

## South Indian (SI) Cinema: Is it beneficial to SI Youth in Singapore?

### 1. Introduction: Indian Cinema

Synonymous to Indian Cinema and often wrongly associated as the only form of Indian Cinema is Bollywood, a portmanteau of Bombay and Hollywood. However, belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest country of the world by population which has 22 official languages, Indian Cinema is more than that. Since the first premiere of *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, touted to be the first full length Indian feature film, Bollywood has grown to be a market leader of Indian Cinema, with the highest percentage of Indian Box Office Revenue (43%) and greatest number of films produced in 2017<sup>1</sup>. Dastidar and Elliott summarises how Indian films are tailored to cater to the Indian Diaspora and more money has been injected to these movies to ensure the success<sup>2</sup>. Some well-known examples of movies exported to the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) audience include *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Swades* (2004), *Namaste London* (2007) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) which even made it into the famous international “1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die” list. This recipe for success has ensured a similar pattern in Bollywood movies encompassing grandeur locations, light-hearted romance and action films with top performing actors. *3 Idiots* further increased awareness of Bollywood on an international scale, giving rise to increased viewership by audience such as those in China. Touted as India’s soft power<sup>3</sup>, Bollywood has traditionally aimed to produce movies that showcase the rich Indian culture but recently, to stay relevant to changing times and to appeal to the youth has incorporated western trends. Some examples include having movies talking about homosexuality such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and live-in relationships as portrayed in *Luka Chuppi*. This push to increase revenue might have caused a change in narrative of the core Indian values preached and an erosion of culture, resulting in a dispute as to whether Bollywood is a good enabler of India’s soft power compared to Kollywood<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> “Economic-Contribution-of-Motion-Picture-and-Television-Industry: Deloitte India: TMT: Articles,” Deloitte India, October 13, 2014, <https://www2.deloitte.com/in/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/economic-contribution-of-motion-picture-and-television-industry.html>; “CENTRAL BOARD OF FILM CERTIFICATION INDIAN FEATURE FILMS CERTIFIED FROM 1-4-2016 TO 31-3-2017 REGION-WISE-LANGUAGE-WISE.” Film Federation of India. Accessed May 5, 2022. <http://filmfederation.in/iff2017.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Sayantan Ghosh Dastidar and Caroline Elliott, “The Indian Film Industry in a Changing International Market,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 44, no. 1 (March 2019): pp. 97-116, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-019-09351-6>.

<sup>3</sup> Yanyan Hong, “The Power of Bollywood: A Study on Opportunities, Challenges, and Audiences’ Perceptions of Indian Cinema in China,” *Global Media and China* 6, no. 3 (2021): pp. 345-363, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364211022605>.

<sup>4</sup> C.S.H.N Murthy, “29,” in *Routledge Handbook of Soft Power* (S.I.: ROUTLEDGE, 2020), pp. 358-368.

While all of this is happening, the other Indian regional film industries have been gaining traction. Among the different Indian Film industries distinguished by language and its state of prevalence, regional industries such as Kollywood, Tollywood and Mollywood for the languages Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam stand out more for its quality of movies produced. While Tollywood has been steadily rising over the years, during the Covid-19 pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 specifically, it unprecedentedly overtook Bollywood in terms of Box Office share and had four movies that were part of the top 10 Indian movies<sup>5</sup>. Kollywood is not too far behind at third place, signalling the rising dominance of SI movies in Indian Cinema. This might have been triggered by the success of *Baahubali* that released in 2016 which proved that it was able to incorporate grandeur while still showcasing the rich culture of India. It also garnered much attention due to its prominent director S. S. Rajamouli and its beautiful marketing, which publicised SI cinema to the international stage.

This global shift towards SI cinema is significant to Indians in Singapore as the Diasporic Indian population here primarily of South Indians, with the top two groups being Tamils (54.7%) and Telugus (11%)<sup>6</sup>. Now with the global rise of SI cinema, it raises the question as to whether SI movies are relevant to the South Indians here and more crucially, how useful these movies are. Specifically, investigating this among the SI youth would be significant in understanding the relevance of SI movies shown here in Singapore especially since Bollywood movies are shown in Singapore at significantly cheaper rates despite the proportion of North Indians being less than their South Indian counterparts. Thus, in this paper, **I will argue how through primary research, SI cinema (narrowed to Tollywood and Kollywood) is beneficial to the SI youth in Singapore because it teaches them regarding social and cultural issues and preaches to the youth good values such as inclusivity and fearlessness.**

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<sup>5</sup> "The ORMAX Box Office Report - Ormaxmedia.com," THE ORMAX BOX OFFICE REPORT 2020 & 2021, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://www.ormaxmedia.com/data/library/OrmaxBoxOfficeReport-2020-21.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion," accessed May 5, 2022, <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.pdf>. ; Aganith Pte Ltd TV Raju, "Career and Jobs in Singapore," Singapore Telugu Samajam, accessed May 6, 2022, <https://events.sts.org.sg/content/sts-beginners-guide/1054>.

## 2. Research methodology:

To investigate the relevance of SI cinema on the youth, a qualitative focus group discussion was conducted with five SI youth between 20 and 25 who watch Indian movies. These youth are regular viewers of SI movies, with three of them also fans of Bollywood movies. Their profiles are in the appendix. Due to the sample size available, the SI cinema and its examples discussed in this essay will be limited to Tollywood and Kollywood.

## 3. Results: Benefits of SI Cinema to the youth

### 3.1 SI movies inform youth about social issues and cultural values

SI movies, known for their thought provoking plots, are useful because they enlighten youth regarding current social issues. As a university student in busy Singapore, watching a movie might be a privilege and four of them told how they selectively choose to watch movies on the basis of the plot. According to Ansar and Sneha, a movie should have a “good storyline” and one should ideally learn something from it. It is worth noting that the landscape of movies has shifted from just romantic comedies to movies crafted to deliver a social message, which is opportune and aligned to the wants of the youth of today. This could explain why youth appreciate the awareness to the social issues affecting India such as the plight of farmers. Shown in many movies such as *Kaththi*, *Bhoomi*, *Kaapaan*, *Maharshi* among others, these movies have made Divya “aware of the issues faced there” and Aditya “grateful for food we have today”. Apart from farming, for Ansar, the recently released *Jai Bhim* showcased the “inefficient judiciary system” and state of bribery and corruption that he only heard from his relatives in India and it made him “thankful that we do not face such discrimination here”. Pooja mentioned how *Kaapaan* created awareness of organic farming using decomposed faeces and made her reflect on the quality of food these days where everything is processed and genetically modified. This prompted Divya, who aspires to serve people healthy Indian food in a restaurant one day, to reiterate her desire to be a “service to mankind like the police” as echoed by Suriya in *Kaapaan*. Sneha brought up how she was introduced to the black market of organ trafficking through movies such as *Doctor* and *Kaaki Sattai* and followed up on more research after these movies. Thus, the movies are more than just a mere entertainment to the youth but an avenue to learn more about the social issues during and after the movie. The fact that the youth are increasing their knowledge of the issues even after watching the movies is testament to SI’s cinema and its ability to create useful informative

content that is relevant and well-received by the youth today. It is a plus too that they are still able to incorporate other elements of a successful film such as “romance, good actors and songs” without compromising the story which Aditya claims is equally important as a good plot.

For the SI youth in Singapore, the increasing quality of movies spanning multiple issues is beneficial to them despite not being directly relatable to Singapore because of the inherent value of knowing the lifestyle in the past. When asked whether they can relate with the movies which predominantly showcase rural India, Sneha firmly asserted how despite the “happenings in India not directly representative of the Singapore Indian culture which has been mixed with the Malaysian culture”, SI cinema serves as an educational platform to understand and revisit their roots, where her parents were from and the customs followed there. One example of this would be regarding marriage. As a traditionally patriarchal society whereby girls were married off youth to someone from the same religion and caste, arranged marriage has been a staple in India but is not as common in modern Singapore. For Pooja, she felt that reflecting upon arranged marriages shown in movies was enlightening and useful to her since her parents did a love marriage, so she was able to compare and decide what would suit her most for her future - love marriage but learning from the lessons shown in movies. In fact, the ability to sustain marriages with someone you do not love despite the multiple fights taught her to give and take in relationships with her friends and family. The Telugu movie *Pelli Choopulu*, which translated means the match matching process omnipresent in Indian culture shows a glimpse of how the process really exemplifies the plight of coming-of-age youth as parents get ambitious in getting them married off, something the youth might not be too familiar with. It shows a glimpse and sparks conversations relating to a youth’s future, which helped Divya better envision her future by observing these stories. As such, SI cinema has a place in guiding the youth in the future through the showing of the past.

For the youth in modern Singapore, the Indian values could be said to be progressively diluted by globalisation but SI cinema serve as a reaffirmation of our traditional emphasis on family. Family is a cornerstone of the Indian Culture and is emphasised in every movie as traditionally families used to stay together in a house as a joint family and in harmony with neighbours. Even with the migration of many Indians to western countries, movies such as *Pandaga Chesko* depict migrated families coming back to embrace the rich importance of family upheld. Divya, who only started watching Telugu

movies since 2014 with *Govindudu Andarivadele*, felt that each movie she watches has this “feel good impact” on her such as when a disjointed family with years of family feud solve their issues through congregating and talking it out. Every family-centric movie is a “needed reminder to never neglect family” despite us becoming progressively hooked onto the advances available in the modern world. Aditya nodded, explaining how Telugu movies have a way of inculcating the power of family in solving any issue that may arise, citing *Sathamanam Bhavati* as a perfect example highlighting this. This point was relatable to the others and Ansar added how many Tamil movies showcase our selfless helping culture towards others especially in a village setting, something that might be eroding in Singapore as more of us, especially youth, become increasingly self-contained in their houses. The concept of doing things together as a family and importance of supporting one another is reaffirmed in many movies that specially bring out the camaraderie of family through its thoughtful dialogues and direction, which Pooja felt was enhanced by her own family’s culture of watching SI movies in cinema monthly and helping their neighbours in times of need. Thus, the youth can benefit from the reinforcement of the importance of family as a way to pave the way forward in reviving the “Kampung Spirit” Singapore is famous for and our core part of our identity.

All the participants agreed that amidst the cultural erosion caused by globalisation and westernisation, these movies serve as a reminder of our roots and the rich culture held in SI. This is surprising as even those who were born and brought here are eager to learn more about Indian history and values despite being exposed to western beliefs early on in life and seek to watch Indian movies to enrich their understanding and general knowledge. As newer generations of Indian families are increasingly born here and slowly losing their ties to their Indian relatives who migrate here too, SI cinema emerges as a saviour in imparting awareness of these issues and values to the youth of today and ties in well with their passion to revisit and learn from the past and present issues. This helps retain and pass down the elements of the rich Indian culture, history and values to subsequent generations especially when battling against the inevitable cultural erosion that is happening due to modernisation.

### **3.2 SI Cinema preaches good values to the youth**

More than just its great storyline, SI cinema does justice to the SI youth of today through its preaching of good values, namely humility and inclusivity, and fearlessness.

#### 3.2.1 Inclusivity and Humility:

On an industry level, SI cinema seems to have created a culture of inclusivity and humility that has impressed and influenced the youth. Ansar said that what enticed him to continuously follow SI cinema and reduce his Bollywood movie intake was the humility displayed by the top actors in the industry. He argues that SI is a very collaborative space where everyone is treated as equals as shown by how Sivakarthikeyan, a famous actor, helped write the famous Arabic kuthu song Halamithi Habibi for another renowned actor Vijay for his movie *Beast*. Deserving new actors without links to the industry such as Vijay Sethupathi are given the chance, unlike in Bollywood where “nepotism is more prevalent and discriminatory towards humble actors such as Sushant Singh Rajput and Ayushmann Khurrana who were doing well and allegedly threatened the top stars” there. Sneha concurred, explaining how movie storylines and acting skills were prioritised in SI over being a famous actor’s son or daughter, referencing many new faces that have had an express ticket to a Bollywood debut such as Jhanvi Kapoor, Ahan Shetty and Varun Dhawan. Pooja mentioned too that it was important to have an equal starting point for everyone of all walks of life, signalling the strong desire from the youth for equal treatment.

The meritorious entry process is perhaps important to the youth who have grown up in Singapore where we are Singaporean first before anything and are treated as equals “regardless of Race, language and religion” as narrated in our pledge. While occasional racism and discrimination might occur in Singapore, the SI cinema reminds the youth of today to treat everyone as equals, with the goal being advancing the industry and providing an enjoyable experience to viewers. It serves as testament to how top stars can work hand-in-hand and provide quality content. Also, given how famous stars such as Jayam Ravi, Vishnu and Vishal are friends shows that in becoming famous, there is no need for competition and lose friends. In the recent song Dosti from movie *RRR*, how the various music directors and musicians such as Anirudh and Amit Trivedi came together in the production of songs and are friends shows the possibility of competitors working harmoniously to create a great song.

Another aspect of inclusivity displayed by SI cinema is through its revival of Pan-Indian films. Pan-Indian films, which are films that are dubbed in multiple regional languages to cater to a wider audience, was first created by Kannada cinema, another SI cinema region in 1959, in the movie *Mahishasura Mardini* which was dubbed and released in seven languages. The turning point was in fact *Baahubali: The Beginning* which was released in 2016 in Tamil and Telugu while being dubbed in Hindi and Malayalam. Since then, many movies have followed suit and more movies are even concurrently shot in multiple languages such as Tamil, Telugu and Hindi such as *Devi*, *Saaho* and even the most recent *Radhe Shyam* which was simultaneously shot in Hindi and Telugu. The introduction of Pan-Indian has allowed other segments of the Indian population to appreciate and enjoy the beautiful movies without being restricted by language barriers. It also sparked more of the youth such as Sneha and Pooja to start watching Telugu movies and this has allowed them to get along better with their other friends through discussing of other language movies. Ansar also mentioned that the accessibility enabled by Pan-Indian films have also created cross-culture exchange with his North-Indian friends and his Telugu friends, something he never knew would have been possible. Thus, the opportunities for Indians to unite to watch films that have good storylines highlighting social issues and preaching good values has increased and the youth are able to benefit from these discussions and become a better person who is close to India despite being in Singapore.

### 3.2.2 Fearlessness:

Another quality that Youths can and are learning from SI cinema is fearlessness. From *Eega* exploring the idea of reincarnation through a fly among similarly themed films such as *Manam* and *Anegan to 24* and *Indru Netra Naalai* exploring time travel and *Okka Kshanam* exploring the concept of parallel lives and *Tik Tik Tik* being the India's first space film, SI cinema has a reputation of being novel and trying new things. This uniqueness and tendency to include some new concepts is one of the main hooks of SI movies according to Pooja. Despite the uncertainty of doing a film that might not appeal to everyone as seen in flops such as *24*, *Kaapaan* and *Vivegam*, directors and producers are still experimenting with unique concepts and storylines that might not have the usual elements that define a successful SI film. Sneha identifies Surya as an inspiration as he has been producing unconventional movies such as *Jai Bhim* and *Soorai Pottru* which ended up quite successful despite the relative

failure of his previous venture *24* and for his braveness to be different. Divya was impressed when she heard that Surya decided to release his movies on OTT (Over-The-Top), setting the stage for other producers to follow suit during the Covid-19 pandemic even though it might not generate the same revenue as showing it in theatres. The courage displayed by Surya, a prominent actor in SI cinema to adapt and stay through to his belief of creating novel films despite his initial failure of *24* is useful for the youth to learn to not give up and have faith in themselves that success will eventually ensue, especially in times of adversity.

Another aspect of fearlessness that has impacted the youth is through the actor's dedication to go above and beyond. Ansar said that when he heard that Ajith did the mountain bike stunts himself in his recent release *Valimai* despite his old age of fifty-one, he "just had to watch the movie" as a form of respect for his service to the industry. Divya shared a similar anecdote of Vikram's transformation to a body builder and then to a deformed person in the movie *I* which was inspirational as she realised how seriously actors saw their trade despite the element of difficulty involved and were not there just to make big money. To her, it signalled to her that whichever job she does in the future, she should do it to her best ability, even in adversity, without being fearful, just like Vikram.

Lastly, fearlessness manifests in how despite the unknown prospects, many young individuals have made a name for themselves in various ways. Pooja mentioned how Hip Hop Thamizha, a nobody, made India's first Hip Hop album 'Hip Hop Thamizhan' in 2012 and since then has been producing top notch songs for top actors such as Vishal, Jayam Ravi, Vijay Sethupathi and has even written, directed and produced some movies. Particularly, his ability to incorporate his love for the Tamil language while making modern raps and music is commendable to her as it is surely not easy to enter an industry with top pre-existing music directors and emerge as a top music director today. Sneha, an avid fan of Sivakarthikeyan, said that his journey from a mimicry artist to a full-fledged hero is motivational to her and serves as inspiration that one does not need someone to bail them out but instead should depend on their passion, dedication and talent to be someone noteworthy in the industry and that trying out new things such as acting, writing and singing songs could pave the way for better prospects in life.



As a whole, the industry and the excellent work they are doing, be it directors and producers, or actors and music directors, have been subtly impacting the youth, who look up to and follow them. Seeing the different journeys they take to stardom and admiring the hard work put in, the youth are benefiting by being inspired to try new things, be fearless and work hard to be the best version of themselves.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To the youth of today and changemakers of tomorrow, SI cinema is performing its role of inculcating good values, equipping with knowledge of our culture and leading by example but accessibility is inhibiting them from reaping the benefits. In Singapore, SI movies are expensive, ranging from a fixed price of \$15 - \$18 as compared to Hindi and English movies that can go to as low as \$7 during selected weekdays. This has led to some youth such as Pooja and Ansar choosing to watch a non-SI movie, even when going with their families, citing high cost. Having outlined the benefits of SI cinema in this essay and how it shines over Bollywood, it is my utmost belief that the cost of watching SI cinemas can be regulated and reduced to better incentivise SI youth to watch more SI movies with their families, reap the benefits and enact change effectively in their respective domains. That way, the rich values present in SI cinema can be retained and impact many more youth now and in the future.

Word Count: 3498

## Appendix A: Profiles of SI youth interviewed

Name (anonymised)	Age	Gender	Profile
Aditya	22	Male	Singapore citizen born in India, Native Telugu, watch mainly Telugu and Hindi movies and recently some Tamil movies
Ansar	25	Male	Singapore citizen born in Singapore, Native Tamil, watch mainly Tamil and Hindi movies
Divya	24	Female	Singapore PR born in India, Tamil Telugu mix, watch mainly Tamil and Telugu movies
Esha	20	Female	Singapore citizen born in Singapore, Native Tamil, watch mainly Tamil, Hindi movies and a bit of Telegu movies
Pooja	20	Female	Singapore citizen born in Singapore, Native Tamil, watch mainly Tamil movies and recently some Telugu movies

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