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Pop-up plexes bring theatres back to the small town

The movie-watching experience is changing beyond the big cities. A few years ago, Sushil Chaudhary realised that most villages had no halls as most single-screens had wound up. Chaudhary, an engineer, designed his own travelling, inflatable multiplex, the digiplex. "I was inspired by touring tent or tambu talkies in old Indian trucks in Maharashtra that would do open-air screenings," Chaudhary says.

Unlike the tambu talkie, a digiplex is fully air-conditioned, equipped with a 18ftx7ft screen and surround sound, and seats 120 people on chairs. Prices are kept low: tickets cost between Rs 30 and Rs 70, with a bag of popcorn for Rs 8 to Rs 15. These inflatable air-conditioned digiplexes can be packed into trucks and assembled in just 2.5 hours. Chaudhary's company, PictureTime, runs 37 such trucks with plans to expand to over 100 by next March. His focus is on entertainment dark spots — villages and Tier-3 towns with populations of 50,000 to a lakh. "I want families to come back to theatres."

Caravan Talkies, started by distribution company UFO Moviez in 2015, works on a similar concept, but in even smaller villages. Its fleet of 114 vans travels to villages with a population of less than 10,000, and it is experimenting with LED screens. "We take content to the audience without investing in brick and mortar cinema screens," says Sidharth Bharwaj, national sales head, enterprise business, UFO Moviez. "Just like the bioscope-wala took cinema to the villages earlier, we thought why can't we take cinema on wheels to an audience that has never seen a movie on a big screen?" — **Sonam Joshi**

