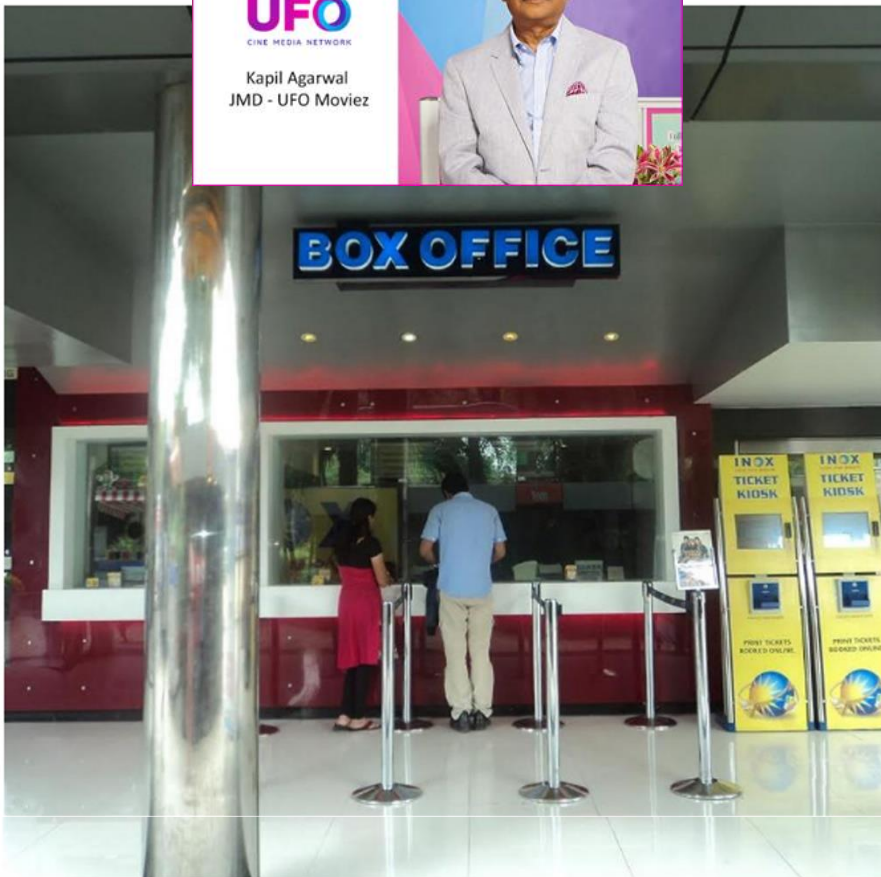




## Cinemas stare at empty halls, slow recovery post Covid2019

Experts feel there is no comparison between OTT and theatrical release.



NEW DELHI: The movie industry has found itself cornered for the first time in history. Cinema halls stayed shuttered since March and it might take a while for the footfall to get back to normal. Meanwhile, business revenue has come to a grinding halt and producers are keen on releasing films on OTT platforms.

Amitabh Bachchan and Ayushmann Khurrana's Gulabo Sitabo, Vidya Balan's Shakuntala Devi are premiering on Amazon Prime Video whereas Anurag Kashyap's movie, Choked: Paisa Bolta Hai has released on Netflix. Even regional players are releasing their content on digital platforms.

Until now, movies usually arrive on video streaming platforms only after running in cinemas for a few weeks. As per media reports, around 10,000 single-screen and 3000 multiplexes are closed and this shutdown is estimated to cost the Indian film industry Rs 984 crore in box office revenue.

As multiplex revenues have become null and producers are switching to video streaming platforms as an alternative option, the theatre industry is anxious about how to deal with the dire situation.

INOX Leisure Ltd CEO Alok Tandon says, "In these times of an unparalleled crisis, we want the entire ecosystem to show solidarity. We have also urged the producers and studios to wait for the theatres to resume operations and follow the globally prevalent cinematic windowing pattern as it has done wonders in terms of revenues for all the stakeholders, and allows the creators an opportunity to extract the best from all available mediums."

He also shares, "The theatrical run has its own significance in the cinematic value chain as it remains the phase which generates the maximum revenues for the content creator. Besides fetching huge volumes of audiences, cinemas also contribute massively towards the experience economy."

However, even if the government eases the restrictions on the opening of theatres, there are lower chances of high footfalls in the coming months, as many people will not take the risk of going to movie theatres.

Tandon adds, "We are looking at the post-Covid2019 phase as another evolution with new processes and protocols and we are sure that we will take it into our stride. We are looking at the new normal soon going back to the old normal. Keeping in mind the insistence on social distancing, we will promote private screening as a consumer offering. We also look to leverage our massively successful loyalty program to innovate and curate customised offers which will help us to bring them back to cinemas."

Editor Complete Cinema and film trade analyst Atul Mohan says, "In my opinion, the first threat OTT brings is to GECs than theatres. Nothing can replace the charm of going to cinemas and OTT is dependent on hits at the cinemas. How many can afford to buy subscriptions from different players? We have so many satellite channels available at one subscription."

Upon asking, how he sees the situation evolving in the long run, he explains, "The situation is such that many can't hold their investments. The OTT players have deep pockets and hence, can afford to acquire some titles at a premium but even they have their limitations and budgets. This is just a matter of time but in the long run, every actor and producer wants their product to be showcased in cinemas."

However, in this situation, OTT giants i.e. Netflix and Amazon have geared up to maintain their position and lure consumers through different genres of content. But, till when? Looking at the scenario, there's a big question of when shooting will resume.

UFO Moviez JMD Kapil Agarwal shares, "India releases almost 140-150 movies in 22 languages in a month, a total of 1700 movies per year. Now, barely there are 100 movies which are ready, perhaps. The industry has only one month worth of content. If it will be released in the starting months, there will be a crunch of content."

According to Agarwal, in the short run, it will hurt the exhibition industry but in the long run, there will be no impact, because films are made for big screens.

"Producers prefer to release their content on big screens instead of OTT platforms but people who have invested money are also under pressure and then the uncertainty of opening cinemas is also a challenge, so, they will opt for video platforms but that's very temporary. The occupancy may go down to 30 -35 per cent

and once cinemas open, it will take three to four months to get back to position," he adds.

Most cinema chains are expecting to recover by the last quarter of the year. Time will tell if they can resume operations by then.