



## Through the lens, digitally

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To meet the new Bollywood, you need to get out of Mumbai. We found it 125 km down the highway from Mumbai, next to a bicycle repair shop and a tea seller, in a large village called Neral.

The only theatre here, the single-screen Mahesh Talkies, was on the brink of being shut down before being reincarnated last year. It now downloads films on a satellite link, using a technology that few have begun to use across the globe.

From themes to work ethics to the way films are written, sold and distributed, the world's most watched movie industry is going through its biggest transformation ever. In ways visible and invisible, this change will touch the lives of millions of people across the globe — including those who watch it and those who live off it.

All that, however, would have could come to nothing if theatre owners like Srinivas Dasrath Dhule in Neral did not ride the new wave. People like him will begin to decide the destiny of flop films which could break even or make profits through digital theatres. In the process, they will also avoid the death that threatens thousands of humble single-screen theatres across India.

And how. From Aurora Cinema in Doomdooma (Assam) to Shyam Chhavi Grah in Churu (Rajasthan), and Zeenath Theatre in Alwaye (Kerala) to Amar Mahal in Katra (Jammu and Kashmir), hundreds of small-town theatres are screening films digitally, in languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bhojpuri, Tamil and Kannada. Of India's 13,000 film theatres, at least 1,500 are already using digital technology.

In Neral, a village surrounded by craggy hills and shrubby plateaus, the leap of imagination by the owners of the 310-seat Mahesh Talkies is showing results. The theatre is winning back viewers by screening films the same day they are released — not a month later, as it used to do earlier. It does not pay Rs 60,000 to buy a print and then transport it in heavy metal boxes on bumpy journeys from Mumbai.

Instead, it pays just Rs 4,000 upfront and an average of Rs 200 a show to screen the film. It is winning the battle against piracy. The films have great sound and picture quality. There are big savings on electricity and equipment. And it is making good money — despite raising the prices of tickets, 70 per cent of the seats are sold out, up from 40 per cent earlier.

Shiny new seats have been placed. And Mahesh Talkies now has a Dolby sound system. “We were deep in debt. We could only show scratched prints of old films. By the time we got prints in Neral, everyone had seen pirated copies,” says 40-year-old owner Srikant Dasrath Dhule, sitting in a room full of the strong fragrance of sandalwood incense. “Now, things have transformed.”

It is a fitting statement on how the village has aligned itself with the world: the film being shown at Mahesh is a new Hindi dubbing of the Thai film Chai Lai’s Angels — a takeoff on the Hollywood hit Charlie’s Angels. Hours later, an even more popular offering will play — Rambo 4.

Outside the theatre, a few lanes away, the swiftly globalising India was making a footprint in the village — a leading international motorcycle maker had brought a road show, showing off gleaming new models from a truck amid loud music.

In the earlier format — still alive in most theatres across India — two attendants braved thick carbon fumes and placed huge spools of film every half hour in the projectors, and had to connect negative and positive carbon rods to produce the flash that illuminated the screen. Now there is a small glass cabin built on the side and a split air-conditioner keeps the satellite-connected computer cool. The two attendants lost their Rs 5,000-a-month jobs, but it saved dozens of others from getting fired.

Last Friday, Mahesh Talkies witnessed something unimaginable even a year ago. Villagers who often travel two hours by the train to watch films here saw this season’s big-ticket offering, Jodha Akbar, the same day as the rest of the world.

### **An idea born of desperation**

Dhule grew up in nearby Badlapur, enjoying action movies and comedies like most other friends. Then he made movies his profession. But the world of cinema viewing was

#### **The new reel**

##### **Markers for the series**

The Indian film industry is expected to be worth \$5.1 billion in 2011, a three-fold increase in five years.

The coming of corporate giants has made deals cleaner. Mafia money does not rule. Payments are mostly done by cheque.

There are 500 multiplexes now, expected to increase to 3,000 in a few years. Viewers are back at the theatres.

Actors and directors are signing multiple film deals — but there is a severe shortage of scripts and stars.

Coming up: movies on mobiles and IPTV and games based on movies.

swiftly changing. Hundreds of thousands of jobs around the country were at risk as theatres began shutting down to make way for shopping malls and office complexes.

Soon, the monster was on Dhule's doorstep. One day, a theatre closed down in Karjat, an hour away. "The day that cinema closed down in Karjat, I realised I had to do something... I had to change while there was still time," he says. He did a quick survey – there was no other theatre nearby, and he could potentially draw thousands of viewers from 56 villages. All he needed was the right idea.

Armed with information from some other theatre owners, Dhule travelled to Mumbai, where a handful of companies such as UFO Moviez, Real Image, Pyramid Saimira and Adlabs are providing the software and the hardware needed for digital projection.

Before films are released, they are brought to such a company. Any leakage could mean huge losses to piracy. Expectedly, it thrives on a detective agency-like secrecy. One owner of such a company was once barred by guards from entering the area where the prints were kept because he did not have the authorisation.

With over 1,500 screens on digital projection, India has emerged as one of the largest theatres for the new technology.

At UFO Moviez, a security guard travels in the van that carries the print from the producer to the lab where huge spools are converted to digital D5 files, which look like big VCR tapes. It is then brought to the UFO 'Capture Centre' under tight security, with the van driver's time of departure and arrival monitored to ensure the film has not been illegally copied on the way. Only the fingerprints of a few people can help open the door at the capture centre, physically linked by a 2,300-km optic fibre to a New Delhi satellite hub, which downloads a digital version of the film to the member theatres.

Dhule soon had all he needed: a digital projector, a server called Cineblaster attached to a satellite link, an uninterrupted power supply set, and a high-speed phone connection for data transfer. Better still, the company gave it all for free.

Using all that could sound like rocket science, but if the company's cooks could use it, surely could Dhule. "When we started out, we first called our cook and asked him to download a movie, reading from a pictorial chart we give to all our customers," says Sanjay Chavan, the UFO Moviez chief technology officer, who was earlier with the Indian Air Force. "Until all the five cooks in our office could download films without our help, we kept refining the chart."

Now, every Thursday, UFO engineers download the upcoming film to the computer at Mahesh Talkies and 1,000 other theatres across India. Every film, about 2,500 gigabytes

in size (on an average, the storage capacity of 125 home computers), is compressed to an encrypted 10-gigabyte version. The download takes real time — a two-hour movie is saved on the theatre's computer in two hours.

However, someone like Dhule cannot screen the film until the scheduled time on Friday morning. And when he does, he uses a pre-paid card or a numeric key that has to be used to show a film.

For now, all seem to be gaining from digitisation.

“On an average, there will be an increase of 15 per cent to 20 per cent in tickets sold per movie — that is, if the shift from traditional screens to digital screens happens,” notes a Confederation of Indian Industry study.

“For a hit movie from a mid-sized production house, the average domestic gross box office collections will increase by about 40 per cent (from Rs 20-25 crore to

Rs 30-35 crore), while for a flop movie the gross box office collections will increase by about 15 per cent (from Rs 5-5.5 crore to Rs 6-6.5 crore). This will help some of the flop movies to break even or even make money,” the study predicts.

And as theatre owners such as Dhule dream big, companies such as UFO are dreaming bigger. They want to now reach out to the US, where the penetration of digital films is only 2 per cent. Hollywood mostly delivers its films physically to theatres, on hard disks.

Attempts to digitise films in the US began in the 1990s, but did not take off because the technology available there is extremely expensive, says UFO's Chavan.

“We will now take Hindi content to the US theatres — we can even beam Hollywood content to American theatres if they are willing to share,” he says.

But back home, the new Bollywood is still dealing with the glitches of the India out there, which is often not a Bollywood fairytale.

“There are huge power outages in small towns. The UPS runs for only 15 minutes — we have had several burnt projectors,” says Chavan. “And there are satellite link breakdowns at the local level. Sometimes the cable is loose, at other times the rat has eaten the cable.”