

Keyword

---

## Region/Regional Cinema

BioScope  
12(1–2) 162–165, 2021  
© 2021 Screen South Asia Trust

Reprints and permissions:  
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india  
DOI: 10.1177/097492762111026055  
journals.sagepub.com/home/bio



**Ratheesh Radhakrishnan**

‘Region’ and its avatars including ‘regional cinema’ assume an overlap between language, culture and territory, linked to the mid-twentieth century emergence of language-based administrative units in India. In the field of cultural practice, including cinema, language forms the basis of thinking the ‘region’, following from the organisation of print publics in the subcontinent.

In the Indian context, ‘regional cinema’ is used as a marker of difference from Hindi cinema; the plural, ‘regional cinemas’ indicate diversity of national cinema. In the tradition of ‘national’ cinemas, ‘regional’ cinemas denote non-Hindi language cinemas, following models of nation formation, with language as *the* marker of difference. The difference is that the languages that constitute the regional exist in a hierarchical relationship with Hindi and English, disallowing its claim to nationhood in fullness. The aspiration for complete nationhood on the foundation of language has been a point of contention, most visibly in the case of Tamil Nadu. In contrast, as a term of analysis, it doesn’t yield sufficient results owing to its conceptual opacity. Firstly, it points to the continuing tensions in imagining a national cinema in India; secondly, it throws into relief the shaky foundations of and the fault lines ingrained in regional formations.

In the early decades of industrial consolidation of cinema till the late 1940s, the linguistic and cultural specificity of industries were not of grave concern (Hughes, 2010a; Radhakrishnan, 2015). ‘Regional cinema’, as a way of indicating a linguistic tapestry of practice within the Indian nation, came to be used with the restructuring of the film industries in accordance with the administrative reorganisation of states, but this took time. The consolidation of these new geographies of cinema was initiated in the late 1960s and early 1970s when capital flows centred on colonial presidency cities were re-channelised to urban centres of the post-independence linguistic regions. The significance of the relationship between princely states and cinematic cultures in this history has been less attended to (Krishna, 2019; Menon, 2009). The unexamined and seamless incorporation of industrial histories of princely states into that of the linguistic state papers over contested terrains of region formation and consequent reorganisation of the cinematic imaginary, and further its relationship with the ‘nation’.

Madras was the production centre for films not only in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam but also in Sinhala and Hindi. Hyderabad became the industrial

location of Telugu cinema by the turn of the 1970s (Srinivas, 2013). The shift of language cinemas out of Madras was often initiated by stars mapping language affiliations onto territorial units and using their symbolic capital to mobilise investments. These include Nageswara Rao for Telugu cinema, Raj Kumar for Kannada, Madhu for Malayalam and in the north, Dara Singh in Punjab. These moves had support from state governments who offered subsidies and awards to encourage relocation of production. Difference was founded not just on claims to cultural authenticity; in capital intensive industries as in Hyderabad and Madras big-budget star vehicles became markers of regional difference. The male stars, now identified exclusively with one language cinema, provided the symbolic power for narrative integration for 'regional' cinemas (Prasad, 2014). In less capital intensive industries, often aided by the state, such as Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Assamese and Oriya, claim to cultural authenticity was the key marker of difference. Aloor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli, Narsing Rao, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Jahnu Barua are exemplars of this strand of cinema where a desire for national culture was relocated on to linguistic regions, *a la* Satyajit Ray.

As mainstream Hindi cinema lays claim to a national territory as opposed to a regionally differentiated one, the engagements with regions in Hindi appears to take a different form, in the more *avant garde* articulations. Here, the region, constituted via a disjuncture between language and landscape became, among other registers, the ground for formal experimentation. Rajasthan (Bhaumik, 2011b) in Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972) and Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (1973), Kangra in Shahani's *Kasba* (1990) and Punjab in Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1969) are examples. Such practice had a few exponents working outside Hindi such as G. Aravindan, whose early films attempted a disarticulation of space and speech/language. A variant of such regional engagement, framed within radical politics of the 1970s and after, could be seen in the case of Calcutta in Mrinal Sen's films, Telangana in Goutam Ghose's *Maa Bhoomi* (Rajadhyaksha, 2009), rural Tamil Nadu, Kuttanad and Malabar in John Abraham's *Agarharathil Kazhuthai* (1977), *Cheriyachente Kroora Krithyangal* (1979) and *Amma Ariyan* (1986), respectively. In these films, the regional was a ground on which the aesthetic underpinnings of the national, as exemplified by not just Satyajit Ray but also mainstream Hindi cinema, were examined and challenged. These were the conditions for the emergence of regionally distinct parallel cinema by the late 1970s, institutionalised in the Indian Panorama of the International Film Festival of India and state television. The continuing exploration of these tendencies could be seen in filmmakers such as Anup Singh, Gurbinder Singh and Amit Dutta. Renewed interest in Ritwik Ghatak in the 1970s could be partially attributed to the new engagement with the regional, where Partition created regional imaginaries beyond the national borders, with water accruing significance, as opposed to land.

Within mainstream Hindi cinema, Anurag Kashyap's *Gulaal* (2009) opened up a different modality of thinking language, region and territory by incorporating with it the history of the princely state that haunts the modern nation state. This re-discovery of the 'regional' in Hindi was carried forward by Kashyap, deferring to Tamil cinema, as he engaged in new cartographies of northern India in his *Gangs of Wasseypur* Parts 1 and 2 (2012). This recent engagement of mainstream Hindi cinema, and via it the nation, with the 'regional' is occasioned by the emergence of new exhibition technologies such as streaming, the availability of subtitled content online and re-organised industrial linkages which were linked to film schools, production infrastructure in Mumbai

and Chennai, exhibition platforms such as film festivals, streaming and micro-release initiatives, renewed energy in film criticism on the internet and **social media** and the emergence of the curator as taste maker. The 'regional' (linguistically variegated, or generically, 'South Indian'), marking difference from national, has made a re-appearance. In these practices, the regional is but a differentiation within the imagination of the national.

It is only in the case of Tamil, and to some extent Telugu and Kannada, that 'region' appears to have been deployed, on occasion, to turn the tables on the 'national' by privileging linguistic identity (Pandian, 1992; Prasad, 2014). In Tamil, the charge of language politics was coupled with the concentration of production in Madras. Language cinemas in general have had little use for the term 'regional', except in such explicitly political contexts, or when enumerated by the national for awards/festivals. As mentioned earlier, in most 'regional' industries male stars provided the conditions for ideological suture in creating the semblance of an overlap between language, culture and territory, a formation that has been strained all along. This is a complex manoeuvre not only because of internal variations but also because these political units demographically extend via sea and land (South East Asia – Tamil, Persian Gulf – Malayalam, Mumbai – Bhojpuri), not to mention capital movement, legitimate and illegitimate (Hardy, 2015; Kumar, 2016; Kuotsu, 2013; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Velayutham, 2008). Complicating the picture is the dubbed circulation of 'South Indian' films on Hindi television channels. Popular cinema in most of the Indian languages, in its narrative and circulation, has taken on the burden of examining this confluence as its *raison d'être*. The impossibility of mapping territory, culture and language – the pulls and pressures of unification and difference, aggregation and disaggregation (Radhakrishnan, 2015) – has been one of its central concerns.

The constant mining of smaller geographies within the 'regional' – the conceptual space of the *pettai*, a place of individual belonging that is territorialised, in recent Tamil cinema (Vasudevan, 2017) or 'real' spaces such as Rayalaseema, Chambal, North Madras, Madurai, Hyderabad Old City, Fort Kochi... – presents us with another site for examining the tension between language, culture and territory as bound entities (Dickens, 2015; Krishnan, 2008; Srinivas, 2011). Films are being made in languages such as Brij, Maithili, Garo, Bodo, Wancho, Moran, Rajbangshi, Konyak, Dakhni, etc., in hitherto invisible cultural contexts and uncharted geographies, most spectacularly redrawing 'the North East'. Cultural exposure and scholarly engagement sees the emergence of new small-scale enterprise, the industry in Malegaon (Tiwary, 2015), Manbhum videos in Purulia (Mukherjee, 2016), Home cinema in Malabar (Karinkurayil, 2019; Menon & Sreekumar, 2016) to name a few. Cinema's exploration of regions outside the pale of national/regional imaginaries is underway. But we must remember that this tension had longer antecedents known to film historiography, be it the linguistic identity of the 'first Tamil talkie', the 1931 *Kalidas* (Hughes, 2010a), the disappearance of Urdu cinema from Bangladeshi film history and archives (Hoek, 2014a) or the post-restoration controversy that erupted in India around AJ Kardar's *Jago Hua Savera* (1959).

'Region' and 'regional' often tend to reproduce the pitfalls of national cinema imaginations. We need to recast it as a category that denotes an unstable and temporary territorialisation of geography around language, culture, questions of authenticity and proximity/distance from the nation. The imaginaries of popular

cinemas in India do not often conform to the pieties of dominant formations of the region. Instead, like the lovers in Nagaraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016) who elope from Marathwada to Hyderabad instead of to Mumbai as would be expected by those schooled in narrative traditions in Indian cinema, they defy the presidency geography in favour of a princely state geography. While the cinema of India/South Asia is an ideal site for engaging the ways nation-region histories are played out, this discussion might in fact be salient across film cultures. Can Gunasekhar's *Okkadu* (2003) and its use of star power to trace 'regional' encounters illuminate Robert Rodriguez's *Machete* (2010) and its 'regional' imaginaries? What would a juxtaposition of Haobam Paban Kumar's *Lady of the Lake* (2016), Giorgi Ovashvili's *Corn Island* (2014) and Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) tell us about inhabiting land and water in a bounded world?

As we await detailed histories of different language cinemas in India, the category of 'regional cinema' is best kept under erasure. Such histories will have to engage with cinema's entanglements with imaginations of the region where language, culture and territory aggregate and disaggregate.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Key Readings**

- Hughes, S. P. (2010). What is Tamil about Tamil cinema? *South Asian Popular Culture*, 8(3), 213–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2010.501540>
- Mukherjee, M. (2016). Toward a new frame for regional films: Manbhum videos and the other side of (Indian) cinema. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 7(1), 58–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927616635939>
- Prasad, M. M. (2014). *Cine-politics: Film stars and political existence in South India*. Orient Blackswan.