

THE HINDU

Movies on the move

Caravan Talkies, a 'movies-on-wheels' campaign, provides big-screen movie watching experiences in areas of low cinema penetration

By **SRIVATHSAN NADADHUR**

This story dates back to 2004 when 13000 theatres existed in the country, the analog screening paradigm dented a film's reach in theatres, made matters costlier for producers to take their film to smaller (rural) markets across the country. The move eventually affected screens, theatre owners found little hope in keeping their business alive. Even before the digitisation era took off, 25% of the theatres were reportedly shut, converted into convention centres, marriage halls and other avenues. A decade and a half later, a cinema-viewing experience is still absent in many parts of the country, a void that Caravan Talkies, a movies-on-wheels campaign alike the age-old 'touring talkies' initiated by UFO Moviez in association with leading brands, is trying to fulfil. Siddharth Bhardwaj, Chief Marketing Officer at the cinema distribution chain UFO Moviez tells us more.

"The biggest challenge that cinema faces in the country is penetration. As we have a 3700-theatre base in India and have been in the business for long, we thought of investing our efforts around this. The difficult way forward was to set up screens in such areas, the easier way was to ensure some innovation in areas where cinema doesn't ex-



FACT FILE

The initiative is active across Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu.

Caravan Talkies vans display advertisements and screens movies on the weekly market day (haat). Each van covers seven haats in a week.

The average audience for each show ranges between 250 and 1100.

ist," says Siddharth and feels cinema still largely caters to the urban population. Taking cinema beyond this audience remains critical, these being the areas that many leading brands also want to reach out to. The movie-watching experience offered free-of-cost to spectators, began as a great fit between brand requirement and cinema, that has now gone to 14 states.

Caravan Talkies takes cinema on wheels with the help of leading brands. The team behind the campaign identifies areas where cinema penetration is low, routes where a van could travel, mapping various circuits in the country. The van serves as a mobile hoarding, the team conducts crowd-engaging events through the day, organises a sundown event for them and ends the day with a movie catering to their entertainment needs. UFO

Moviez and other brands work together on the circuits where movie-watching and brand-promoting ends meet, cinema serves as a magnet for the brands to reach out to their target au-

dience. The ideators went into the initiative presuming that rural audiences would want to watch the latest blockbusters, but ground realities left them surprised. "They wanted to watch films in their own language, ones they could relate to. *Khalnayak* was as popular a choice as was *Baahubali*. People are keen to watch old movies, say from 30 years ago." There were a few logistics issues. Most villages observed a custom of not engaging in entertainment activities post a person's death in the area, something they didn't expect, but it was important to respect sensibilities.

Feedback sessions have been organised in many villages, in an attempt to come up with content that could engage them next time around. "Our experience in understanding audience tastes over the years helped, capturing the audience pulse will get better with time," Siddharth shares. Most of the villages that the initiative has covered don't have electricity in the evenings and doesn't boast of many popular entertainment options. The advantage has been the big screen (15 feet) experience. The challenges have of course been aspects like planning routes to villages, accessibility issues, availability of large areas for people to gather in a safe environment and obtaining permissions from village heads.

Will this initiative cease to exist once the screens come up in such towns/villages? "India has around 1,50,000 villages, you've to travel to watch a movie. This is a campaign where the film comes to you, the idea is here to stay. People in villages may watch films on mobile, the joy of a 15-foot screen is different. This is a market that'll stay. We're eager in reaching to the rural populace more," Siddharth says.

Movies on wheels At a movie screening, Siddharth Bhardwaj

