



GAINING POPULARITY

The age of hyper-local cinema

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MUMBAI

A new segment can be added to the regular classification of Indian cinema as Bollywood (Hindi) and regional (everything that is not Hindi): dialect cinema. Movies are being made across the country in tongues such as Bhili, Kunchi Kurve, Khortha, Tulu, Awadhi, Sadri, Rajasthani, Badaga and Bundelkhandi. Produced in ones and twos on modest- to -negligible budgets and squeezed into the margins of the annual release calendar, these films include those in dialects and languages that don't have their own scripts, such as *Lakniwalo Chwara*, a Lambadi film about the tribal community, *Byari*, a Byari picture about social restrictions on women, *Faislo Manzoor Se*, a Bhili love quadrangle involving a dacoit and Indian Administrative Service aspirant, *Pakaranina*, a social issue movie in Kunchi Kurve, *Muthbhed*, a Haryanvi political drama, and *Saadu Mera Jhaadu*, a Dakkhini comedy aimed at speakers in Karnataka (as opposed to Andhra Pradesh's Dakkhini populace).

Many of the ancient communication systems are not on the official list of languages, while some of the filmmakers are

from the ranks of the marginalized, such as *Pakaranina* director Vainkatesh Kunchi Kurve, whose surname derives from his scheduled caste and his unique lingo. Kunchi Kurve has no script, and carries seeds of Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, said the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation employee. "Nobody has made a film like this before about my community," said Kunchi Kurve, who described *Pakaranina* as an account of the issues being faced by his people. "I have acted in it myself, written some songs and composed the music. We have been educated in Marathi and we speak our language only at home."

Kunchi Kurve's maiden effort was made for under a lakh of rupees.

For sub-regional cinema missionaries, a passion for cinema is twinned with the preservation of culture. Banoth Ramu, a Lambadi from Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, is a Life Insurance Corp. of India agent who, along with three other friends (a building contractor, a newspaper agent and a farmer) pooled together money to produce *Lakniwalo Chwara*. "The movie is about how the younger and older generations regard Lambadi culture," he said. *Lakniwalo Chwara* was released in 12

centres in three districts in Andhra Pradesh in 2012, where it ran for four weeks. "My people loved it," Bhanoth said. "We spent ₹20 lakh on the film, and while we haven't earned it all back, we are very happy that we made a film that is a message about our tribe."

The blossoming of dialect cinema picked up in 2009 and has been tracked since by UFO Moviez India Ltd, the digital broadcasting technology company. Mitalee Patel, senior vice-president of content at UFO, started noticing that the list of movies being beamed into digitized single screens and multiplexes included some in languages and dialects she hadn't even heard of. One of the first productions to pop up on her radar was *Hosa Mungaru*, made in Badaga, which is spoken largely in Udagamandalam in Tamil Nadu. (Only a handful of Badaga films have been made over the years).

"We are the digital highway, the releaser," she said. "Over the last few years, we have been meeting producers, many of them in it for commercial reasons and others because they want to." *Hosa Mungaru*'s producer, M.K. Sivaji Raja, ran his film in a theatre he had

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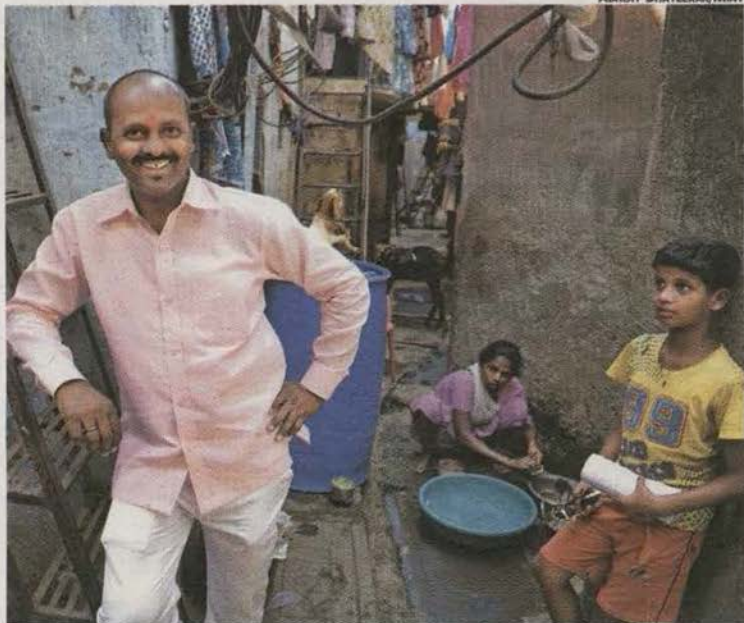
The age of hyper-local cinema

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booked for 50 days.

While some filmmakers are first-timers, others are experienced hands. Mohamed Usman Aejaz, a veteran distributor from Bangalore, made *Saadu Mera Jhaadu* in the Dakshini spoken in his hometown in 2011. The comedy, about two brothers-in-law, was initially meant to go direct to DVD until Aejaz walked into a local UFO centre located near his office. "They gave us technical assistance and told us how we could release our film in cinemas," Aejaz said. "The film ran for two weeks in Bangalore and it has done very well on DVD. I spent ₹15 lakh and I made my money back. I didn't make it just for profit—I have the satisfaction of knowing that I made a film in my native tongue."

A movie in a dialect that caters to the likes, tastes and cultural practices of a particular section of the population might, on paper, be the perfect antidote to the all-India movie that speaks to everybody and nobody in particular. Yet, dialect filmmakers face many obstacles: they don't get the cinemas or the shows they want, have almost no money for publicity, and are often edged out



Unique take: Vainkatesh Kunchi Kurve directed *Pakaranina* as an account of the issues being faced by people of his community.

by the latest blockbuster that staggers into town.

There is a demand for a hyper-local cinema that needs to be tapped, said Ajay Sharma, a filmmaker from Delhi who produced the Bhili film *Faislo Manzoor Se* last year. Sharma used his Film and Television Institute of India contacts—he is a 1977 batch cinematography graduate from the college—to improve production values on the ₹40 lakh-plus

project. He tried to release the film in 60 theatres in places where Bhili is prevalent, including Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan, but a spat with a distributor resulted in a week-long run across only 20.

Still, Sharma is satisfied with the experience. "The one week that we got, the shows went house-full and there was a demand for the second week, but the theatres were booked by *Himmatwala* (the Sajid Khan

movie) that came the following week," Sharma claimed. "This film is speaking to the Bhils in their language, not in Hindi or whatever they are forced to communicate in."

Some films include well-known faces in the cast. The Tulu movie *Sompa*, made in 2012, has Marathi and Hindi actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar, while a few low-budget Hindi films starring the likes of Ashmit Patel, Sara Khan and Ayesha Jhulka have been dubbed into Rajasthani. The 2011 Haryanvi movie *Muthbhed* starred Hindi actor Mukesh Tiwari, and was co-produced by Bollywood producer Kumar Mangat. *Sant Sevalal*, a Banjara biopic about the eponymous saint released last year, featured singers like Anuradha Paudwal and Anup Jalota on the soundtrack.

However, many dialects boast releases that are still in single digits, and it isn't unusual for a feat—the first film ever in Bhili! A proud moment for Awadhi!—to be rarely repeated.

The films are "small" in every which way, but there is little doubt over the bigness of their makers' dreams—to produce movies in the language inside their heads and on their tongues.

"In their own small corner of the world, these guys are so excited about their own small films," Patel said.