

India gets hooked on 'snackable' micro-dramas that challenge Bollywood

Popularity of short productions for smartphones grows rapidly but some doubt boom will last

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On a humid and misty morning in Mumbai, Amit Pachori was surrounded by four Pakistani militants inside a dilapidated hillside bungalow.

Sweat trickled down the muscular 41-year-old's face as he sprang into action, fending off their assault and sending one assailant flying backwards in a somersault with an uppercut.

Pachori then froze, fists raised as a wind machine whipped his jet-black hair, wrapping up another micro-drama episode — the addictive entertainment format that has exploded in popularity across India.

Low-budget, AI-assisted and designed for smartphone viewing, the bite-sized medium is already a hit in China where it has become a multibillion-dollar business and generated more annual revenue than the country's cinema box office.

Shows consist of one- to three-minute episodes running to 50 instalments or

more with dramatic hooks and constant cliffhangers keeping viewers swiping for the next episode.

Dressed in black, with fake pistols strapped to his thigh holsters, Pachori was starting a fast-paced four-day shoot for an action series. The actor, a familiar face from Indian TV series over the past two decades, was filming his 21st micro-drama in just eight months.

"Micro-dramas are the future of our industry . . . big production houses are jumping into it," he told the FT in his dressing room. "Every studio is booked, so everybody is working, almost all the actors, technicians. It is tough because we shoot 16 to 17 scenes every day."

The sudden popularity of micro-dramas comes at a difficult moment for India's entertainment and film industry, particularly its Hindi-language heartland Bollywood, where audiences have become more selective with only the biggest blockbusters consistently drawing big crowds. For many actors, technicians and producers, micro-dramas have meant a new source of work.

The appeal is evident across India's trains, buses and workplaces where commuters spend journeys and lunch breaks scrolling through short videos.

Viewers of micro-dramas in India

spend 30 minutes each day watching the shows, according to a survey published by Meta and Mumbai-based consultancy Ormax Media in February.

Micro-drama revenues in India reached about \$300mn last year and are projected to reach as much as \$4.5bn by 2030, according to interactive media venture capital firm Lumikai.

India's 800mn smartphone users, cheap mobile data and youthful population provided fertile ground for micro-

dramas, said Salone Sehgal, founder and managing partner at Lumikai. It has invested in Indian micro-drama platform Story TV, whose slogan is "Snackable Stories That Get You Hooked".

"It's just a category that didn't exist a year before — you're not seeing people, especially young people, tune into television anymore," Sehgal said. "Attention has shifted . . . audiences are largely on mobile and are largely watching content which is instantly available."



An episode of a micro-drama action series is filmed in Mumbai — Karishma Somnath/FT

The commercial opportunity from those eyeballs has also attracted some of India's biggest media groups.

Alongside domestic pioneers such as Kuku TV, JioStar, the media company owned by Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani, launched micro-drama platform Tadka in April. Zee Entertainment, India's oldest private television network, and TV producer Balaji Telefilms have also announced partnerships with short-format start-ups.

The economics are attractive because micro-dramas are relatively inexpensive and quick to produce, costing about Rs1-2mn (\$10,500 to \$21,000) a series.

However, success depends on keeping audiences engaged. "Retention is often poor and that's why there it's almost like a winner-takes-all market," Sehgal said.

AI is also reshaping production and shortening the creative process. Backed by former India cricket captain MS Dhoni, market leader Kuku began making micro-dramas in 2024 after taking inspiration from China and South Korea.

It is now India's largest producer with 10mn subscribers accessing a library of 10,000 shows in 20 languages.

As it gears up for a stock market listing, Kuku aims to use technology to increase its monthly tally of new series

from 150 to more than 1,000. For a story that used to take three months, the same creator could now write five versions in three days, said Kuku co-founder and chief executive Lal Chand Bisu.

"When we started using AI, our content exponentially started increasing," he said in an interview at Kuku's Bengaluru office. "Within five years, India will be a global factory for content."

Although AI is speeding up production, advanced video-generation software now threatens millions of jobs in China's micro-drama industry, meaning the same could happen in India too.

Not everyone is convinced the boom will last. Prathyush Parasuraman, a film critic with The Hollywood Reporter India, said micro-dramas had in essence repackaged exaggerated performances, twists and melodramatic Indian TV storytelling tropes for the smartphone era.

He warned of the risk of audience fatigue from "heavily formulaic" content. "You cannot have a subscriber base hooked on to a platform if the stories being told are the same. There's been this exponential rise but an exponential rise is not sustainable," he said.

Additional reporting by Andrea Rodrigues in Mumbai