

# TRAVELLING TALKIES



**New-age mobile cinemas are** taking big-screen content to rural India, offering the AC, surround-sound experience for as little as ₹35 per seat

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**D**inner and a movie is not often an option for the residents of Chhappar, Rajasthan. The small town is about 250 km from Jaipur, and 15 km from the nearest single-screen cinema hall.

So when the PictureTime truck rolls in for the first time, with its inflatable theatre, big screen and seats for 150, crowds gather just to watch it being assembled.

"I have never in my life seen something like this. They just made a cinema hall in front of my eyes and it has AC too!" says Babu Singh, 22, a college student.

In the town, children run behind the announcer as he paces with a microphone, calling people to gather for a screening of the 2017 film, Bahubali 2: The Conclusion. Tickets are priced at ₹35. Women hurry

with the housework to make time for the evening show.

What time are you going, one man asks a neighbour; go first and grab the best seats, another suggests. Inside, a screening begins, but the excited chatter won't die down. There's a lot of clapping; some of the seniors in the audience are chatting.

For Puja Bhowal, 21, who works in the local ward office, this is her first big-screen experience. "I am so excited, I don't have words to describe it," she says.

The PictureTime travelling theatre toured Rajasthan all through June, organising 80 shows on its 18 ft x 7 ft screen, mainly of the high-octane Bahubali, this year's Akshay Kumar-starrer Pad Man and Aamir Khan's Secret Superstar (2017). In all, about 10,000 people turned up.

PictureTime, founded in 2015, currently has 45 such vans touring rural Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, charg-

ing ₹35 to ₹75 per seat. And they're not the only ones.

Over the past five years, new-age travelling talkies have begun taking content to new markets. These are not the rough-and-ready tents with shaky picture and uncertain sound. They're outfits that offer seating, allied events, even interactive sessions where the movie is discussed.

Caravan Talkies, owned by distribution company UFO Moviez and launched in 2015, has 114 vans that tour villages in 14 states, from UP to Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. In Assam, Aaideo Talkies was launched in 2013 by two film institute students and screens Assamese films.

"India is a screen-deprived country of more than 1.3 billion people and only about 9,000 cinema screens," says Kulmeet Makkar, CEO of Producers Guild of India. "The US and China have about 40,000 movie screens each. So despite producing the most films of any country in the world, India loses out on revenue. Cinema needs alternative ways of reaching to people."

Given the high costs and overheads involved in setting up and running a theatre, mobile outfits make sense, adds Anupama Chopra, film critic and founder of online platform, Film Companion. "In a time of dipping footfall at multiplexes, it will be interesting to see how they fare among audiences new to the big screen."

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VIPIN KUMAR



Caravan Talkies has 114 vans that tour villages in 14 states. The vehicle's side opens up into an LCD wall about 12 ft by 7.5 ft.

## MOVING PICTURES

Better tech has been a key turning point. Even in the relatively low-grade Caravan Talkies set-up, the picture and sound are clear even in daylight, though the screen is essentially the truck's side, which opens out into an LED wall about 12 ft by 7.5 ft. Aaideo has a portable 35 ft x 20 ft screen. And PictureTime prides itself on its tech. "The mobile element of our theatre is that it can be taken from place to place. Otherwise it's a semi-permanent set up," says founder and CEO Sushil Chaudhary. The revenue models vary—where PictureTime relies on ticket sales, Caravan

Talkies depends on advertising, typically by vehicles like tractors and two-wheelers and fast-moving consumer goods such as colas, biscuits and low-cost smartphones.

Caravan Talkies and PictureTime typically choose big commercial release like Dangal, When Harry Met Sejal and Sultan, which have proven to have mass appeal.

Producers and distributors share film rights for a particular duration or number of screenings, because it's a low-cost way to battle the theatrical movie's biggest challenge—piracy. And it's a way to monetise areas where there are no screens.

"I believe piracy is simply a function of accessibility," says Makkar of the Producers' Guild. "These initiatives can be a game changer because they have low overheads and so ticket prices can be kept low too."

## ACT TWO

With a new audience, you have to expect surprises, say the organisers of the travelling screenings. In some areas, it helps to have women-only shows. Tears and emotion in a film mean you can expect repeat viewings, because the men that first attended will likely return with the family.

The biggest surprise, though, is the audience requests—often for films from decades ago.

"The first time, the audience will watch whatever is playing," says Siddharth Bhardwaj, chief marketing officer and head of enterprise sales at UFO Moviez.

"But the next time we visit, there are often specific films they want to see. In Saharanpur, UP, in 2016, it was Henna, a 1991 movie starring Rishi Kapoor. Another time, a survey group that visited beforehand found there was much demand for the 1985 Raj Kapoor hit Ram Teri Ganga Mailli, which we screened."

For PictureTime and Caravan Talkies, the future is pegged on growth and expansion as they cater to this market with variety, customisation and scale. PictureTime wants to have 120 vans by March and 3,000 across the country by 2022. Caravan Talkies started with 24 vans and now has 114. Adding screens, states and films will build its own momentum, Makkar says.

As Nitin Kaushal, 22, a farmer from Chhappar, put it, "This is an experience no one from here is willing to miss."

For Aaideo, the future lies in content creation too. As part of their effort to promote niche films, co-founders Pappu Kabeer and Ratna Das are crowdfunding their first production, a comedy feature titled Anamay Dot Com, on the state of toilets installed by the government in Assam.