

June 14, 2022

## Rise of the Regional Blockbuster

By: S.V. Srinivas

Southern blockbusters have a star playing a man of the masses, spectacular action and song and dance sequences, magnificent sets, and computer-generated imagery. Whether or not they make a profit, they need massive investments, production infrastructure and creative workers helming them.

There is something new coming to a theatre near you, and it could well be a southern blockbuster. A relatively recent trend in Indian cinema is producing 'regional' blockbusters — big-budget south Indian films — which have to travel beyond their home markets to even recover production costs.

We know there is no avoiding the 'south movie' dubbed into Hindi on television, YouTube, or other platforms; because the dubbing rights for a majority of films were — and continue to be — sold for next to nothing by producers. But the regional blockbuster is different. It is meant to compete with the latest Hindi releases.

My use of the term 'regional' for industries that are comparable to Bollywood in output needs qualification. Distribution of films made in the four major south Indian languages was till recently largely limited to the southern states, or to places with sizeable populations speaking those languages. Southern industries are also regional because they do not cater exclusively to any one linguistic state or territory. Films made in the region have a history of crossing linguistic and state boundaries and have been dubbed into one or more south Indian languages.

The term blockbuster — first used in 1951 to describe Hollywood films — often refers to an unusually, or surprisingly, successful film. I use the term here to signal the intent to tap large markets, regardless of whether the attempt is a commercial success.

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Let us not forget that the term blockbuster was coined during the World War II to refer to bombs which could 'bust' entire blocks. The blockbuster is not a genre in the sense that horror, or murder mystery is. It is better understood as a package of components that are thought to appeal to a wide cross-section of the audience. Typically, there is a saturation release of the package across the market, in hundreds or thousands of theatres.

What, according to its producers, does the blockbuster need or have to capture markets? As early as the 1950s, the blockbuster was about size, production values, and spectacle (Hall and Neale 2010: 139). Admittedly, spectacle is too broad a category to offer insights into either production practices or audience preferences. From Shankar's action scenes to Sanjay Leela Bhansali's song sequences, and David Attenborough's documentary on Karnataka, spectacle is everywhere. And it has been around for decades. S.S. Vasan, producer-director of *Chandralekha* (1948), went on record saying that he was creating “pageants for the peasants.”

Spectacles do not guarantee success, but they have long been seen by producers and distributors as ingredients of films that seek to travel. Spectacles are expensive and require highly skilled creative workers. They also need to be back-ended by an industrial infrastructure that can support their creation — experts like stunt directors and visual effects supervisors are often hired from other industries or countries. The elements that go into the creation of screen spectacles tell us a great deal about the production infrastructure, creative workers, and also capital that a film industry has access to.

For more than a decade now, Tamil and Telugu blockbusters have invited comparison with Hollywood and other international productions. Since the 1990s, spectacular action and song and dance sequences have been regular ingredients of Tamil and Telugu productions. These sequences feature dozens of extras, exotic locations, magnificent sets, prosthetic make-up, and computer-generated imagery (CGI); all of which enhance other attractions or create characters. What we can expect from a blockbuster is the constant amplification of scale. Rajinikanth starrer *Enthiran/Robot* (2010) was shot in Peru, Brazil, Austria, and Vienna, in addition to half a dozen locations in India.

## The *Baahubali* story

*Baahubali: The Beginning* (2014), which was mostly shot in the Telugu states, Kerala, and Maharashtra, had [more than 4,500 CGI shots](#), which were created by 15 different companies from different parts of India and abroad. Art director Sabu Cyril stated that between [500 and 2,000 people worked](#) on the sets and props of the two *Baahubali* films. The sets were erected at the 1,600-acre Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad.

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The *Baahubali* films (2014 and 2017) were [a part of a franchise](#) that included novels, comic books, animation and live action series, merchandise, and a game. This project was ambitious and grand, even by the standards of a blockbuster. And yet, it began like most other big-budget productions in Telugu with the producers deciding to work with the director S.S. Rajamouli and the male lead Prabhas. Genre, story, budgets, and the creation of a transmedia franchise came later.

According to Shobu Yarlagadda, one of the film’s producers, their initial plan was to make just one film. When they decided to make it a two-part film, the budget was already Rs 120 crore — extraordinary for an Indian film in the early 2010s. The scale of the project grew, as did its incubation period, and it eventually became a Rs 450-crore venture completed over a four-year period. (Unless otherwise mentioned, information on the *Baahubali* project is from interviews with Shobu Yarlagadda, by the author, in Hyderabad, on 3 February 2018 and 14 June 2018. This section is based on the interview conducted on 3 February.)

At the heart of the blockbuster, therefore, are its creative workers — the director and male star and the producer(s) capable of mobilising the funds to see the project through. *Baahubali*’s producers provided the seed capital and funded the project through loans and also advances from distributors (at a later stage).

Although the earliest statements made by Rajamouli do not refer to a Hindi version, Yarlagadda stated that from the very outset, *Baahubali* was conceived of as an all-India release. In fact, a public relations officer was appointed for the Hindi version early in the project’s development. *Robot*, *Enthiran*’s Hindi version, was then the gold standard for films dubbed into Hindi. As the budget increased, *Robot*’s Rs 15 crore-plus collection came to be seen by the *Baahubali* team as an amount unworthy of a Hindi version of their work.

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The producers approached Karan Johar to distribute the Hindi version of *Baahubali: The Beginning* because they felt that he would be able to “hand deliver” the film to Hindi audiences. That is to say, package and present it as a special product. For the second *Baahubali* film, the producers did not need to work with a Karan Johar to attract attention — the growing scale and budget began to evoke interest in trade circles even before the first part was released.

Evidently, the reputation of Rajamouli for staging screen spectacles played no small part in generating interest in the project. So central was he to the project that he was the only one among the cast and crew who did not receive a salary. Instead, he was paid an undisclosed percentage of the films’ earnings. His reputation was among the reasons why the multifold rise of the initial budget, which is usually a red flag, was interpreted by industry representatives as the promise of a spectacle on an unprecedented scale.

## Stars and the blockbuster

Salaries for the entire cast and crew of the *Baahubali* films, including the male lead, were less than 15% of the project cost — modest in percentage terms. The honorarium of major Telugu and Tamil male stars alone accounts for up to a third of the total budget of their films. Stars are an interesting and intriguing part of the blockbuster package. There is literally no regional blockbuster without a major south Indian male star. Most of these stars have never acted in a Hindi production.

Early regional blockbusters relied on two stars who had acted in Hindi films — Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth. Kamal Haasan was the lead in *Dashavataram /Dashavatar* (2008), which his fans claim was the first pan-Indian film made by the southern industries. This film was released in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi versions and featured Haasan in 10 roles. Two years later, Rajinikanth was

cast as the male lead (and villain) in *Enthiran/Robot*, reportedly the most expensive Indian film till that point.

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In the more recent past, familiarity with southern stars and other attractions associated with their vehicles is being facilitated by the plentiful supply of Hindi-dubbed versions of films on television channels and YouTube. In 2018, *Pushpa's* male lead Allu Arjun [created a 'record' on YouTube](#) when the Hindi dubbed version of his *Sarrainodu* (originally in Telugu) became the first Indian film on YouTube to cross 300 million views.



The success of a blockbuster is often credited to its male star and director. The female star's contribution has been largely ignored by commentators. Critics have correctly noted that female leads play ornamental roles — they are seen in the first half of the film, before the story proper begins, and reappear only in song and dance sequences in the second half. While this is true, we need to note that female stars cast in blockbusters tend to work in more industries, especially the southern ones, appearing in far more films than male stars in a given period of time. The song and dance sequences which define the limits of their roles in a male star's vehicle are critical to the film's publicity campaign.

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Moreover, like their Hindi counterparts, female stars of Telugu and Tamil industries also make special appearances in “item numbers”, which are often the most popular songs in a film. If Google searches can be read as an indication of popularity, then as of late May 2022, Samantha Ruth Prabhu, who appeared in an item number in *Pushpa: The Rise* was not far behind the film's male lead Allu Arjun. She was more popular than Chiranjeevi and Mahesh Babu. As [Anupama Prabhala points out](#), “It is traditional gendering practices that have allowed female stars to move easily between various industries.” Surely, the blockbuster with its hyper-masculinist aesthetics cannot exist without its female stars.

### Playing on every screen

The blockbuster is a spectacle mounted on male and female star bodies by a director who can be trusted with a lot of money. It is a media event whose baseline is the availability of thousands of screens across the country. *Enthiran's* sequel *2.0* (2018) was released on 7,850 screens in India, that is more than 80% of all screens in the country. In 2018, India had 9,601 screens (Ernst &Young 2020: 133). In the previous year, *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* was released on 80% of the screens in the country (Interview, 14 June 2018). My co-authors and I pointed out elsewhere that releases on this scale were made possible by a) digitisation of distribution and exhibition, and b) multiplex chains and also distributor-exhibitor networks that have de facto control over hundreds of single screens in south Indian states (Srinivas and Nanduri 2021; Srinivas, Shyam, et al. 2018).

When the latest blockbuster plays on almost every screen in the country, there is literally no space for any other film. The shortage of exhibition venues is not a new problem for Indian cinema and during the early years of this century, the multiplex was seen as a solution. It was then possible to plan limited theatrical releases to cater to discerning audiences or niche tastes. More recently, OTT platforms are being presented as an alternative to theatrical exhibition.

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[An OTT platform executive claimed](#): “OTT platforms offer viewers the opportunity to discover content, sans geographical and language barriers. This is helping viewers widen their watch preferences, which are slowly, and steadily, building the market for regional titles.” However, there are indications that blockbusters are crowding out other films on OTT platforms too. Senior film journalist [Sreedhar Pillai tweeted](#), “Something has to be done for small films in #Tamil and #Malayalam as they are not getting footfalls in #theatres ... adding to their woes satellite & OTT have lost interest in them [sic].”

### Politics and markets

Despite differences, there are striking similarities between regional blockbusters and Amitabh Bachchan vehicles of the 1970s. The invincible hero of the blockbuster is a man of the masses, even in films which cast him as a prince or billionaire. Upon his release on bail in early May this year, the activist politician Jignesh Mevani made a gesture of defiance borrowed from *Pushpa's* worker-turned-gangster protagonist as he threw a challenge to the Prime Minister. He followed up by Tweeting a GIF of the gesture from the film with the caption, “*Jhukega nahin*” (Will not bow).

In 2018, when Rajinikanth's *Kaala* was released in multiple languages, Mevani praised the film's director Pa. Ranjith for telling the story of a Dalit, a working class hero. [He pointed out](#), “After the 1990s, we hardly get to see a working class hero, a chawl, a *basti*, or the plight of a working widow.” Little did he know that he was summarising the story of *KGF: Chapter 1*, which would be released six months later.

M. Madhava Prasad (1998) argues that the 1970s Bachchan vehicle was assembled by the Hindi film industry to counter the challenge posed by the rise of a middle-class cinema, which had first launched Bachchan as an actor. The Bachchanesque mass hero — derived partly from the films of M.G. Ramachandran and N.T. Rama Rao—remained alive in Telugu, Tamil, and Kannada cinema.

Ironically, starting from the 1990s, film critics as well as sections of the very industries that produced them, were critical of vehicles of major male stars. After all, they tended to be over-the-top, predictable, formulaic, and often failed to recover distribution costs. A new

version of the mass film appears to be doing the work of the Bachchan vehicle on a pan-Indian scale — re-aggregating a market that is spread across geographies and screens.

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Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Shobu Yarlagadda for his insightful and informative interviews. Many thanks to Megha Shyam, Raghav, Vasundhara and Vishnu Dath for their contributions to the research this essay draws on.

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