



## Is Bollywood losing its small-town audience?

For an industry that contributes almost 40% to India's total net movie box office collections, Bollywood might soon have to confront the risk of losing out on a major chunk of the audience—those from small towns. Film industry experts say the success of mass-market commercial films like Tiger Shroff-starrer *Baaghi 2* (that had crossed the Rs164 crore mark at last count) is becoming rare in an industry that has increasingly begun to cater to multiplex audiences and tastes.

Hardcore commercial films like *Tiger Zinda Hai*, *Padmaavat* or *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* which appeal to the lowest common denominator, are universal in nature and bring returns across India, are few and far between. Niche and experimental subjects, targeted at the more discerning audiences are far more common, films like *Jab Harry Met Sejal*, *Newton* and *Jagga Jasoos* being some examples last year.

"Unlike the metros, in the smaller towns, if you want to take your family out, you go watch a movie. Unfortunately, the movies that really cater to the taste of this audience, come very rarely, there are not more than five to six tent-poles in a year, and that's extremely unfortunate," said film distributor and exhibitor Akshaye Rathi.

The shift started with the rise of multiplexes in the late 1990s, say industry experts. When filmmakers realized that the same film would sell a Rs50 ticket at a single screen versus a Rs250 ticket at a multiplex, their narratives automatically swayed towards the urban, multiplex route. The popular belief, however, Rathi added, is that a lot of films, and money-spinners at that, nowadays are being set in small towns, be it *Padman* or *Bareilly Ki Barfi* or *Newton*.

"But these are movies that are based in small towns, not ones that cater to the taste of the people in small towns," he said pointing to the niche and often experimental subjects of these films, like the take on menstruation in case of *Padman*. The Akshay Kumar-starrer may have eventually managed returns but not only do they pale in comparison to the high earnings of the mass-based films but also only a minuscule portion of the collections are likely to have come beyond the big cities.

"Ten years ago, for a big-sized film, 65% of the revenue would come from single screens and 35% from multiplexes. Today, 65-70% of the earnings come from the multiplexes, within which the top 300 multiplexes account for 80% of the business," said Shibasish Sarkar, chief operating officer, Reliance Entertainment. "More than 2,000 single screens must have shut down over the last five to seven years. There is a huge audience sitting in the hinterland and there is no content for them," he added.

To be sure though, the single screen crisis in the small towns is not just one of finding the right content. Rajesh Mishra, chief executive officer of Indian Operations, at cinema distribution network UFO Moviez said single screens suffer from many logistical issues too—they lack the bargaining power of multiplexes and often have to cough up substantial minimum guarantee payments that often go down the drain if the film bombs.

"By not making films for these smaller centres or not giving them films, you're driving audiences to OTT (over-the-top) streaming platforms," Mishra said.

Meanwhile, challenges for exhibitors in small towns are plenty too. From dealing with Internet piracy to the explosion of satellite television to on-ground issues. "From finding the right kind of infrastructure, to the location and the various licenses, from the kind of content that works to the pricing that works for the audience and also helps the cinemas sustain," said Rahul Puri, managing director, Mukta Arts and Mukta A2 Cinemas.