

Pan-Indian Cinema: Dominance and the Industrial Evolution of Creative Cultures

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Abstract

The concept of "Pan-Indian cinema" has gained significant traction in recent years. While Hindi films traditionally attempted a nationwide appeal, South Indian film industries have emerged as major players in this space. Blockbusters like Baahubali, KGF, RRR, and Pushpa showcase a distinct "Pan-Indian" approach, with storylines and production values that transcend regional boundaries. This paper investigates the factors driving this new wave of Pan-Indian cinema. Does the rise of new media technologies, OTT platforms, and increased investment play a key role? Does the socio-political climate of India also contribute? By examining the trends, elements, and potential formula behind these successful films, this paper aims to understand the landscape of Pan-Indian cinema and its potential future.

1. Introduction

Cinema in India is often understood as Hindi cinema by scholars around the world. But India has many cinemas based on linguistic uniqueness. Diverse cultures and emotions are connected through cinema. The so-called regional cinema industries from the southern part of India contribute some time alone and many times, all together, produce the highest number of films in a year globally. The successful venture of dubbing films released across India and the world proved to be profitable. South Indian cinema, with its locally woven stories, culture, and settings, was well received by audiences throughout India.

In the context of India, the term 'regional cinema' typically refers to films in non-Hindi languages, where language serves as a marker of distinction (Radhakrishnan, 2021). This category also encompasses films from South Indian languages. However, the emergence of the trend of Pan-India cinema, spurred by new technological shifts, has blurred the difference and provided an opportunity for what is traditionally labeled as 'regional cinema' to make inroads into the national scene.

The grand acceptance by the audience across India has several preludes to it. The 24-hour entertainment and dedicated cinema television channels aided the promotion of dubbed Southern language films. It is important to mention that India is a content-hungry nation, where the dubbed films received an overwhelming response as they are available in Hindi on CD/DVD format. Most of the dubbed films available include the action genre. The scenario is

the same for the Indian viewers of dubbed Hollywood and Hong Kong films in regional languages. Aside from satellite television, computer technologies and the digitalization of cinema distribution aided in increasing pan-India viewership. Over the top (OTT) platforms and YouTube expanded global access to cinema. The dubbing industry has been rampant in dubbing films across the years from southern industries.

2. What is Pan-Indian cinema?

We can say Pan-Indian cinema is a financial collaboration across India, where actors are drawn from different language industries with purely local or "regional" stories. The funding for the Indian Film project was sourced from across India and abroad as a key strategy. In general 'Pan "Indian" cinema refers to the cinema with all India's reach, circulation, and reception. It includes the "taste" and "sensibilities" of people from all over the country and generally produced at a huge scale (Bhaskar, 2022; Tiwary, 2024). The reach of the audience through the release of the film across India and the financial revenues from the box office are also indicators of the success of Pan-Indian cinema.

Pan-Indian cinema is now focusing not only in India but also the global south and United States of America (USA). The Telugu film RRR (2022) released in Japan and received well. The success of the film is also weighed on the box office revenue in the first week in the USA. The Indian diaspora over the years has been playing an important role in the promotion of film culture across the globe.

The emerging trend of Pan-Indian cinema represents

not only a creative endeavor but also a meticulously orchestrated commercial venture. Its impact extends beyond overshadowing the prospects and viability of low-budget films, as it also jeopardizes the endurance of regional cultures depicted in films from regional languages. One way to understand the phenomenon is from the financial and funding of the film. The collaborative funding by producers from two or more language industries, which includes Hindi film Industry with other Indian language cinema producers. International technical collaborations, Pan-India and overseas film distribution and releases, multi multi-lingual releases are markers for this phenomenon. The language barrier was overcome by more authentic dubbing in different languages. The earlier dubbed films have different processes, where actors are not really bothered about dubbed versions and voices in other languages. The voices may not suit the actor. Films were released on digital platforms, dedicated television channels and OTT platforms. The other phenomenon is Hollywood films or English films and Hong Kong/Chinese films released in Indian language dubbing. The Pan-Indian cinema with Baahubali and RRR brought more nativity to the actors dubbing in different languages.

The other feature of a Pan-Indian cinema is featuring actors from more than one language Industry. The inclusion of prominent actors from all leading film Industries has worked for the success of the film.

The Baahubali franchise (2015 and 2017) was a major milestone in the context of Pan India cinema and was highly successful. This forced Bollywood to look towards the formula of South Indian cinema. Some critics have called this trend 'Baahubalisation' of Indian cinema, which has challenged 'Bollywoodisation' and inspired dominant industries like Bollywood to do smart packaging and marketing like South Indian blockbusters films (Majumdar, 2022; Putta, 2023). It is also argued that the traditional perceptions were primarily focused on Bollywood and its aesthetics, neglecting the diverse landscape of regional cinemas and promoting uniformity. However, the new Pan-India cinema phenomenon accelerated by South Indian mega hits disrupts Bollywood-centric tradition and demands to redefine Pan India cinema (Putta, 2023). However, Pan India cinema is now more about a cinema of collaboration between various film industries including Bollywood, rather than being operated or dominated by any one industry. As actress and KGF 2 starrer and Bollywood actress Raveena Tandon argues, it is no longer a matter of North-South cinema, rather all the industries are converging and turning into one big power (Suri, 2023).

3. Previous trends: Dubbing and Remake

Indian cinema has been generally recognized and classified on the basis of its languages. For example, a film originally made in the Telugu language is called Telugu cinema, or a film from the Tamil film industry. However, in reality, the film-making process and its circulation transcend linguistic and regional boundaries. Cinemas also break language and regional boundaries for greater audiences. 'Dubbing', 'subtitling' and 'remaking' are some of the methods used in this process (Nikhila H., 2016)

In the context of Kannada cinema, Nikhila (2016) argues that before the 1990s, Kannada cinema was

remaking its films to gain national level recognition, compete with other regional cinemas, and gain the acknowledgement of a "national" audience. We can argue this phenomenon of Kannada cinema for other South Indian films also.

Folklore and mythological films have been a popular genre in South Indian language cinema. Telugu and Tamil cinema have explored the grandeur and format for many years. The magnificent court scene, heavy gold ornaments, huge forts, horses, swords, and aesthetically enthralling sets formed a larger than life image of kings and kingdoms for an ordinary audience. Another genre in which the lives of gods and goddesses and their environments are brought to havelife in front of dark theaters with illuminated screens.

Tamil cinema Chandralekha (1948) later dubbed in Hindi language is one of the first pan India as well as global cinema. It was not only a commercial success, but also created a template for folklore and mythological films.

Director of Chandralekha, S.S. Vasan spent about 30 lakh rupees on the production of the film and in addition 1 lakh rupees on its publicity. The film collected about 2 crore rupees at the box office. Thus, this was the first extensive attempt to get distribution all over India. Its great success changed the film production equations (NFDC, 1998).

Not just South Indian cinemas, according to Usha Iyer, it also influenced the 'Bombay film formula' with dance as a prominent attraction of a cinema. It amazed audiences from all over India and presented a way to make big mass entertainment films to Hindi film makers also (Iyer, 2021).

The emerging pan India's cinema is not a new phenomenon if we strictly speaking as films like Chandralekha (1948) have been released across India. Actors and technicians from South Industries used to work in Hindi and other language cinema. Remake of films from South to North and vice versa has been a trend over a period of time.

The rise of pan India phenomena in the era of OTT and multiplexes created new financial viabilities and carefully planned strategies.

4. The Emergence of a 'national hero'

Many critics have indicated that Hindi cinema and its heroes have been seen as a national image, be it Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar or Amitabh Bachchan's character. The seventies are known for Amitabh Bachchan's image of 'angry young man'. However, after globalization and liberalization, not only film production and distribution but also the popular image of the hero changed. The new 'liberalized' hero of Hindi cinema is different from the previous angry young man.

As Sudhanva Deshpande has rightly pointed out, the previous hero has anger towards unequal society, however it was limited to personal vendetta and not transformed into a larger movement of oppressed. So, it belongs to a poor background or sentiments, It has a memory of past and revolt with personal touch. But, the new hero of globalized India of the nineties is mostly from a rich background and it has a lack of anti-establishment sentiments. It is basically conformist in its nature (Deshpande, 2005).

This is mostly also true for the hero of current times in Hindi cinema. However, the recent big hits from south Indian cinemas, 'KGF' and 'Pushpa' films have a similar image of 'angry young man' of the previous hero of Hindi cinema. South Indian cinemas have regularly released films with action dramas with similar heroic images and these so called

regional cinemas have also different and diverse images of heroes. However, the KGF and Pushpa with angry young man image is also celebrated in Hindi belt as well other parts of the country. Thus, the departure of Hindi cinema from its previous angry young man hero is somehow adapted in South Indian cinemas. This image is also enjoyed at national level, and hence it is also an emergence of the local hero as 'national' hero.

Some critics have termed this phenomenon of south Indian films as the rise of 'regional' blockbusters. In addition to larger than life heroes of the masses, these films with huge investments have spectacular sets and computer-generated visuals to create great effect (Srinivas, 2022).

5. The new wave: The formula

The angry young man image in the recent wave of pan-India cinema is also influenced by other socio-political scenarios. Some critics suggest 'hyper-masculinity' and 'nationalism' are some of the prominent characteristics of the recent pan-India cinema phenomenon. The rise of hyper-masculinity is clearly visible in KGF and Pushpa: The rise. Be it Tamil, Telugu or Hindi pan India cinemas, some critics have considered hyper-masculinity as a common element in their success formula (Naraharisetty, 2022).

Sentiments of nationalism and Hinduism are also seen as two major elements in the success of these pan India films. RRR (2022) has this nationalism touch, whereas RSS's agenda of Hinduism has been expressed in Hindi cinema's big hit The Kashmir Files. Considering this narrative as the formula of recent pan India cinema phenomenon, Aditya Shrikrishna writes, "It is about certain narratives that click in the box office—a predestined saviour, the rise of an oligarch, upholding every tenet of Hinduism and rewriting history. Misogyny gels well with these themes." (Shrikrishna, 2022)

However, we cannot sideline the factors from the production to the distribution process of this phenomenon. These have a major role in making the content of the Pan India reception. Actors and directors to producers and distributors from different film industries, all are collaborating with each other to make the cinema pan India success. For example, Karan Johar has emerged as a presenter of many other South Indian films including Bahubali. They are also flooding huge investment in all the processes of these films.

According to IMDB 2022 box office report, there are 10 films from South India in the top 15 films in terms of collections. KGF: Chapter 2 is top in the list with the budget of 100 crores, it collected Rs. 1235.2 crores worldwide. Whereas RRR with 450 crore budget, collected 1135.8 crores worldwide. (Lalu, 2022)

However, not only regional films but bollywood is also releasing Hindi films with the pan India trend. The film "Animal," starring Ranbir Kapoor and directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, released in 2023, is also an example of collaboration between South and Hindi cinema industries to get pan India audiences. This film was released in five regional languages, including Hindi and was a big hit all over the country. Given the earlier reference to hypermasculinity, this film also prominently presents male superiority with great emphasis. The film has reinforced gender stereotypes, sustaining toxic masculinity and its representation of an

alpha male figure and themes of violence and poison have provoked considerable controversy (Chakravory & Bera, 2024).

New media technologies have also helped these films to get pan Indian reach. Digital marketing, including social media, is now crucial in the promotion of a film. Pre-production to post-production, nowadays, digital marketing is being primarily used to influence the audiences of different regions (Juvvignunta, et al., 2021). OTT platforms have also changed the scenario.

Global OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime are investing on Indian content and they are getting them global exposure. To generate a roster of its original Indian content, Netflix invested 405 million dollars in 2019 and 2020 (Kenny, 2021). This trend is increasing day by day and will see bigger investment in future.

Some small budget South Indian films are also getting pan India success. Low budget films like Karthikeya 2 (2022) are also successful in Hindi belt and other parts of the country. However, in contrast to this, big budget pan India cinemas are also affecting small budget films in theaters in regional languages. This trend appears in different film industries in India. The impact is hard hitting as the pan-Indian cinema is occupying all the theaters as well as blocking the release of the small films. The OTT platform is another option to showcase the small budget films but until the film is released in theaters traditionally it may not get the breakeven point as well as reaching to all kinds of audiences. The pre-release events, audio functions, hundred crore celebrations are part of big budget films to promote with a bandwagon across the globe. But small budget films could not do such extravaganza for publicity, they strive on the strength of the story, storytelling and acting.

6. Is Pan-Indian cinema a success formula?

The Pan-Indian cinema has breached the opportunities of regional cinema, local language OTT platforms. Internal projection through OTT and overseas theatrical releases has been emerging in parallel with ongoing political ideologies. It has established a phenomenon like "One India One Cinema", which is a dangerous trend. While the trend of Pan India cinema has offered an opportunity for regional language cinema as well as Bollywood to reach a pan-Indian audience, it also risks promoting homogeneity and reliance on a singular formula. Additionally, there is a concern that the unique regional flavors and characteristics of cinema may be diminished.

However, the film Adipurush (2023), starring primarily Telugu cinema star Prabhas, was not successful. This film is also an example of collaboration between the Hindi and South Indian cinema industries. It was shot and released simultaneously in Hindi and Telugu, and was also dubbed into Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam. Despite being based on the Hindu mythology Ramayana, in which Prabhas played the role of Ram, the film failed to become a hit. So even though many Pan-India films have achieved success in recent years and it has become a trend, the story, storytelling and content that touch every section of every region matter a lot. And, it is not necessary that a film based on the same theme or idea becomes successful everywhere. Hence, although Pan-India cinema demands a common

formula and taste for the audiences, plurality and regional culture and taste matter, and this is also an area of concern.

In terms of production and circulation, this can also provide an opportunity for the already dominant big players in the cinema industry to further solidify their dominance at pan India level. The Pan-indian films are gigantic in terms of funding, casting and also distribution. In contrast, small budget films are not able to get the theaters to release. The theater system and distribution mechanism is hegemonized by the corporate companies, politicians, senior actors and producers. Unlike actors of earlier years, now actors and producers are investing in cinema theaters, production of films, share in OTT platforms and television channels.

The monopoly of theaters has changed the ecosystem of the cinema industry. The means of production and distribution has been the dominant factor in the sustainability of films. Whenever Pan-India film releases it will occupy maximum cinema theaters, which forces the small budget film producers to postpone their films on a later day which results in increasing the film finances. OTT platforms also though it looks like an additional opportunity window to the small budget films, the major earnings and profits are taken away from the producers.

7. OTT platforms as game changer:

OTT companies started producing original shows and films added to the existing corporatization of filmmaking in India. The existing practices like film making corporate conglomerates are already there in India, which not only have stakes in distribution, but also financing and producing the films. For example UTV Motion pictures, UTV spot boy for small budget films, Reliance entertainment, Reliance film distribution, Disney direct, Fox star studios etc. According to The Ormax media 481.1 million viewers are engaged across India in OTT in the year 2023.. The subscribers have been raised for the past three years.

The phenomenon of Covid and lockdown, along with the increasing expansion of the internet and digital technology, has contributed to the rise of OTT, and its enhanced convenience has also shifted the audience towards it (Puthiyakath & Goswami, 2021).

Streaming platforms have expanded the reach of movies by providing them with broader distribution and improved dubbing and subtitling options in multiple regional languages. Consequently, audiences are more receptive to watching films through these platforms and it has facilitated the emergence of regional films with nationwide appeal. As Ishita Tiwary (2024) argues, this trend has led to a significant shift, with both Hindi and regional-language films increasingly offering dubbed versions or subtitles, a departure from the previous norm primarily seen only with Hollywood blockbusters. Thus, she argues that OTT promotes the idea of pan-Indian films from beyond the Bollywood hegemon and speeds up the diversity of offerings both linguistically and generically (Tiwary, 2024).

8. Future:

The pan-India cinema is now not a new thing and actually it is a new normal. We will see the trend of Pan

India cinema continuously growing. The general success of Pan India films, coupled with collaborations between different cinema industries and substantial investments in funds and resources, indicates a continuous production of such films in the future. Digital platforms have not only facilitated audience consumption but also provided industries with opportunities to engage their audience.

The actors from neighboring southern industries were part of the films, as were actors from Hindi cinema to give them a Pan-India appeal. For example, RRR (2022) Telugu cinema starred Alia Bhat and Ajay Devagan. In the same way, Indian actors like Irfan Khan, Gulshan Grover, and others were used to play Indian roles in Hollywood movies. But it is rare to see Hollywood actors in Indian films as well as Hindi actors in Telugu or Tamil films. These statements excluded the actors who play the villain characters. The lead male actors largely and stereotypically made the face of any Industry film in India. So, here, the movement of Hindi male actors to other film industries is rare.

Now, with the Pan-India and global cinema scenarios, it is imperative that Hollywood is going to cast more Indian actors and vice versa. The Grey Man (2022) where Danush, a lead actor from Tamil cinema played an important role. As Hollywood no longer has a single community but it encompasses multiple ethnicities, the inclusion of actors from different ethnicities plays a key role; it will be purely on the strength of the "Story" and "Storytelling".

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