

Article

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The Big Nowhere? Film Exhibition and Viewership in the Pandemic World



Since the development and mushrooming of film cultures in different parts of the world in the twentieth century, the physical place and space where actually films are experienced have undergone many a change in terms of the technologies of projection and the overall viewing experience. Along with it there have been also changes in ambience, decor and sitting arrangement of cinema theatres with the advent of time and technology. Writing about the picture palaces and movie theatres in the 1920s in Berlin, cultural critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer teased out the difference between the specific wholesome experience of watching a film and the implications of the breakdown of this experience if film is sandwiched with other varied forms of entertainment (which was often the case back then in theatres). His point and argument were that the masses were used to such a fragmented experience and they could appropriate such distractions to perceive the chaos and anarchy of urban life. Kracauer also draws attention to the grandiose and baroque architectural design of most of these theatres and finds an irony here since the entertainment on

display is far removed from high art and culture implied by such structures. He proposes that movie theatres “should rid their offerings of all trappings that deprive film of its rights and must aim radically toward a kind of distraction that exposes disintegration instead of masking it” (Kracauer, 1995). Standing at the crossroads of exhibition practices of film in the twenty first century we the viewers are experiencing films now in the theatre, on television and in different hand-held mobile devices. While the viewers will have their different preferences of watching a film through any of these means, there is a raging debate going on amongst filmmakers and theorists as to what constitutes a true film experience. Many of the new generation filmmakers are medium agnostic and they have almost no qualms in this regard as long as their films reach the viewers. On the other hand, many stalwarts still swear by the theatre experience as the touchstone for film viewing. The debate reached the Oscars couple of years ago when there was a controversy as to whether films releasing on digital streaming platforms should be considered for awards. There is still no consensus as such on

the issue and by all accounts, this seeming incoherence in film distribution, exhibition and reception is here to stay.



On the audiences' front too, changes are in place which pose a challenge for established viewing habits and patterns. According to news reports, all the streaming services have

In a much shared and discussed article by renowned author Yuval Noah Harari on the post Covid-19 pandemic world, he argued that changes which earlier took decades for materialization may now happen overnight and realign our worlds in almost all aspects. He predicted that “the decisions people and governments take in the next few weeks will probably shape the world for years to come. They will shape not just our healthcare systems but also our economy, politics, and culture. We must act quickly and decisively.” Three instances from Mumbai film world this year here can illustrate what Harari is driving at. Shoojit Sircar’s *Gulabo Sitabo*, starring Bollywood legend Amitabh Bachchan and rising icon Ayushman Khurrana was released digitally on Amazon Prime after a brief controversy as the producers had to cancel plans for theatrical opening due to the sudden countrywide lockdown announced by the Government of India in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sushmita Sen and the entire cast of the Disney+Hotstar web series *Aarya* did their dubbing through online interactions and meets during the lockdown as the date for release had already been announced for the already delayed project. According to the director of the series Ram Madhvani, he and his team worked on post-production for 18 hours a day from their respective homes to complete the show in time for its release date of June 19.

registered increasing viewership during the lockdown which probably will spill over in the post-pandemic scenario too. According to online streaming guide Justwatch.com, Zee5 lead the eyeballs with an increase of 259 percent in the period between March 24 and April 24. During the same period in India, Netflix saw a 204 percent increase, while Amazon Prime (189 percent), AltBalaji (174 percent), JioCinema (161 percent), and Disney+Hotstar (149 percent) all showed impressive viewership figures. In fact, for all the streaming giants, India was looked upon as a huge market even before the pandemic induced lockdown. In a 2017 issue of the Open magazine, Gaurav Gandhi, COO of the digital streaming site Voot was quoted thus: “There are around 450 million mobile users in India now, out of which some 200 million consume digital video. In all our estimates, going ahead, more households will have at least one streaming device than a TV set. It is going to go wild”.

The debate before the pandemic relating to film exhibition veered towards the consensus that both traditional film going, and online streaming is going to co-exist and flourish in different measures. But in the context of specifically India, the pandemic is showing no signs of withdrawal and film theatres have remained shut for close to six months now. As a result, many a big-budget Hindi and regional language films have reformulat-

ed their promotion and exhibition plans. In this context, the traditional social institution of the film theatre where publics congregate to collectively experience a film is in crisis as the financial aspect of their continuation and development has hit a roadblock due to the Covid-19 protocols against public gatherings in almost all the countries of the world. Just a few days ago, in the state of Assam (where I live) the government announced a subsidy package for cinema theatre owners in the light of the revenue deficit during the pandemic period. The money was released under a scheme of the Assam State Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Limited to five entrepreneurs for opening of new cinema halls and five entrepreneurs for reopening or renovation of closed and old cinema halls. The announcement came straight from the Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who is considered to be close and familiar with the concerns of the cultural community of Assam. For new cinema halls, the government would bear a subsidy up to 25 percent or Rs 75 lakh, and for the renovation of cinema halls subsidy of Rs 25 lakh would be provided. Part of the fund (Rs. 50 lakh) would also go towards the opening of old and closed cinema halls. However, it needs to be considered that for a state where the local cinema is facing different challenges, film business is mostly patchy from locally made films, and theatres mostly bank on Bollywood fare for regular flow of revenue. In a television talk programme aired after the government announcement for local theatres, cinema hall/multiplex owners and film journalists expressed their viewpoints, apprehensions, and expectations about the changing and dire implications for their trade in the wake of the pandemic. Rajib Bora, owner of movie chain Gold Cinema and general secretary of All Assam Cinema Hall Owners' Association appeared hopeful in spite of the setback and said he is satisfied with the overall package but suggested that there were many halls in smaller towns across Assam which needed an urgent financial boost. Moreover, he applauded the Government of Assam, for it is the only state where the government have come forward to help private players in the

exhibition business. Chinmoy Sharma, owner of capital city Guwahati's prestigious Anuradha Cine Complex (which is one of the oldest in the region and still thriving) had sounded the warning bells in the month of May to the government about the "huge amount of fixed costs which include electricity bills, rent, staff salary, etc "amid the lockdown, and losses incurred were reportedly "approximately Rs 25,000-Rs 30000 per day." The Assam government's policy orientation regarding cinema in the last twenty years is geared towards the twin goals of backing meaningful film projects and building sustainable mini film halls where local films are to get preference. But without a sufficient number of Assamese films releasing per year, halls or theatres cannot sustain their business depending solely on them. Assamese films have a brief shelf life as they have very few options for viewership after their theatrical run. Thus, most mainstream Assamese films still depend on their theatrical run to earn a profit. Regional television and emergent digital streaming platforms have not yet turned around things for Assamese cinema since their business model is purely profit-driven. Netflix may pick up a local film if it has generated enough buzz in the international film festivals like it happened with Rima Das *Village Rockstars*. It seems, *Village Rockstars* also became a hit in the theatres only because sufficient publicity around it surfaced thanks to its selection as India's official entry to the Oscars in 2018. Das's next venture *Bulbul Can Sing* (acclaimed in festival circuits) almost sank without a trace at the local box office. So, one can say masses in the state of Assam are star-struck like in the rest of the country. Cases in point which can be mentioned are the huge hits in the form of *Kanchanjangha* (2019) and *Ratnakar* (2019) which had two of the most popular stars of the region in the lead. But it is unlikely that these two films will be picked up (in spite of their commercial success) by leading streaming platforms since their appeal is limited to Assam and its adjacent regions. Currently when it comes to the question of producing quality films in local languages, film policy of the Government of Assam approves Rs 25 lakh

subsidy for film productions which costs beyond Rs 1 crore. Subsidy of Rs 1 crore is assured for films honoured with National Award while Rs 2 crore is earmarked for films nominated for Oscar. But going by the recent record of Assamese films which have performed decently at the box office and garnered good reviews, one is prompted to say that this new film policy is a bit lopsided. Most of the new directors who have made noteworthy films recently (Bhaskar Hazarika, Himjyoti Talukdar, Kenny Deori Basumatari, Anupam Kaushik Bora) have worked within very tight budgets which is rarely beyond Rs. 1 crore. Add to it, filmmakers who can assemble a crore for production are more likely to procure another 25 lakh which is roughly the budget for many of the exciting filmmakers on the horizon. It is also very unlikely that every good film made locally will make their mark at the National Awards not to speak of the Oscars where no Indian film has won a major award like the best foreign picture trophy yet. Apart from the subsidy to ailing and new theatres all across the Brahmaputra Valley, what Assamese filmmakers need are a transparent selection procedure for quality worthy scripts which will get financial and other logistical support from the authorities. One is afraid of the way this new film policy is positioned to be realized will probably only help the status quo and not bring about much of the desired changes.

Film scholar Stephen P. Hughes observes that only through careful documentation of 'local histories of exhibition we will for the first time be able to begin address the questions of who saw what kinds of film, where and when'. Historically India presents these changes in the domain of film distribution and viewership in a unique manner. Along with the emergence of the latest state of the art multiplexes in the late 1990s to the rapidly dying single screen theatres of yore, going to the cinema in India is an exciting everyday experience. It has been popular very consistently, unless for the relatively small decline in attendance in the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of the exponential rise in the popularity of television. The multiplex, like the departmental store is

one of those commodities of an aspiring post liberalized India, whose consumption pattern is marked by a corresponding class dynamic. High ticket costs have meant that the multiplex has become a haunt only for the affluent. Thankfully, multiplicity of media technologies these days from the television set to the mobile phone, especially of the smart variety, has ensured that the most popular art of the modern times is accessible for the average consumer and citizen. Streaming platforms currently operating in India offer a wide variety of regional, national, and international cinema, web series and television programmes at varying prices tailored for different segments of the population. Many operators like Netflix (which is one of the pure streaming services without any other product aimed at the customer) have kept their monthly subscription rate on the higher end while the other streaming agencies like Amazon Prime, Voot, MX Player, Jio Cinema etc are offering their libraries through hybrid business models where they are looking beyond the content to actually push their primary products (Prime Video, for instance, is only an attachment for the customer which if he/she subscribes at just over hundred rupees will give a boost to the overall e-business of Amazon with perfunctory benefits for the consumer).

The word 'cinema' apart from referring to its medium specific attributes, also simply means 'a building in which films are shown, containing at least one auditorium in which an audience watches together' (Oxford Dictionary of Media & Communication, 2011). In our Indian context, these places where films are exhibited are quite plainly referred to as 'cinema halls'. We seem to use the word 'hall' to mark its difference from other various kinds of halls in our villages, towns, and cities. Our towns and cities are marked by their colonial pasts and cinema halls are an important marker of their status as urban centres. If eighteenth century bourgeois Europe had its share of coffee houses, its colonial outposts, from the late nineteenth century had its cinemas. Both contributed to an emergence of a form public culture significant at different

points of time in history which German sociologist Jurgen Habermas have characterised as a 'public sphere' – 'a network for communicating information and points of view' and by extension, in the modern world the mass media can be seen as constituting this arena. However, Habermas' idea of public sphere or his lament of a decaying public sphere into the twentieth century in Europe does not sit comfortably with the specific Indian context and experiences where the audio-visual media of film, folk theatre/entertainments and then television have been dominant over print media in terms of power and influence historically. Here, the role played by cinema halls as public entertainment and a performance arena where films are routinely played out before a mass audience requires scrutiny. In a country where literacy rates have been very low for a long-time cinema was the only medium which allowed a kind of public conversation. If the European salon of the eighteenth century was bourgeois, the Indian cinema hall in colonial and post-colonial times is uniquely a democratic space, albeit with resistances coming from the owners and the influential upper middle class. S.V. Srinivas (quoted in Athique, 2011) has detailed through his examination of letters sent to film journals of the 1950s the debates surrounding cinema halls. It was revealed that most of these letters (written by men) were centred upon the discomfort of middle-class Indian viewers with the public behaviour of the lower social orders within theatres, as well as concerns regarding the potential for contacts between 'respectable' Indian women and thoroughly 'unrespectable' men that were now being made possible by the institution of cinema. Thus, in many ways state irritation coalesced into middle class anxiety about mass gatherings in public places. Nonetheless, both the economic logic of film exhibition as a mass medium and the scarcity of public space in the new India meant that people of all classes were regularly brought together by the instrument of cinema during this period (Athique, 2011). With web broadcasting and streaming, however, space has become interspersed with speed. 4G net speed and more data at cheaper rates is go-

ing to be the norm which will facilitate further growth in the viewership of streaming platforms. However, the numbers in India in relation to general internet users (53.66%) and users with mobile internet connectivity (29%) conveys a less buoyant picture than the one purportedly touted in popular discourse about the impact of web platforms and their content. Television and film theatres continue to be parallel reception sites if not more influential than their latest glitzy counterpart.

In the classical film theory perspective, films become films only because they are projected inside dark theatres on a big screen to a group of viewers. The expression 'larger than life' connote the materiality of the large screen where characters and places appear in vast sizes and connote the subject matter of cinema where stories are largely dreamlike fables (e.g. classical age Hollywood films or the early Indian devotional films). Television may have influenced the language of cinema, or for that matter, millions of viewers may view films on the television or the smaller smart phones but that does not take away the specific quality and appeal of watching a film in a theatre where there is a greater engagement of viewers with the screen. There is little possibility of external interference in a theatre. In fact, the power of the apparatus of theatre is such that it makes the viewers oblivious to external factors and frictions for the time being. It is literally a dream like state where most viewers voluntarily enter for a specific period of time. Much of the power of narrative cinema resides in its ability to make the viewer enter the world of the screen narrative, thus enabling the process of 'suture'. A film positions its viewers as much as a viewer frames a film in terms of its stars, story, spectacle, or genre. With increasing popularity of web-based platforms, viewership globally is changing the economy and ecology of film exhibition and reception tremendously. The aberrant and unpredictable behaviour of the covid-19 virus has dealt body blow to the global economy upsetting the routine order of

things everywhere. The pandemic, apart from its tragic toll on human lives, has given us a taste of the world that is at the horizon. The things we are accustomed to, habituated to and love watching are in for a reorganization session big time. May be, after the pandemic, as philosopher Slavoj Zizek says: “World as we know it will be just nostalgia”.

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