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Where a movie night means *Prem Rog*

While we in the cities are spoiled for choice on when and how we watch a film, in rural India, there are still places where a 35-year-old film and its like, screened on a cloth tied to a van, generates huge excitement

GAURAB DASGUPTA

MOST OF US might be spoiled for choice if we wish to watch a film. From multiplexes offering 4D, IMAX options to Netflix or even a download of the latest movies (some of them not even released in India), we can have it our way.

The scenario is completely different in rural India, where—forget theatres and multiplexes—houses are still devoid of a dish antenna. Harsoa, a tiny village on the edge of a two-lane, semi-concrete road, about 25 km from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, is one such area.

When I visited the village recently, it was gearing up for 'movie night'. Loudspeakers were announcing the film schedule all afternoon, and much before the screening at 6 pm, the children of the village were out in full force at the two-storeyed building that was to be the venue for the screening. And with good reason too. Because prior to the screening, some games such as the wheel-of-fortune were played and some basic refreshment like biscuits passed around.

The film this evening was Raj Kapoor's *Prem Rog*, starring his son Rishi Kapoor and Padmini Kolhapure. I was amazed that a film dating back about 35 years could generate this kind of excitement, but in a village where satellite television is a luxury, people look forward to any entertainment they can get. Moreover, the event is also a social occasion, where villagers gather around, gossip, play, watch a film together and return home happy.

The older generation was perfectly happy to watch the old film, preferring classics to newer movies. "Nayi filmon mein wo mazaa nahi aata hai jo purani me hai. Pichle dino jo aap log laaye the, Heena picture... itna buland picture tha wo, ki badi janta juta raha" (The new films are not as entertaining as the old ones. Last time, the movie that was screened—Heena—was a very strong one. A huge crowd came to watch it), said 65-year-old Raja Ram Patel.

An initiative of Caravan Talkies, a movie-on-wheels concept by UFO Moviez India for movie viewing in rural areas deprived of multiplexes or theatres, the whole experience takes you to another era, only that it is 2017.

Caravan alone has taken this concept to eight states—Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Haryana, West Bengal and Odisha, covering approximately 1,270 villages.

The initiative involves a mobile van travelling to the selected places in rural areas and screening movies, for free, to entertain the crowds. Equipment consists of a projector, a sound system and a genset to provide power backup, among other essentials.

A typical day involves setting up of the van at the designated location around 4 pm, followed by some games, such as the wheel-of-fortune, and eventually, screening of the movie.

UFO Moviez believes that Caravan



(Clockwise from top) People of Harsoa watching the film, *Prem Rog*; members of Caravan Talkies publicising the movie screening in the village; and children gather around the van before the movie to take part in a game of cartwheel organised by Caravan Talkies

Talkies delivers guaranteed media reach to rural areas. Siddharth Bhandwaj, chief marketing officer, head of enterprise sales, UFO Moviez said, "Most advertisers struggle to reach out to consumers in media-dark rural India. Caravan Talkies not only delivers guaranteed media reach in these markets, it also leverages on the movie passion and ensures aggregation of consumers at the time of sunset movie screening. This gives an opportunity for brands to interact with the consumers using customised, on-ground activation tools. This unique proposition has been received very well by the market and high percentage of repeat business from

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clients is a testimonial for its success." During a round of the village I met Lilawati, a middle-aged woman, who tells me how she, too, wants to go and watch the movie, but cannot. "Shaan ko agar picture

dekhne chahain gaye, to ghar baar kaun dekhaya? Khaana kuan banayega? Gai ko charu kaun daaloga?" (If we go out in the evening to watch the movie, then who will look after the house? Who will cook the food? Who will feed the cows?), she laments, sitting on a cot inside her *kachha* house. Later that evening, I see what she means. The crowd, predominantly made up of children, has little participation from women. The organisers tell me this is one aspect they want to work on.

However, one of the major challenges the organisation faces is getting licences and permissions from producers for new

films, which involves a lot of money as well. This is another reason for screening of mostly old films, something at least in the younger lot in the village would love to change. During the screening, a teenager walks up to me and asks, "Bhaiya, ye nayi picture hyun nahi dikhaate hain? Baahubali-2 hyun nahi dikhaate hain? Ye sari to bahut purani hain" (Why don't they screen new movies such as *Baahubali-2*? These movies are very old).

Crowd-control issues also crop up many times, as around 400 people gather to watch the film screening held once every fortnight. One of the organisers told me that once the

crowd got unruly and the police impounded their van. Hearing this, village sarpanch Ram Moonat Manjya pitches in: "Ini bheed hoti hai ki thaanse se ek permission le lena chahiye. Humne to suvekruti de di hai, par koi baat ho jaaye to pradhan usme lya kar sakta hai? To thaanse se ek hetu application le aaye, hum aapko amanati de denge." (There is a huge crowd that gathers at these screenings, so they should get the approval from the local police station. I have given the permission, but if something goes wrong, then I cannot do anything. So, I asked them to get an application signed from the station, and they have my permission to go ahead.)

The screenings are not about films alone. Caravan Talkies has also been generating some employment in the villages. It ropes in locals to help in screening of the films, like 65-year-old Patel, once a worker with the local Benarasi saree manufacturing unit, who has been unemployed ever since the unit shut shop. Lured by the job opportunity, and exposure it came with, Ramesh Singh joined the organisation after its initiation in October 2015 in Varanasi. Once a spectator, today Ramesh is an important part of Caravan as the zone supervisor.

"Hamaari sindagi kaafi fast ho gayi hai. Desh aur duniya ke baare me ab patra raha hai. Itna ghoomne ko milta hai, show bhi chala rahe hain, paise bhi kamata rahe hain... Is kaam se khushi hain," (My life has become very fast. I get to know about what is happening in the world. I get to travel, screen shows and earn money as well... I am happy with this work), he said cheerfully.

Inspired by him, twenty-something Dheeraj Singh decided to join the initiative. Barely 20 days into it, he said, "Main kaam dekhndi raha tha... Mujhe Rameshji ne iske baare me bataya. To maine socha ki main bhi apna career isme dekhna." (I was searching for a job. Rameshji told me about this opportunity, so I thought of trying my career in it).

Clearly, movie night in villages like Harsoa are more than dreams on screen.