

## Promoting Regional Cinema In India To Preserve Cultural Heritage - A Critical Analysis On Language Revitalization Efforts

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### Abstract

Cinema is relatable to people's lives in India or it wouldn't be wrong to say that cinema is an emotion to them. The 70mm screen gives an escape from the hustles and bustles of daily life and stress. Cinema gives liberty to cry, sing, laugh, and dance along. Films are made in every corner in India. Around 1800 films are made every year constantly in different languages and some are critically acclaimed across the nation and the world. Indian cinema makes world's biggest film industry with over 3.5 billion tickets sold in 2011 all over the world.

Indian films have wide exposure across Southeast Asia and realistic films reach all over the world, including Eastern Africa, North America, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Considering the number of films produced and people working in the film industry, Bollywood is considered one of the biggest film industries in the world. This study aims to discuss various regional film industries in India representing various Indian languages and recent efforts on language revitalization through regional films.

**Keywords:** regional cinema, Bollywood, cultural heritage, language revitalization, Indian films

### 1. Introduction

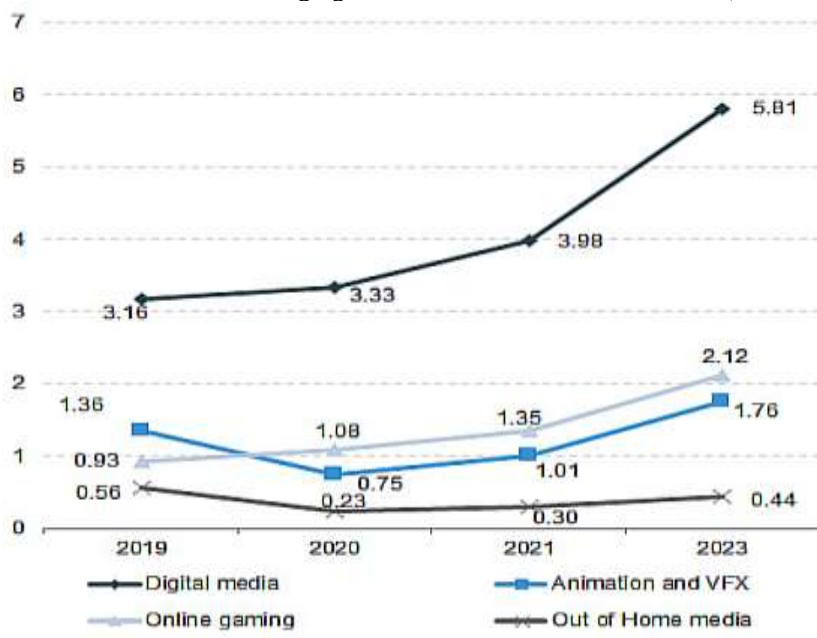
India is one of the largest countries in the world by area and is bounded by Arabian Sea on the Southwest, Indian Ocean on the south, and Bay of Bengal on the Southeast. With 9 Union Territories and 28 states, India has different languages and cultures. There are 122 major languages spoken in India and 1599 dialects, as per the "Census of India." Bollywood is the largest and oldest cinema industry in the world which has good reputation. Indian Cinema consists of 20 different languages representing various states and cultures.

The term "Bollywood" is misinterpreted with Indian cinema as a whole as it is related only to Hindi language films and shows filmed in Mumbai. There are various regional ventures all over the country in different languages. Some of the most popular regional film industries are Telugu (Tollywood), Tamil (Kollywood), Kannada (Sandalwood), Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Bhojpuri, and Malayalam, to name a few. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian cinema got its prominence across the world. Cinema has always been affordable and reachable to common people. Cinema portrays daily life and raises social issues through films for wider audience.

The Media and Entertainment (M&E) sector is growing rapidly and is a positive sign for the economy. The rising availability of cheap and superfast internet, increasing consumer incomes, purchasing power, etc. have drastically helped entertainment industry to grow (IBEF, 2023).

Figure 1 illustrates market size of emerging industries in Media & Entertainment (in US\$ billion).

**Figure 1** – Market size of Emerging Media & Entertainment Industries (US\$ billion)



Source – IBEF (2023)

Since independence, India has a lot of stories to share and has emerged as a young voice to tell. The cinema came out as a form of affordable entertainment and film industry met this need by producing several films to make a huge cultural impact on society. India kept on being world’s largest film producer. Several movies kept the audience engaged with fun dance numbers, soothing tunes, and impactful topics. People have different feelings and emotions like language and cultures. The film industry of India is so diverse as Indian culture. Indian cinema is made in various languages like Hindi, Telugu, Kanada, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Bhojpuri, etc. Indians mostly understand their regional languages. Every regional cinema is given a unique name like Punjabi (Pollywood), Malayalam (Mollywood), Telugu and Bengali (Tollywood), etc.

## 2. Literature Reviews

Technology plays a vital role in preserving a language but it is considered to be effective to interact and communicate with a language. People who speak Khroskyabs are supposed to show negative attitude for their language, especially when compared to dominant language “Mandarin” and regional and prestigious language “Tibetan.” The “Mother tongue Film on Mobile Social Media” project is aimed to boost “Khroskyabs language” in new domain amidst the speakers with the creation of range of videos in language and sharing the same on “WeChat” social media platform. The rising social media usage gives a platform for the use of language in modern context for “under-resourced and unrecognized languages.” Lhawa (2019) addressed those problems of negative behaviour and domain exclusion by producing digital and mobile data which can be shared conveniently and freely over social media platforms for people’s consumption in the community. Various languages and dialects are getting extinct eventually and rapidly because of different reasons like genocides, natural disasters, and cultural assimilations to globalization in this day and age. Various languages call for effort, time, and energy, and the process of revitalizing the same is a humongous task. One of the Malayalam dialects, Jasari is spoken by Lakshadweep natives and it is all set to extinct and the making of “Sinjar” film was aimed to rejuvenate this variety. Muhsina (2021) attempts to analyse the challenges, prospects, and impacts of this venture when it comes to translate culture and language to silver screen.

Media plays a vital role in bringing social and political change. They can also play a vital role in revitalization of minoritized or endangered language with proper implementation of language policies. Considering official documents related to broadcasting of Amazigh on Moroccan public TV and interviews with media practitioners and Amazigh experts, Belhiah et al. (2020) scrutinized the efforts in revitalizing Amazigh, the language spoken by pre-Arab people living in North Africa. Despite having changes in Amazigh’s status dramatically over the past two decades, its distribution is affected in public TV by economic, political, and logistic forces. It has implications for “language shift reversal, language revitalization, language planning, and language policy.”

Indigenous languages have constantly been endangered and threatened by imperialism and colonization. There is a lack of resources to learn and adopt indigenous languages, for example, lack of excellent or trained teachers. Materials following Western or external philosophies may not meet local community's needs. For the initiatives related to revitalization of indigenous language, the aim is to encourage the transmission of intergenerational language and use in various social platforms. Can technology usage help in revitalizing native language? From existing research, Meighan (2021) synthesized some of the important conclusions on the role of online approaches to revitalize indigenous language over the past 30 years since the beginning of the internet in the year 1989. The researcher has highlighted the contribution of content creators, indigenous communities, visionaries, and scholars on existing decolonization of online domain. Fjellgren & Huss (2019) focused on novel approaches to address the feeling of sadness and silence related to cultural and language loss related to indigenous contexts and often causing deep trauma. Due to two conventions of "Council of Europe" approved by Sweden, maintenance and revitalization of minority and indigenous language were covered in the commitment related to Human Rights in Sweden in the year 2000. In these fields, works have been done in 2010 to establish "Semi Language Centre" while assigning and finding new ways to ensure that all native languages would survive in Sweden and develop as national heritage.

## 2.1 Research Gap

Also known as "language revival," language revitalization refers to an attempt to reverse or stop the decline of any language or its extinction (Tsunoda, 2006; Pine & Turin, 2017). There are various parties involved in this attempt like linguistics, community, or cultural groups, or even governments. Some argue about the difference between "language revitalization (saving a dying language" and "language revival (renaissance of a language which became extinct without any native speakers)." India is culturally rich and diverse with various regional film industries. This study is an attempt to fill the knowledge gap about recent efforts made to preserve regional language through regional cinema in India and open further research directions on this path.

## 2.2 Research Objectives

- To discuss various regional film industries in India representing various Indian languages
- To suggest language revitalization through regional films

## 3. Research Methodology

With engaging storytelling and such diversity in cultural landscape, Indian cinema has come a long way in recent years. Significant growth of regional cinema has literally blurred the lines between languages which once affected the impact and reach of industry. Speaking of which, this study performs critical analysis on recent developments related to language revitalization through regional cinema in India. To fulfil this objective, this study is based on secondary data collected from various news articles and online sources.

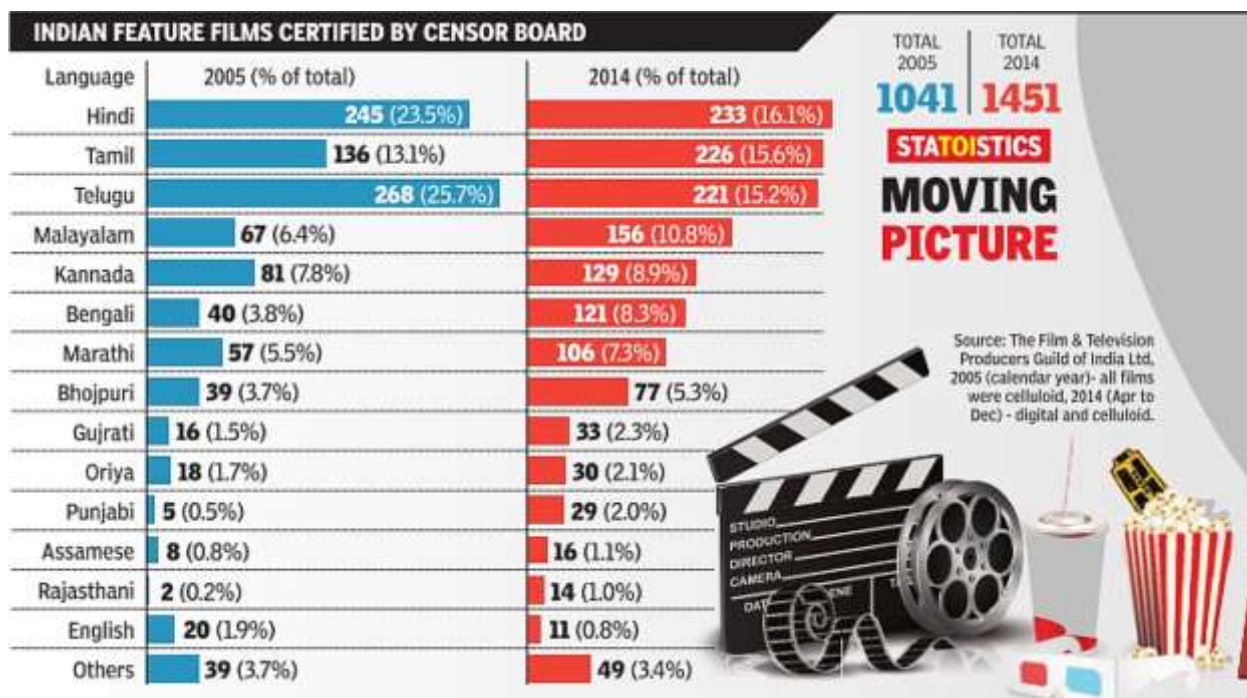
## 4. Analysis of Study

### 4.1. Regional Film Industries in India representing various Indian languages

Indian cinema contains films or motion pictures produced in India which has made a profound impact on global cinema since the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Suroor, 2012; Krishnan, 2021). Indian cinema also includes several regional film industries in India, including India's biggest film industry, Bollywood (Mukherjee & Joshi, 2021). Some of the major regional film production centres in India are Hyderabad, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bhubaneswar, Bangalore, Kochi, and Guwahati. Film industry in India has ranked world's first in terms of annual output over the years (Statista, 2023). Indian cinema grossed whopping Rs. 15,000 crores from the box office in 2022 alone (Jacob, 2023).

Over 1000 Indian films are certified by the Censor Board every year. There has been a significant rise in number of regional films along with Bollywood in recent years. Figure 2 highlights Indian films certified by the Censor Board from 2005 to 2014.

**Figure 2** – Censor Board Certified Indian Films from 2005 to 2014



Source – The Times of India

Indian cinema consists of multi-ethnic and multilingual film art. Hindi cinema collected 44% of revenue from the box office in 2019, followed by Tamil and Telugu industries (13% each), and Kannada and Malayalam industries (5% each) (Basuroy, 2023). Some of the other popular regional film industries are Punjabi, Bengali, Marathi, Odia, Bhojpuri, and Gujarati film industries. The combined South cinema revenue has crossed the same of Bollywood in 2022 (Financial Express, 2020). Telugu cinema led the revenue of box office in Indian cinema (Srivatsan, 2022). Indian cinema is a multi-billion dollar business and its films have appealed global audience and critical acclaim all around Southeast Asia. Regional films are also dubbed in multiple regional languages, making them Pan-India release. Since the beginning of Indian cinema in the year 1913, Bollywood became the top film industry in India. Regional film industries started giving tough competition in recent years (Ramachandran, 2022).

**4.1.1. Hindi (Bollywood)**

Hindi film industry or Bollywood is the most influential and biggest branch of Indian cinema (Parkar, 2015; De Bruyn & Bain, 2004). Hindi cinema is well regarded to explore cultural and caste issues in classics like “*Sujata* (1959) and *Acchut Kanya* (1936)” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998). Shakti Samant and Raj Kapoor brought international attention to Bollywood with their masterpieces *Aradhna* and *Awara*, respectively (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998). Indian cinema emerged during the 1990s by releasing over 215 films every year. The industry was covered well in magazines like *Stardust*, *Filmfare*, and *Cine Blitz* (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998).

Commercial cinema kept attracting audiences with films like “*Sachaa Jhutha* (1970), *Aradhana* (1969), *Anand* (1971), *Haathi Mere Saathi* (1971), *Amar Prem* (1972), *Kati Patang* (1971), *Daag* (1973), and *Dushman* (1972).” Hindi cinema witnessed thematic inaction by the early 1970s ruled by musical and romantic films (Ayaz, 2017). The industry was revived by screenwriter duo “Salim-Javed (Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar)” (Raj, 2009). They brought the genre of violent, gritty, crime films based on Bombay underworld like *Deewar* (1975) and *Zanjeer* (1973) (Ganti, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2015). They re-defined rural themes of Gunga Jumna and Mother India in urban perception showing the backdrop of India in the 1970s, which channelled the rising disillusionment and discontent among the public, unexpected rise of urban poverty and slums, crime, corruption, and anti-establishment agenda (Raj, 2009; Kumar, 2003; Mazumdar, 2007; Awaasthi, 2017).

Later on, Amitabh Bachchan emerged with the persona of “angry young man” with his stellar performance in *Gunga Jumna* and became the voice to the urban poor (Kumar, 2003; Mazumdar, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2015; Awaasthi, 2017). In the 1970s, Hindi cinema was renamed as Bollywood when the conventions of Hindi films produced in Bombay were established (Chaudhuri, 2015). The creation of masala films by Salim-Javed and Nasir Hussain combined the elements of romance, action, comedy, drama, musical, and melodrama (Joshi, 2017). The first quintessential Bollywood masala film of its kind was *Yaadon Ki Baarat* (1973) (Bhaumik, 2016). Amitabh Bachchan became the megastar of Bollywood by his masala films. Manmohan Desai’s *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) was another landmark to his career and this genre expanded further in the 1980s.

**4.1.2. Telugu cinema (Tollywood)**

It was originated for the first time in 1912, the period when silent films were made. In 1921, Raghupathi Venkaiah Naidu released the film “*Anusha Adusumalli*”. The sound films started being produced in 1931 and the first sound film was H.M. Reddy’s “*Bhakta Prahlada*”. In this day and age, Sankalp Reddy was probably the first to start Pan-India trend with “*Ghazi* (2017)” based on submarine war due to mysterious altercation between INS Karanj and PNS Ghazi during 1971’s Indo-Pak war (News18, 2018). Later on, S.S. Rajamouli came up with his epic *Baahubali* film series and *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017) bagged “Saturn Award for Best International Film” in the US (McNary, 2018; Sudhir, 2017). He created history again by launching “*RRR* (2022)” which received several global accolades, including the “Critics’ Choice Movie Award for Best Foreign Language Film” and Academy Award for the track “*Naatu Naatu*”.

#### 4.1.3. Tamil (Kollywood)

Chennai (previously Madras) was established by Tamil cinema as a secondary centre for film production in India for Bollywood, other South film industries, as well as Sri Lankan cinema (Ramakrishnan, 2020). Indian Tamil films gained global presence at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century by distributing a huge number of foreign theatres (193,194). The industry has also been an inspiration to independent filmmaking in Tamil diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia, and Western countries, and Sri Lanka (195). Tamil cinema earned huge patronage in Indian states like Maharashtra, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Delhi, and Gujarat. Films are released directly in Tamil in Karnataka and Kerala but they are usually dubbed in Telugu in Andhra Pradesh (Pillai, 2016). Tamil films were sent to Academy Award from India for “Best Foreign Language Film” category for 8 times. A.R. Rahaman, the legendary music composer based in Chennai, achieved global fame by winning two Academy Awards.

#### 4.1.4. Marathi

Marathi film industry is also based in Mumbai, Maharashtra. It is India’s oldest film industry. In 1912, Dadasaheb Phalke directed the first ever Marathi film “*Raja Harishchandra*”, which was a silent film having the whole Marathi cast and crew. Phalke made a lot of films based on Hindu mythology once this film became successful. Five years after Hollywood released the first ever sound film titled “*The Jazz Singer* (1927),” Marathi cinema released the first ever sound film “*Ayodhyecha Raja*” in 1932. V Shantaram made the first film in Eastman colour in Marathi “*Pinjara* (1972).” Movies were made on social issues and rural subjects with elements of humour and drama in 1960s and 70s. A lot of hit films were released by Sachin Pilgaonkar and M. Kothare in 1980s on comedy and thriller comedy genres. Laxmikant Berde and Ashok Saraf were starred in a lot of these films and became the top actors. Several hit movies were released in mid 2000s by the Marathi film industry (India Today, 2016; Bose, 2013; Goldsmith et al., 2016).

#### 4.1.5. Malayalam (Mollywood)

1980s was the Golden Age for Malayalam cinema thanks to filmmakers like G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shaji N. Karun, and T.V. Chandran (Kaitholil, 2008). Gopalakrishnan is also known as the spiritual heir of Ray (Gopalakrishnan, 1997). He was the director of some of the most popular films like *Elippathayam* (1981) which bagged the “Sutherland Trophy” at the “London Film Festival.” (Gopalakrishnan, 1997). Later on, *Drishyam* (2013) made by Jeethu Joseph was remade into four different Indian languages, including “*Drushyam* (2014) in Telugu, *Drishya* (2014) in Kannada, *Papanasam* (2015) in Tamil, and *Drishyam* (2015) in Hindi.” It became so popular that it was remade in Chinese as “*Sheep Without a Shepherd* (2019)” and in Sinhala as “*Dharmayuddhaya* (2017)” and even in Indonesian language (Kumar, 2020; Times of India, 2021).

#### 4.1.6. Kannada (Sandalwood)

Also called as “Chandanavana” or “Sandalwood”, Kannada cinema is another part of Indian cinema devoted to producing motion pictures in Kannada which is spoken widely in the state of Karnataka (Banerjee & Srivastava, 1988; Shenoy, 2010). The first sound film in Kannada was made in 1934 by Y.V. Rao “*Sati Sulochana*.” (Dhaan, 2006). Those films consist of adaptations of leading experimental films and literary works. In recent years, Prashanth Neel directed period action “*K.G.F.* (film series) in 2018 and 2022 based on “Kolar Gold Fields” (Mitra, 2018). The series is based on Rocky (played by Yash) aka Raja Krishnappa Bairya, a Mumbai-born mercenary who rose from poverty to rule of the Kolar Gold Fields in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the constant uprising as among the leading businessmen and gangsters of his time (Thanjavur, 2022; Asianet, 2022). The film series became cult classic and one of the highest-grossing Kannada films (India Today, 2019). In addition, Rishab Shetty starrer *Kantara* (2022) also received critical acclaim for beautifully portraying a native Ceremonial ritual, Bhoota Kola, which is prevalent in native tribes of coastal Karnataka (Joy, 2022).

### 4.2. Language Revitalization through Regional Films

There are different types and shapes of language revitalization efforts in practice. Students and children were some of the first language protestors who kept on speaking their languages in boarding and residential schools, despite having risk of psychological or corporal punishment, and also at home. Since the withdrawal of complete bans on speaking native languages in a lot of countries in public, some of them have been lifted in the past few decades (Bulcha, 1997; Anchimbe, 2006). Language revitalization efforts have now got support from councils. A lot of programs for language revitalization have support from NGOs, government organizations, and also non-government bodies (Pine & Turin, 2017).

India is such a diverse country with a lot of languages and cultures. Hence, Indian cinema is not all about Hindi and Bollywood films. It consists of regional language films like Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi and a lot more. Regional cinema has gained immense value in India in recent years as it plays a vital role to preserve culture and promote local talent and languages. Regional movies have achieved a lot of respect and traction due to their popularity in India and rise in quality productions.

Regional cinema has made a lot of contribution to the growth of social themes. These films constantly address specific topics and concerns, while improving their awareness and attention. Kannada film industry has brought crime thrillers like KGF which depict the impact of organized crime on society. Culture is a significant part of modern lifestyle of individuals. Cinema affects hopes, values, ideas, thinking, and views of people along with their loyalties. So, it is vital to understand and preserve regional cinema to make living standards stable. Cinema is a medium to share the cultures, rituals, and heritage of the country by directors or producers from generation to generation.

Regional films make significant contributions for language revitalization and cultural preservation in society as they provide a sense of identity, communication, lifestyle, dressing, and change the perception of generations in a positive manner. Hence, linguistic cinema is important to protect rituals and heritage. Cinema is mainly aimed to reach the social rituals, cause, and cultural heritage in an entertaining way.

## 5. Results

Bollywood films majorly got success and fame globally during the 1970s. The aura of onscreen characters of Dharmendra, Rajesh Khanna, Hema Malini, Amitabh Bachchan, Sanjeev Kumar, and other veteran actors had truly hypnotized and captivated the crowd. Manmohan Desai was one of the most popular filmmakers. He was also known as the “father of Masala films” by some people. Ramesh Sippy’s Sholay was a magnum opus of its time which got global attention, owing to which Amitabh Bachchan became the megastar. Similarly, regional film industry started from scratch.

J.F. Madan produced the first full-length film in Bengali “Nal Damyanti” in the year 1917. “Keechaka Vadham” was the first silent full-length film in Chennai by R. Nataraja Mudaliar. Mandakini was the first female child artist who acted as young Krishna in “Kaliya Mardan” in the year 1919 by Dadasaheb Phalke. The first ever Bengali talkie film was screened in 1931 “Jamai Shashthi” which was produced by “Madan Theatres Ltd. The first Tamil talkie film was “Kalidass” in Madras on October 31, 1931, and it was directed by H.M. Reddy. Along with South Indian and Bengali dialects, regional films were made in other languages like Punjabi, Oriya, Assamese, Marathi, etc.

Regional film industry has been around for over 100 years. However, there are still some states which are still untouched by makers. There is no special place for Himachal Pradesh over the past 100 years. The cause is still unknown but it might be because citizens of Himachal Pradesh don’t want to compromise on their cultural and traditional values. The first Himachal film which was released in the world over the history of 100 years was “*Saanjh*” in 2017. It was released in Pahaadi and Hindi languages in all states in India. It was released in Hindi as “Riston ki Samajh.” The film was directed and produced under the banner of “Silent Hills Studio” by Mr. Ajay Saklani in association with “Sharya Entertainment” and “PCU Films.”

## 6. Conclusion

India is a multi-linguistic and diverse country with various cultures, religions, art forms, beliefs, rituals, and festivals. India is well regarded for its rich art form and heritage, along with its modern modes of communication. In such communication mediums, Indian cinema has been top-ranked and effective medium. Over 4 films are released and produced every day on average. Regional cinema is not included in this figure. But regional films are the next strong and effective tool for communication. It is a strong instrument to preserve local languages, cultures, heritage, rites, and rituals of the masses and regions. Regional films also pass the languages and cultures generation after generation. These films are the mediums of communication to deliver social message.

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