

Surge of South

In conversation with
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Nitin: Before we start, it's important to underline that though it makes an interesting chatter on Twitter and on TV debates to pitch Hindi versus South, we basically are all a part of one big Indian film industry.

Ashish: I think it is true that while we (Hindi Industry) all still grappling with the disruption of the pandemic, South has certainly delivered much bigger hits in the recent times be it Pushpa, RRR, KGF2 and your own film, PS1. So how do you think that the Tamil, Telugu, Kannada industries have managed to navigate the post COVID world better than the Hindi industry?

Ashish: Movie making is about content creation. And probably what South has delivered better on the content and that's why these films have worked. When you talk about RRR, Pushpa, PS1, these are made by one of the finest filmmakers of India. While lot of these film were shot during the COVID period, they were planned for the world before COVID... so, it's just the delivery of content that has worked.

Nitin: Can you think of the style of working, where the South differentiates from the Hindi film industry specifically, specifically talking about the marketing budgets. I think the Tamil industry has a much better fix on it than the Hindi industry. So, any thoughts on that?

Ashish: In the South, clearly there are very few studios, so there's no competition. In fact, the Producer Associations' in the South are very closely knit and they have kind of formed systems that work well for the Producers. Films don't stretch beyond a time. So, even actors finish your film within those 40 or 60 days that are committed to you. The Directors are far more respected over there as Filmmakers, even by super stars. As at the end of the day, it is a Filmmaker's job for us to deliver a good film. Even in Hollywood, you see films like Avatar that comes out without a star because

the Filmmaker is so strong. Similarly, in South, the Filmmakers sometimes work with smaller stars and deliver bigger hits. So, it's more about the Filmmaker delivering you that great content at the relevant budget and with great marketing budget so that things don't balloon out of hand.

Nitin: While on the subject of stars, the South fandom is particularly fanatical and their loyalty is at a different level altogether. To what extent do you think that helps the business?

Ashish: That definitely helps, because in the South, your first weekend is guaranteed. You could plan that first weekend and at least your base budget is covered. And if a film does not open well, and if the word of mouth is not that good, then it really goes nowhere in today's times.

Nitin: Ashish, even we have had that level of fanatic fandom for, say, Mr. Bachchan or Dharam ji, but we don't see that anymore. Where do you think Hindi has lost out today?

Ashish: Well, it's a commercial business and everybody wants to make money. But finally, it's the actors who decide what they want to do, especially, when the times are good. But as an audience, I definitely miss out on that aura of seeing (the stars) what his latest look, his walk, how does he talk, except for the characters. But in that sense, Hindi actors all over the place. But in the South, actors are still very conscious about this. For e.g. when we were promoting PS1, they (stars) were very conscious of where to be seen and where not to be seen, that helps build that aura (for the audience)

Nitin: I remember growing up as a kid, even the biggest super stars from the South, would always play second and third leads in Hindi films, but now people in the Hindi audience is very acceptable. How do you think that has changed?

Ashish: That has changed over a period of time, business grew, the number of eyeballs that were watching the films grew, theaters grew. And most importantly, in the last 5-6 years, with COVID hitting us, watching more (films)

on OTT, we got used to watching dubbed content. So that entire barrier of language has broken, which has given the opportunity to the creators and the actor. The world for the South actors has really opened up. That's really helping the talent and the creators to take their content world over.

Nitin: Monetization model also has evolved over time. Can you elaborate?

Ashish: what really works for the South content is that there is a lot of demand for the Hindi dub version. Not only is there a market for the South, which is a core market, where most of them have great fan clubs and people want to watch the films. But beyond that, the market in the Hindi industry has opened up for them. You can release the South film in 5 languages now, which gives you a great access to global audiences who speak in those languages.

Nitin: So, while this growing market has been accepted in the Hindi belt, has it affected your own green lighting process? Do you evaluate crossover or Pan India hit, while green lighting projects now?

Ashish: Yes, absolutely. I mean you clearly know that all content does not travel. Let's be very practical about it. A lot of the content from south also has not traveled in Hindi because that was the typical commercial kind or what we call 'masala cinema' which you get to see in Hindi also. So, clearly it does not mean that every South film will do well in the north. But if the content differentiates itself from what the Hindi industry is doing or it has a big screen feel to it or uniqueness in terms of the content than (then it will do well) for e.g. The Kannada film, Kantara is very unique in its concept and it's very local. But for a person who's sitting in the north, it's something very new. In India, when you see such stories coming from a small, remote village of Karnataka, it's very fulfilling. These are the kind of stories that will take Indian content globally.

Nitin: taking a bit more macro view Despite the success of Mission

Impossible, Hollywood too is still recovering from the ravages of the Pandemic. The Hindi story is well known and even for the South industries, despite the few massive hits, the industries themselves are not in great shape. So how do you see the short to medium term outlook for the global theatrical business as a whole?

Ashish: Personally, I don't think the theatrical business is going anywhere. I think we have a certain core audience that does want to go to the theaters to watch films, especially in a country like India where probably the middle class has very little to do with their families except going to malls or theatres. Also, movies and especially songs have an integral role in our culture, in weddings and parties etc.

But globally, yes, there is a challenge. And I think the challenge is more due to this entire friction about OTT and theatrical. Part of this confusion was created during the Pandemic period as Studios also wanted to sell their film to OTT to get their investments back but due to that audience also lost their focus as films were coming on OTT within four weeks. But going forward, I think in the next 1-2 year, at least in India, the windowing will come back to its original eight weeks that we've been following for the Hindi industry and even globally, it will settle down to say what (films) should go to OTT directly and this is what they (audiences) should be paying for. So, at some point I think due to players like Dolby and IMAX etc. the Big Screen experience will kick in where you want to go to the theater just for that great experience.

Nitin: The ticket prices in the South are generally cheaper than at least the urban multiplex film experience. So how much of it a factor does you think?

Ashish: Ticket pricing definitely will help in getting volume and also to create the habit of people coming back to the theaters to watch films. I think it is also important to pull people out after COVID to come and watch films. On the other side, exhibitors have their own set of challenges because they are paying rents to the malls, the salaries are going



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up, inflation is hitting them. So, how do we bridge this gap? I don't think we have a clear-cut solution yet, but I think the think tanks are really thinking about it, what should that average ticket price be to get the audience and at the same time ensure that everybody is making money down the value chain.

Nitin: What is that one message you would like to give to the Hindi industry about what they should learn from the South and vice versa?

Ashish: Honestly, I'm too small to give a message to the Hindi industry or to the South industry. I think it's about focus, discipline and passion. Follow these three things and you will get your success. And even if you may fail at times, but sooner or later you will succeed.