

South Indian film directors discuss coronavirus impact on local movie industry

By Yuvan Darwin
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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sudden announcement of a three-week national lockdown, beginning on March 24, to combat COVID-19 has abruptly halted industries across the country. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been left jobless without any economic support.

The lockdown, which does not include any serious plan to assist millions of low-paid workers, has drastically impacted on the Indian film industry and its workforce, which largely subsists on daily wages.

Those hit by the crisis include assistant directors, artists, designers, location assistants, script supervisors, camera assistants, and lighting- and motion-control technicians. Daily wage workers in the film industry generally receive between 300 to 700 rupees (\$US9) per day, depending on their experience, and have no real possibility of accruing savings. Thousands of these workers are now unemployed.

The Indian film industry is one of the largest in the world in terms of the number of films released. It produces approximately 2,000 films every year across a range of languages and, according to the most recent statistics, employs over 248,000 people. Although its gross earnings are dwarfed by the US film industry, Indian studios earned over \$2.1 billion in 2017 with predictions that this would climb to \$3.7 billion by 2020. Millions of workers and young people patronise the country's tens of thousands of cinemas.

While Bollywood—the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai—dominates, South Indian studios make a major contribution to the country's annual cinematic output.

Tamil Nadu, the country's southernmost state, produces about 200 Tamil-language features annually which are distributed in numerous countries and regions, including Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Japan, the Middle East, Europe and North America. The state has 1,213 screens and 900 theatres and a total cinema seating capacity of

over 636,000.

WSWS reporter Yuvan Darwin interviewed three Tamil Nadu directors about the impact of the coronavirus on film making and the Modi government's sudden, and ill-planned, lockdown.

Dharani Rajendran, director of the award winning *Gnana Serukku* (2018), is an independent film maker. He has received several international awards for his work and has won recognition at film festivals in Venezuela, Miami, the UK and in Kolkata, India.

YD: Could you explain how the lockdown is affecting low-paid film industry workers?

DR: Many daily-wage film workers are sleeping with hungry stomachs and waking up with empty pockets. Those who have been able to return to their home towns may at least get food to eat and a place to sleep but we will only know whether they're alive or dead after the lockdown ends.

Many say that "nature is teaching humanity a lesson" but in reality this pandemic's greatest impact is on the poor and the oppressed. The rich can escape every disaster with the help of their money.

YD: Can you speak about what the lockdown has done to your latest film?

DR: I'd planned to release my latest film on March 20, 2020, but because of the lockdown it failed. My film is an independent and crowd-funded work and was produced with the help of friends and well-wishers. We've suffered a great loss because of the lockdown.

When the lockdown eventually ends and the theatres are reopened, the big producers with big capital backing will bring their films into the theatres and we will be crushed.

S.P.P. Bhaskaran is the founder of the Kovai Film Society (KFS) and director of *Insha Allah* (2019), a Tamil-language film. The 84-minute movie is a straightforward story about the life of blue collar working class Muslims. It attempts to undermine the stereotypes

created by Indian cinema which often demonises the Muslim community as violent and supporters of terrorism.

Insha Allah has been nominated for several awards and screened at many film festivals, including the Paraguay Independent Film Festival, the Accolade Global Film Competition, the 3rd Chambal International Film Festival and the Indian World Film Festival.

YD: What's been the economic impact of the coronavirus and the government response on filmmakers?

SB: All the small producers who borrowed from the big money lenders now face a suicidal situation. The big money lenders will start threatening the small producers and demand that they pay back these loans, and with high rate interests. We'd planned to complete and release our film this month [April 2020] but that has all failed because of the lockdown. Now my producer and I don't have any income.

YD: What's been the artistic and cultural impact?

SB: Because the media does not have any new television content during this lockdown, it is broadcasting repeats, that is, old material with feudal ideas. For example, Doordarshan, the central government channel, is screening serials about Hindu epic stories, like Ramayana and Mahabharatha, to indirectly promote the communalist agenda of Hindutva and the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu extremist organisation and the ideological mentor of the ruling Bharatiya Janatha Party].

I was inspired by Soviet Russia and studied the history of the October Revolution, but in 1991, I saw it dissolve in front of my eyes. Similarly, I now see the USA, which proclaims itself as the "world police," crumbling down. Its foundations are totally broken.

Director Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* [2011] contains scenes of food riots and other social explosions caused by hunger, death and people's uprisings. A similar situation will surely happen in India.

Lenin Bharathi is the director of *Merkku Thodarchi Malai* (2018), a Tamil-language movie about the harsh lives of landless plantation workers in the foothills of India's Western Ghats. Bharathi's widely-praised film has a raw narrative and unique and convincing characters. It was screened at the 21st International Film Festival of Kerala, Singapore's South Asian International Film Festival, the Chicago South Asian Film Festival and the Indian Film Festival in Toulouse, France.

YD: What's your opinion of the trade unions that claim to represent film workers?

LB: The trade unions in the film industry, who proclaim themselves as "left wingers," are consciously betraying workers. These unions receive monthly dues payments from these workers but only organise various "namesake" conferences and, under the banner of "bargaining," receive various privileges from the big producers.

Film industry car drivers are in the drivers' union but it does nothing for them. These drivers are being forced by the private banks to keep paying their loans even though they're in lockdown and cannot earn any money.

YD: Could you comment on the cultural impact of coronavirus and the lockdown?

LB: After the end of the Second World War, we had international films depicting the horrors of war and destruction. Genuine art always gives expression to the objective crises facing humanity and through its various aesthetic forms helps to develop a critical attitude towards these events.

YD: What do you think about the response of the Indian government and other governments to the pandemic?

LB: Capitalist governments are spending trillions of dollars to safeguard their borders but are completely neglecting public healthcare and welfare.

The US, which was once seen as the "world superpower," is now nakedly exposed. It doesn't even have ways to store or transport the dead COVID-19 victims to graveyards. Yet, the US has been waging wars for a quarter century and killing millions of people, all in the name of "freedom and democracy."

A huge eruption of working-class struggles will surely emerge around the world and left-wing ideas will come to dominate the minds of millions.

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