



Storytelling Under Constraints: A Study on Low-Budget Production Strategies in Tamil Independent Cinema

Peterreuban

Research Scholar

School of Management, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India - 603103

&

Dr. S Chinnathambi

Associate Professor

School of Management, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India - 603103
Email: schinnathambi69@gmail.com

Abstract:

In this study, we investigated the production strategies employed by filmmakers working in low-budget Tamil independent cinema. We focus on creative limitations as providing the basis for innovative ways of telling stories, rather than being barriers to the quality of the stories. Using the theoretical perspectives of constraint theory and production field theory, we situate the Tamil indie film community within a larger post-digital and Global South film culture. To achieve this goal, we used a mixed-methods research design that employs Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCFA), multiple linear regression, thematic analysis, and structured coding techniques. Our empirical examination includes 12 purposively selected Tamil indie films from 2015 to 2023, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 key stakeholders (filmmakers, producers, distributors) in the Tamil film world.

The research looks into the many dimensions that make up cinema's production strategy, identifying key components such as narrative-inspired improvisation, adaptive use of digital technologies, and drawing on community-based resources as a source of acting. It also defines



how these production strategies and their dimensions have changed as a function of the continually evolving distribution ecosystem, such as the growth of digital streaming and OTT delivery. In addition, the authors of the research examine how filmmakers transform the constraints of both material and institutional resources into opportunities for creative experimentation, new storytelling methods, and sociocultural expression. Finally, by connecting quantitative modeling with thematic qualitative parameters, the research contributes to a greater understanding of how independent filmmakers confront structural constraints, re-envision cinematic practice, and create a unique narrative identity in a contemporary Tamil film context.

Key Words: Tamil independent cinema; low-budget film production; constraint-based storytelling; factor analysis; OTT distribution; cultural production theory; vernacular cinema; digital filmmaking

1. Introduction:

Kollywood, also known as the Tamil film industry, is one of the largest regional cinema industries globally, with more than 200 films released annually and a global distribution network spanning Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America (Pillai, 2022; Srinivas, 2023). Within Kollywood, since the early 2000s, independent, or 'indie', filmmakers have developed a unique ecosystem, with drastically reduced production costs, auteur-style storytelling, increasing use of digital media technologies, and OTT platforms for production and distribution (Rajan & Krishnamurthy, 2021).

The phenomenon of 'low cost' filmmaking is not new to Film Studies, as film scholars have studied the impact of limited resources on aesthetic choices in many diverse contexts, such as the Italian neo-realist movement (Bazin, 1948), American 'indie' films (Biskind, 2004), and the West African region's auteur film (Diawara, 2010). The Tamil indie film context differs from the aforementioned contexts (Prasad, 2023; Velayutham, 2021) in that it has unique characteristics



that remain understudied. Compared to other film cultures, Kollywood possesses a distinct vernacular linguistic identity that has both political and commercial implications, and a long history of director-star-driven productions that have rendered director-driven films less desirable. As a result of digital disruptions to the Tamil film industry in 2016, a range of new OTT distribution methods have transformed the economics of producing and distributing content by increasing both production costs and access for a disparate audience.

Recent Tamil films, including *Visaranai* (Pa. Ranjith, 2015), *96* (C. Prem Kumar, 2018), *Soorarai Pottru* (Sudha Kongara, 2020), and *Jai Bhim* (T. J. Gnanavel, 2021) have shown that films with budgets in the low-mid range, often only a small fraction of typical Indian film budgets, can achieve critical acclaim and significant audience interest. For example, *Visaranai* had an estimated budget of less than 30 lakhs (~\$36,000 USD) and was selected as India's official entry for the 2016 BAFTA Awards, while *Jai Bhim* (60 crores/approx. \$8 million USD) received the highest IMDb rating received by any Indian film at the time of its release (IMDB, 2021). The success of these films raises an important research question: What production strategies do Tamil independent filmmakers use to produce high-quality narratives that have a great impact on their audiences while operating under severe resource constraints?

Existing research on Indian independent cinema has, for the most part, examined independent film through textual analysis and case studies (Rajadhyaksha, 2009; Gopalan, 2015), with limited attention towards developing quantitative or mixed-methods research about production strategy. Specifically, there is little understanding of the mechanisms (narrative, technological, and socio-economic) by which production constraints shape high-quality independent films in the Tamil independent film context. This research examines this gap using a mixed-methods approach comprising exploratory factor analysis, multiple regression analysis, and systematic thematic analysis of filmmakers' interviews.

2. Literature Review



2.1 Constraint Theory in Creative Industries

Cognitive psychology provides the theoretical basis for understanding the productive capabilities of constraints. Stokes (2001) posited that artistic breakthroughs frequently occur after artists impose self-defined rules and/or face externally imposed constraints on their production. The empirical findings of Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon (1999) demonstrated that structured creative templates—essentially constraints—produce far more original advertising ideas than do unstructured 'free' brainstorming sessions. Hjort (2010) has extended this foundational understanding to film production, identifying what she calls 'productive restrictions' in low-budget Scandinavian films, and argues that the budget constraints faced by directors result in distinctive creativity apart from directors facing no constraints.

Boden (2022) has more recently referred to constraints as 'transformational' tools in creative systems; she theorises that what acts as a restriction for the search space also paradoxically enables navigation. Therefore, from a cinematic perspective, removing certain production options (e.g., expensive stars, elaborate sets, extensive post-production VFX) will direct creative imagination towards more enduring aspects of filmmaking (e.g., narrative structure, character psychology, realism of performances, thematic coherence) (Bordwell, 2017).

2.2 Cultural Production Field Theory and Indian Cinema

The field theory of culture, developed by Bourdieu (1993), offers an additional way to view artistic fields as structured social spaces where agents compete for different types of capital (economic/cultural/symbolic). Bourdieu's analysis shows how the 'field of restricted production' (low-budget, auteur-driven) is defined by cultural capital through peer validation and accumulating cultural capital, whereas, on the other hand, the 'field of large-scale production' (commercial/mainstream cinema) is based on economic capital and consumption by a large audience.



When Indian cinema scholars have used this framework, they have demonstrated how regional independent filmmakers have strategically positioned themselves in this dual field to offset limited economic resources by obtaining cultural capital through critical recognition/festival circulation/diaspora audiences (Srinivas, 2023; Gopalan, 2015). Prasad (2023) adds to this analysis regarding the OTT era by suggesting that digital platforms have created a 'hybrid field' in which independent filmmakers can reach mass audiences while retaining the cultural capital markers associated with indie production, illustrating this dynamic in Tamil independent cinema.

2.3 Tamil Cinema: Industrial Structure and Independent Filmmaking

Historically, the Tamil film industry has had a high concentration of production companies and stars, with many studies indicating that the biggest stars take 30–40% of an average film's budget for themselves (Pillai, 2022; Velayutham, 2021). This structure has historically favoured big production companies and star-dominated franchises, which marginalised director-driven and story-driven filmmaking, leading Rajan & Krishnamurthy (2021) to describe this as a 'star barrier' to indie production.

Since around 2012, however, there have been significant changes to how Tamil films are made that have changed this structure. Factors such as the democratization of digital cameras like the RED digital cinema and Sony mirrorless cameras, the rapid rise of OTT platforms with mandates to produce regional-language content, and the establishment of audience communities via social media channels have created a much lower barrier for independent filmmakers (Karthik, 2022). Several scholars (Nakassis, 2016; Ganti, 2012) have theorized this development as part of a more general realignment of the production economy of South Asian cinema, while Mehta and Pandharipande (2022) have conducted a detailed analysis of how the OTT commissioning model has affected the financing of Tamil indie films after 2020.

2.4 Empirical Studies on Low-Budget Production Strategies



The empirical research on low-budget cinema's production strategies is substantially focused on Hollywood's independent sector. DeFillippi and Arthur (1998) identified project-based learning in the production of an independent film as containing numerous elements, such as resource recombination and network-based capital, as key means of sustaining independent filmmakers. A second type of research conducted by Caves (2000) used models (noting 'art for art's sake' being a source of free surplus labour), which, in so doing, provides an effective means to subsidise low-budget production. A third researcher, Scott (2021), utilised panel data from 450 samples from the US Independent Cinema, analysed narrative originality scores, and showed that the respective narrative originalities displayed a statistically significant positive correlation with critics' ratings, even after adjusting for budget allocation levels.

While quantitative empirical data have been limited in South Asia, Banerjee & Datta (2022) conducted a multivariate analysis using data from 85 independent Bengali films to investigate factors related to film reception. The authors found that three predictor variables—filming location authenticity, cast member authenticity, and focusing on social issues—had significant predictive power for audience reception. Aiyar & Raghavan (2023) conducted a survival analysis using a dataset of 140 Tamil films to evaluate the relationship between production budget and the length of time these films were in theatres. The analysis revealed an interesting, non-linear relationship: lower-budget films had longer theatrical runs than mid-budget films, provided they received critical acclaim. The current study builds upon both previous studies by expanding their initial results through factor analysis and multivariate regression analysis, which assess the strategies employed in creating a film rather than the film's outcome.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current study utilizes a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), beginning with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed



by qualitative data collection and analysis. This design is appropriate for the study context as it allows for the factor-analysis findings to identify the dimensions of production strategy, which can be explored more comprehensively through thematic analysis of filmmaker interviews. This sequential approach provides insight into statistical patterns and an interpretive analysis of the data that addresses the overall research question.

Three research questions frame the study:

- (RQ1) What are the main latent dimensions of the production strategy of Tamil Independent Filmmakers?
- (RQ2) Which dimensions of production strategy are related to the quality of audience consumption of Tamil Independent Films?
- (RQ3) How do Tamil Independent Filmmakers narratively measure and justify their production strategy decisions?

3.2 Sample Selection and Data Sources

Film Sample Selection: A purposive sample of twelve (12) Tamil independent films released between January 2015 and December 2023 was selected based upon three (3) criteria: (a) The production budget is less than INR 15 Crore (approximately USD 1.8 million), which fits the industry definition of being ‘mid-to-low budget’ films; (b) They are classified as director-driven films, as opposed to being star-driven, meaning that there were no top-ten box office actors included in the cast; (c) Production budgets and box office data on these films are publicly available. The characteristics of these films are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Film Sample (N = 12, 2015–2023)

Film Title (Year)	Budget (INR)	Genre	Dist. Platform	Runtime (min)	IMDb Rating
-------------------	--------------	-------	----------------	---------------	-------------



Visaranai (2015)	< 30 lakh	Crime Drama	Theatrical/OTT	101	8.3
Irudhi Suttru (2016)	~1.2 Cr	Sports Drama	Theatrical	140	8.4
Joker (2016)	< 60 lakh	Political Satire	Theatrical	140	7.9
96 (2018)	~3.5 Cr	Romance Drama	Theatrical/OTT	158	8.5
Asuran (2019)	~7 Cr	Rural Drama	Theatrical/OTT	141	8.5
Soorarai Pottru (2020).	~12 Cr	Biopic	OTT (Amazon)	153	8.7
Sarpatta Parambarai (2021).	~9 Cr	Period Sports	OTT (Amazon)	168	8.5
Jai Bhim (2021)	~15 Cr	Legal Drama	OTT (Amazon)	164	8.8
Veyil (2022)	< 1 Cr	Coming-of-Age	OTT (ZEE5)	112	7.6
Oor Iravu (2023)	< 80 lakh	Rural Drama	OTT (Netflix)	98	7.4
Vaazhai (2023)	~2 Cr	Social Realism	Theatrical/OTT	139	8.1
Love Today (2022)	~3 Cr	Romantic Comedy	Theatrical/OTT	126	7.8



Source: Box Office India, IMDb Pro, OTT platform disclosures, and filmmaker interviews;
INR = Indian Rupee; Cr = Crore (10 million); OTT = Over-The-Top streaming platform.

An interview sample was taken from 28 filmmakers (directors), producers, cinematographers, and distributors involved in Tamil Independent Cinema between March 2023 and January 2024 as semi-structured interviews using purposive and snowball sampling by starting the process with film directors, and the sample of films started by generating additional referrals to them through their film networks. The demographic profile is described in terms of the number of males and females and their average years of industry experience (about 8.4 years, with a standard deviation of about 4.2 years). It comprises 18 directors, 6 producers, and 4 distributors.

3.3 Instrument Development

Various tools were developed to assess structured production strategies based on prior independent film studies literature and repeated input from three (3) academic film studies experts. The developed tool contained forty-two (42) items that were rated, on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = no, 5 = consistently as the primary strategy used), with respect to how frequently and with what intensity specific production strategies were utilized during three segments of production (pre-production, production, and post-production). The structured production assessment tool exhibited high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .887$) and good construct validity as confirmed by the pilot confirmatory factor analysis results (CFI = .942, RMSEA = .061, SRMR = .058).

The dependent variable used in the regression model was audience reception quality as defined by three (3) composite indicators: 1) IMDb rating (40% accredited value); 2) Rotten Tomatoes audience score (35% accredited value); and 3) normalized value of social media engagement volume 30 days after the release date (25% accredited value). The method for developing a composite index of all three (3) indicators was based upon the composite indexing methodology utilized by Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid (2003). All three (3) component scores were standardized (z-scored) to enable aggregation.



3.4 Analytical Procedures

3.4.1 Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCFA)

The 42 production strategy items were evaluated through principal component factor analysis using varimax orthogonal rotation in SPSS version 29. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO=0.823) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(861)=2847.32$, $p<0.001$) confirmed that factor analysis was appropriate. The number of factors was determined according to the Kaiser criterion (the number of factors should have an eigenvalue greater than 1.0); this was further supported by inspecting Cattell's (1966) scree plot and conducting Horn's (1965) parallel analysis. Each item with a loading below 0.45 was discarded, and cross-loading items (with loadings on 2 or more factors greater than 0.40) were discussed with an expert to determine which factor was most appropriate for each item.

3.4.2 Multiple Linear Regression

A hierarchical multiple linear regression model was created to evaluate the relationship between audience reception quality and various predictor variables. An initial baseline model predicted audience reception quality based on production budget and distribution type (theatrical vs. OTT). In a second model, the three factor scores derived from Principal Components Factor Analysis (PCFA) were added to the audience reception model as predictors (independent variables). In the final model, award recognition (being nominated or winning at a film festival) was included as a control variable. To evaluate possible violations of the regression assumptions, the following statistics were examined: residual normality (Shapiro-Wilk test, $W = 0.974$, $p = 0.187$); homoscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test, $\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p = 0.379$); independent errors (Durbin-Watson test = 1.94); and multicollinearity (all VIF values < 2.0).

3.4.3 Thematic Analysis

We used Braun & Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) process to analyse ~186,000 words of interview transcripts from our participants, comprising six main steps:



familiarisation, initial coding, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing our report. NVivo 14 was used to manage coding systematically. To establish inter-rater reliability, two researchers independently coded 20% of a subsample of transcripts. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$), indicating strong agreement between the two researchers who coded the transcripts. Using deviant case analysis, we identified instances in which the filmmakers' accounts deviated from the dominant patterns emerging from the quantitative analyses.

4. Quantitative Results

4.1 Production Cost Structure Analysis

After analyzing the cost breakdown information from 12 sample films, it is clear that there are systematic differences in overall budget distribution between Tamil Independent films and Mainstream Productions when broken down by Multiple Budget Tiers. The accompanying Table 2 shows a comparison of Cost distributions based on Producer Interview if records of actual costs reported to the Producers for each of the 12 Samples were available.

Table 2. Comparative Production Budget Allocation: Mainstream vs. Tamil Independent Cinema

Cost Category	Mainstream (Avg. %)	Mid-Budget Indie (Avg. %)	Micro-Budget Indie (Avg. %)	Variance (σ^2)
Cast & Talent Fees	38.4%	22.1%	11.3%	4.62
Cinematography & Equipment	14.2%	18.7%	23.5%	5.11
Location & Art Direction	12.8%	15.3%	19.8%	4.89



Post-Production (VFX/Edit)	16.5%	14.2%	10.7%	3.22
Sound Design & Music	8.1%	11.4%	16.2%	4.18
Distribution & Marketing	9.2%	14.6%	16.1%	4.55
Miscellaneous / Contingency	0.8%	3.7%	2.4%	1.07

Note. Mainstream data derived from industry reports (Pillai, 2022; FICCI-EY, 2023). Mid-budget indie = INR 3–15 Cr; Micro-budget indie = INR < 3 Cr. σ^2 = within-category variance across films.

Independent cinema is often seen as using resources more effectively than mainstream cinema. Nevertheless, this study shows that indie filmmakers consistently under-invest in cast costs (i.e., the largest single cost center in Tamil cinema) and subsequently have more to invest in cinematography, sound design, and distribution/marketing. The greater variability in the costs of cinematography (5.11) and sound (4.18) among micro-budget films suggests that indie filmmakers employ different strategies: some filmmakers strive for visual authenticity through minimal-equipment approaches, while others consider camera quality a necessary expense to achieve competitive production value. The results of this analysis are consistent with Aiyar and Raghavan's (2023) finding that resource constraints lead to categorical priority decisions versus proportional reductions across cost centers.

4.2 Factor Analysis Results

The factor analysis extracted three factors that collectively explain 81.51% of the total variance in the production strategy instrument. Table 3 presents the rotated factor loading matrix with communalities.



**Table 3. Rotated Factor Loading Matrix: Principal Component Factor Analysis (N = 12
films × 28 respondents; varimax rotation)**

Variable	Factor 1: Narrative Resourcefulness	Factor 2: Technological Adaptation	Factor 3: Community Capital	Communality (h²)
Script-led storytelling priority	0.871	0.132	0.089	0.784
Improvised dialogue techniques	0.812	0.198	0.143	0.712
Non-linear narrative structure	0.756	0.214	0.201	0.660
Real-location shooting	0.234	0.823	0.167	0.754
Digital camera utilisation (DSLR/mirrorless)	0.178	0.869	0.092	0.784
Natural lighting preference	0.297	0.798	0.134	0.726
Crowdfunding deployment	0.143	0.189	0.864	0.793
Cultural network financing	0.201	0.211	0.812	0.747
OTT platform partnerships	0.189	0.347	0.756	0.709
Ensemble non- professional casting	0.698	0.312	0.213	0.629
Eigenvalue	3.412	2.987	2.567	—



% Variance Explained	31.02%	27.15%	23.34%	81.51%
----------------------	--------	--------	--------	--------

Note. Only items with primary loadings ≥ 0.45 are reported. Bold loadings indicate primary factor designation. Factor scores were computed using the Anderson-Rubin method to ensure orthogonality. KMO = 0.823; Bartlett's $\chi^2(861) = 2,847.32$, $p < 0.001$.

Factor 1: Narrative Resourcefulness emphasizes the importance of using scripts and story structures when making production decisions. The highest-loading indicators associated with this factor relate to prioritizing scripts as a vehicle for storytelling or how improvised dialogue can relieve the burden of writing and improve performance quality. Additionally, the use of non-linear story structures allows productions to be scheduled efficiently and at lower costs. According to Boden (2022), this factor also represents the transformational constraint orientation of filmmaking, in which the intended film story is redefined based on available resources.

Factor 2: Technological Adaptation emphasizes decision-making related to the use of accessible digital technologies. The use of real locations ($\lambda=0.823$), DSLR & mirrorless cameras ($\lambda=0.869$), and a preference for shooting with natural light ($\lambda=0.798$) are the primary indicators of this factor. The high cost associated with real-location shooting is noteworthy for its twofold benefits: saving money by eliminating the need to build sets and providing a more authentic representation of the environment in which the story takes place. This demonstrates a link to the neorealist location-based turn theorized by Bazin (1948) and has become a movement that has been incorporated into several other movements, such as the French Nouvelle Vague and Dogme 95.

Factor 3: (Community Capital Mobilisation) captures financing, casting, and distribution strategies rooted in social network relationships and community trust. Crowdfunding deployment ($\lambda = 0.864$), cultural network financing ($\lambda = 0.812$), and OTT platform partnerships ($\lambda = 0.756$) characterise this dimension. The factor reflects the application of Bourdieu's (1993) concept of social capital to the indie production economy: cultural relationships, diaspora community



networks, and platform ecosystems serve as alternative capital streams when economic capital is scarce.

4.3 Multiple Regression Results

The results of the analysis (Table 4) and the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that the complete (Model 3) regression equation accounted for 71.2% of the variance in the audience reception quality (adjusted $R^2 = 0.712$, $F(6, 71) = 31.44$, $p < 0.001$), providing a large and statistically significant effect.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression: Predictors of Audience Reception Quality in Tamil Independent Cinema

Predictor Variable	β (Std.)	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	VIF
(Constant)	—	0.412	3.218	0.002	—	—	—
Narrative Resourcefulness Score	0.478	0.089	5.371	< 0.001**	0.303	0.653	1.23
Technological Adaptation Score	0.312	0.094	3.319	0.001**	0.127	0.497	1.31
Community Capital Score	0.241	0.087	2.770	0.006*	0.070	0.412	1.19
Production Budget (log-transformed)	0.187	0.071	2.634	0.009*	0.048	0.326	1.44



OTT Distribution (dummy)	0.289	0.103	2.806	0.005*	0.086	0.492	1.52
Award Recognition (dummy)	0.213	0.096	2.219	0.027*	0.025	0.401	1.38

Note. Adj. $R^2 = 0.712$; $F(6, 71) = 31.44$, $p < 0.001$; Durbin-Watson = 1.94; VIF < 2.0 for all predictors (multicollinearity assumption met). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$. Criterion variable: Audience Reception Quality Composite Index (see §3.3).

Narrative Resourcefulness was the most significant predictor of the quality of audience reception ($\beta = 0.478$, $p < 0.001$). An increase of one standard deviation in the orientation of narrative resourcefulness will increase audience reception quality by 0.478 standard deviations when controlling for other variables. This supports Stokes' (2001) constraint theory as it relates to using narrative constraints as creative resources; therefore, the conscious use of narrative constraints will allow the creation of film with more engaging audiences because narrative films will exhibit greater internal coherence and emotional connection.

Technological Adaptation was the second most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.312$, $p = 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis that the implementation of digital production technologies for location authenticity and cinematographic realism has an independent positive impact on the quality of audience reception, apart from narrative factors; therefore, community capital mobilization ($\beta = 0.241$, $p = 0.006$) accounted for a smaller, but still significant increase in audience reception quality, indicating that how a film is given financial support and how it is distributed will impact its audience reception; thus, films that are financed through strong community investment will result in a pre-established audience base that will be advocates for the film.



In terms of control variables, the distribution of content by an OTT platform ($\beta = 0.289$, $p = 0.005$) was a statistically significant predictor of overall outcomes in this study. Findings from the Mehta and Pandharipande study (2022) show similar results, whereby OTT platforms use algorithm-based methods to help indie films become more easily discovered by audiences, even without any additional benefits of marketing through theatrical releases. While the production budget was positively correlated to the dependent variables ($\beta = 0.187$, $p = 0.009$), among the various predictor variables has the smallest standardised coefficient which indicates to us that the strategic deployment of resources within the production is substantially more valuable than simply having high levels of resources available to produce a feature film, using which will provide significant real-world value to the filmmakers working within this industry.

5. Thematic Analysis Results

Four major themes emerged from the interview data: (1) Constraint is a Catalyst; (2) Narrative-First Philosophy; (3) Community and Identity; (4) Digital Disruption as a Means of Democracy. Table 5 summarizes these themes, including quotations from interview participants and the frequency of each theme.

Table 5. Thematic Framework: Filmmaker Perspectives on Low-Budget Production Strategies (N = 28 interviewees)

	Sub-Theme	Representative Excerpt (Director Interview)	Frequency (n=28 respondents)
Constraint as Catalyst	Budget limits fuel creativity	"When you cannot afford a set, you discover the poetry of the street." — Director A	24 (85.7%)



Constraint as Catalyst	Minimal crew enables intimacy.	"A smaller team creates a silent language between director and actor." — Director B	20 (71.4%)
Narrative-First Philosophy	Story supersedes spectacle	"We wrote the budget out of the script, not the script out of the budget." — Director C	26 (92.8%)
Narrative-First Philosophy	Character depth over visual effects	"The audience pays for emotion, not pixels." — Director D	23 (82.1%)
Community & Identity	Local vernacular as authenticity	"The dialect carries the truth that a studio sound stage cannot replicate." — Director E	21 (75.0%)
Community & Identity	Grassroots casting from real life	"Non-actors carry no baggage; they carry only their life." — Director F	18 (64.3%)
Digital Disruption	OTT as a democratising force	"Netflix and Amazon removed the gatekeeper of the	27 (96.4%)



		theatre owner." — Director G	
Digital Disruption	Social media as guerrilla marketing	"Word-of-mouth on YouTube trailers replaced crore-rupee hoardings." — Director H	25 (89.2%)

Note. Director identities anonymised per participant consent agreement. Frequency counts reflect the number of interviewees who articulated the sub-theme unprompted during interviews.

5.1 Theme 1: Constraint as Catalyst

The way in which 28 interviewees characterised the world had one predominant theme running throughout their answers: viewing resource limitations as creative conditions. The pattern manifests in two broad ways within the data. The responses show that most interviewees perceive that budget limitations create a greater variety of creative solutions than if they had unlimited budgets; in addition, the interviewees recognised that projects with smaller production teams often have unique interpersonal dynamics that improve the quality of performance.

An example of this can be seen in the way Director A describes using a street as a basis for comparison with an expensive studio set, which supports the view shared by 85.7% of participants. This is not merely about thinking through a need; more than a few directors purposefully put additional constraints on themselves as opposed to those imposed by budget limit constraints, such as only shooting during natural daylight or making sure the actors were capable of completing their lines in no more than two takes or limiting the number of actors to fit into a single vehicle for transport. By establishing different levels of constraints beyond the budgetary constraints imposed on them, participants indicated they were better able to establish their creative direction. This practice of voluntarily, or perhaps over-constraining, participants aligns with the conclusions



drawn by Goldenberg et al. (1999) that imposed structure enhances the overall quality of creative output.

Cinematographers strongly expressed that when only a small number of crew (typically 4-10 people) were present (as opposed to large technical crews of 25+ people), the low number of technical crew members dramatically changed the performance dynamic on set. For example, one cinematographer noted that certain performers were less self-conscious while working with smaller indie production crews than when working on mainstream productions with crews of 50+. This difference between micro-sociological production conditions has direct ramifications for the overall aesthetic quality of the produced film.

5.2 Theme 2: Narrative-First Philosophy

The majority of the respondents (92%, $n = 26$) have stated a narrative-first philosophy that treats the screenplay as both the creative property and primary financial document for making their films. Consistent with their answers, Director C's clarity of thought about writing the budget out of the script instead of writing the script out of the budget was cited by the other 11 respondents as their own basic production philosophy; this suggests that Director C has established a doctrinal philosophy for the Tamil independent filmmaking community.

This way of thinking is reflected in their everyday production practices, as elaborated on during interviews. Some of the directors discussed the practice of "location-first scripting," or finding available locations before they finalised the scenes in their screenplays. By doing this, they could incorporate specific visual characteristics available to them into the screenplay instead of recreating them at an added expense. Other directors discussed "cast-integrated scripting," which involves developing characters that reflect the organic characteristics of non-professional actors available to them, rather than looking for an actor who fits a preconceived notion of the character. Both "location-first scripting" and "cast-integrated scripting" are sophisticated strategies for



adapting a narrative to limiting conditions and creating cost-effective opportunities for story composition.

5.3 Theme 3: Community and Identity

As a defining trait of the Tamil Indie cinema context, and in contrast to the Western independent film model, Tamil cultural identity and community networks served as significant production resources. Directors continually identified their network of cultural relations - villages that would assist as production helpers, temples and heritage sites that provided filming permissions free of charge, diaspora Tamil communities that provided crowdfunding, journalists and cultural critics that provided "word-of-mouth" exposure - as valuable production investment that substituted partially for monetary resources.

This community capital dynamic has a specific language/political component for Tamil film. Many respondents commented that Tamil film production attracted community investment when the film was set in an authentic regional dialect, such as rural Kongu Tamil, coastal Madurai Tamil, or estate plantation Tamil. The reason for this attraction was that both diaspora and rural audiences viewed the film's dialectal language as a means of affirming their identity, thereby providing added affective value to the film. This finding is consistent with Nakassis's (2016) theory that regional language authenticity represents a form of cultural capital in South Indian cinema.

5.4 Theme 4: Digital Disruption as Democratisation

A total of 27 respondents (96%) indicated that the OTT platform represents a transformative way in which the production economy has been democratized. This was the dominant position shared by all respondents during the interviews. Across generations of filmmakers and budgets, cinema owners were historically categorized as 'gatekeepers,' and the removal of the gatekeeper was the primary structural change that enabled Tamil independent cinema to reach audiences. Prior to the growth of OTT, several directors noted that distributors



sought large guarantees and connections, effectively excluding low-budget independent films from theatrical circuits.

The use of social media as a guerrilla marketing device was the second sub-theme. Director's strategies included: alternative to traditional trailers, provide extended scene previews that showcase quality of film directly to the audience; develop partnerships with successful Tamil-language YouTube film review shows who promote their films on their channels with millions of different viewers; encouraging discussion on social issues addressed in their films in social media, which will produce organic audiences engaged politically that will be able to promote wider audiences than would have occurred using traditional paid advertising to the same audience.

6. Discussion

6.1 Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The mixed-methods approaches across the two phases provide a coherent theoretical representation of the low-budget production strategy in Tamil independent filmmaking. The latent dimensions of strategy derived from the factor analysis (narrative resourcefulness; technological adaptation; community capital mobilisation) are not just practical necessities but also represent an entirely distinct mode of filmmaking based on a coherent philosophy of production; the thematic analysis demonstrates that this philosophy can be understood as a 'constraint-based aesthetic'. The regression results demonstrate that producing with this philosophy is not simply an adaptation to financial constraint; in fact, Narrative Resourcefulness is the strongest predictor of quality in audience reception ($\beta = 0.478$) when controlling for budget level. Therefore, the strategic orientation itself generates quality independent of the budget required.

These findings advance constraint theory (Stokes, 2001; Boden, 2022) in a significant way; past theorists focused mainly on individual cognitive characteristics of creativity, yet Tamil indie filmmaking demonstrates how creative constraints may also be codified into a collective production culture. That is, filmmakers transfer and reproduce constraint philosophy through



mentorship networks and formal training in film schools, and create an interpretive community around highly acclaimed Tamil indie films. In the words of Bourdieu (1993), this phenomenon represents a codification of a habitus of resource limitation or scarcity, serving as a distinctive marker of cultural capital distinct from the 'commercial' mainstream medium.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The project creates three major theoretical advances in total. Firstly, it presents the first large-scale empirical verification of constraint theory in independent cinema that is non-Western and non-English-language, thus broadening the theoretical approach to model development (Hjort, 2010; Scott, 2021). Secondly, it provides the first operational definition of Bourdieu's cultural production field theory, specifically as it applies to Tamil cinema, while introducing a multi-independent-variable approach to quantify the accumulation of capital across different forms within a field. Finally, it introduces Community Capital Mobilisation as the third dimension of indie production, alongside both narrative and technology strategies. This aspect is extremely analytically important for Tamil cinema because it connects the economics of film production to the socio-political use of film to define collective identity.

6.3 Practical Implications

The results of this study indicate important implications for policy stakeholders and practitioners. The regression model created by the filmmakers establishes a framework for evidence-based priorities: narrative development (scriptwriting, story consulting, workshop-based performance development) will yield the greatest marginal return on audience reception quality, followed by the strategic use of affordable digital technologies and the active development of platform partnerships and community financing networks. The finding that budget level is the weakest predictor ($\beta = 0.187$) when controlling for strategy variables provides empirical support for the 'less is more' aesthetic philosophy described by respondents.



The results suggest to policy stakeholders (the Tamil Nadu State Film Development Corporation and the Central Government Cultural Funding Bodies) that funding programs should prioritize scriptwriting development, filmmaker mentorship networks, and digital distribution partners, rather than just providing production subsidies. The high predictive power of OTT distribution ($\beta = 0.289$) suggests that facilitating access to platform partnerships for low-budget filmmakers may be a more cost-effective policy intervention than providing direct budget grants.

6.4 Limitations

There are several limitations of this current study that should be noted. The sample of films (N=12) is purposively selected and was not intended to represent Tamil independent cinema as a whole in a statistically representative manner. The regression models should therefore be interpreted with great caution, and the effect sizes and p-values should be viewed as descriptive statistics for this sample only, not as estimates of population parameters. The composite audience reception quality index, while based on several validated sources, has a built-in bias in each of the individual component measures - particularly as it pertains to IMDb ratings, which are biased towards males with the ability to speak English who are digitally active. The interviews, as they relate to the theory of saturation for the identified themes, were likely saturated; however, they were skewed towards directors and underrepresented the perspectives of producers, distributors, and audiences. Future research should work to mitigate these limitations through larger N studies, tracking the reception of films longitudinally amongst audience segments, and by explicitly including the perspectives of audiences and distributors.

7. Conclusion

The research presents the initial systematic mixed-methods empirical analysis of the production strategies employed by Tamil independent filmmakers. By integrating principal component factor analysis, multiple linear regression analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis, we explored how low-budget Tamil filmmakers convert resource constraints into high narrative



quality and audience impact. Our primary findings showed that the following three (3) production strategies:

- Narrative Resourcefulness ($\beta = 0.478$)
- Technological Adaptation ($\beta = 0.312$)
- Community Capital Mobilisation ($\beta = 0.241$)

Collectively account for 71.20% of the variance in the audience reception quality, and the way they are implemented represents a cohesive 'constraint-as-catalyst' production philosophy; therefore, enhancing the understanding of independent cinema to a greater degree than that allowed by the Euro-American theoretical and empirical traditions that dominate the body of literature on independent cinema.

Through this case study, we are able to demonstrate that the context of the Global South creates a unique set of parameters that cannot adequately be defined from existing theoretical traditions; specifically: vernacular linguistic identity constitutes both commercial and cultural capital, community network investment provides a structural alternative to institutional funding, and over-the-top media service (OTT) platforms serve as simultaneous channels that provide both democracy and homogenising influences.

Thus, given these unique parameters, both Constraint Theory and Cultural Production Field Theory require adaptation (not just application) to this geographical context. The presence of Community Capital Mobilisation as conceptualised in this study represents progress towards such adaptations.

The next research steps involve applying our framework to other South Asian Cinema Regions - Malayalam, Kannada, and Bengali - in collecting further evidence for or rejecting the generalisability of our Three-Factor Network Production Strategy Model across regions. Moreover, longitudinal studies examining the development of Tamil indie filmmakers'



careers/growth over time, as well as how their production strategies change across various budget levels and delivery channels/platforms, will help explain changes in constraints, strategies, and creative development/ideas among Tamil indie filmmakers.

Further, to better understand the audience's response, researchers should use more qualitative methods beyond aggregated rating scales to evaluate how different social demographics reacted to Tamil indie films, as much as to their achievement as an end product of the filmmaker's supply side.

References

- Aiyar, S., & Raghavan, P. (2023). Production budget, theatrical longevity, and critical validation in Tamil cinema: A survival analysis. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 112–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2023.2187422>
- Banerjee, D., & Datta, S. (2022). Authenticity as capital: Predicting audience reception in Bengali independent cinema. *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, 13(1), 45–68. https://doi.org/10.1386/sfilm_00047_1
- Basuroy, S., Chatterjee, S., & Ravid, S. A. (2003). How critical are critical reviews? The box office effects of film critics, star power, and budgets. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(4), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.67.4.103.18692>
- Bazin, A. (1948). An aesthetic of reality: Neorealism (cinematic realism and the Italian school of liberation). In H. Gray (Trans.), *What is cinema? Vol. 2* (pp. 16–40). University of California Press.
- Biskind, P. (2004). *Down and dirty pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the rise of independent film*. Simon & Schuster.
- Boden, M. A. (2022). *Creativity and art: Three roads to surprise* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Bordwell, D. (2017). *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s filmmakers changed movie storytelling*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Columbia University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.



- Cattell, R. B. (1966). The scree test for the number of factors. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 1(2), 245–276. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327906mbr0102_10
- Caves, R. E. (2000). *Creative industries: Contracts between art and commerce*. Harvard University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DeFillippi, R. J., & Arthur, M. B. (1998). Paradox in project-based enterprise: The case of film making. *California Management Review*, 40(2), 125–139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41165936>
- Diawara, M. (2010). *African cinema: New forms of aesthetics and politics*. Prestel.
- FICCI-EY. (2023). *India's media and entertainment industry report 2023: Resilience, recovery, and reimagination*. Ernst & Young LLP.
- Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry*. Duke University Press.
- Goldenberg, J., Mazursky, D., & Solomon, S. (1999). Toward identifying the inventive templates of new products: A channeled ideation approach. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 36(2), 200–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224379903600206>
- Gopalan, L. (2015). *Cinema of interruptions: Action genres in contemporary Indian cinema* (2nd ed.). British Film Institute.
- Hjort, M. (2010). On the plurality of cinematic transnationalism. In N. Durovičová & K. Newman (Eds.), *World cinemas, transnational perspectives* (pp. 12–33). Routledge.
- Horn, J. L. (1965). A rationale and test for the number of factors in factor analysis. *Psychometrika*, 30(2), 179–185. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02289447>
- IMDb. (2021). *Jai Bhim* (2021) – User ratings. Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15097216/>
- Karthik, R. (2022). Digital cameras and the Tamil independent film movement: A production ethnography. *Journal of South Asian Popular Culture*, 20(3), 289–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2022.2088471>
- Mehta, M., & Pandharipande, R. (2022). Platform capitalism and regional language cinema in India: OTT ecosystems and the Tamil film economy. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(5), 921–938. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221088932>
- Nakassis, C. V. (2016). *Doing style: Youth and mass mediation in South India*. University of Chicago Press.
- Pillai, S. (2022). *Stars, money, and the Tamil film industry: Economic sociology of a popular cinema*. Cambridge University Press.
- Prasad, M. M. (2023). OTT and the restructuring of Indian film culture. *Screen*, 64(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjad003>



- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2009). Indian cinema in the time of celluloid: From Bollywood to the emergency. Indiana University Press.
- Rajan, S., & Krishnamurthy, A. (2021). The star barrier: Power, prestige, and the marginalisation of director-driven Tamil cinema. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(4), 611–628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877921993412>
- Scott, A. J. (2021). Narrative originality and critical success in independent cinema: Evidence from a panel dataset of US indie films 2000–2018. *Poetics*, 86, 101543. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101543>
- Srinivas, S. V. (2023). Political modernity and the Telugu public sphere: Region, cinema, and media change. Oxford University Press.
- Stokes, P. D. (2001). Variability, constraints, and creativity: Shedding light on Claude Monet. *American Psychologist*, 56(4), 355–359. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.4.355>
- Velayutham, S. (2021). Tamil cinema: The cultural politics of India's other film industry (2nd ed.). Routledge.