

The cushy multiplex experience may be what most of us associate film viewing with today. But away from the carpeted floors, instant online booking and the big screen, India's metropolitan cities as well as its small towns and villages retain their passion for movies in unique and striking ways. In a three-part series, *Mint* looks at the film-viewing experience in India 20 years after the country's multiplex revolution.

Why rural India does not miss big screens

Mobile movie theatres, smartphones and free-to-air channels offer people in villages cheaper and easier access to entertainment

RAMESH PATHANIA/MINT

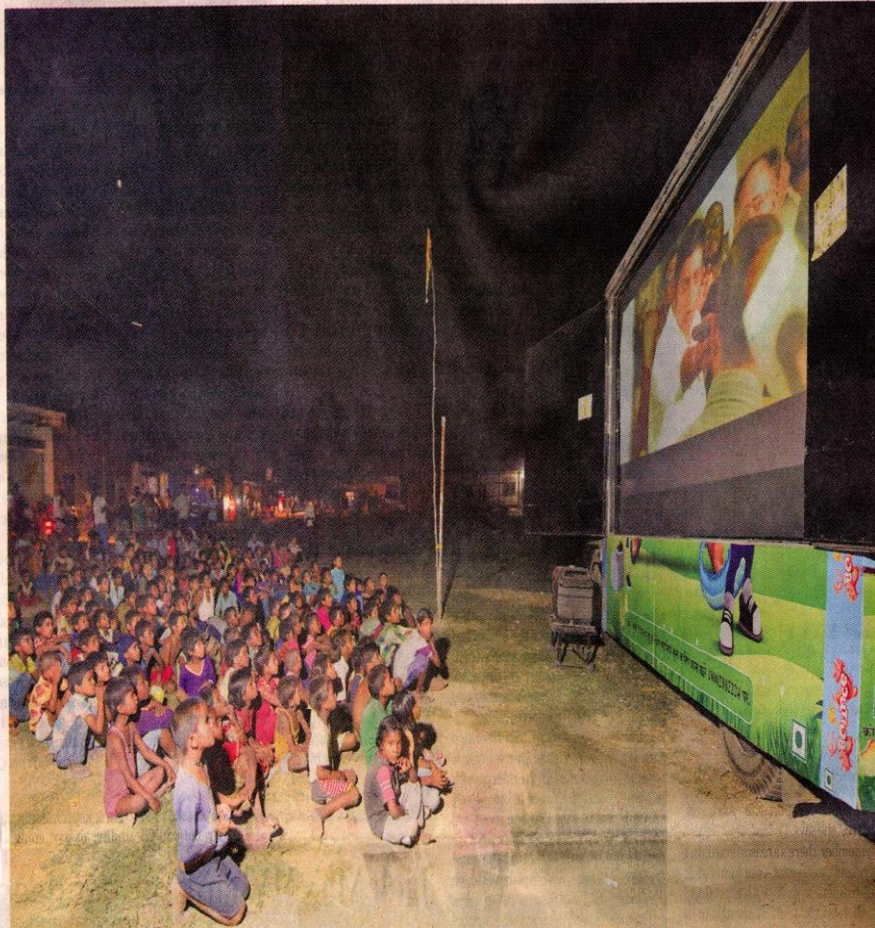
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ASTHUA (BIHAR), BENIPUR
(UTTAR PRADESH) AND
MAMONI (RAJASTHAN)

Satish Kesari is having a lazy afternoon. At around 42°C at 2pm on a scorching Tuesday, there are few customers at Kishan Readymade, his garments shop in Benipur, a tiny village about 40km from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh (UP). But even on this sweltering afternoon, some excitement is palpable in the village. Parked next to a cowshed, just metres from Kesari's store, is a conspicuous van emblazoned with colourful posters advertising Sunfeast Bounce cream biscuits. If the doors of container on the van is flipped open, it becomes a projection screen on which all of Benipur watches a movie every fortnight.

The movie will begin in a few hours. About 600-700 people are expected to show up for the screening. People will try to wrap up work and eat dinner early to be able to make it to the 7.30pm show. Some will watch it sitting on their bikes and bicycles, others from faraway terraces. Kesari is among the half-a-dozen lucky storeowners on the main road who don't even have to step out to catch a good view of the screen.

Caravan Talkies, a travel and touring vehicle that screens sundown movies in India's remotest villages, will make sure that Benipur village has the time of its fortnight this evening. Caravan is a business initiative by cinema distribution network UFO Moviez India Ltd. In its own words, it's "an open movie-viewing experience for India's rural population situated in media-dark areas".



with a substantial annual loss of revenue to the tune of around Rs18,000 crore and a loss of 60,000 jobs every year. The reason is that when the industry makes lesser money, it employs fewer people. On set or as employees in theatres.

The easy availability of sophisticated smartphones and camcorders ensures that virtually every new movie is recorded during the course of theatre viewing and then published on rogue websites. Such websites and their operations are believed to be closely linked to the spread of malware and cyber-crime. They make money from advertisements and subscriptions and expose users to high-risk advertising.

To be sure, mobile penetration has brought about the single biggest change in people's lives and entertainment habits in the last 10 years.

The reduction in smartphone prices from unaffordable Rs40,000-50,000 to a range of Rs3,000-4,000 has ensured democratic seepage. That, coupled with better bandwidth and cheaper data offered by multiple players, has contributed to a rise in overall video consumption in rural areas.

On 2 March 2017, *Mint* reported that according to the findings of the Internet and Mobile Association of India and market research firm IMRB International, 77% of urban users and 92% of rural users consider mobile the primary device for accessing the Internet, largely driven by availability and affordability of smartphones.

In urban India, internet user base grew by 7% to 263 million in the year-on-year period ended October 2016 and is expected to be 275-285 million by June 2017. For the same annual period, internet user base in rural India grew 22% to 157 million and is forecast to reach 170-180 million by June 2017.

"The society here is not developed enough to keep visiting theatres. The closest anyway would be in Varanasi, 35-40km away," said Amresh Singh, UFO's local vendor in charge of Benipur, among other areas in UP and Bihar.

"In cities, people know of good life as one where the day ends by unwinding in air-conditioned rooms with 55-inch television sets. Here even if people own a set, they are barely 21-22-inches. Only 15-20% of the population has services like Tata Sky. This (van) with its sound and picture quality, gives the feeling of a theatre."

Singh has been bringing the van to Benipur every second Tuesday for the past 9-10 months. The entire day is spent promoting the evening show, which is free. Even on this day, a recorded voice can be heard on a megaphone as the van circles around the village at least 35-40 times, starting as early as 10 am.

The film for the day is Ajay Devgn's 2011 hit *Singham*, a Bollywood entertainer about a police officer who's mightier than the system he works in. Some previous offerings have been similar in theme. Others have been slapstick comedies such as *Double Dhamal* and actioners such as Akshay Kumar's *Boss*.

A recent record-breaker was the cross-border love story *Henna* starring Rishi Kapoor and Pakistani actor Zeba Bakhtyar.

"Boss may not have worked elsewhere but you can't imagine the hysteria here. Akshay Kumar, Suniel Shetty, Govinda—all these people are worshipped here," said Singh, who's also taken the van to places such as Aarah, Rohas, Bhagalpur and Bhojpur. "In fact, screen any film anywhere in this area and you will not get less than 300-350 people as audience."

TV INVASION

It's easy to see why Caravan Talkies is a hit in Benipur. The nearest cinema hall in Rajatalab, which is 10km away from the village, shut down recently. The next one is in Kachhwa in Mirzapur district, which is 15km away. And Varanasi is 40km afar.

"We're very happy the day the van comes; everybody really looks forward to it," said Anjani Devi, who runs a paan shop next to Kesari's store and can watch the films from her work spot. "Movies provide information, they're good timepass and when so many people gather, it feels nice. I've never been to a theatre here. Where would we have one anyway?"

One reason she's not craving a movie theatre is the easy access to television entertainment available through the DTH (direct-to-home) box that provides her nearly 50 channels at home. With a Chinese TV set available for anything between Rs2,000-2,500 and a DTH box for another Rs500-600, there is little that

villages such as Benipur technically miss out on in terms of entertainment.

The introduction, particularly of DD Free Dish, a free-to-air digital direct-broadcast satellite television service owned and operated by the public service broadcaster Prasar Bharati (Doordarshan) in 2004, has transformed the rural entertainment market with its current bouquet of 80 FTA (free-to-air) channels. According to the *Media and Entertainment Industry Report 2017* published by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and KPMG in India, the service reaches 22 million active consumers by the end of 2016.

"Having visited hundreds and thousands of villages across India, I see that TV is seen as an aspirational asset," said Osama Manzar, founder-director of non-profit organization Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF).

"People who have it feel proud of it. In fact if you go to someone's home in a village and they have a TV, they will switch it on immediately, not realizing it's actually going to disturb our conversation. They have to show that they have it and it works, especially if it's a colour TV. Secondly, there is no doubt it works as an alternative to the radio. So many people who have their workstation at home, like weavers, craftsmen or beedi-makers, actually have the TV switched on (while they work) and it's running like an oral entertainment thing."

There are other social implications too. "The reach of television has generated information and aspiration," said Ashish Bhasin, chairman and chief executive of media and advertising group Dentsu Aegis Network South Asia.

"Today, a youth, whether he is in a small village in Uttar Pradesh or a large town in Maharashtra, has similar, if not same aspirations because they all see and have exposure to the same kind of lifestyle and opportunities. There is a bit of an issue there though. While on one hand, we are showing this lifestyle and generating these aspirations which is good because it gets people to be ambitious, are there enough jobs and remuneration opportunities available?"

To be sure, the advent of television has overturned many traditional structures over time.

In Mamon, a village in the Baran district of Rajasthan, for years, people had thronged the annual Sitabari fair, the biggest event organized for the Sahariya tribe of the region.

For Rs10-25, older members of the village have memories of watching blockbusters such as *Sholay* and *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* on the quintessential white

curtain brought to life by a projector in the middle of an 8-10 hectare field.

"It's not the same anymore. The bazaar culture has died and alcoholism and rowdiness have taken over," said Ramesh Sen, joint secretary at Sankalp Sansthan, which works in collaboration with DEF's Community Information Resource Centre (CIRC). "But besides the fair, we've had days of paying Rs5-10 for theatre viewing."

What Sen is actually referring to are the makeshift video parlours wealthy members of the village had set up when television first came in. Today, most of the 350 families in Mamon have their own sets (and accord them top priority for dowry as well) equipped with services such as Tata Sky and Airtel Digital TV that came in about five years ago and are available for a maximum of Rs250 per month. But there was a time in the late 1980s when anybody with the requisite space, a TV set and electricity supply could charge impoverished villagers for a community viewing of Ram-anand Sagar's iconic Ramayan TV series or a Hindi film on a pirated video cassette.

MOBILE ENTERTAINMENT ECONOMY

While internet schemes by telcos like Airtel, Vodafone and most recently, Reliance Jio have made inroads in these villages at

Residents of Benipur, Uttar Pradesh, watch a movie on the screen of a Caravan Talkies mobile theatre. Caravan is a business initiative by cinema distribution network UFO Moviez India Ltd. (Below) A daily wagger and his family sort beedi leaves at home in Baran, Rajasthan, while the TV plays in the background.

reasonable rates, the more pronounced impact is of mobile repair and stationery shops that double up to transfer as many as 15-20 films for Rs5-10 to a customer's phone memory card. While Mamon residents have to travel to places such as Samraniya and Deoria, about 15-20km away, Asthwa in Bihar's Darbhanga district has as many as 10 shops within the village.

"This business is working out well for us," said Indrajit Kumar, the owner of a store called Indrajit Mobile Repair Shop who uses a Rs309 Airtel plan to download films from YouTube and transfer a pack of four movies for Rs10 to his customers' phone memory cards. The reticent entrepreneur is reluctant to give out any other details of the business or the kind of films people demand but admits there is "some south Indian film" a lot of people have been asking about lately.

"People don't have a choice if they want to watch new films. But it's not like we're the only ones running this business here either, right?" he almost smirks.

He may not have consciously meant it but Kumar points to the larger phenomenon of digital piracy that has ensured that the copy of a new film becomes available online on the day of its theatrical release.

According to the FICCI-KPMG Report, piracy continues to be one of the major issues affecting the Indian film industry

BYPASSING TV, COMPUTERS

"I see a replacement of television with increasing mobile penetration, especially among the youth and boys," Manzar said. "You will no more see people looking to buy a TV if they don't have one. With a TV, you have to pay for your cable otherwise options are very limited and you can't do anything but watch it. With the mobile, you can do so many different things. I think there is buying capacity among people who are working and they are anyway always moving around so they can't use a TV as much as a mobile."

The appeal of a mobile phone lies in the freedom of individuality it provides rather than adopting a community-driven approach like the TV, something that works for the youth, Manzar said. Interestingly, a lot of households in rural India have completely bypassed the television and computer phase and gone directly to mobiles, he added.

"You can't watch a lot of stuff on TV, even a regular dancing film may seem vulgar to some parents, plus there is the interference of advertisements. I'm pretty sure TV will be replaced by mobile in rural India in less than five years," Manzar said.

To be sure, the reliance on mobile and television as entertainment platforms also has to do with basic indifference towards the big-screen experience and what it offers in rural India.

"They (people in rural areas) don't know of theatres, they don't even aspire for them," Manzar said.

"If you give them a municipality plan, they would opt for a community hall or a library, but never a theatre because they have entertainment literally in their hands. And the purpose of a theatre is to bring people together to do something, that they can do for anything."

It's also fundamentally unaffordable. Kashinath, a former sarpanch of Mamon, says quite unhesitatingly that a Rs150 bus commute to theatres in nearby Kota or Baran and a Rs20-25 ticket are not worth it. "We don't wish for the big screen, what will we do with it when it's all available at home?" he asks.

Younger movie buffs, meanwhile, can see and recognize the difference but barely find any incentive.

"The online versions are all half-baked, dubbed and abruptly cut. For sure, theatre is a different feeling and experience," said Benipur's Satish Kesari, who watched *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* in Varanasi on a Rs250 ticket.

"I'm personally fond of Bollywood, but there is often no story in the film. *Bas gaana dikha rahe hain* (they only have songs). Only when it comes to a movie like *Baahubali* that you feel *safal ho gaya paisa* (the money spent has been worth it)."



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