



## Subtitle Writing, or the Thankless Work of Making Indian Films Globally Accessible

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This video essay documents the creative contributions of English language subtitle writers for Indian films. It shows how the work of subtitling films is essential to the industry's continuing global success.

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### Creator's Statement

“Subtitle Writing, or the Thankless Work of Making Indian Films Globally Accessible” is a video essay that draws our attention to an area of film and media labor that has contributed immensely to Indian cinema’s supposedly rising global popularity. As the title of the essay indicates, it turns our attention to the creative work of subtitling. Building on the work of Tejaswini Ganti (2011) and Aswin Punathambekar (2013), it identifies two distinguishable stages (2000–2009 and 2009–present) of Indian cinema’s attempt at global expansion. It argues that the projected and speculative growth of Indian cinema’s overseas box office revenue post-2009 is closely associated with the rise of subtitle writing as a form of specialized film work in the Indian media industries.

Drawing from interviews with subtitle writers, the essay demonstrates that attempts at the sustained growth of Indian film Industry’s global presence was facilitated by the behind-the-scenes postproduction work of subtitle writers who worked hard to make these films accessible to a wider audience. The essay seeks to show how a small circle of creative workers based out of Bombay, Kochi, and Chennai pioneered this art of serious and skillful film translation which has since blossomed into an indispensable component of the contemporary Indian film industry. At the same time, it raises issues of wage theft, lack of recognition, and exploitative work conditions that are faced by the workers who create these subtitles. It pays particular attention to the affordances and networked configurations of the film and media industry within which they are employed.

For an area of film work that is relatively seamless and invisible, the audio-visual essay form becomes crucial in conveying the intricacies of a task involving the skilled weaving of textual translation onto a cinematic body. Audio-visual rhetorical strategies such as on-screen text highlighting and split screens help us pay attention to this aspect of filmmaking that we either overlook or take for granted. These strategies

compel us to closely look at the work of translating the foreign into the familiar. At its core, the essay grapples with the contradiction of invisible labor. Subtitle workers argue that for a subtitle to be a successful one, it must be invisible; i.e., subtitles ought not disrupt the *jouissance* of film viewing with its textual encroachments. On the one hand, the golden rule of subtitle writing entails that the audience must not realize they are watching the film by reading subtitles. On the other hand, since the audience does not take notice of the subtitles in a well-subtitled film, they fail to acknowledge and appreciate the hard work and skill that transpires to render the work of film translation a successful one. It is this ironic invisibility of subtitle work that the essay seeks to make visible.

### Works Cited

- Ganti, Tejaswini. 2012. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Duke University Press.
- Punathambekar, Aswin. 2013. *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry*. NYU Press.

### Biography

Suryansu Guha is a third year PhD student at the Cinema and Media Studies program in UCLA's Department of Film, TV and Digital Media. His areas of interest are media industry studies, labor/infrastructural theory, and South Asian film and media. He has previously published research in *Television and New Media* and has presented at a number of international conferences. He has been working on outsourced post-production and localization film labor for his doctoral research. He has two Master's degrees in English Literature and Critical Theory from Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi) in India.

### Review by Tejaswini Ganti, New York University

Translation is central to the global circulation of entertainment media as most films, television shows, and web-series are consumed in a translated form through dubbing or subtitling. With *Parasite's* Academy Award win and reported viewer displeasure over the subtitling of *Squid Game*, subtitles have gained prominence in recent media discussions about non-English language audiovisual content. Ironically, the people who carry out the labor—the “armies of translators” (Lobato 2019)—that enables such global circulation are frequently invisible, since an effective or successful subtitle, akin to “good editing,” should go unnoticed by viewers. Suryanshu Guha's video essay seeks to make visible this very important dimension of film labor and rightfully argues

that subtitling is a form of creative work, which has been essential to 21st century Indian cinema's "becoming global project." This project includes the increased visibility of mainstream Indian films in North American and European film festivals, their distribution by multinational theatrical chains, and filmmakers' search for new markets.

What is important about Guha's analysis is that he does not present the attention and care paid to subtitling since the 2010's as a phenomenon that happened out of the blue, but one that is closely tied to the transformed political economy of filmmaking in India once it received official industry status by the Indian state. Rather than a simple causal argument—after all Indian films were circulating globally for decades and managed to garner large audiences even without subtitles—Guha seeks to understand the forces and actors that led to a consistent use of subtitles and a focus on the quality of translation. He hones in on two main reasons: the corporatization of the Bombay film industry and the film festival circuit. As the distribution sector has traditionally been responsible for orchestrating a film's theatrical release, it is only after big entrants into the production and distribution sector such, as Reliance Entertainment, UTV/Disney, Viacom 18, and Fox Star, start buying the all-India and global rights for distribution that one starts to see a greater consistency and care lavished upon subtitling. The growing interest in mainstream Hindi cinema on the part of high prestige international film festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Venice, and Toronto illustrates how the film festival circuit has been an important catalyst for subtitling.

Guha's video essay is mainly focused on how Indian languages are subtitled into English, but since he interviewed many professionals who subtitle films from the southern Indian film industries, I was curious about the role of subtitles in facilitating the circulation of other Indian language films within India. The brief glimpses of the popularity of Hindi films in China also left me wondering about the labor, expertise, and institutions involved in those subtitling ventures. It is obvious that audiovisual translation is a rich and generative topic, and I commend Guha for providing us a glimpse into one dimension of this important and fascinating practice.

### **Works Cited**

Lobato, Ramon. 2019. *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. NYU Press.

### **Review by Sangita Gopal, University of Oregon**

This essay makes a significant intervention in discussions of media globalization by drawing attention to how this process is largely driven by high-quality subtitle work and yet in the global media industry that is his focus—Indian cinema—this class of

below-the-line labor still operates in a highly precarious and mutating environment with little to no recourse to regulatory infrastructure. Guha uses a variety of archival and ethnographic sources to show how subtitling works, what the special challenges are with regard to the special characteristics of Indian cinema, as well as the particular ecosystem of informal and reputation-based dynamics that structure the film industry. The case study on Netflix with which the essay ends adds a welcome layer of complexity to the industrial and cultural dynamics of globalization and localization.

This is a seminal contribution to the broad field of media industry studies and emerging global ecosystems of film labor with expanded relevance beyond India.

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