



## Reviving cinema halls

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Even as the battle of the plexes and the distributors is yet to be settled as to the revenue split for the two big-ticket Diwali releases, the excitement in Churu, seven hours from Jaipur is palpable. Sanjay Agarwal of Shyam Chavi Grah is awaiting Diwali as much as S A Bhagwan of Royal & Prabhat in Kolhapur and Subhash Bhiyani, of Modern Cinema in Bhuj.

These are among many others who have breathed new life into their cities by reviving their cinema halls, refurbishing their old seats, re-painting their walls, got in new sound systems, spruced up the ambience, new food and beverages, bigger screens and basically, brought the people of their respective cities back to the big screens.

The biggest lure being the one of seeing the big ticket films on the same day and date as their metro cine goes.

Investments too have not been exactly small. Each refurbishment and digital installation cost at least Rs 30 lakh and often go up to as much as Rs 50 lakh. For Agarwal, the choice was clear. "My father said, both your name and last name are pretty common.

What differentiates you is that you are the owner of Shyam Chavi Grah and that is your identity which separates you from the rest of the Sanjay Agarwals, it is up to you to keep that or sell that," says Agarwal, his decision to sell his eight acres of land in Churu, valued at Rs 10 crore away or choose to revive the past glory. Agarwal had heard about the digital offer from UFO Moviez and rumours of defunct theatres in Japiur etc running to packed houses and openings of Rs 30-50,000 etc.

"I was not even getting Rs 5,000!" says Agarwal. The rest as they say is history. A two month study of the other digital cinemas, made Agarwal take the plunge. He decided to install the UFO system, invested in Dolby, seats upgradation, move from cloth to a silver screen, all of which as he says, got the families back to his hall. "I even have at least 20-25 single women at my theatre now, which is a great achievement!" says Agarwal.

Besides the social impact, these centres today play a critical role in the film industry. For UFO Moviez, which began around two years ago with a handful of cinema installations, today 903 cinemas across 23 states, is a big achievement. With their recent infusion from private equity 3i, the aim is to reach 2000 cinemas by March 09.

"The cost is 10% of a physical print so that is an advantage which is a given in digital but the critical effect for the industry has been that the prices of territories has doubled, with increased prints come more collections, specially in Bombay circuit and Central Province and Central India, besides of course giving a strong factor to fight piracy as well," says COO, UFO Moviez Rajesh Mishra.

Digital prints have played a huge part in the growth of the industry and is one of the critical reasons that most of the big ticket movies can release with a bigger print run., While so far, UFO's biggest print run had been 360 prints with Heyy Babby, Om Shanti Om (OSO) and Saawairya are expected to cross that. "Between the two we should release at least 650-700 prints if not more.

Though the theatres get booked only a few days before the release, OSO will be at least 350-400 and could go up to 500," adds Mishra. From the 300 released last Diwali between Don and Janneman, it's a big jump. Like Mishra points out, the fact is that digital prints are not only matching the analogue ones, but at times crossing them as well.

For Mishra the big tickets so far have been Heyy Babby and Eros Entertainment's Partner, the latter says Mishra went onto with 30-40 prints even in its 8th and 10th weeks! "Now it is Bhool Bhulaiya which is holding out pretty well," says Mishra.

Distribution of films in digital form is tripling, in some cases, is almost equal to the total release of the previous year. This has created value, as per market sources. While last year's big ticket films were said to be sold in the range of Rs 4 - 6 crore last year for Bombay circuit, this year, market sources are placing the value of the movies at about Rs 11 crore.

A large part of this is to do with increase in the business to the flexibility in programming due to the digital cinemas. Both distributors and exhibitors gain by screening films in smaller centres in the first few weeks of its release in big cities.

Diwali is big season and Agrawal is excited. His special family box at Rs 50 is always full, and his audiences are demanding that he converts his near four-decade-old hall from air-cooled to air-conditioned. From closing down his hall, Agarwal today has a small queue outside for tickets. Take two.