



Why Vijay's Master or Vikram's Cobra are likely to have Hindi versions

With Covid forcing Hindi films to take the OTT route, dubbed South Indian films will help ensure cinemas have enough fresh content to exhibit and this may even serve as a long-term strategy

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What if Tamil star Vijay's upcoming film Master is available in a Hindi version?

It's a proposition that holds some promise for the audience, in terms of content, and for exhibitors, who may otherwise have limited material to play whenever operations restart. Indeed, many exhibitors are now in touch with producers down South for dubbed versions of their upcoming films.

"It is a necessity now with a lot of films going OTT. Cinemas need a lot of content and big numbers and footfalls can be generated by tentpole films. In Hindi, we have about 4-5 films that are ready for release. So, it means we need to look at (Tamil) films like Vijay's Master, Cobra starring Vikram, Suriya-starrer Soorai Pottru, or Dhanush's Jagame Tantram," Akshaye Rathi, film exhibitor/director, Saroj Screens, told Moneycontrol.

Rahul Puri, MD, Mukta A2 Cinemas, concurs: "The exhibition space will need content when cinemas reopen post lockdown and there is little to no Hindi content available. Therefore exhibitors will need to rely on English and regional content and the Tamil and Telugu industries are both on par with Hindi when it comes to big films."

Acing the Hindi market

Puri is right. There are examples of southern films that have recorded strong numbers at the box office, especially in the Hindi speaking markets, after a pan-India release.

One of the best examples is SS Rajamouli's Telugu film *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion*. The Hindi version of the film collected over Rs 500 crore and is still considered the highest grossing film for Hindi cinema. The first film from the *Baahubali* franchise also minted strong revenues. The Hindi version of *Baahubali: The Beginning* collected over Rs 118 crore.

Rajinikanth, too, has made a mark in the Hindi speaking markets. Take *2.0*, for example; the film's Hindi version raked in more than Rs 185 crore.

While *2.0* and *Baahubali* are big ventures, *KGF*, a Kannada film starring Yash, also stood tall at the box office. In fact, the film proved to be tough competition for Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *Zero*.

KGF's Hindi version earned Rs 44 crore and became the fourth-highest grossing Hindi-dubbed film. The multi-starrer *Zero*, which released along with *KGF* on December 21 in 2018, made with a budget of Rs 270 crore, raked in just Rs 88 crore. *Zero* was released only in Hindi. Whereas *KGF*, made with a budget of Rs 80 crore, collected Rs 134 crore from its home State Karnataka alone.

These past instances tell us that the strategy of a pan-India release for southern films, especially the tentpole ventures — big budget movies that are expected to get in huge revenues for their studios — can spell good news for both producers and exhibitors.

Also, makers of South Indian films have no intention of taking the OTT route. Producer Xavier Britto has clearly stated that Vijay's *Master* will only release in theatres.

"The concept of stardom down South is entirely different. If the makers take the decision to go to OTT, there will be outrage. That kind of fandom I can't imagine for any Hindi star," said Rathi.

A big asset for single screens

While southern films dubbed in Hindi will be beneficial for the entire exhibition space, they will especially be a big asset for single screens, which have been reeling under immense pressure due to the coronavirus-induced lockdown.

Rathi explains why. "Unlike the Hindi film fraternity, the southern fraternity has always focussed on making content for the common man. Ajith, Vijay, Rajinikanth films cater to everyone and not to a niche audience like Hindi films. A lot of Hindi films do not appeal to common people. Hence, for the common man of India, if southern films go to single screens in Hindi speaking markets, it will be a big asset."

He added: "Allu Arjun's *Surya, The Soldier*, which had released only on single screens, ran for three to four weeks in some of my cinema halls with strong collections."

This is why Rathi thinks south stars like Allu Arjun, Mahesh Babu (both Telugu stars), Mohanlal (Malayalam), Rajinikanth, Vijay and Ajith (Tamil), who are extremely popular in the Hindi belt, courtesy TV, have a connect with the Hindi-speaking audience, and why their films have a high probability of doing well.

"The audience recognises them and if you bring them to the big screen in Hindi markets, there will be a fantastic response and I have witnessed it. In these tier II, III markets I have seen young kids taking selfies outside cinema halls with standees of Allu Arjun," added Rathi.

Multiplex operators, too, consider such films a big asset.

“A big mass-entertainer will work in both multiplexes as well as single screens. But dubbing holds the key. Good dubbing is vital in the multiplex markets,” said Puri.

Distribution costs

Rathi believes that while there will be an additional marketing cost, it will be in markets that have the potential of paying huge dividends.

He added: “Companies like UFO Moviez that handle the logistics for distribution of content have come out with some measures to incentivise filmmakers to stick to the theatrical format.”

Kapil Agarwal, Joint MD, UFO Moviez, explains: “We are proposing to give movies to the smallest of the theatres and single-screen theatres on a daily settlement basis instead of doing a weekly settlement or bi-weekly settlement.” This way, exhibitors can manage their business better as they can track day-to-day collections and, depending on a film’s business, buy a license for the rights of a film.

While dubbing southern films in Hindi has become a necessity in times of Covid-19, Rathi sees this as a strategy for the long run.