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# REGIONAL SHOWS GET A PUSH ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Last week, Hungama, a digital entertainment company announced its foray into original programming in regional languages starting off with a Marathi series. The company's managing director and chief executive officer (CEO) Neeraj Roy says Marathi happens to be one of the most consumed languages on its video streaming platform. To be sure, the other Originals that Hungama is planning are in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali and Punjabi. Although the video streaming platform Hungama Play has always had content—movies, TV shows, kids and short-format videos—in 13 languages, it has commissioned its first regional language original only now. Earlier this year, it launched Hinglish originals with two shows, *Damaged* and *Hankaar*.

Hungama is not the only digital platform to get into regional language originals. Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd's digital platform Zee5 announced its second Telugu original—*Chitra Vichitram*—a light-hearted web series, last week. Zee5 claims it has lined up original content with 20 shows, a number that will cross 90 by end March 2019. It is, however, not clear how many of these will be in regional languages. As digital streaming services percolate down to smaller cities, the need for original content in regional languages will rise. Keeping consumer demand in mind, Viacom18 Digital Ventures, which operates the video streaming platform Voot, is also expanding its regional language slate. Monika Shergill, its head of content, says the company has announced two Tamil and one Kannada show on its platform.

Content studio Applause Entertainment, too, is putting in one-third of its total investment in non-Hindi content, says CEO Sameer Nair. The studio is making shows in Tamil, Telugu, Bhojpuri, Malayalam, Gujarati and Bengali. "Currently in production are original penned series *Viktor* (Tamil), *Yali* (Tamil), *Madhuri Talkies* (Bhojpuri) and *Village Lo Vidduram* (Telugu). We have more shows in development in all these languages," says Nair.

## The future of online content will be fuelled by local language consumption

Vishal Maheshwari, country head at Viu India, a video-on-demand platform that is making shows in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Marathi,

agrees that user engagement in Indian regional languages is very strong. "That we are running into season 3 of our Telugu series *Pelli Gola* is an indication of the demand. In Tamil, we are getting ready for a second outing on some of the shows. Regional content users are adopting the unique storylines. So, it won't be wrong to say that our user base is growing phenomenally." Currently, Viu has 20 million monthly active users across geographies.

Increasingly, digital platforms are investing heavily in regional web originals to take their viewership to the next level. Roy, who claims a collective reach of 50 million users for his platform in India, says: "Over 48% of our users consume non-Hindi content and we have seen a tremendous demand from this audience for differentiated stories. Our regional shows will focus on strong, contemporary narratives that not only resonate with a language-specific audience but also have a universal appeal. We intend to launch six to seven non-Hindi shows in nine months and are certain that this will help us increase our user base by almost 30%."

Voot has already announced a slate of 18 originals of which 12 will be in Hindi and the rest in regional languages. "Regional viewership on Voot has grown five times from last year. Currently, Voot has 40 million monthly active users. With regional content, we expect this to grow by another 30-35 million. There is an untapped audience base in key language markets," says Shergill. She feels that Voot may be under-serving the regional markets. "The potential to grow content consumption in your own language is huge. To tap this, the company is also looking to add user interface for customers in regional languages."

Regional is the way to go, because while dubbed international content may have found a niche for itself, it is the originals in regional languages that flourish, feels Maheshwari. Agrees Nair: "It is important for us to tell a billion Indians stories in their own language set in their own milieu. That's why while foreign dubbed content may find some traction initially, it can never become the mainstay for a culturally vibrant country like India."

Nair says consumption of English content is a tiny 7% and the rest is dominated by local languages. Like TV, the future of mobile and internet-delivered content will also be fuelled by local language consumption.

Shuchi Bansal is Mint's media, marketing and advertising editor. Ordinary Post will look at pressing issues related to all three. Or just fun stuff.