

# Existential Crisis of Single Screen Theatres in India

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**ABSTRACT** - Single screen theatres are in moribund status and fighting hard for their survival in India. Year 2020 delivered a mortal blow to single screen cinema halls which faced restrictions on running shows at the outbreak of novel coronavirus in March 2020. After prolonged closure, movie theatres were allowed to be functional from November 2020. There was huge loss incurred due to COVID restrictions for several months. Although government granted permission for running theatre with fullest capacity, occupancy rate remained abysmally low. About 10 percent of single screen theatres from North India closed down their operation on permanent basis. Making payment to wages of theatre employees and paying utility bills remained a heavy burden in the backdrop of miniscule box office earning. Threat of virus, social distancing norm, change in viewing pattern, rise in OTT based entertainments kept audience away from theatres. Expenses on sanitation and hygiene precautions went high but revenue generations turned minuscule. In February 2021, existing single screen theatres pinned hope for big ticket release of new blockbusters but rise in corona virus cases in India marred the hope of prospective earning. High operating cost, scant revenue, devoid of grants from government are pushing single screen theatres to the edges. Unless virus threat is over and people returning to old movie viewing habit, threat to existence would loom large for single screen theatres.

**KEYWORDS:** *Healthcare emergency restriction, Low occupancy, Operating cost, Permanent closure, Scant revenue, Single screen theatres*

## I. INTRODUCTION

World is changing at faster pace. Old concepts and practices are becoming obsolete and passing into oblivion. There is disruption in social life, economic sphere, business operation and in other spectrum of activities. Technology is the driving force and providing stimulus for superior alternative measures. There is no dearth of man-made catastrophe and natural calamities in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Business model is changing to keep up with aspirations of modern society. Businesses are more concerned with market dynamics, environment and preference of people. Standardisation and customisation are ruling the roost to fulfil the need of customer and enhancing loyalty factor. There is constant upgradation in product, process and program to gain competitive advantage and attain long term sustainability. Entertainment underwent massive transformation since liberalisation in India in 1990s. Multiplex movement started in the world in 1980s and it made its presence in India mid-1990s. India's first multiplex emerged in 1997 with advent of PVR Anupam in Delhi. Single screen theatres started to feel challenged in rise and prosperity of multiplexes across all cities of India. Movie, eating out, recreation and relaxation happened under one roof. Indian population with rising purchasing power in post liberalisation period welcomed this new experience wholeheartedly. So many single screen theatres lost viewers, failed to compete with rising popularity

of multiplexes and were compelled to close down. Few continued with distinct makeover and due to old patronage. Technology boom made single screen theatres unattractive. High Definition Television set and home theatre captured attention of new age viewers. Fast life, time-based options and anytime movie at smart devices created a new pattern in movie viewing style. Over the top (OTT) media service ushered in a new era in entertainment industry in 2008 with BigFix introduced by Reliance Entertainment. Many joined into OTT foray and market bustled with exuberance of Hotstar, Netflix and rest OTT providers. It became a phenomenal success across all age groups with better telecom service and lower expense of data service facility. As per KPMG Media and Entertainment Report 2018, OTT has great prospect in India and can turn out to be Rs 1380 crore business by completion of financial year 2023. This OTT euphoria was also unfavourable phenomenon for single screen theatre and ended up making it lacklustre. Arrival of pandemic with outbreak of dreadful COVID 19 was the last nail in the coffin of single screen theatres. Imposition of lockdown pulled the shutters down and fear of infection, social distancing made a scathing blow to cinema halls with single screen.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal objectives of the research paper are referred below-

- i. To describe vulnerability and obsolescence of single screen theatres in India.
- ii. To explain the gravity of crisis for single screen theatres in India during pandemic and post pandemic time.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the article 'The End' looms for single screens but some say 'Picture abhi baaki hai' by Sharmila Ganesan Ram and Priyanka Dasgupta published in TOI dated December 8, 2020, authors expressed concern over pitiable status of single screen movie theatres in metro cities which are at the end of tether during pandemic led pandemonium. There had been significant reduction in footfall to all theatres owing to COVID restrictions and fear of contacting fatal virus. The decrepit talkies of the town required much-needed facelift but in absence of fund, revival remained distant hope. The prospect of better seats, well-functioning air conditioner and conducive ambience inside hall remained dimmed as revenue reduced drastically with passage of time. Turnout of viewers declined sharply over time on account of assault from TV versatility and pervasive piracy of motion pictures. The assistance by die-hard theatre enthusiasts in the form of sponsoring community viewing so far salvaged moribund halls for some time. All theatres waited for big release from Bollywood or Hollywood to lease them a fresh life.

In the article 'A slow death' by Suhani Singh published in India Today dated October 5, 2020, author delineated about struggle underwent by single-screen theatres on the wake of COVID 19 in 2020. Author mentioned about March 2020 report of FICCI- EY on India's Media and Entertainment sector which specified decline in revenue from Rs 6,000 crore in 2018 to Rs 5,300 crore in 2019 for talkies which reduced from 6,651 to 6,327 in numbers. Both talkies and multiplexes faced the blow of lockdown and incurred huge revenue losses. Livelihood of about 2 million people were at stake when screening stopped in talkies and multiplexes in March 2020. Theatres earlier garnered revenue of Rs 11,500 crore in 2019 being miles ahead from digital revenue worth Rs 2,210 crore and TV satellite accumulation of Rs 1,900 crore with rights of screening during same period. The tendency of releasing movie in digital medium with spike in OTT subscription diminished the prospect of revival for single screen talkies. Talkies faced financial hardship. Maintenance expense, staff salaries, property taxes and payment of water and electricity bills became unaffordable in absence of allowance from state government.

In the research paper titled, 'Changing movie viewing patterns of moviegoers and the rise of multiplex theatres in India: Is it the end of the show for single-screen theatres' by K. Shiva Shanka, K. Raja Ram published in Parishodh Journal, September 2019, authors explained about screen deficiency in India for viewing movie in comparison with facility available in US. But dichotomy lies with closure of single screen theatres in India despite shortage of screens for

per million population. Authors pointed out dwindling status of talkies with rising popularity of multiplexes in metros and tiered cities of India. There had been change in preference as multiplex offered superior experience for moviegoers. In absence of proper revamp plan for single screen theatres, hope of revival went downhill for decrepit talkies.

In the narrative of Hemani Bhandari in article 'For single-screen theatres, it's still a 'no show'' published in The Hindu dated February 07, 2021, we find the worry of prolonged shutdown for single screen theatres in India. Lockdown brought the halls down on their knees due to massive revenue loss. Low occupancy during unlock also hit the cinema hall business very hard. There was lack of wherewithal to pay full wages to cinema hall employees. So, workers were worst affected as their income reduced drastically and it became an uphill task to manage household expenses of ill-fated employees. Problem is more when they are old or aged with no prospect of getting job in other sector. Talkies ran empty mostly even after reopening post lockdown but electricity and other expenses continued to be same.

In the article 'Single screens pin hopes of recovery on summer lineup' by Lata Jha published in HT Mint on February 25, 2021, we find the concern of low occupancy rate for single screen talkies after reopening post lockdown. About 6000 talkies looked forward to big release as last hope of turnaround. Pandemic driven lockdown dealt mortal blow and about 1000 single screen halls disappeared permanently. It had been difficult to run talkies with shrinking footfalls though electricity and salary expenses continued to be same. Business remained in loss and failed to come above break-even point when audience turnout remained less and people received other means of entertainment at reasonable price.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

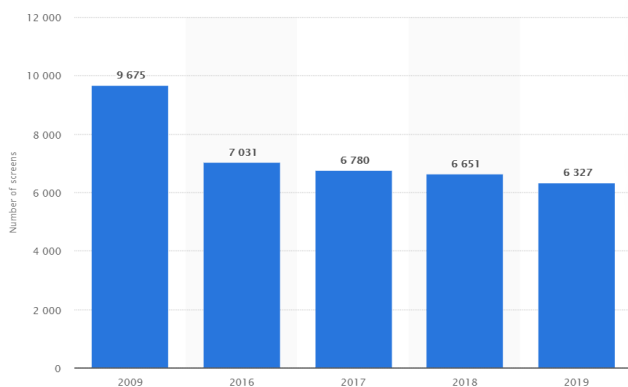
The Descriptive and analytical methods were adopted to orchestrate the research process on aforementioned topic. There had been epistemological and ontological angle of the research activity as it embarked the authors on journey of discovery. There was sincere search to find the wretched conditions of single screen theatres in India. Historic evolution of entertainment had been uncovered and exploration had been made to figure out contributing factors for deterioration of single screen cinema halls. Secondary data and information buried in reliable sources such as books, periodical publications and newspaper articles had been rummaged through. Effort was exerted to track the transforming trend in entertainment industry and change in preferences among people of civil society. There was attempt to delineate causal relationship between dwindling status of single screen cinema halls and contributing factors which triggered the process. The research paper would attest to be a treasured account as it left no stone unturned to delve deeper and discover root cause of decadence for standalone theatres. Further research can be conducted to express

reasoning for unfortunate fate of fading means of recreation which created roar and ripple in yesteryears.

### PREDICAMENT OF SINGLE SCREEN THEATRES

Single screen talkies across India are at tipping point, fighting hard for their survival. Challenges are multifaceted and solutions are miniscule. Journey of talkies in India started during British era of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and gained traction in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bombay (now Mumbai) had always been prominent location for film industry where Bollywood industry reached pinnacle of glory all through the decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Film industry also flourished in south and other parts of India in post-independence time. Single screen talkies had a roaring business in pre liberalisation period as they remained prime source of entertainment for movie loving audiences. Even in post liberalisation time, movie halls continued successfully with patronage from all sections of population. Cinema always remained as highest form of performing art and watching movie in theatre used be regarded as best recreation for mankind. Fortune of talkies started to eclipse with the advent of multiplexes in India since early years of 21<sup>st</sup> century. People started to enjoy movie in new set up with better amenities. Growth of multiplexes dented business of talkies. Multiplexes progressed at an accelerated pace with new breed of audience and switchover from old cine-goers. Talkies failed to modernise due to space and financial constraints and found it difficult to compete with corporate led multiplexes. The declining status is nicely portrayed in following diagram.

Diagram I: Statistics of single screen theatres across India from 2009 to 2019



Source: Statista 2021

In the above diagram we find the declining trend of single screen theatres in India. Talkies are no longer in vogue and people are not so keen to view cinema parochial setting. In time series bar diagram presentation, we see regressive pattern for talkies as it declined from 9675 single screen theatres in 2009 to 6327 in 2019. It is evident that glorious time of talkies are over. Multiplexes stole the thunder since their arrival in India in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, pandemic hit talkies like a wrecking ball closing thousands of them completely. In the view of new

development in entertainment industry, single screen talkies seem fighting a losing battle. Turning people away from video streaming, OTT services and movie on demand would be impossible. People enjoy and care more about personal choice of movie and viewing in privacy. High definition picture quality and Dolby digital plus sound clarity in digital platforms acted as unmatched experience for viewers which remained a far cry for majority of theatres.

### DISCUSSION ON UNFAVOURABLE PROSPECT

Talkies are not favourite among cine-goers. Days are gone when single screen theatres were only option for movie viewers. Technology has offered plenitude of options to enjoy movie. People of 21<sup>st</sup> century can watch movie in big screen of multiplex, and also in HD television, personal computer, laptop, tablet and smart phone. There is no time constraint of viewing movie in smart gadgets as it is there for show time-based talkies. People prefer to visit multiplexes because of assorted amenities. It offers a complete package under one roof with cleanliness, better air-conditioning, food court and lounge area which remained a big deficiency for worn out talkies. People no longer find value for money in talkie-based movie viewing experience. Cable TV arrived in India in 1982 and accustomed people with varied options of entertainment. Direct to Home (DTH) service with high end satellite television signals offered multiple channels at affordable price since its arrival in October 2003 with government approval. Over-the-Top media service brought a new wave in entertainment since Bigflix made an entry through Reliance Entertainment in 2008. Video on demand was introduced in India January 2016 with arrival of Netflix and offered superior TV series, content-based documentaries, host of blockbusters in one subscription. It caught the imagination of all movie lovers and turned attention away from all traditional medium of movie viewing options. By 2020, there were more than 10 online streaming services or OTT Platforms in India. All reminded viewers friendly and easy on monthly expenses. Pandemic drove the last nail in the coffin of dwindling theatres when lockdown prohibited visiting of theatres for months.

### RECOMMENDATION TO RETRIEVE LOST GLORY

Hope of revival looks elusive for single screen talkies. But all is not lost. An overhaul strategy can be applied to provide much needed booster dose to dwindling theatres. There should be survey operation to figure out expectations of viewers in tech dominated time. There should be more focus on infrastructure, cleanliness, amenities and utility services. Sanitisation of halls should be done uncompromisingly to eliminate fear of virus threat or spread of communicable disease. Movie goers should realise value for money in revamped set up. Building of talkies should get painted to avoid dilapidated look. Oil painting posters for new releases and old blockbusters would do the trick as people are mostly visual by nature. There should be electronic ticket booking facility. Confirmation of booking and cancellation should be

hassle free process and instantaneous. There could be opening of rooftop café which would attract people who want to date, have a relaxing time, have a bite or a place to have family or friend get together. Open air rooftop café is a craze among all age groups. If run properly, there would not be dearth of footfall in tech driven era as people are ready to pay for exciting experiences. There could be loyalty bonus for regular visitors. Special privilege should be given to old patrons who never gave up on talkies. Courteous service, better infrastructure, superior hospitality at reasonable price can resurrect dismal talkies.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sun is setting on single screen theatres. Ray of hope is mostly invisible in the horizon. Glorious moments are over and no one finds a bee line before ticket counter of talkies as it happened for decades since dawn of cinema industry in India. We are living in information age and part of knowledge economy in India. 21<sup>st</sup> century showed various disruptions in market space and also in economic field of operation. New concept and practice replacing outdated habits and systems. Changes are everywhere on a fast track movement. Stereotype and time bound work, sports, education and entertainment are on vanishing spree. It is more of flexible and with round-the-clock and round-the-year features. Flexible modern system and practices accommodate all and devoid of any time-based rigidity. Archaic single screen theatres fail to fit the bill in changed circumstances. Multiplexes are also facing tough time in technology driven flexi timing framework. Patrons for both talkies and multiplexes reduced substantially in pandemic ridden world as social distancing became stringent norm. India witnessed millions of new subscribers for OTT video streaming platforms. Video on demand is on exponential rise. Talkies would be no match for new world craze. Single screen talkies would find hard to get viewers in post pandemic time also. Maintenance expense, utility bills and salaries for workers would be unavoidable burden. It would be more taxing with meagre footfall and shrinking revenue. Government apathy and absence of financial grants would push the talkies over the edges. Unless some radical transformation happens to draw attention of public, existential crisis would lead to extinction of traditional movie viewing pattern.

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