BECAUSE THE GIRLY MAN WON’T DANCE
Stars and the Blockbuster in South India

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MAY 25, 4pm SSMS 2135

Between them, the four film industries located in southern India produce more films and generate more box office revenues than their Bombay counterpart. They have thrown up generations of film stars with highly organized fan followings, enabling some to launch lasting political careers. Notwithstanding their considerable prestige and popularity, south Indian cinemas and stars have, for the most part, been characterized by their inability to break into larger markets. A few of them did achieve international recognition but primarily as found objects of either global cultural currents or remix artists looking for cool-weird material. Rajnikant became a sensation in Japan in 1998 as an epitome of authentic Indian exotica. Chiranjeevi, another major star who was also a government minister, has an embarrassing YouTube presence as the “Girly Man” in a video uploaded by the monogreen artist Buffalax.

In this talk I trace the origin and evolution of Tamil and Telugu blockbusters, which over the past two decades have successfully competed with the biggest Bollywood productions. The south Indian blockbuster is a response to complex economic and formal-aesthetic problems faced by south Indian film industries. The most important of these has had to do with the nature of stardom in the region. This blockbuster, as a variant of a global popular form assembled by entertainment industries across the world, is usefully situated at the cusp of developments that are highly localized and others that are beyond the control of local players but have fundamentally transformed production/consumption cultures in a relatively short period. These include recent technologies in more advanced industries, centralisation of theatrical exhibition and digitisation of projection, increased access to international cinema in digital formats and the rapid penetration of mobile internet.

S.V. Srinivas is a Professor at the School of Liberal Studies, Azim Premji University, Bangalore. He has worked on film stars and their fan clubs, the evolution of cinema as a political form, distribution, exhibition and consumption of imported films. His recent work has focused on the links between the consumption of moving images and political mobilizations. He is the author of Megastar (Oxford University Press, 2009) and Politics as Performance (Permanent Black, 2013). This talk is a part of the “Regional Blockbuster” project housed by the Azim Premji University.