



Past
Exhibition

Advertising India's Sandalwood Film Industry

November 16, 2023–April 14, 2024

While Indian cinema is internationally renowned for its Hindi-language Bollywood films, the country's numerous regional languages and its culturally diverse audience have produced several flourishing, local film-production centers, particularly in South India. Bangalore's Kannada-language Sandalwood cinema industry is among the most prominent of these--affectionately named after the tree that is native to the region. The top three Indian box-office hits of 2022 came from South India and included one Sandalwood production. In this region, vibrant film posters, ubiquitous in the urban landscape, point to an enthusiastic fan culture. Hand-painted, 70-foot cutouts of beloved actors tower over the admiring public, turning movie theaters almost into shrines to film idols and to regional Indian cinema in general. On virtually any open surface--at building sites, highway overpasses, and bus stops--endless layers of such film posters compete for attention. Posters written in the South Indian languages of Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu occupy space next to advertisements for Hindi-language Bollywood films and even Hollywood movies. Until recently, posters by a printer known only as Ramachandraiah stood out in this blur of text and celebrity images.

In 1971, Ramachandraiah opened Sri Venkateshwara Litho & Printing Press in the heart of Bangalore's Majestic neighborhood, eventually employing his son, Raju, as the shop's resident artist. Using zinc lithography, they created striking posters for Bangalore's celebrated single-screen cinemas. These vivid prints typically illustrate the stars of a film in images often copied directly from the official promotional material. As he designed these compositions outside his father's storefront, Raju would hold his thin sheets of paper down with rocks, referring to scraps containing the film's title and the cinema's information. The resulting posters, covered in Kannada and Tamil text, occasionally Hindi, and sometimes even English, urge viewers to "watch today" at one of the local "talkie" theaters, boasting of their DTS sound, ColorScope, and perhaps even air-conditioning. After dark, "guerilla promoters" would paste them across the city, ignoring notices to "stick no bills."

Sometime in 2019, Ramachandraiah and Raju's print shop shut down, coinciding with the closure of a number of single-screen cinemas across India and marking the end of an era. In their heyday, these posters encapsulated the distinctive culture of South Indian cinema in a way that the sterile designs of official movie posters could not possibly emulate. Their bright colors and layered patterns reflected the aesthetic preferences of Majestic and Bangalore audiences; together they preserve a small part of this rich cinema culture as it quickly fades away, allowing us a glimpse of the resourcefulness and sheer creativity of Sandalwood's film community.

This exhibition was made possible through a generous gift from Gail Anderson.

Curation

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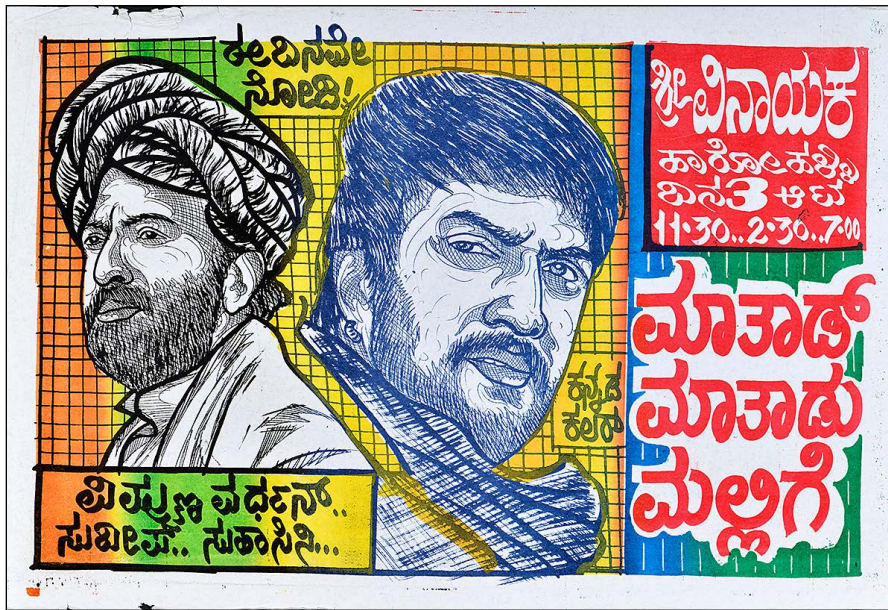
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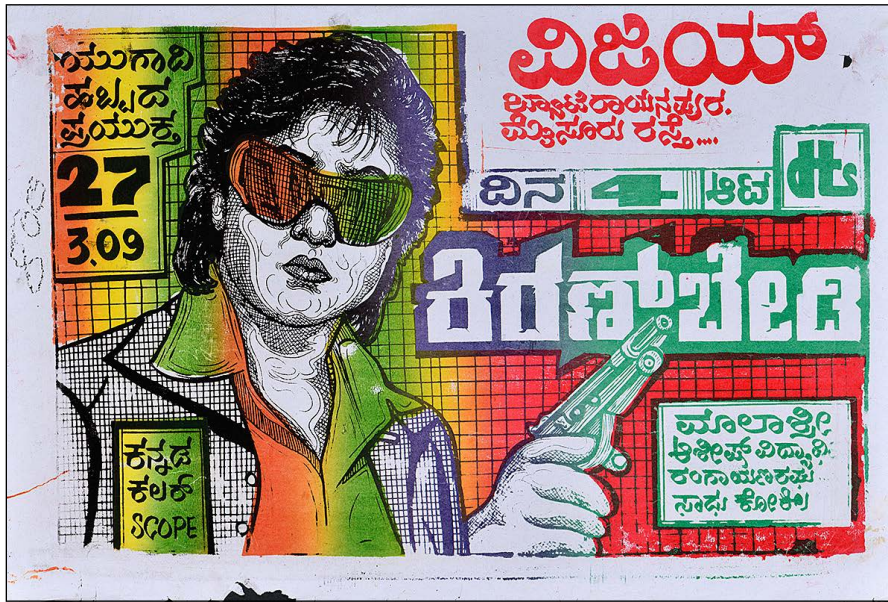
Maathaad Maathaadu Mallige, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Maathaad Maathaadu Mallige* (Speak, Speak Out, Jasmine) follows the story of a rural jasmine seller who single-handedly takes on the multinational corporations and corrupt politicians that seek to mine the land of his village. Described as a “clarion call for the villagers and farmers,” the film was a commercial success and won a host of awards after its release in 2007. This was partly due to its moving socioeconomic critique, one that championed the struggle of the disadvantaged against globalization and environmental degradation.
- These posters are all printed through zinc lithography, in which designs are drawn onto a zinc plate with oil-based ink that is then fixed onto the surface through a chemical process. The illustration is then inked and printed on a sheet of paper, creating a reverse image. As Raju copies his compositions from existing promotional material, the mirroring effect can be seen when this poster is compared to the official one.
- Zinc plates are far less expensive than the limestone traditionally used for lithography, and are thus more accessible to small shops like the one owned by Ramachandraiah and Raju.



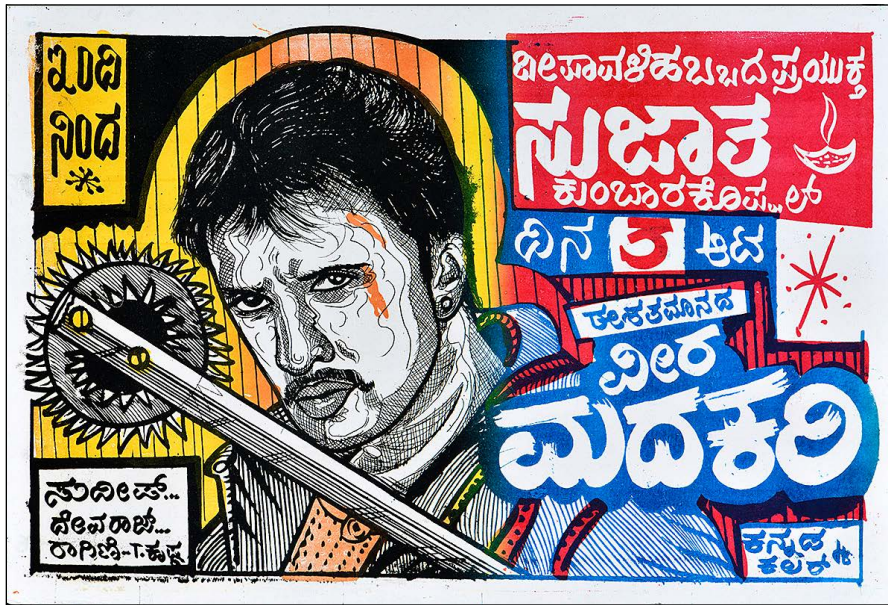


Kannadadda Kiran Bedi, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- In *Kannadadda Kiran Bedi* (Kannada's Kiran Bedi), a police constable recruits Bellary Bhagyalakshmi to impersonate and avenge his murdered daughter, a female cop named Kiran Bedi. Both the roles of Bhagyalakshmi and Bedi are played by Malashri, one of the top stars of the Kannada film industry throughout the 1990s.
- The movie was dubbed into Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam, and became one of Sandalwood's biggest box-office hits in 2009. It did not have much competition, however, since that year was a disaster for the Kannada film industry, with only 15 percent of films making back their investment through ticket sales.
- The print shop made these posters using two different lithographic plates to overlay the images. Typically, one plate is applied with a gradient of black, blue, and dark-green ink, while the other is applied with red, orange, yellow, and lime-green ink. This cost-effective technique allows the printer to produce hundreds of vibrantly colored posters in very little time.

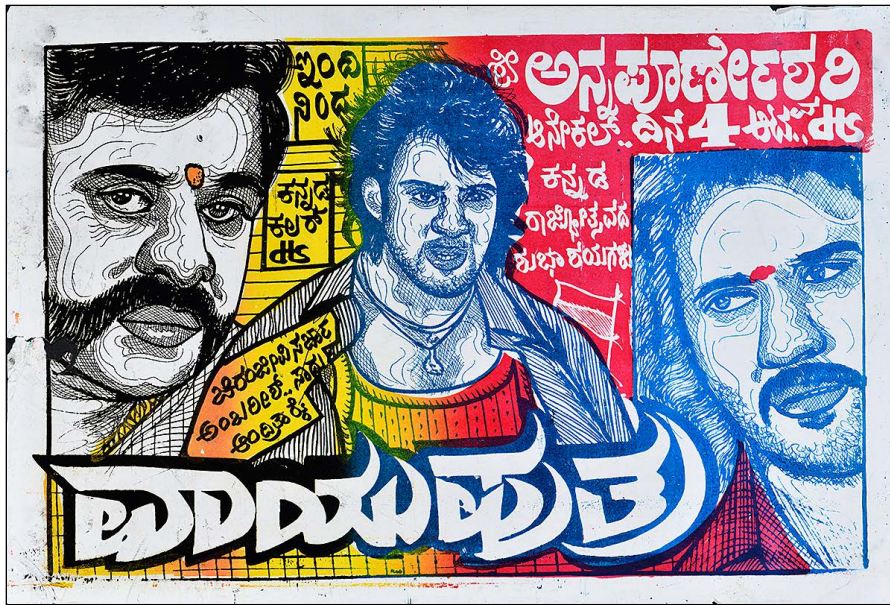


Ee Shathamaanada Veera Madakari, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Ee Shathamaanada Veera Madakari* (The Hero of this Century is Veera Madakari) is a Kannada-language remake of the 2006 Telugu action film *Vikramarkudu* that follows a small-time con man who impersonates a recently murdered cop named Madakari and then avenges his death. Both roles are played by actor-director Sudeep Sanjeev.
- This doppelganger-revenge cop plot mirrors that of *Kannadadda Kiran Bedi*. This is not entirely surprising since Kannada films are known for their formulaic storylines, focusing on star power, action scenes, and musical numbers.
- Despite a lukewarm critical response, the film remained in theaters for a hundred days—a notable run considering that most Kannada movies last only a couple of weeks before being pushed out by newer productions. This high turnover rate predictably created a lot of business for Ramachandraiah and Raju.
- In 2009, Sandalwood began to produce a group of films featuring high levels of crime and violence that became known colloquially as “machu-longu” movies—a slang term for the axes and long swords used by members of the criminal underworld in the region.



Vayuputra, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Vayuputra* (Son of Wind) is a Kannada-language remake of the Tamil romance-action film *Sandakozhi* (Fighting Cock). It was directed by Kishore Sarja and produced by his brother, the prominent Tamil-language actor Arjun Sarja.
- Sandalwood is often criticized for releasing so many remakes, a situation generally attributed to a lack of creativity and a determination to make a quick profit. About 20 percent of the Kannada movies released in 2009 were remakes.
- Raju's unique design style reflects both the shop's fast turnover time and his use of zinc lithography. The images of the stars and the bold text are often drawn directly from the film's existing promotional material; Raju's illustrations prioritize speed over precision, resulting in imperfect but charming and vivid line drawings.

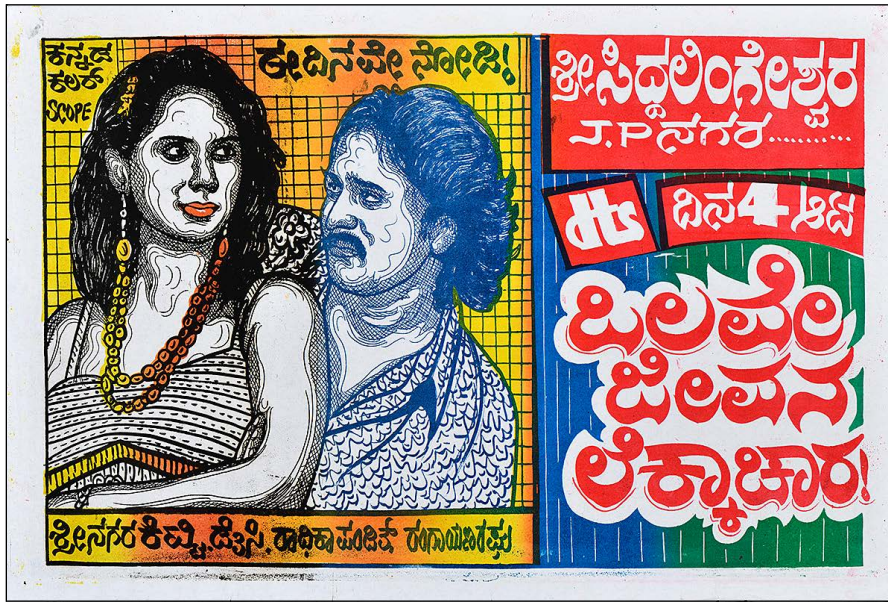


Punnami Naagu, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Punnami Naagu* (Full Moon Snake) is a female-centric horror film about a mythical serpent that possesses a beautiful *devadasi* (temple maiden) in order to exact revenge upon the poachers who have killed her mate. Both snake and shrine maiden are played by Mumaith Khan, whose gyrating, seductive dances were the popular highlight of the movie.
- This was the last film made by the famed Telugu director A. Kodandarami Reddy. Of the 94 movies he directed, 90 percent were considered commercially successful—although this was not one of them.
- In this poster, Raju uses the two-plate lithographic process to create a dynamic design, layering patterns that reflect Indian maximalist tastes. As in many of his compositions, the grid creates visual noise, drawing attention to the details and emphasizing the color gradients.

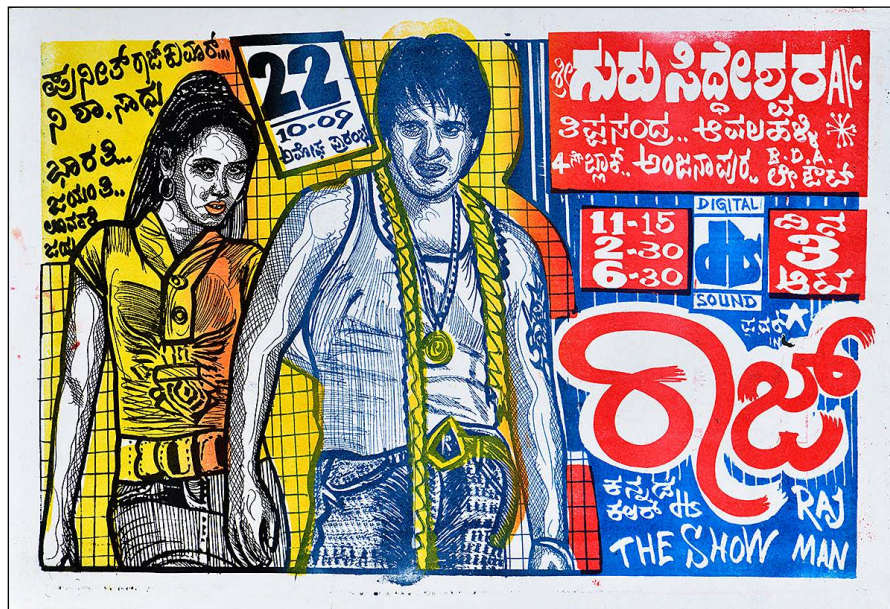


Olave Jeevana Lekkachaara!, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Olave Jeevana Lekkachaara!* (Love is the Calculation of Life!) is a Kannada-language romance film starring Srinagara Kitty and Radhika Pandit, two of the industry's leading actors. It was directed by the award-winning Sandalwood veteran Nagathihalli Chandrashekar.
- Sandalwood experienced its golden age during the 1960s through the '80s, when most of the movies featured original content. Throughout the '90s and 2000s, however, the Kannada film industry began to increase production. The quality of the works soon deteriorated; there were more remakes and "formula films" that pointed to the studios' desire to make a quick profit at any cost.

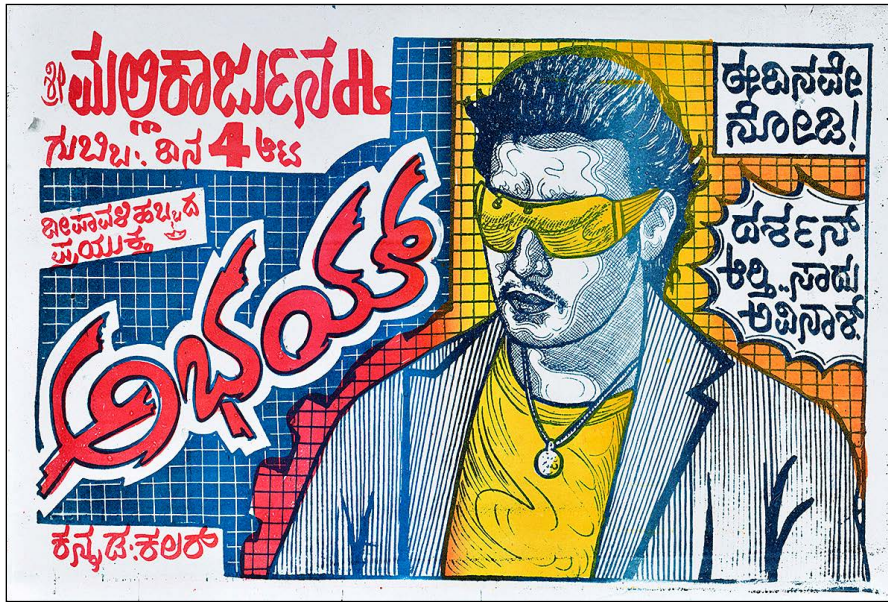


Raaj the Showman, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- While small compared to U.S. film budgets, *Raaj the Showman*'s 75-million rupee investment (approximately \$1.5 million USD) was incredibly expensive for a Sandalwood production. The movie was a box-office hit and collected sums amounting to more than triple its budget after only 50 days in theaters.
- A large part of the budget had been used to secure the cast, which included Puneeth Rajkumar (nicknamed "Powerstar"), one of the highest-paid actors in Kannada cinema. The Bollywood model-turned-actress Priyanka Kothari (often credited as Nisha Kothari) was also featured. Kannada films often turn to unsuccessful Bollywood actresses such as Kothari as they are less expensive to hire than the top South Indian stars but still elevate the status of the movie due to the Bollywood connection.
- *Raaj the Showman* was the first Kannada film to have a simultaneous domestic and international release--this is probably why its title is in English rather than in Kannada.



Abhay, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Abhay* is a Kannada-language *masala* film. Named after the Indian spice mixture, these frequently combine action, comedy, romance, and drama. The most popular type of films in India, they might follow a riveting fight scene with a musical dance number (most Indian films are musicals), even overlaying a serious plot addressing violence and colonialism with a comedic love triangle.
- While this movie was criticized for its derivative nature, Indian films intentionally cater to the tastes of local audiences. Fans of Kannada movies expect jam-packed action, song, and dance in productions often running around three hours. They also complain that Hollywood films are too short and that their stars lack emotion.

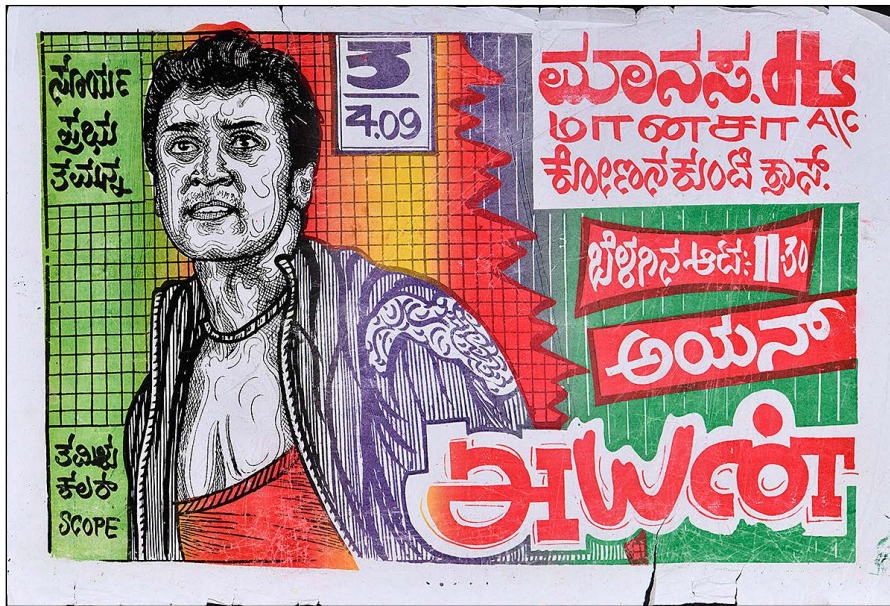


Duniya, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Duniya* (World) was a resounding success with both critics and audiences, remaining in theaters for 150 days—impressive, considering the shortage of single-screen cinemas in India and the high production rate of films in the region. As a testament to its popularity, this poster promotes a 2009 screening of the film, a full two years after its initial release.
- According to the Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce, the number of single-screen cinemas in the state fell from 1,300 to 780 in 2009. This decline was not unique to Karnataka—the rise of multiplexes and the increased popularity of television and streaming has reduced the number of single-screen theaters across India.
- *Duniya* was devoid of the standard gimmicks featured in typical Kannada films and was thus heralded as representing a new age of filmmaking—a fresh, original work in a year when the usually successful remakes began failing at the box office.

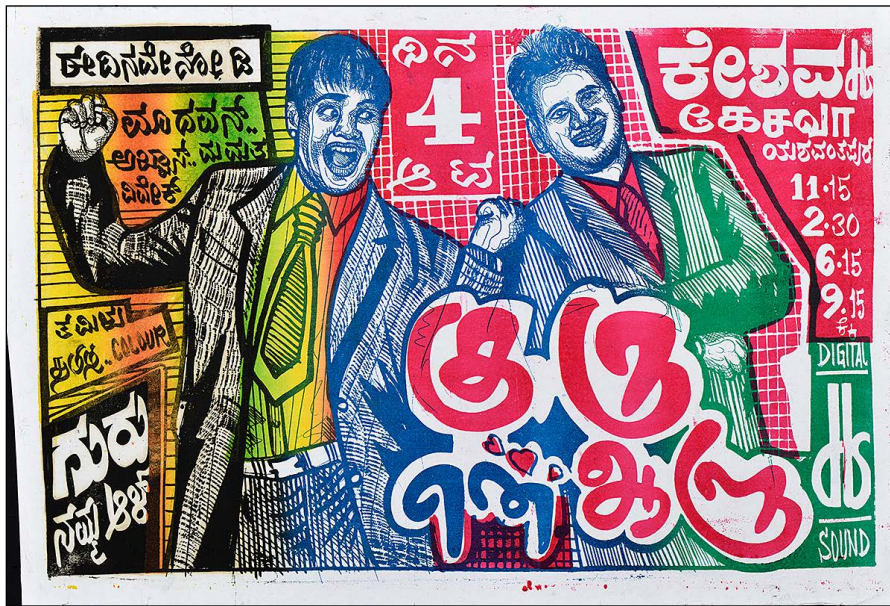


Ayan, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Ayan* (Creator) was a box-office hit and declared the “solo blockbuster of 2009” in Tamil cinema.
- The Tamil-language film industry is known as “Kollywood,” a portmanteau of the words Hollywood and Kodambakkam (the neighborhood in Chennai where it is based). It is the second-largest film-production center in India, and its movies regularly have higher budgets than those of Sandalwood.
- Although Raju and Ramachandraiah speak Kannada, this poster also includes text in Tamil, the same language as the film. This is not uncommon in their work; Raju frequently creates posters in English, Hindi, and Tamil.
- These multilingual, rapidly produced posters (Raju can design a poster in just three hours) often, and perhaps inevitably, feature misprints and typos.

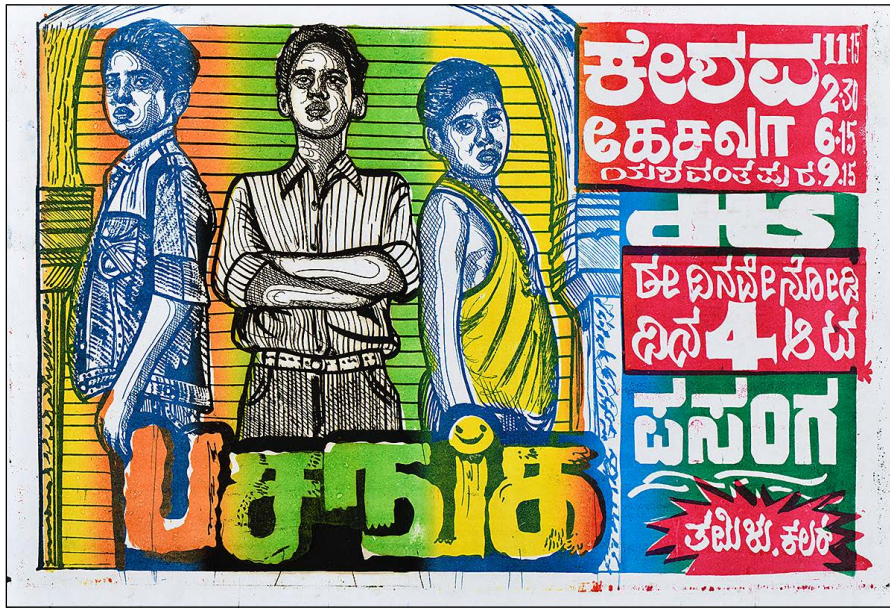


Guru En Aalu, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Guru En Aalu* (Guru Is My Man) is a Tamil-language remake of the 1997 Hindi romantic comedy *Yes Boss*, based in turn on the 1993 Hollywood film *For Love or Money* starring Michael J. Fox.
- This is the type of movie that was rarely screened in Bangalore multiplexes but found a passionate audience in single-screen theaters. These venues typically cater to different viewers, with the former dedicated to Bollywood and Hollywood films with higher ticket prices, and the latter offering more affordable seats to working-class people who mostly speak Kannada.
- The audience experience in these two locations is also markedly different. In local cinemas, those seated closest to the screen (frequently called “front-benchers”) often throw coins and torn-up lottery tickets, especially on a movie’s first day—symbolically declaring that they consider a first-day screening to be more valuable than any amount of money they might win.
- Multiplex theaters in India, particularly those in shopping malls, have transformed moviegoing. The noise that characterizes traditional, single-screen cinemas has been replaced by a decorous silence.

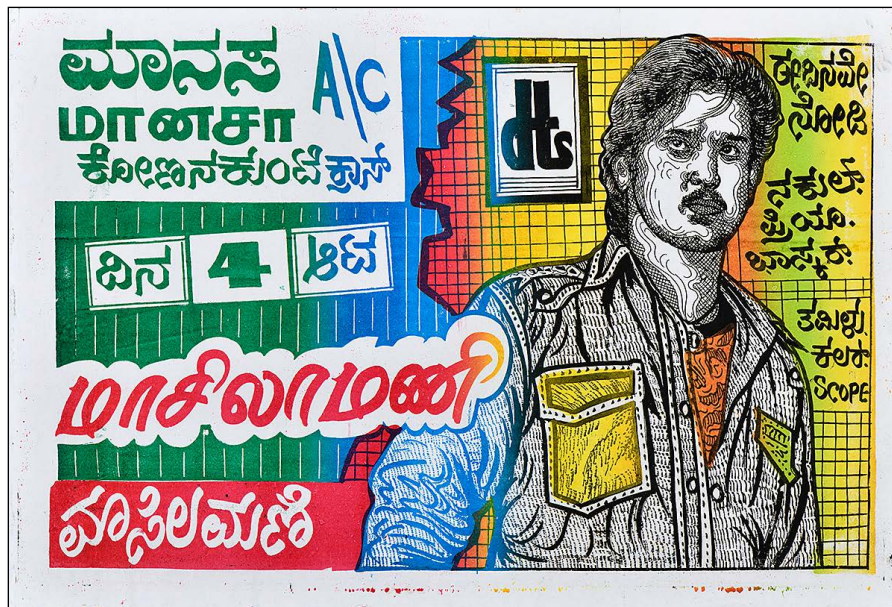


Pasanga, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- The Tamil-language children's movie *Pasanga* (Kids) received critical acclaim, winning three National Film Awards as well as several international ones. The film was remade in Sri Lanka in 2012 as *Daruwane* (Kids).
- Ramachandraiah's shop was situated in the Majestic neighborhood (also known as Kempe Gowda Road), named after the iconic Majestic Theatre. While this was once the "Broadway" for Kannada cinema and home to dozens of single-screen theaters, only four remain today.
- Before the rise of multiplexes, Majestic was a Sandalwood hub, with crowds lining up in front of theaters on opening night and facades decorated with tinsel and garlands like temples on festival days. Theaters showing Hollywood and Bollywood films, mostly in the Cantonment area of Bangalore, are not involved in these displays of enthusiasm. The location of Ramachandraiah's shop and its focus on South Indian films reflect a specific folk aesthetic and culture, one addressed by these posters.

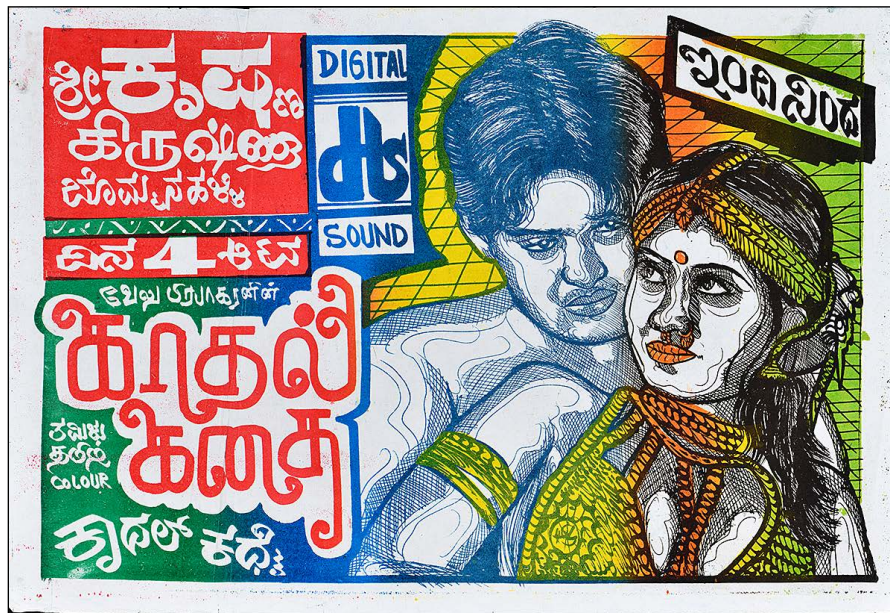


Maasilamani, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Maasilamani* is a Tamil-language romantic comedy featuring music by Immanuel Vasanth Dinakaran—popularly known as D. Imman—a singer and composer who chiefly works in Tamil cinema.
- Many South Indian movies include original music that is central to the film. It also helps to shape the unique environment associated with single-screen theaters, where the love of audience members for cinema often transforms the experience into a raucous and intimate affair as they dance and sing along.
- Many movies are crafted around these musical dance numbers, which are frequently filmed before the plot is finalized. The songs generate profits and a film's score sometimes becomes more popular than the production itself.

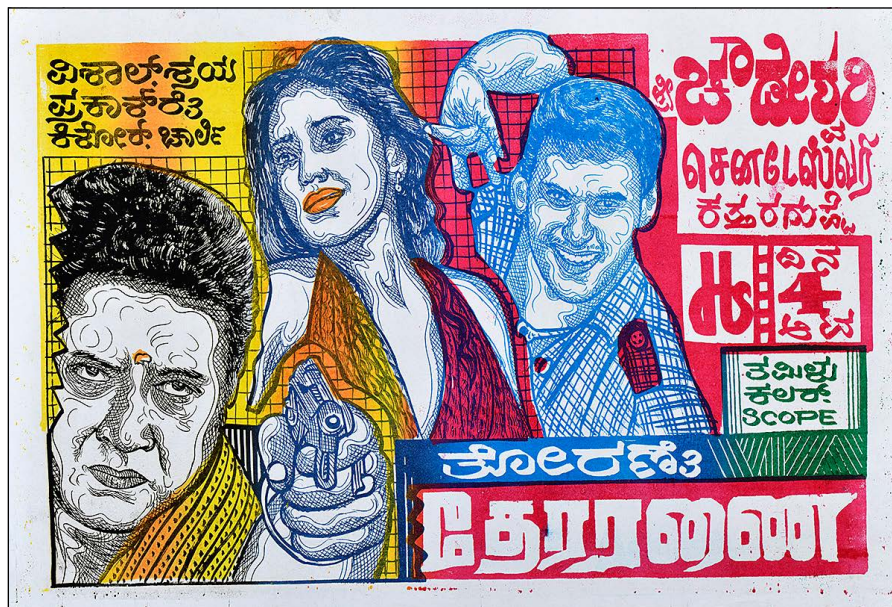


Kadhal Kadhai, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- This poster advertises the Tamil-language romantic drama *Kadhal Kadhai* (Love Story). It was written and directed by the film's star, Velu Prabhakaran.
- The movie was released after years of conflict with India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) over its excessive erotic content and criticism of the prevailing caste system. Despite the director's claim that it intentionally took a moral stance on the exploitation of the female body, the film was condemned for its utter lack of plot and its hypocritical exploitation of three actresses in gratuitous and violent sex scenes.
- In order to be approved by the CBFC, films must not glorify violence, criminal activity, drug consumption, or obscenity, and are often subject to large cuts and delays in order to comply with these strictures. Producers are also known to bribe the CBFC to secure its approval.

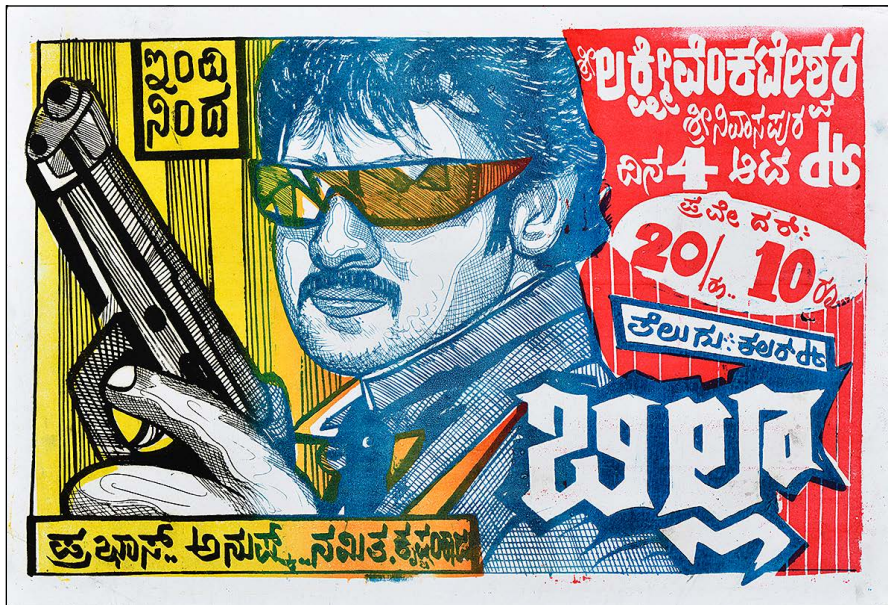


Thorani, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- *Thorani* (Posture)—also called *Pistha* (Person with Attitude)—was shot simultaneously in Tamil and Telugu, with each version featuring a different supporting cast. It was also remade in Bhojpuri as *Shola Aur Shabnam* (Fire and Dew Drops).
- Although the posters by Ramachandraiah and Raju were adored by tourists and other outsiders, locals often considered them urban blight. In an effort to clean up Bangalore in the 1990s, the city banned the pasting of posters on buildings and other exterior walls.
- These bans have come and gone over the years, depending on the position of the city government. Politicians sometimes try to gain the favor of voters by promising to clean up Bangalore; posters throughout the city are torn down overnight and the walls are painted white and stamped with the words “stick no bills.” The local government might even commission artists to paint murals to discourage wheatpasting—but the posters and fliers inevitably return.



Billa, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- Telugu cinema is known as Tollywood. With Kollywood and Sandalwood—also South Indian—it is one of the three largest film-production centers in the country after Bollywood. In 2010, the region housed about 62 percent of the country's movie theaters.
- A remake of a 1978 Hindi film, *Billa* is a Telugu-language action thriller starring Prabhas, one of the highest-paid and most popular movie actors in India.
- Although this poster is written in Kannada, it advertises a Telugu film. Since India is home to countless languages, it is not uncommon for the residents of a single city to speak a different language from that of their neighbors. Thus, some Bangalore locals would not have been able to read the text on this Kannada-language poster. Language barriers of this kind necessitate such immediately recognizable imagery as portraits of celebrities.



Blue, 2009

Ramachandraiah & Raju

Gift of Gail Anderson, Poster House Permanent Collection

- This Hindi-language action film is loosely based on the 2005 Hollywood movie *Into the Blue*, starring Paul Walker and Jessica Alba. At the time of its release, *Blue* was the most expensive Hindi film ever produced, with a budget of one billion rupees (approximately \$20 million). Nonetheless, it failed to earn back the original investment.
- Raju often pulls elements from various promotional materials when creating his posters, synthesizing them into a single image. In contrast to the official movie poster for *Blue*, Raju has only incorporated two of the main figures, modifying the composition so that it also includes the film's female protagonist, a detail taken from a different advertisement.
- The designs of Ramachandraiah and Raju are much better suited to Bangalore audiences than the generic, composite images of standard movie posters. Their vibrant colors and layered patterns effectively reflect the aesthetic of Majestic, one informed by a creative culture of resourcefulness and community.





Press Reviews

around the block, around the world
harlem world

POSTER HOUSE