Rajnikant in Japan: Indian “superstardom” and low value markets

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ABSTRACT  This paper draws attention to some questions thrown up by the increased circulation of mass-produced cultural commodities sourced from Asia in the relatively new markets of the region. Juxtaposing the short-lived success of the Indian star Rajnikant in Japan in the late 1990s and the unsuccessful attempt to promote Korean films in the Indian theatrical circuits a decade later, the paper argues that in spite of their considerable differences both instances foreground the difficulties cultural industries of Asia have in generating revenues in the region’s markets. The paper goes on to elaborate on a model of stardom, exemplified by Rajnikant, which has evolved as a direct response to the challenges posed by low value markets.

KEYWORDS: Rajnikant, Indian cinema, Japan, Korean Wave, culture industries, stardom, externalities

1. The problem

Rajnikant, India’s highest paid actor, was in the news in 2010 for his role in the Tamil film Enthiran (dir. Shankar, 2010, Robo in Telugu and Robot Hindi). Enthiran is a landmark film because it tested the limits of the Indian film industry’s capacity to absorb capital. The significance of big budget productions in India is best appreciated against the backdrop of the historical problem that the film industries in the country have had in generating profits at the box office and other such windows of revenue. The film industry survived, and indeed thrived, by attracting surpluses generated elsewhere in other spheres of economic activity, such as agriculture and money lending to begin with but also real estate speculation, illegal mining and extortion.

At first glance Enthiran appears to be a far cry from a typical twentieth century Indian film, which was funded by speculative investors and was likely to lose money at the box office. Even as the film was being made, reports citing the officials of the Sun TV Network, whose Sun Pictures produced the film, claimed that 165 crore rupees (1.65 billion rupees or about 33 million US$) would be spent on the film by the time its 2000 or so prints reached screens across the world in October 2010. This was a stunningly large budget for an Indian film, regardless of language and place of production. Within weeks of the release the press announced that it was the biggest hit in Indian film history, with takings exceeding 200 crore rupees (Nivas 2010). An industry website estimates that the Hindi version alone grossed 237 crore rupees and the figure stands at 255 crores when adjusted for inflation.1 If these figures are accurate, Enthiran is not merely among the most expensive films made in India but belongs to a relatively rare category of films whose commercial success matched their enormous budgets. Further, it belongs to a growing number of films whose production is funded with money sourced via the stock market, not the “film financier” of the murky informal sector. Where size matters is that the film’s budget was so large that an average sized Indian Initial Public Offering (IPO) at the nation’s stock market, which stood at 965 crores in early 2010, could fund just five or six films like this one.
It would thus appear that Rajnikant is a part of the solution to Indian film industries’ historical incapacity to return profits. Unlike a number of film stars of his generation, he also comes across as having made a neat transition to a new economy in which production companies have evolved into corporate houses, raising money from legal sources such as the stock market. Those who are aware of the intimate connections that the Sun TV Network has had with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagham (DMK) party of Tamil Nadu over the years and the more recent accusations of large scale corruption and money laundering against both the party itself and those involved in setting up and running Sun TV Network would, of course, dismiss any claims made on behalf of Enthiran’s capacity to solve any problem whatsoever. Without implicating either the film’s production team or Rajnikant in any of corruption scandals that have surrounded Sun TV’s promoters, I would like to suggest that the film and its lead star drew attention to an interesting problem that confronts film as a cultural commodity in India. This problem has to do with the realization of value: the difficulties film industries across the country have had with converting cultural visibility and their pride of place as institutions producing political leaders, into profits on investment in production. I draw here on Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s (2003) formulation of the problem in his discussion of what he called the “Bollywoodization” of the Indian film industry. Rajadhyaksha makes the crucial distinction between the culture industry called Bollywood and the Indian film industry:

...Bollywood is not the Indian film industry, or at least not the film industry alone. Bollywood admittedly occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio. If so, the film industry itself—determined here solely in terms of its box office turnover and sales of print and music rights, all that actually comes back to the producer—can by definition constitute only a part, and perhaps an alarmingly small part, of the overall cultural industry that is currently being created and marketed. (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 27; emphasis in original)

Rajadhyaksha (2003, 31) goes on to argue that the issue is one of “defining culture economically” (emphasis in original). Indian cinema, much more than radio or television, he argues, has been characterized by its “resistance to industrialization” that is manifest in such familiar difficulties as “defining a production line and thus defining a stable channel of capital inflow” (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 31). He went on elaborate that the problem was “demonstrated in the incommensurability between what Indian cinema was doing culturally ... and what was required financially in order to qualify for globalization” (Rajadhyaksha 2009, 74). Indeed, “most of Indian cinema was incapable of translating its cultural value into a financial business plan” (Rajadhyaksha 2009, 74–75, emphases in original).

I have argued elsewhere (Srinivas 2009) that the south Indian superstar—who is the centre of a highly organized fan phenomenon, becomes closely identified with contemporary socio-political mobilizations and goes on to establish political parties—has proved to be a major obstacle for film industries of the region to implement their own models of Bollywoodization. What makes this deadlock particularly interesting for a cultural studies student is the manner in which the incapacity to Bollywoodize is textually and narratively manifest in virtually every single film featuring these superstars. And Rajnikant is the biggest of them all.

In Section 2 I discuss the variant of Indian stardom that Rajnikant exemplifies in order to show how the value problem is linked to the career of film stars. I then go on to examine two “inter-Asia moments” when cultural commodities produced in one part of Asia found themselves in another context and setting, which suggest that the issues at hand may not be unique to India or its films. The first of these instances is discussed in Section 3, which elaborates on the fate of imported films, Asian films in particular, in the Indian market. A further opportunity to explore the inter-Asia manifestation of the problem of value—indeed the leakage of
value—is offered by the short-lived runaway success of Rajnikant in Japan. By pure chance this star became something of a cult phenomenon in Japan in the late 1990s.

2. Rajnikant’s “superstardom”

Rajnikant is the most famous living example of a type of stardom prevalent in south Indian film industries that is characterized the star’s total control over all aspects of filmmaking, absolute centrality to the narrative and also film publicity. South Indian industries have their common origin in colonial Madras, which continued to house them after national independence (1947) and the linguistic reorganization of the Indian states (1956). Formation of linguistic states however created the conditions for the relocation of non-Tamil industries. The crucial contribution of Madras as the common site for all south Indian industries, as film scholar M. Madhava Prasad (1999) points out, is that in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada industries film stars began to claim to be representatives of their respective linguistic communities. Interestingly, some of Tamil cinema’s biggest stars, including Rajnikant, are not native speakers of Tamil. Clearly, their representative mandate is a direct consequence of their film careers and not ethnic/linguistic origin.

This variety of stardom is the centre of massive off-screen mobilizations of organized fans. Rajnikant is reported to have 100,000 fans’ associations with a total membership of twenty million fans, mostly in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu (Subramanian and Bamzai 2010). Fans’ associations, of course, promote a star’s films but, in southern India, fans are known to have actively resisted deviations from their stars’ screen images. Furthermore, the stars themselves carefully nurture their on and off-screen images, avoiding roles that they perceive as diminishing their prestige.

Up until some years ago Rajnikant seemed to be following a path that had clear parallels with other south Indian stars of his stature, past and present. Like them he too excelled in the performance of a certain kind of role, acquired a large fan following and began to take an interest in politics.

The flip side of this model, however, is that such a star can only be cast in a familiar role and no other. To take a rather trivial example, these stars simply cannot die on the screen. When the south Indian megastar becomes an elephant in the living room, he becomes a politician. Paradoxically, the actor who cannot die on the screen because of the solidity of his image constantly refers back to his screen roles in politics. For two generations now major south India film stars have retired as politicians. The latest example is the Telugu actor Chiranjeevi who became the Minister of State for Tourism, Government of India in October 2012. Interestingly, the film careers of Telugu stars N.T. Rama Rao (NTR, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh) and Chiranjeevi, as indexed by the box office success of their films, actually improved when speculations about their political crossover began to circulate.

Unlike most other Indian male stars who confine themselves to a single industry, Tamil superstar Rajnikant is familiar to audiences across linguistic barriers. He acted in Telugu films in the early stages of his career, including one in which he co-starred with NTR (Tiger, Telugu, N. Ramesh, 1979). From the mid-1990s, Telugu dubbed versions of his Tamil films have outperformed most local productions in Andhra Pradesh—India’s largest market for films. Likewise, in Karnataka and Kerala, his films are listed among the biggest releases for the year in question. As a result of his earlier attempt (in the 1980s) to break into the pan-Indian market by featuring in Hindi language productions, Rajnikant emerged as one of the very few south Indian stars with a constituency beyond southern India. However, it was only with Sivaji (dir. Shankar 2007) that an attempt was made to position his vehicle for a genuinely all-India release, with simultaneous releases in Tamil, Telugu as well as Hindi. Multiple language versions are now the norm for imported films but it is only on rare occasions that Hindi films have competed with their south Indian counterparts
on equal terms. Likewise, prior to Sivaji it was unprecedented for south Indians films to be positioned as major releases in the Hindi film market.4 Enthiran, whose Hindi version was positioned at par with the biggest Hindi productions of the season, further consolidated Rajnikant’s position as India’s biggest box office draw in the domestic market.

Enthiran is in many ways an atypical Rajnikant vehicle. In spite of a business strategy that was similar to Sivaji, the film has virtually no use for the well-established screen-image of Rajnikant and casts the star in the double role of a geeky scientist as well as a robot that turns into the chief villain of the film. Underplayed in the film is the over-the-top style of the star and his trademark mannerisms. The key difference between this film’s deployment of the star and his other work is that here the star is not required to perform along expected lines. A second difference between this film and his earlier work is that the remuneration of the star—rumoured to be between 36 and 50 crore rupees—is considerably less than the production budget of the film. Over the past decade, a vast bulk of the production costs of the vehicles of both Rajnikant and Chiranjeevi was these stars’ salaries. The challenge before the star in this film therefore is not his ability to earn back the cost of renting him but to do more. This is, arguably, the inaugural moment for the emergence of a new model for Indian stars in general and south Indian superstars in particular.

Put a different way, the challenge is how the low value trap that cultural commodities fall into in certain markets—including India but elsewhere too as we shall see—can be avoided.

3. The B circuit revisited: a case study of The Host (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2006)5

Some years ago I proposed the term “B circuit” to refer to the lower rungs of distribution and exhibition in India: the thousands of single-screen cinema halls across the country and the hundreds of small distributors who feed them (Srinivas 2003). The B circuit has undergone a significant transformation in the past five years with the spread of digital projection and also the formation of powerful syndicates controlling several hundred screens, each through complicated lease agreements with owners of cinemas halls (Times News Network 2008). Nevertheless, this segment of the film market continues to survive and also depend on celluloid prints. Typically, the B circuit distributor acquires either cheap new films (including Indian and non-Indian films) or reruns. Most cinema halls available to such distributors are run down and have low ticket prices. The margins are so low that it is not economically viable for major players to operate at this level.

In spite of significant volumes and innovation aimed at localizing imported films, the activities in this segment of the market often do not return large revenues to the producer of the film in question. The B circuit’s innovative publicity campaigns and their ability to reach the last frontiers of the film market had, in the 1980s and 1990s, often resulted in fascinating local institutions and cultural forms inspired by imported films. These include schools for East Asian martial arts and indigenous action films.

The B circuit certainly illustrates the argument made by Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2003) about the noticeable mismatch between the cultural significance cinema and its status as a commodity of low economic value. Extending my earlier observations on the B circuit, let me now propose that the process of localization witnessed here is one which results in the devaluation of imported films as also their transformation into recognizable variants of the familiar. Distinction (in the sense of cultural superiority) is the most perceptible loss. Let me elaborate by focusing on a specific instance that involves a major South Korean film.

It is possible that some South Korean art films circulated in the late 1980s and 1990s in India as soft-porn films in the B circuit, but I have not come across any specific examples. The first commercial release of a Korean film in the past decade is likely to have been Arahan (dir. Ryu Seung-wan, 2004). The Telugu version of the film was released theatrically in Andhra Pradesh as Kung fu Veerulu (Kung Fu Heroes, see Figures 1a, 1b and 2) one year after
the airing of the English and Hindi versions on television. Little is known about the box office performance of *Arahan* in India. Staff of the film’s Secunderabad distributor, whom this author met, were not even aware that it was a Korean film.

In 2007, another Korean film *Tube* (dir. Baek Woon-hak, 2003) was released in Telugu as *Action Veerudu 117* (i.e. *Action Hero 117*). The Manager of Sri Saiappa Film Distributors, who was one of the distributors of this film said *Tube* did not do well commercially. The Indian release of *The Host* through a Chennai-based distributor was, going by the information that I have been able to gather, in all likelihood the third commercial release of a Korean film in this country during recent years. I would like to discuss the fate of this film in some detail to flag the state of affairs in low-value markets. A useful point of comparison and contrast to *The Host*’s misadventures in the Indian market is the high visibility of the Korean Wave in East Asia. Researchers have noted that Korean film and television stars have acquired a considerable transnational appeal and *distinction* (see for example the discussion of the Korean television star Song Seung-Heon’s transnational popularity in Tsai [2007]). *The Host* did not feature major Korean stars but in any case neither the distributors nor viewers in

![Figure 1a, 1b. Posters of the Telugu language version of the South Korean film *Arahan*, released as *Kung fu Veerulu*, at the distributor’s office in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh (Photographs by the author, 2008).](image1)

![Figure 2. Hindi version of *Arahan* on Star Plus with crawlers of a Hindi tele-serial aired by the channel (24 February 2008).](image2)
this segment of the market knew anything about Korean stars. In other words, unlike locally produced films, stars did not contribute to the promotion of Korean films.

Contrary to the unremarkable local releases of *Arahan* and *Tube*, *The Host* was slated for an impressive release in May 2007 and meant to announce the arrival of the Korean blockbuster into India. The preview of the film was suitably marked by its symbolic significance with InKo Centre Chennai, dedicated to Indo-Korean cooperation and exchange, and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, New Delhi supporting the event.

*The Host* becomes a particularly good vantage point for understanding the problem of value when we juxtapose the film’s own aesthetic and political ambitions and the institutional CV of its Indian importer-distributor. Indo Overseas Films who brought the film to India is among the country’s largest and most experienced importers of Hong Kong and other Asian films. Indo Overseas Films was established by a Non-Resident India (NRI) who was an exporter of seafood. In 1984 the company began to distribute films imported by the state-owned National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), which became the channelling agency for imported films in 1980.6 In 1990, when the government relaxed import regulations, the company began importing films directly with foreign exchange earned from its seafood exports. The company released a number of Jackie Chan hits in the past and Thai blockbusters more recently. The segment of the film industry that Indo Overseas Films has traditionally presided over and continues to have privileged access to is the Indian B circuit. But the B circuit today is struggling for survival. This is due to increasing running costs, reduced ticket sales and emergence of alternative sites for film exhibition: the high-end multiplex on the one hand and syndicated chains of single-screen cinemas controlled by corporate players on the other. One of its survival strategies in the B circuit has been to trade in the cheapest films money can buy so that even the most decrepit of cinema halls can hire prints to keep themselves in business.

*The Host* was, in effect, landing at the heart of the crumbling world of pure celluloid and the business practices that characterize it: there is no chance here of any sources of revenue but ticket sales, no product tie-ins, no promotions on satellite television either. In this domain, unpolluted by corporate capital and logic, films are traded like perishable commodities and change hands a number of times before they reach the consumer. They are adulterated (or rather spiked) with spliced footage from other films and shown in run-down cinema halls that cannot afford the big-budget Indian or Hollywood films.

Indo Overseas’ strategy was to launch a high visibility publicity campaign, underwritten by Korean corporate giants operating in India, to mark the official arrival of Korean cinema in India. In theory, this was a brilliant strategy because it sought to offset the twin disadvantages of independent distribution, with the implication that most desirable theatres would not be accessible to the film, as well as introducing the product of an unfamiliar industry with the help of familiar brands, framing the former as an extension of the latter. The lower rungs of the film trade had no idea that Korea had a thriving film industry. Furthermore, Indo Overseas sought to upscale the product through a corporate funded publicity campaign, knowing full well that the film would not recover high publicity costs through its box office collections. However, Korean corporations approached by the importer refused to be part of the campaign. Had the Indo Overseas Films strategy worked, *The Host* could well have been positioned very differently in the Indian market and is likely to have had a release in the “Class A” cinemas and multiplexes, at least in some of the major cities. As it turned out, the film failed to enter this segment of exhibition in Andhra Pradesh.

Contrary to the initial announcements, there was no grand all-India release of the film either in May 2007 or in the months to come. According to Ganesh of Indo Overseas Films, the film’s release was postponed due to the non-availability of cinema halls, which had been block-booked for a series of major summer releases, including the Rajnikant starrer *Sivaji*. This, however, is not the only reason for the delay in the release of the film.
The pre-release history of the film offers valuable insights into the way in which distribution networks function in India (Figures 3-5, photographs by the author).

The major thrust of the initial publicity handouts, around the time of the first trade preview for *The Host*, was to highlight the film’s distinctiveness and differentiate it from Hollywood creature films. The press kit issued by the distributor Vishnupriya Enterprises who initially bid for exhibition rights in Andhra Pradesh and later surrendered them due to lack of interest by exhibitors, contained a lot of material compiled by the importer, Indo Overseas Films. The kit had English language reviews and other write-ups of the film gathered from various sources and included reviews of the film downloaded from the internet and also, interestingly, photocopies of articles published in the *Korean Film Observatory* and InKo Centre’s newsletter *Focus*. Hollywood was a constant referent in the texts assembled for the press but not necessarily as a model. The English language poster of the film that was bundled in the kit states the visual effects are “by the creators of *Superman Returns*…”. Simultaneously, there was also a conscious effort to distance the film from Hollywood productions, which might draw comparison with this film (other creature films, for example).
The press kit foregrounded the commercial success of the film in South Korea and also the critical appreciation of the film internationally. It also contained two Telugu language flyers: a synopsis of the film and a write-up on the distinctiveness of the film. Both appear to be translations of material originally produced in English, possibly by Indo Overseas Films. The latter document introduces the earlier work of the director, lists the awards won by this film, and so on. It also contrasts The Host with Hollywood films such as Godzilla (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1998). We are told in one of the handouts that The Host revolves around ordinary workers and middle class folk and their problems, while Godzilla and other Hollywood productions are woven around scientists, army officials and political leaders (all presumably extraordinary people, unrelated to the common man). The same flyer also states that this film would be of great interest to Indian audiences, aesthetically and politically. The film’s director, it is argued, is as talented as Shankar (director of Enthiran) and Mani Rathnam (another south Indian director). The film contains thrilling scenes featuring the monster but is in fact meant for family audiences (an important audience category for the Indian film industry which is presumed to prefer “clean” films without sex and violence). Indeed it contains the right kind of “sentiment” (melodramatic sequences centred on hardships that befall loved ones) for such audiences. Politically, we are told, it exposes the domination of powerful countries over smaller/weaker countries.

The one liberty that the Telugu advertisements of the distributor took, and thereby departed from the thrust of the press-kit materials, was to insert the line (in English): “It’s Steven Spielberg’s Jaws via Jurassic Park” and the Telugu phrase, “Papam Pasidi” (pitiable/poor little girl). The name of the film appeared in both English and Telugu as The Host and Host respectively. The original design of the English posters, revealing only the monster’s tail and no other part of its body, was retained. Much was to change by the time the second preview of the film was announced (Figures 6–8).

Advertisements announcing the second preview only gave the cell phone number of the new distributor and but did not reveal his name. This second set of advertisements recalls the characteristic modes of publicity adopted by B circuit distributors of imported films from the late 1990s. In this genre of film advertising, premium is given to repositioning the import in and for the B circuit of the local market, no matter what its content or place of origin. This is achieved by taking liberties with the original and transforming it to fit into available frames of intelligibility. In the case of The Host, it was effectively transformed into a low-end Hollywood style creature film. All attempts that the film itself makes to underscore its own distinction vis-à-vis imitation Hollywood films were totally lost in the process.

The film now had a Telugu title: Bhetala Samudramlo Vichitra Jantuvu (which translates as “Strange Creature in the Ghostly Sea”). As pointed out above, the initial publicity of the film refrained from close-ups of the creature. But now the iconic image of the monster’s tail in the original designs was replaced by a composite image in garish colours, crammed with people and objects. In one set of advertisements the monster could be seen holding a speedboat with its claws. The details thus promised a variety of thrills associated with the creature film. Most importantly, unlike the original publicity design, the monster was now shown in detail and occupied a third of the frame.

The film had been effectively transformed into a B film, making precisely the kind obvious comparisons to Godzilla and King Kong (dir. Peter Jackson, 2005) that Vishnupriya Enterprises had sought to avoid.

Although no official figures were released by the importer, investigations revealed that the film failed commercially in all the four territories whose distributors could be contacted.

Given the conditions under which The Host circulated in India, what possible distinction can Korean films claim to set themselves apart from other imports? What economic value can be realized by the Korean film industry from the Indian market? Most importantly, what is
the qualitative difference between piracy and legal trade in the Indian B circuit for the South Korean film industry?

New work on the circulation of imported cultural commodities in India—the Korean Wave in particular—allows us to note that localization and leakage of value are general conditions of what we may for the sake of convenience call Track II Globalization. Neither controlled from the production centre nor limited to legal channels of distribution, cultural commodities that travel far and wide are transformed almost beyond recognition and are drawn into highly context specific political and social contests that have nothing to do with the context of production (see Neikolie Kuotsu’s essay in this issue). The range of meanings that these commodities generate stands out in stark contrast to their low economic value.

Figure 6 (left). Press Kit issued by Vishnupriya Enterprises (2007 August).
Figure 7 (top right). Vishnupriya Enterprises’ advertisement for the first Telugu preview of the film (Andhra Jyothi, August 15, 2007).
Figure 8 (bottom right). Announcement that the film would be released on December 28th as Bhetala Samudramlo Vichitra Jantuvu (Andhra Jyothi, August 19, 2007). The actual release was a week later.

The erasure of distinction: Evolution of The Host into Bhetala Samudramlo Vichitra Jantuvu (“Strange Creature in the Ghostly Sea”).
Brian Larkin’s (1997) study of Indian cinema and its Nigerian audiences allows us to see that the fate of Korean popular culture in India has parallels with the localization of Indian cinema in Nigeria. Larkin shows how Indian films had a large constituency and, more importantly, spawned new genres of popular literature and inspired video film production in Hausa language. Evidently, the gap between cultural visibility and economic worth is a truly global problem.

In 2001, Indian importers of Hong Kong films paid US$15,000–30,000 per film to the producers. This figure was considerably less than the US$50,000 that Hong Kong producers got from the much smaller Taiwanese market during this period. The Indian market has historically posed a problem for non-Indian film industries that intend to tap it. As we have seen with The Host, the creative inputs by distributors, while eroding the distinction of a film, do not necessarily translate into economic value addition for the exporters/producers of films. Hong Kong, South Korean and Japanese players have more or less given up on the Indian film market. Japanese content industry now looks to Indian television rather than cinema as a potential market.

Among the reasons for the modest revenues accruing from the Indian market is the low price, of cinema hall tickets as well as other entertainment content on optical disc formats (CD/DVD), in comparison with North America, Europe and Japan. The attractiveness of Japan for exporters of entertainment is that content is considerably more expensive than most other Asian markets. Japan, with its high ticket prices and steep video rentals (370 yen per day and 650 yen for a week in Tsutaya in Tokyo) is a lucrative market to those who can tap it. Average ticket prices are reportedly US$0.69 in India as against US$4.34 in China and US$7.89 in the USA (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2011, 59). Whereas the price of a feature film on DVD format can be as low as Rs.50 in India, the cheapest CDs/DVDs this author was able to find in Tokyo in 2010 were priced at 1500 yen (more than Rs.750)

Since the 1990s, all major film industries of Asia, with the exception of India, made plans for accessing the Japanese market. The foray made by Indian film industries into Japan was largely confined to about a decade (1998–2009) and was made possible by the success of Rajnikant’s Muthu (dir. K.S. Ravikumar, 1995, Japanese release 1998). The period roughly coincides with the rise of the multiplex in India and also the decline of the traditional distribution and exhibition sectors in India (see Hill and Athique’s essay on the multiplex in this issue). As for the film business, there was a reduced visibility of Hong Kong productions. Hollywood persisted with its attempts to tap the Indian market and registered modest but significant gains. Notwithstanding the inroads made by Hollywood, the gross output (i.e. aggregate revenues of all companies involved) of all international film industries in the Indian market reportedly stands at around US$108 million. Although this appears to be substantial, it is less than 1% of the takings of the Indian film industry, which was estimated to be US$2,709 million in the same year (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2010). Hollywood increased its revenues from three billion rupees in 2009 to four billion rupees in 2010. However, and this also indexes of the importance of being Rajnikant, Enthiran’s takings alone were estimated at 3.75 billion rupees in 2010 by the same source (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2011, 64). If these computations are accurate, we can safely conclude that Rajnikant single-handedly took on the might of Hollywood. And thus we return to our Superstar.

Logically, given the cost of entertainment in Japan, an entry into the Japanese market should enable Indian culture industries escape the low value trap of the domestic as well as also other South Asian, African and Eurasian markets (in particular countries that were once a part of the Soviet Union)—where Indian cinema reaches large audiences but returns almost nothing to the production sector back home. It is altogether another matter that neither Rajnikant himself nor the rest of the Indian film industry had any plans for Japan prior to the discovery of Muthu by an enterprising Japanese film buff.
4. Maharaja and Elephants

Rajnikant’s arrival in Japan—which briefly opened up the Japanese market for Tamil, Hindi and Telugu films in that country—was largely a result of “pull factors” at the Japan end and not any conscious strategy on the part of the Indian players involved. During the years of the “bubble economy” in the 1980s and 1990s there was a boom in Japan’s mini-theatres screening a wide range of international films. According to the Japanese film scholar Yoshiharu Tezuka, new methods of film distribution pioneered by Masato Hara and his company Herald Ace “promoted a particular kind of film that came to signify difference in comparison to film produced by both Hollywood and the Japanese majors” (Tezuka 2012, 82). The audience targeted by Masato Hara was constituted by “Office Ladies,” a new category of workers with high disposable incomes “who were expected to work only till they got married and then became homemakers” (Tezuka 2012, 82). Tezuka goes on to point out that the mini-theatres were comfortable and designed to cater for an audience who had access to the highest disposable income and enjoyed the greatest amount of leisure time and who were actively seeking to mark these differences and enjoy the privileges it gave them access to.

This, argues Tezuka (2012, 85), was the moment of “banal cosmopolitanism,” characterized by consumption of “otherness” in the comfort of “culturally safe” spaces. I will note in passing that the demography of the Japanese mini-theatre’s audience is in marked contrast to that of Rajnikant’s south Indian fans who were the largely lower-middle class or poor and also overwhelmingly male.

_Muthu_ was released in Japan as _Muthu: The Dancing Maharaja_ and went on to become a super-hit. Although Kandasamy Bharathan of Kavithalaya ( _Muthu_’s production company) was credited by the Indian press with taking Rajnikant to Japan, it would be more accurate to say that it was the Japanese distributors who came knocking at Kavithalaya’s doors for the film. Evidently, the rising cosmopolitanism of Japanese film industry had created a context for the migration of “The Dancing Maharaja” by encouraging the setting up of distribution companies for foreign films (Tezuka 2012, 79).

Fumio Furuya8 a.k.a. Jun Edoki, President of Eden Entertainment Inc. is known in Japanese film circles as the man who introduced Rajnikant there. He says he chanced upon _Muthu_ in 1996 while on a private trip to Singapore. Edoki was an avid viewer of international films and a fan of Bruce Lee (he published a book on the star in 2010). Even he was “shocked” by a song, featuring unknown Indian stars and elephants, that was playing on a television set at a video store in Little India. At that point he knew nothing about Indian cinema, let alone Rajnikant. He bought the VHS tape, of _Muthu_ as it turned out, and went on to watch the film “hundreds of times” between 1996 and 1998, when the film was eventually released theatrically in Japan. In the intervening period Edoki, grew increasingly fascinated with the film. It did not have subtitles but—like the Nigerian viewers of Indian films who comprehended unsubtitle Hindu films so perfectly well that they claimed to Larkin (1997) that they even knew Hindi—he says he understood it fully. But he failed to convince film and video distributors to release _Muthu_ in Japan because they felt it was too risky a proportion. He eventually roped in a close friend from Japan Cinema Associates to finance the purchase of distribution rights of the film. He invested a part of the money and also took on the responsibility of promoting the film. The film was subjected to low-key promotion—mostly with the help of flyers, posters, plot synopsis and a theatrical trailer—for 8 months before its release in a 250 seat art-house theatre called Cinema Rise.

The film was indeed a huge success—Edoki reckons that it was perhaps the biggest hit in the history of Japan’s art-house (mini-theatre) circuit. It was a packed house at Cinema Rise for seven months. In all, seven prints of the film were exhibited in over 100 screens across
Japan. Edoki estimates that the film may have grossed up to 200 million yen (over 10 crore rupees) in Japan.

Film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2009, 74) argues provocatively in his book:

if Bharathan, the producer of Muthu...had been asked why this film proved a hit and no other, or how he suggested Rajnikant capitalize on this sudden popularity to stabilize an East Asian market for his next film and his future film career, he may have admitted that he had no idea why Muthu did so well in Tokyo or why Rajnikant’s subsequent films received virtually no release in Japan.

To be fair to Rajnikant and his Indian producer, there was an attempt to consolidate the Japanese market in the star’s Baba (dir. Suresh Krisna, 2002), which featured a Tamil speaking Japanese couple as characters in the film. Unfortunately, the film proved to be a box office disaster in India too, proving Rajadhyaksha right.

Returning to Muthu, this film was not initially promoted as a Rajnikant vehicle at all in Japan. Edoki, who felt the superstar in the film was unlikely to go down well with Japanese audiences, says jokingly, “To hide Rajnikant we placed Meena [the heroine] at the centre of the publicity [campaign].” The publicity for Muthu was centred on the female lead Meena. It was only in the wake of Muthu’s success that Rajnikant began to figure prominently in the publicity materials of his vehicles. Indian exotica were the USP of Muthu. Flyers of the film introduced the cast thus: “Starring Superstar Rajnikant ‘Muthu,’ Meena and Elephants”!

(see Figures 9–11).

Edoki promoted Muthu as a real (authentic) Indian film, one that showed an India that the Japanese audiences wanted to see but could not in the art-house films that were exhibited in Japan. Tamaki Matsuoka, Executive Committee Member, Indian International Film Festival

**Figure 9, 10 and 11.** (Left and middle) Cinema Rise brochure of Muthu and Yajman, the older Rajnikant vehicle released as Dancing Maharaja 2. (Right) Only after several of his films were released did Rajnikant finally become a saleable proposition in Japan. Seen here is an advertisement for Padayappa (K.S. Ravikumar 1999), presented as “Rajnikant’s new film.”
in Japan, the leading promoter of Indian cinema in Japan for some years now, shared with me an unpublished list of Indian films released in Japan which she herself prepared. This list indicates that 40 odd Indian films have been commercially released in Japan since 1954 (Matsuoka n.d.). Nevertheless, Edoki’s point holds: Matsuoka’s list makes it clear that most Indian films released in Japan were Bengali and Malayalam art-house films and moreover, there had never been a significant theatrical release of an Indian commercial film in Japan before Muthu.

Dozens of Indian films, mostly Tamil and Hindi but also a couple in Telugu, were released theatrically in Japan post-Muthu. Curiously, the market for Indian films disappeared almost as soon as it was created by Muthu. One possible reason could be that the India that was invoked by the promotion of Muthu and some of the later films was so deeply orientalist that few Indian films could in fact match the expectation of such high doses of exotica. No other Indian film released in Japan after Muthu can be termed a box office success. Later Rajnikant starrers too did not fare well. Sivaji was not even released. Edoki laments, “Muthu is history now. To distribute a new Indian film in Japan, we have to start from scratch again.” To make me appreciate the extent of the problem, Edoki took me on a guided tour of the Shibuya area’s outlet of the video rental chain Tsutaya. At the far end of the fifth of the seven floors of this enormous Tokyo store, all of Indian cinema—including films about India produced by non-Indian companies—sits on a single shelf right on top. It can only be accessed with the help of a stool (Figures 12 and 13, photographs by the author).

![Figure 12](image1.png) **Figure 12.** Unending shelves of audio and video materials in Tsutaya.

![Figure 13](image2.png) **Figure 13.** Edoki with a DVD of Muthu near the store’s Indian cinema collection, classified as “World Cinema.”

The release of Muthu coincided with the rapid increase in mini-theatres in Japan, which began to show an unprecedented variety of films from across the world. The opening of the Japanese market (from 1998) was also coeval with the “Bollywoodization” of Indian cinema (Rajadhyaksha 2003). Drawing on the work of Rajadhyaksha (2009), we can conceive of Bollywoodization as the process by which sections of the Indian film industry attempt to pull out of the low value trap by integrating the cinema into a much larger network of consumption that included fashion, food, music, and so on.

Indian cinema’s arrival in Japan was greeted enthusiastically by a band of loyal fans—numbering no more than 300 according to Edoki—who contributed to its promotion in unique ways. Two interesting entities spawned by Indian cinema in Japan are Namaste Bollywood and Contemporary Natyam Company. The first is a Japanese language monthly magazine that is entirely written and illustrated by its editor Sugeeta Kajuto. It is distributed free of cost through Indian restaurants, video stores, and so on. It faithfully updates readers about
the latest Hindi releases and other film news and has managed to survive in spite of the halt to Indian film releases in Japan. Contemporary Natyam Company, which offers training in Bollywood dance, was established by Kyoko Nobi a trained Bharatanatyam dancer. She has also written books on Indian cinema explaining complicated plotlines and providing brief biographical sketches of Indian stars (Figures 14 and 15).

We notice a striking parallel between the Japanese circulation of Indian cinema and the Indian B circuit: like the sphere of influence of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, Indian cinema in Japan has cultural offshoots in spite of its economic worthlessness. It sustains a vibrant fan culture—indeed a fan culture that is closely integrated with the activities of the Indian High Commission in Tokyo—but its impact on the market for Indian cinema has been insignificant.

Edoki and Park Byung Yang of Asia Films Co. Ltd, the other major distributor of Indian films in Japan, had a straightforward economic explanation for the failure of the Indian cinema to sustain itself in Japan. They estimate that at present the Japanese market is unlikely to fetch Indian producers more than about US$20,000. Japanese distributors who bought films at higher prices than this lost money. Few Indian producers are willing to make a long-term investment in Japan when the returns are so low. There have also been other problems that dissuaded distributors from doing business with their Indian counterparts: on one occasion, two distributors in Japan found themselves with different Indian language versions of the same film and sued each other. While the sale of language-specific rights is a valid and sound business practice in India, it makes no sense in Japan where the film would in any case be either dubbed or subtitled in Japanese.

As things stand, the Japanese market for Indian cinema is non-existent. The last Indian film released there was Chandni Chowk to China, co-produced by Warner Brothers and distributed by them, not any Indian player, internationally. The commercial failure of this film worldwide effectively ended the decade-long run of Indian films in Japan.

Nevertheless, the success of Muthu is constantly invoked by the Indian press. Indeed, Rajnikant’s producers have systematically propagated the lie that he remains a major phenomenon in Japan. Even in the run up to the release of Enthiran the production company executives went on record claiming that a Japanese release was planned although there was in fact no such plan at all—there was no listing of the film in Japanese cinemas till
the end of 2010, almost three full months after the “world-wide” release of the film. When a major Indian newspaper tracked down Nariko Inagaki, who calls herself the “first member of the official Ranjikant Fan Club in Tokyo”, for a story on the Rajnikant wave in Japan, she made a touching tribute to the Rajnikant wave a decade ago of which, alas, there are no traces at present. She concludes her essay by saying: “And every time I read about the ‘world release’ of a new Rajni film, I feel sad that Japan is not in that ‘world’” (Inagaki 2010). So much for the Rajnikant phenomenon in Japan.

Why then is Rajnikant’s success in Japan constantly evoked in India as a thing of the present, even by industry representatives who obviously know better? The most striking feature of the model of stardom that Rajnikant exemplifies, and which is also strongly associated with south Indian industries but is not limited to them, has to do with its externalities. The concept of externality is glossed over by Joseph Stiglitz (1999) as “unintended consequences” but I would like to use the term to conceptualize the all too visible socio-political spillovers of cultural commodities. Importantly, these activities may have economic value but at issue is the incapacity or inability of the star, property owner or production centre in question to capture this value.

In the low value market scenario, we notice a penumbra of social-cultural practices surrounding the cultural commodity but these do not return revenues to the producers of the commodity. Nobi’s dance school, Kajuto’s magazine and the tens of thousands of fans’ associations dedicated to Rajnikant back home in India are potentially positive externalities as far as box office collections are concerned. However, as we have seen, the first two did not have any significant long-term consequences for the profitability of Indian cinema in Japan. While fans in most parts of the world are seen as cash cows, the highly organized fans of south Indian stars are known to have boycotted films, thereby with a potential to affect box office collections negatively.

Often these practices around the cinema come across as instances of value leakage or acts of resistance. In some of the literature on popular culture, for example, externalities are misleadingly described as instances of resistance to and subversion of dominant culture, as if they are marked by a politics that is superior to the commodity’s own regressive politics. The discourse of resistance as a function of reading/consumption is traceable to the late 1980s when, among others, John Fiske (1989, 8) argued that popular culture “work[s] as an agent of destabilization or as a redistributor of the balance of social power toward the disempowered.” He went on to make an aggressive defence of popular culture, likening it to “guerrilla raids” on “Western patriarchal capitalism” (Fiske 1989, 12). In more recent times, the celebration of class war by other means has yielded place to the search for newer forms of progressive politics in the domain of the popular. Frederik Dhaenens (2012, 444), for instance, reads edits of mainstream and heteronormative soap operas by queer fans on YouTube as “illustrations of subversive practices within the popular.”

I suggest that that the so-called subversive practices that Cultural Studies of an earlier vintage foregrounded are straightforward externalities. Their importance lies not in their potential to bring capitalism to its knees. These practices flag the double constitution of the cultural commodity as a source of meaning/signification and economic value. The problem that Indian cinema highlights is the gap, indeed chasm, between the social and political significance of this institution and its incapacity to generate profits. The grey economies surrounding the cinema—from the black-marketing of film tickets outside theatres to cheap commodities named after individual films or stars – do not for the most part return profits or royalties to production companies or stars.

To generalize the condition beyond the Indian context, the challenge before the producer of cultural commodities in the low value market is the leveraging of externalities in order that value is generated—because the producer in any case does not have access to the ancillary economies surrounding the commodity. In the hypothetical scenario where Rajnikant fans use 100,000 gallons of milk to worship his images during a new film’s release, the producer
is neither in a position to make them buy branded milk nor have a tie up with a milk factory to supply them milk. Instead, he tries to ensure that the hysterical fan is adequately foregrounded as a potential revenue earner when he negotiates the price of distribution rights of his film. It is another matter altogether that fans might decide to boycott the film because they don’t like their star’s role in it.

By way of illustrating how externalities might be leveraged in the film business, let me draw attention to a controversy that broke out while the distribution rights of Enthiran’s Telugu version were being negotiated. A Hyderabad-based distributor announced in August 2010, about two months before the official release, that he had bought the Telugu rights of Enthiran for Rs.30 crore (Galatta 2010). Sun Pictures responded by announcing that the rights had not yet been sold and soon made the sale to another distributor for a reported Rs.27 crore (Anon 2010). The first claimant then produced documents stating that he had paid Sun Pictures an advance of Rs.2 crore out of a total of 27 crores (not 30 as he himself had claimed). He then went to court against Sun Pictures while the latter filed police complaints against two of their own employees on the charge that they represented the company without proper authorization. Throughout this controversy, the lack of disclosure and the impossibility of verifying any of the claims made by the players involved were striking. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that the business model that is propped up by south Indian stars like Rajnikant is centred on speculation at multiple levels. The key survival strategy is risk distribution. The producer recovers his investment not by ticket sales but the pre-sale of rights to distributors. The distributor in turn sells the film to smaller distributors or forms syndicates with other distributors and also collects advances from cinema hall owners. A good part of the business is wrapped up before the film is released. Understandably, developments in the Japanese market do not directly affect any of the local players.

But of course they do, because the entire business model is predicated on valuations of stars as also the technical personnel associated with the film. In fact the film’s director and music director, respectively Shankar and A.R. Rahman, are non-actor stars in their own right. “News” or rumours about stars are aimed as much at potential investors/buyers of the film’s rights as viewers. Since distributors do not have the opportunity to see the film before making their investment, the past achievements of Rajnikant and other stars of the film, and the multiplier effect of combining two or more stars, is the methodology by which the potential worth of the film is arrived at.

The Japan episode in Rajnikant’s career is of continued relevance for the market valuation of this star. As recently as 2012, there was yet another round of news/rumours that the next Rajnikant film Kochadaiiyaan will have a “world” premiere in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Tokyo (Jha 2012). The star and the film’s female lead, Deepika Padukone, were to be present for the event. Gossip columnists were even speculating whether Padukone would speak in Japanese during the event (Payak 2012). No doubt this is pure hype and its exact contribution to the valuation of the star or the extent to which the discounting of the star’s success in Japan will affect his career in future is not clear. On the other hand, there may well be a Tokyo premier of the film. My attempt is not to quantify the impact of such an event so much as to draw attention to the model “back home” that props up an expensive production. For all we know Rajnikant couldn’t care less about reviving his Japanese market as long as his worth in the domestic market continues to increase on the strength of the rumours of his popularity there.

5. Conclusion

Anne Ciecko argues that a new kind of (male) film star is on the rise across film industries in Asia. Unlike the Hollywood star, this category of Asian star she argues “is always more than a movie star, or (in compound terms) a movie star and more” (Ciecko 2004, 188, emphasis
added). Ciecko draws on Brian Gallagher’s (1997) distinction between pure stardom (film work alone accounts for celebrity status) and impure stardom (work in other media), to contend that Asian stars are necessarily impure. These are “telegenic” stars that cross over to television, have a significant web presence and frequently feature in advertisement campaigns of popular brands to extend their constituencies, and sources of income. Ciecko’s discussion echoes Rajadhyaksha’s argument on Bollywoodization: as cinema moves beyond celluloid, its stars too become available for deployment across multiple media and entertainment forms. In spite of his stunning if short-lived success in Japan, Rajnikant is hardly the kind of Asian star Ciecko has in mind. On the contrary, he is as pure a movie a star as there can be. His immobility marks him out as the perfect representative of the cinema’s (in) capacities in India.

The Rajnikant model of stardom is quite unlike the standard Hollywood model on which Anita Elberse (2007) elaborates. Elberse’s study confirmed the theory that Hollywood stars’ contribution to a project is limited to the generation of additional revenue that is more or less equal to their fees. For this reason perhaps, casting a major star does not enhance the stock market valuation of the entertainment companies that make the films in question. A star such as Rajnikant does much more than recover the rent of his own body. He anchors the project and becomes the reason why investments are made in it. The irreplaceability of the star is also textually manifested in his films, which offer him as the most important source of the spectator’s pleasure. As I pointed out earlier, Enthiran does not have Rajnikant perform over the top gestures to the camera. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the star himself is central to the film. What is fascinating about Enthiran is the manner in which it gestures towards another economic-aesthetic model, by way of intertextual references during the elaborate climax to science fiction and creature films. Those genres feature expensively produced virtual beings, which replace stars as the chief attraction of a film. Interestingly, there is

![Figure 16, 17. Enthiran’s quotation of the Hollywood Transformers series of films and Korean D-War: creatures made of thousands of robots in the likeness of the scientist hero played by Rajnikant.](image)
even a reference to the Korean creature film *D-War* (dir. Hyung-rae Shim, 2007), released in India after *The Host*. However, it is quite literally the figure of Rajnikant that takes the form of the creature as the robot is replicated endlessly: as if the latest technology is only an embellishment of the star and not a replacement (Figures 16 and 17).

The economic and aesthetic model that Rajnikant is the prime exemplar of is no doubt bound to run aground in a film viewing context that is unaware of the star’s stature. But the *Muthu* story is symptomatic of the larger problem: the economics of Rajnikant’s stardom is a delicate balance between actual earnings and pure externalities. Neither fully determines or subsumes the other. The star’s value resides in his ability to straddle both economic and non-economic domains of his own circulation.

There is now an increasing body of evidence to suggest that a major challenge confronting culture industries in different parts of Asia is not so much the inability to circulate beyond well-established national or regional markets but the limited capacity to realize value from the newfound global circulation. Whether it is the Korean Wave in Northeast India or Japanese animation in France, the problem is the mismatch between *popularity* and *revenues*. Piracy has contributed to a phenomenal expansion of the consumer base of Asian, as well as non-Asian, cultural forms and their rising popularity in new contexts. There is also an explosion of cultural production in these contexts that is inspired by the encounter with (illegally) imported forms. The problem confronting policy makers and researchers alike is actually quite similar: what do we make of externalities produced by cultural commodities as they travel down the value chain and across the world?

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Notes

1. http://ibosnetwork.com/asp/topgrossersbyyear.asp?year=2010, visited on 8 May 2012.
2. For an overview of the corruption scandal involving SUN TV, see DNA India (2011).
3. For an account of organized fans in Tamil Nadu, see Dickey (1993). An examination of fan clubs, including a discussion of incidents related to opposition and even violent reaction to their star’s films and actions (political choices in particular) can also be found in Srinivas (2009, 3–69).
4. Prasad (2009) argues that *Sivaji* is also politically significant in that it flags Rajnikant’s shift away from the older model of south Indian stardom which facilitated large scale subaltern mobilization around the figure of the star.
5. This section is based on a report on the release of *The Host* in Andhra Pradesh by the author (Srinivas 2008).
6. The establishment of Indo Overseas Films was a direct consequence of the attempts made by the Government of India in the 1980s to reduce the control of Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) on the market for imported films in India. Government of India asked MPEAA to leave the country in September 1983. According to Pendakur, the reason may have been the discomfort of the Indian government over the repatriation of the earnings of MPEAA. Between September 1983 and April 1985, when a new agreement
was drawn up with MEPA, the association did not have an office in India (Pendakur 1985). It is no coincidence that this was the period during which Indo Overseas Films began to distribute imported films.

7. According to an industry report, gate collections of Hollywood films in the multiplex chain Cinemax had increased from 12% in 2009 to 14% of gate collections in 2010 (FICCI-KPMG 2011, 61).

8. Interviewed by the author in Tokyo, 13 July 2010.

9. Interviewed by the author in Tokyo on 3 July 2010.

10. See Srinivas (2009, 193–97) for a detailed discussion of risk management strategies of the Telugu film industry and how central the male star was to the entire business model.

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