

Premium large-format cinemas face big test in India

Lata Jha

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NEW DELHI: Real Image Media Technologies Pvt. Ltd, a digital technology provider, will launch four massive screens in Hyderabad in Telangana—about 100 feet wide and 50 feet tall each—over the next couple of couple of months.

The auditoriums, a form of the EPIC cinema experience the company has launched, will be equipped with premium sound and visual systems and offer what industry experts call an ‘immersive’ movie experience.

Earlier this month, cinema exhibition chain PVR Ltd converted Delhi’s iconic Chanakya theatre into the city’s first ECX (enhanced cinema experience) multiplex, a movie-viewing initiative marked by enhanced sound and image quality, comfort and convenience. It is the company’s their third such auditorium in the country after Mumbai and Bengaluru.

The move, clearly, emphasised that audiences are more than ready for a luxurious movie-watching experience.

The premium large format cinema is fast catching on in India, as it has globally.

“We’re living in a time where there’s hardly any difference between watching a movie on a



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home theatre system or your mobile or laptop and watching it on a regular multiplex screen. The only way you can bring the audience to the cinema is by creating an experience that cannot be replicated on the biggest or best home theatre,” said film distributor and exhibitor Akshaye Rathi.

And that is exactly what the premium large cinema format does.

Apart from IMAX, a 70mm motion picture film format and set of cinema projection standards where the screen image width is greater than the width of the film, premium large formats currently available in

India include 4DX, a motion picture technology that allows for environmental effects such as seat motion, wind and rain along with standard audio and video. EPIC offers extra large screens and Dolby Atmos sound and seats with more leg room.

To be sure, these formats mean greater costs. That perhaps explains why over 50% of China’s 39,000 screens are premium-large format while India had 13 IMAX screens and one 4DX screen at the last count. The first obstacle, Rathi says, is at the exhibition level where cinema owners have to equip theatres with expensive visual and audio systems combined with

plush seating and decor.

Gautam Dutta, chief executive officer at PVR, said a premium format like IMAX requires about ₹8 crore more than a regular auditorium; 4DX, on the other hand, demands ₹3 crore more than the standard multiplex screen costs.

“If the screen is around 80 feet wide and 60 feet tall, you’re covering two floors (on a building). So one is the cost of real estate,” said Rajesh Mishra, chief executive officer of Indian operations at digital cinema distribution network UFO Moviez. “Second is the cost on the projection side, for example, one IMAX system costs ₹2 crore. So it is a premium proposition.”

Then there is the cost of crafting content suitable for premium formats that producers incur. While Hollywood may still come up with films like *Dunkirk* and *Fast and Furious 8* almost every month, even an occasional *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* is a challenge for Indian film makers to produce.

“It’s a chicken and egg situation. From an exhibition perspective, there are few films like *Baahubali* which are larger-than-life so we don’t have enough content for IMAX. It doesn’t make financial sense for them, releasing a film on some 8-10 screens, unless it’s a block-

buster,” said Shobu Yarlagadda, co-founder and chief executive officer at Arka Media-works, the producer of *Baahubali*.

Filmmakers, though, feel there is no theatre space. Also, at any point of time, IMAX has a huge pipeline of Hollywood content programmed for the next two or three years. Even though *Baahubali* stormed the box office in April, IMAX still had to go ahead with the release of Marvel’s superhero film *Guardians of Galaxy Vol. 2* the week after that.

Experts like Rathi say that online streaming platforms like Amazon Prime Video and Netflix and increasing broadband penetration across the country only necessitate formats that can bring people back to theatres. The fact that Bollywood has spectacles like *Padmavati* and *Tanaji* planned in addition to Hollywood offerings like *The Lion King* offers hope.

“India is a virgin market for premium large format. If it catches on, people will start making provisions for one such screen in every multiplex. We’ve just started the multiplex revolution and are on an upward curve as far as screen construction is concerned. In 3-4 years, this format should catch up,” Mishra said.



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The move clearly emphasized that audiences today are more than ready for a luxurious movie-watching experience.

The premium large-format cinema is fast catching on in

India, like it has in the rest of the world.

"We're living in a time where there's hardly any difference between watching a movie on a home theatre system or your mobile or laptop and watching it on a regular multiplex screen. The only way you can bring the audience to the cinema is by creating an experience that cannot be replicated on the biggest or best home theatre," said film distributor and exhibitor Akshay Rathi.

And that is exactly what the premium large cinema format does.

Apart from IMAX, a 70mm



Earlier this month, PVR converted Delhi's iconic Chanakya theatre into the city's first ECX multiplex. SUSHIL KUMAR/HT

motion picture format that offers a wall-to-wall experience, premium large formats currently available in India

include 4DX, a motion picture technology that allows for environmental effects such as seat motion, wind and rain,

along with standard audio and video. EPIC offers extra large screens and Dolby Atmos sound and seats with more leg-room.

To be sure, these formats mean greater costs. That perhaps explains why over 50% of China's 39,000 screens are premium large format while India had 13 IMAX screens and one 4DX screen at last count. The first obstacle, Rathi says, is at the exhibition level where cinema owners have to equip theatres with expensive visual and audio systems combined with plush seating and decor.

Gautam Dutta, chief executive officer (CEO) of PVR, said

a premium format like IMAX requires about Rs8 crore more than a regular auditorium; 4DX, on the other hand, demands Rs3 crore more than the standard multiplex screen costs.

"If the screen is around 80 feet wide and 60 feet tall, you're covering two floors (on a building). So, one is the cost of real estate," said Rajesh Mishra, CEO of Indian operations at digital cinema distribution network UFO Moviez. "Second is the cost on the projection side, for example, one IMAX system costs Rs2 crore. So it is a premium proposition."

Then there is the cost that producers incur of crafting content suitable for premium formats. While Hollywood may still come up with films

like *Dunkirk* and *Fast and Furious 8* almost every month, even an occasional *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* is a challenge for Indian filmmakers to produce.

"From an exhibition perspective, there are few films like *Baahubali*, so it doesn't make financial sense," said Shobu Yarlagadda, co-founder and CEO of Arka Mediaworks, the producer of *Baahubali*.

Filmmakers also feel there is no theatre space as at any point of time IMAX has a pipeline of Hollywood content.

UFO's Mishra is hopeful. "India is a virgin market for premium large format. If it catches on, people will start making provisions for one such screen in every multiplex. In 3-4 years, this format should catch on," he said.

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