ABSTRACT

This thesis is both an exploration as well as investigation of the role of Junior Artistes in the Indian film industry. The primary objective of this research is to understand the working of the film industry at the micro-level at the bottom of the pyramid of the film industry. The spotlight here is on the Junior Artiste, who constitutes the largest, but least paid, least recognised casual work-force of the film industry. The study is an endeavour to document the work and social life of Junior Artistes, who are seen as mere bodies in the background, and also to understand how amidst all these social pressures and economic subjugation, the marginal artistes of the film industry are negotiating for agency, self-definition and a niche for themselves, within the social world of Indian film industry.

Studying the social history of Indian film industry by delineating the work life, unionisation of Junior Artistes in the context of the transition of film production practices, Linguistic Re-organisation of States and shifting of regional film industries into their respective language states, and the role of Unions in establishing a language-based film industry, along with exploring the synergy between cine-workers union and language-based film industry, is at the core of this research. The study also examines the nexus between - film labour unions, political parties and the world of crime, here the frame of reference being the significance of film industry in the political economy of the nation. This mammoth task is accomplished by close interpretations of narrative data. The self-representation in personal narratives despite subjectivity being embedded in it, provides us with rich primary data to write the social history of the film industry.

With the research based on the premise that casting and positioning of each screen artist in the frame is an indication of their status in the hierarchy of film industry, the study critically examines the intersectionality between acting and identity to show that Junior Artistes screen 'presence' is essential to constitute stardom. With film industry being vertically integrated with no written contracts, the study shows how workers and agents reduce risk using informal social networks, in addition to highlighting the important role of familial connections in these networks, and how the network also fosters inequality of access to work between workers at the centre of the networks and workers at the periphery of the networks. By interrogating
the political party initiated unions, the research shows how organising based on, ethnicity, language, region and hereditary creates vested interests in the form of socio-economic monopolies. The study ascertains that the history of unionization of Junior Artistes in Indian film industry challenges the reigning perception that producers and unions are unlikely partners.

The study examines the cultural production of the category called the Junior Artistes, through three investigative modes - political economy, textual analysis and ethnographic work. Using a multi-sited methodology appropriate to studying the phenomenon, this study employs ethnographic methods, including oral history and non participant-observation; along with analysis of media reports; and examination of production and film content analysis. The multi-site study includes four film industries - Chennai (Tamil film industry), Hyderabad (Telugu Film Industry), Bangalore and Mysore (Kannada film industry) and Mumbai (Hindi film industry). By re-connecting with film process, product and worker, the study shows the efficacy of interdisciplinary approaches for studying creative labour.

The Thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 documents film history from bottom up, with emphasis on structures and processes mediated by actors and agents. The Indian film history has been chronicled from various perspectives but rarely from the vantage point of film labour working at the lower strata of film industry, and this chapter is an attempt towards filling that void. Unlike the traditional methods of historical hermeneutics, the study adopts an analytical approach, to historicize the ordinary people, the structures and trends that have shaped their art and lives in the film industry, thus resurrecting what they said and did. The life histories of Junior Artistes illustrate the role of aspiration, kinship, and nepotism in the lives of these marginal screen artistes. With the film production practices, constantly evolving, the self narratives reveal how the Junior Artistes are negotiating with these technological changes, along with the exigencies of region, class, caste and gender dynamics at their workplace. This chapter is constructed largely in and through the personal narratives and oral recounting of the Junior Artistes, shared with researcher in the interviews and conversations conducted between 2010 and 2015. These narratives not just help in rewriting the history of Indian film industry, but also redraw our attention to some of the major developments in the film industry, but in a
new light, opening uncharted linkages, between linguistic reorganisation, regional film industry and film labour unions, and their impact on film labour and the process of film making itself. Chapter 2 seeks to understand the social world of film making and its construction of star persona through the lens of Junior Artistes. The aim of the chapter is twofold - first is to understand key screen roles and the screen representation of Junior Artistes and second to look at the significance of Junior Artistes in the construction of star. The Chapter is divided into four sections – the first section presents the key on-screen roles played by Junior Artistes; the second section examines the film credits and Junior Artistes’ interpretation of their screen roles; the third section discusses the star/stardom’s relationship with Junior Artistes and the fourth section deals with movies on Junior Artiste to analyse the ‘Star’ screen representation of the Junior Artistes. I am using film as text, narratives of Junior Artistes of their interpretation of their role in making of stardom to unpack the category of screen-worker, and to understand the logic behind the positioning the star and Junior artistes in the frame.

The concern of Chapter 3 is to trace the unionisation of Junior Artistes - casual daily wage earning cine-workers in Indian film industry. Therefore I approach this chapter using the political economy perspective with emphasis on social change and history, which provides a theoretical framework for addressing structural and institutional issues, within which Junior Artistes’ labour issues are located. The chapter is divided into three main sections – a brief introduction to unionisation of Indian film labour; emergence of language based unionisation of film workers in the decades following Linguistic Reorganisation of States and; Unionisation of Junior Artistes and Junior Artistes Agent. The study on unionisation of Junior Artistes is restricted to four Indian film industries - Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi.

Being pioneers of film industry, Chennai and Mumbai model of unionisation of film workers has a significant influence on other regional film industries like Telugu and Kannada. However since each of them have varied film market, organisation of film workers in each of the regions has its distinctive characteristics. To bring out the parallel and distinctive characteristic of each of the film workers’ Union, this section on Unionisation of Junior Artistes and Junior Artistes Agent will be presented region wise.
Chapter 4 attempts to narrate on-the-ground analysis of the everyday work life of Junior Artistes on the film set, along with exploring Indian film production culture with respect to Junior Artistes. The Chapter highlights the prevailing work condition of the film industry drawing our attention to the status of daily wage earning casual work force like the Junior Artistes both in the Society as well as in the social world of the cinema. Fictional ethnography approach, in the sense of constructing an anecdotal narrative based on field observations is a conducive method to tell a story out of lived experiences, and this is used as prominent method for narration in the chapter. Here the ethnographic ‘fiction’ aims to craft conventional ethnographic materials - interviews, non-participant observation, field notes and photographs – into a compelling narrative.

This study makes a unique contribution to labour history scholarship by recovering hitherto unknown aspects of the complex breadth of the history of film labour unions. The findings and observations of this research endeavour sheds light on the invisible work force of Indian film industry, providing theoretical and practical insights to scholars, industry insiders, and the general public.