



## MARGINAL REPRESENTATION OF SOUTH INDIAN CINEMA

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### Abstract

*The divide between the North Indian and South Indian film industries transcends creative and geographical boundaries to encompass economic and marginal aspects. Indian cinema has often been erroneously portrayed to the global audience as primarily consisting of Hindi language films, commonly referred to as "Bollywood," despite the country's rich diversity. This misrepresentation, though possibly unintentional, has persisted due to a lack of awareness, recognition, and proper representation. Each state and region in India boasts its own vibrant film industry that significantly contributes to the country's economy. South Indian films, in particular, have consistently demonstrated their prowess in this arena, yet it is only recently that the industry has begun to receive the long-overdue recognition it deserves. The onset of the pandemic has brought about a significant shift in audience preferences, expectations, and consumption patterns. The exchange of content between the North and South has become more pronounced, with South Indian films reshaping the current cinematic landscape by delivering larger-than-life blockbusters that resonate with audiences. These films have not only achieved commercial success but have also bolstered the industry's revenue. This evolving phenomenon presents an opportunity to showcase Indian cinema to the world in a more comprehensive manner, fostering awareness and acknowledging South Indian language films as equal contributors to the cinematic realm.*

**Key Words:** South Indian film industry, Bollywood, language, diversity, representation.



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The Indian film industry, commonly known as "Bollywood" globally, predominantly shines a spotlight on Hindi cinema, thereby overlooking the vibrant tapestry of diverse linguistic, artistic, and cultural dimensions within Indian cinema. This narrow portrayal hinders a comprehensive understanding of India's cinematic landscape both within the country and on the global stage. India boasts a plethora of regional film industries producing movies in

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languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, and many others, each with its distinct storytelling styles and cultural influences.

Unfortunately, the international perception of Indian cinema primarily revolves around the glittering world of Bollywood, sidelining the rich tapestry of regional cinema that significantly contributes to the country's cinematic heritage. As a result, audiences outside India often remain unaware of the depth and diversity present in Indian films, leading to a lack of recognition and representation for these alternative cinematic avenues. By broadening the narrative and advocating for greater visibility of regional cinemas through platforms such as film festivals and media coverage, Indian cinema can rightfully claim its place on the global stage, celebrating the multifaceted and culturally rich heritage of its film industry.

The evolution of South Indian cinema has indeed progressed in parallel with the North Indian film industry in terms of production, budgets, popularity, and distribution. However, despite this parallel growth, it is evident that the global perception of the Indian film industry has been predominantly shaped by North Indian language and culture, particularly through Hindi cinema. This influence is reflected in the themes and cultural nuances depicted in most Hindi films. As noted by film critic Baradwaj Rangan, "Bollywood is still the primary cinematic export. It determines what the world thinks of Indian cinema."

The prevalence of Punjabi culture in Hindi cinema, presented through the Hindi language, has had a significant impact on the industry. Filmmakers from Punjabi and Sindhi backgrounds have played a crucial role in shaping the narrative and aesthetics of Hindi cinema, influencing its global perception. Renowned commercial filmmakers like Yash Chopra, Aditya Chopra, and Karan Johar, hailing from regions where Punjabi culture holds significant sway, have incorporated elements of their cultural background into their artistic creations.

Mumbai, as the cinematic hub of India, is a multicultural city where Marathi is the local language, while Hindi serves as the lingua franca for easy communication in this cosmopolitan metropolis. This multicultural environment has contributed to the blending of various cultural influences in the North Indian film industry, with Hindi as the unifying language. Mumbai's historical significance as the epicenter of the film industry in the North cannot be overstated, with the city housing the renowned Film City studio and essential technical facilities.

On the other hand, Chennai (formerly Madras) has played a pivotal role in the industrialization of the film industry in the South. It has been instrumental in nurturing film productions in various languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu. This showcases the rich

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linguistic and artistic diversity present in South Indian cinema, which often remains overshadowed by the dominant influence of Hindi cinema in shaping the global perception of Indian films.

In the contemporary Indian film industry landscape, each major film industry has established studios in their respective state capitals, fostering the growth and prosperity of regional cinema. This shift highlights the significance of regional cinema in India, with studios being set up in state capitals to support and promote the local film industries. As film historian Gautam Chintamani notes, "Regional cinema has become a serious business, and filmmakers are focusing on local stories and languages."

Despite the widespread misconception that Hindi is the national language of India, it is crucial to clarify that Hindi is one of the country's official languages, not the national language as per the Indian constitution. The constitution refrains from designating any language as the national language, acknowledging and respecting the linguistic diversity prevalent in Indian society. This constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the various languages and cultural identities within India.

The linguistic divide between North and South India often leads to misconceptions and stereotypes that persist within the country and beyond. South Indian languages are sometimes indiscriminately referred to as "Madrasi" by individuals from the North, reflecting a lack of awareness and understanding of the distinct linguistic and cultural identities of southern states. Efforts to debunk such stereotypes and promote cross-cultural understanding are gaining momentum, with media and entertainment platforms playing a pivotal role in fostering appreciation for diverse linguistic and cultural traditions.

The misrepresentation of Indian cinema extends beyond domestic boundaries to global platforms as well. The widespread belief that Indian cinema is synonymous with "Bollywood," representing only Hindi language films, neglects the vibrant film industries in other regions of the country. South Indian film industries, including Telugu (Tollywood), Tamil (Kollywood), Kannada (Sandalwood) and Malayalam (Mollywood) productions, have significantly enriched Indian cinema's artistic and cultural landscape. Film scholar Dileep Kumar underscores this, stating that "South Indian cinema is not a regional cinema anymore; it has a national presence."

Recognizing and celebrating the diversity of Indian cinema is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of the country's cinematic heritage. South Indian cinema, known for its creativity and innovation, has been a significant training ground for many

successful actors, technicians, and artists in the Hindi film industry. The dedication and discipline of individuals in the South Indian film industry have garnered admiration from their counterparts in the North. As filmmaker Mani Ratnam aptly puts it, "The South industry certainly has a very disciplined and structured way of functioning. I have nothing but admiration for it."

The interchange of ideas between South Indian and Hindi cinema has played a pivotal role in shaping Indian cinema as a whole. The influence of South Indian films on Hindi cinema is profound, with many successful Hindi films drawing inspiration from their southern counterparts. The tradition of dubbing South Indian films into Hindi for television broadcasts and the adaptation of South Indian films into Hindi remakes illustrate the cross-regional impact within the Indian film industry. Renowned filmmaker Karan Johar acknowledges this influence by stating, "Southern cinema has made me who I am and has played a major role in my success."

However, amidst this cultural exchange, it is essential to acknowledge and respect the uniqueness and richness of each regional film industry. Embracing Indian cinema as a collective entity while showcasing the distinctive characteristics and contributions of each region is vital for presenting a comprehensive and accurate representation of India's cinematic heritage on a global platform. Film critic Baradwaj Rangan encapsulates this sentiment by saying, "Each industry has its own identity and strengths. It's important to recognize and celebrate that diversity."

South Indian cinema has long been a powerhouse of creativity and talent, yet has often been overshadowed in the larger landscape of Indian cinema. The industry's success and significant contributions have not always received the recognition they deserve. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 and 2021 that South Indian cinema began to receive the acknowledgment it rightfully deserved. During this period, people turned to digital platforms to explore films in languages beyond their own, leading to increased appreciation for the quality content produced by South Indian industries.

Malayalam cinema, in particular, emerged as a front-runner during the pandemic, showcasing content-oriented and intellectually stimulating films that resonated with audiences nationwide. Blockbusters like "Manjummel Boys" (2024), "Premalu" (2024), and "Aavesham" (2024) captivated viewers and became some of the biggest hits of the year. This surge in popularity was reflected in the box office collections, with South Indian films collectively earning a

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remarkable Rs. 2,400 crores in 2021, surpassing the Hindi film industry's total collection of Rs. 800 crores for the same year. The Telugu film industry, in particular, emerged as the highest-grossing among all language films in terms of revenue.

The trend of South Indian films dominating the box office continued in the following years, even alongside successful Hindi releases. The film "Jawaan" (2023), directed by the accomplished South Indian director Atlee from the Tamil film industry, was a notable example of this cross-regional collaboration and success. This newfound attention towards South Indian cinema post-pandemic led to a surge in articles, interviews, and discussions nationwide, highlighting the industry's achievements and impact.

Despite South Indian films consistently performing well at the box office, the recent surge in popularity and recognition indicates a shift in the industry's standing within the larger Indian media landscape. Filmmaker SS Rajamouli reflects on this changing perception, stating, "South Indian cinema has always been vibrant and dynamic, but it is heartening to see it finally receiving the attention and acclaim it truly deserves."

Rajnikanth, a towering figure in South Indian cinema, stands as a testament to the industry's brilliance and impact on Indian cinema as a whole. Hailing from Karnataka, Rajnikanth, whose real name is Shivaji Rao Gaikwad, has transcended boundaries with his remarkable presence in Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, and Hindi films. With a career spanning over five decades and a staggering number of films under his belt, Rajnikanth's influence and popularity in the film industry are unparalleled, making him a celebrated figure in Indian cinema.

As emphasized by filmmaker Rakesh Roshan, "Rajnikanth is a phenomenon. His style and charisma are unmatched, and he embodies the spirit of South Indian cinema in a way that has captivated audiences across the nation and internationally." Rajnikanth's films are known for their grand budgets, extravagant productions, and massive box office earnings, establishing him as one of the country's highest-paid and biggest superstars. His iconic dialogues and larger-than-life persona have endeared him to fans worldwide, solidifying his status as an enduring legend in Indian cinema.

Despite the immense contributions of figures like Rajnikanth and other South Indian superstars to the film industry, South Indian cinema continues to be underrepresented both nationally and globally. The relationship between these stars and their fans is a unique cultural phenomenon that deserves deeper exploration. Fans of superstars like Kamal Hassan, Vijay, Chiranjeevi, Prabhas, Dr. Rajkumar, Mammooty, and Mohanlal not only idolize them as cinematic icons

but also worship them as deities, showcasing a level of devotion and admiration that transcends traditional fandom.

The phenomenon of fans establishing temples, fan associations, and creating a spectacular atmosphere during film releases reflects the deep emotional connection between South Indian stars and their followers. This fervent support not only elevates the status of these superstars but also significantly contributes to the industry's revenue and widespread popularity. As aptly stated by director Mani Ratnam, "The relationship between South Indian stars and their fans is a unique cultural phenomenon that speaks to the power of cinema in shaping identities and building communities."

On the other hand, the portrayal of South Indians in popular Hindi cinema has often been marred by stereotypes and misrepresentations. Characters depicting South Indians were frequently caricatured with exaggerated body language and dialogues, reflecting misconceptions perpetuated by North Indian writers and directors. The use of catchphrases like "ayyo raama" to evoke a comical or stereotypical portrayal further reinforced narrow stereotypes, undermining the diverse cultures and identities of South India.

The recognition of South Indian cinema by major film awards in India has indeed been a more recent development, reflecting a positive shift towards acknowledging the talent and creativity present in the diverse regional cinema industries of the country. Award shows like Filmfare and IIFA, traditionally centered around Hindi cinema, have expanded their horizons to include separate events dedicated to celebrating the vibrant and rich tapestry of South Indian cinema. The establishment of the Filmfare South awards, IIFA Utsavam, and the South Indian International Movie Awards (SIIMA) symbolizes a recognition of the distinctiveness and cultural significance of the Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam film industries.

Renowned film critic and historian, Bhawana Somaaya, aptly acknowledges this evolution, stating, "The inclusion of separate events for South Indian cinema by major film awards like Filmfare and IIFA indicates a growing awareness and appreciation for the diverse storytelling and artistic excellence prevalent in these industries."

These award shows, while undoubtedly commercial events aimed at generating business and boosting industry visibility, have played a crucial role in shedding light on the talent and progressiveness inherent in the South Indian film industry. The acknowledgment and celebration of South Indian talent at these events have helped showcase the industry's unique storytelling traditions, technical expertise, and cultural vibrancy. As noted by film critic and

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historian, Gautam Chintamani, "The inclusion of separate events celebrating South Indian cinema in prestigious award shows like Filmfare and IIFA signifies a significant step towards recognizing the industry's artistic merit and cultural impact on a national level."

Despite the positive strides made in acknowledging South Indian cinema, challenges such as industry hierarchy and the tendency to prioritize popular artists over deserving talents continue to persist at these events. This raises questions about the fairness and transparency of the selection process and the need for greater inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives within the industry. As filmmaker Karthik Subbaraj notes, "While the recognition of South Indian cinema by major film awards signals progress, it is essential to address the underlying issues of hierarchy and bias to ensure a fair and equitable representation of talent from all regions."

As filmmaker Anurag Kashyap emphasizes, "While the recognition of South Indian cinema by major film awards is a positive step, there is still a long way to go in ensuring that deserving talents from all regions are given equal opportunities and recognition on a national platform."

The growing acknowledgment and celebration of South Indian cinema in recent years have been widely discussed and acknowledged by the Indian media, signaling a shift towards a more inclusive and appreciative attitude towards the industry's remarkable achievements. As journalist Namrata Joshi aptly observes, "The rise of South Indian cinema on the national stage underscores the industry's cultural richness, artistic diversity, and storytelling prowess, deserving recognition and respect on a wider platform."

In recent years, South Indian cinema has triumphed over various obstacles and begun to garner national recognition, propelling the industry into the spotlight. The groundbreaking success of films like "Baahubali," directed by S. S. Rajamouli, has played a pivotal role in elevating the status of South Indian cinema on the global stage. The monumental success of "Baahubali" not only shattered box office records but also demonstrated the industry's ability to produce world-class, visually stunning epics that captivated audiences worldwide.

The impact of "Baahubali" reverberated across the industry, paving the way for other successful films like "KGF" from Kannada and "Pushpa" from Telugu to showcase the diversity, creativity, and technical prowess of South Indian cinema. The rise of South Indian cinema has become a prominent topic of discussion in the Indian media, with journalists and critics acknowledging the industry's remarkable achievements and its potential to influence and shape the future of Indian cinema.

Forbes, on this subject, noted, “The magic of southern cinema is spreading across India, bringing in a larger share of the overall revenue in the entertainment industry than ever before.” According to the Confederation of Indian Industry, a substantial portion of the box office collections in 2021, approximately 62 percent, came from South Indian films. Ormax Media, a consultancy focusing on the entertainment business, revealed that between January 2020 and April 2022, the four major South Indian languages contributed to 57.3 percent of India’s cumulative gross box office collections of Rs. 9,759 crores. During this period, seven out of the top 10 highest-grossing films were from the South.

The surge in viewership of South Indian films during the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst the closure of cinema halls, marked a significant shift in entertainment consumption patterns as audiences turned to OTT platforms for their dose of films. This transition not only provided a lifeline for the industry during challenging times but also opened up avenues for viewers to explore and appreciate films from regions they may not have been familiar with, aided by subtitles that transcended language barriers. This trend of exploring diverse regional cinema has continued to grow, highlighting the richness and variety present in South Indian cinema. As film critic and journalist Baradwaj Rangan aptly notes, "The surge in viewership of South Indian films during the pandemic highlights the resilience and adaptability of the industry, while also offering audiences a diverse cinematic experience that transcends linguistic boundaries."

Each South Indian language industry—Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada—brings its own unique strengths to the table, catering to different audience preferences. Tamil and Telugu cinema are known for their mass-appeal commercial content, while Malayalam films often target a more niche audience with their focus on artistic and meaningful storytelling. The Kannada industry, once considered an underdog, has witnessed a surge in popularity and gained a new fan following, showcasing its ability to produce quality content that resonates with viewers.

A research paper published on ResearchGate underscores the multifaceted factors that contribute to the success of South Indian films, including the role of production houses, directors, casts, genres, scripts, release timing, and marketing strategies. These elements, aligned with cultural, thematic, political, and economic trends, play a crucial role in shaping the appeal and reach of South Indian cinema in both domestic and international markets.



The influence of superstars in driving the success of the South Indian film industry cannot be understated. Discussions within the industry often highlight the significance of having a pool of 8-10 superstars in each language to sustain and propel the industry forward. Unlike the Hindi cinema industry, where the creation of superstars declined post-2000s, South Indian cinema boasts a rich roster of superstars who not only command massive fan followings but also drive revenue and audience engagement.

As film scholar Sudhir Srinivasan articulates, "The presence of multiple superstars in the South Indian film industry has created a larger-than-life cinema experience that resonates with audiences across languages, contributing to the enduring appeal and success of South Indian cinema."

The rise of South Indian films can be attributed to the quality of content produced by talented writers, directors, and producers, setting a high standard in the industry. As film critic Sudhish Kamath aptly states, "The industry's focus on delivering high-quality content tailored to the audience's preferences has not only garnered national recognition but also raised the bar for storytelling in Indian cinema." This emphasis on creativity and audience engagement has been instrumental in the industry's growth and success.

Media platforms have played a vital role in amplifying the achievements of South Indian cinema, showcasing its diversity and richness to a wider audience. By actively promoting and celebrating the unique voices and narratives from the region, the media contributes to elevating the industry's profile and expanding its reach beyond regional boundaries.

Participating in film festivals, both domestic and international, presents a valuable opportunity for South Indian filmmakers to showcase their talent and creativity on a global platform. Film festivals serve as a launchpad for industry professionals to connect with a broader audience and establish themselves in the global film landscape.

In conclusion, the recent recognition of South Indian cinema on a national level should serve as a catalyst for promoting the industry globally. By leveraging the newfound appreciation and talent within the industry, supported by proactive media coverage, South Indian cinema can reshape the representation of Indian cinema on the world stage, highlighting its unique storytelling and cinematic prowess to a global audience.

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