016) makes a passing reference to YouTube as one of the sites for what he calls 'the new wave of B-movie cinephilia in India' that has made cult classics of low budget films from earlier decades (229). He argues that this development is coeval with digitization of projection which, in turn, has allowed not just the single screen but also the B movie to survive (230).
17. See, for instance, Goldmines Telefilms' YouTube catalogue <https://www.youtube.com/user/GoldminesTelefilms/featured>.
18. [https://www.noxinfluencer.com/youtube/channel/UCyoXW-Dse7fURq30EWL\\_CUA](https://www.noxinfluencer.com/youtube/channel/UCyoXW-Dse7fURq30EWL_CUA)
19. <https://www.youtube.com/user/DishoomFilms/featured>
20. Sanjay Mehta, interviewed by Vasundhara Singhal, New Delhi, 10 July 2018.
21. Uploaded by SEPL Video on 23 March 2018. Details of the original untraceable. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnjNgMs2hNQ>
22. Comments in Thai and Arabic script indicate that it attracted the attention of fans of Hong Kong cinema from across the world. For details, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SxyQcxZbpA>
23. For example, while there has been no official YouTube release of Telugu star Chiranjeevi's *Khaidi No. 150* (2017), the Hindi dubbed version has been available since November 2017, albeit with the requirement that users sign in to view it ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inZoGo\\_c-sY&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inZoGo_c-sY&has_verified=1)).
24. See, for example, the videos uploaded on the channel Hollywood Dubbed Movies whose playlists include a sprinkling of Hong Kong martial arts classics along with dozens of little known films from Hollywood and other industries (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVK734mdajWjemWChxjHPEg/featured>).
25. See, for instance, Alone Bee's stream, which began on 23 December 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNWjeUWxeGXXf9LxMxVj6aA/featured>).

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