



How to bring audience back to cinema halls?

Word of mouth will play a major role, say exhibitors and producers during a virtual conference



MUMBAI: The Covid2019 pandemic has ravaged the film and exhibition sectors the most. With the aviation industry and restaurant services opening up soon it would be interesting to see how cinemas in India are prepping. Also, there's nothing for this sector in the packages announced by prime minister Narendra Modi. There has been some ease in rental and electricity charges but it varies from state to state. These are the pertinent issues that need to be addressed. In a virtual conference hosted by UFO Moviez India Limited under the aegis of FICCI, industry stakeholders discussed the various issues that have been afflicting the film and exhibition segment, the way forward, the precautions to be taken at the

cinema halls, etc.

The main area of concern is about the standard operating procedures that will be followed by cinema halls once things are back to normalcy.

Due to panic created by the Covid2019 outbreak, people are not willing to come to theatres. At the same time, there is a severe OTT fatigue among viewers as well. So the question arises: What measures can be taken to regain the confidence of the audiences and restore the trust of the cinema-going audience?

INOX Leisure Limited CEO Alok Tandon said: "Our first objective is to bring trust among audiences. At INOX, we have divided the entire thing in three buckets. Pre-resumption, post-resumption and lastly the visit of audiences. We are taking various processes and initiatives to ensure they feel safe once they go home. These are the aspects we are currently working on."

About the social distancing and hygiene measures, Tandon said that the company is looking at how guests don't crowd the cinema halls and maintain specific distance. Another important thing is the allocation of seats. They are also working on movie schedules and timings to avoid gathering during entry, intermission, exit points, lobby and rest rooms. Where safety and hygiene measures are concerned Tandon said that a lot of man hours went into ensuring guests are safe; they are encouraging people to use paperless transactions at every counter. They are also using thermal guns to check temperature. There will be dedicated hand sanitiser stations installed at theatres. There are SOPs in place to disinfect counters and surfaces. PPE kits will also be introduced in case people are interested to buy them. As far as food supplies are concerned, multiplex chains will bring single-use disposal bags, to avoid reuse of cutlery and crockery.

"Cinema halls have many similarities to the hospitality, aviation, restaurant and retail sectors. These are unseen times; nobody has a perfect formula for this. We all can learn a lot from each other in this crisis. In this pandemic we have been closely observing what other sectors are doing so that we can also implement that," he added.

The Covid2019 lockdown is choking all the production activities across the nation. UFO Moviez India Limited joint MD Kapil Agarwal raised a question if the film exhibition sector and producer's guild can work together and learn from each other.

Answering this question, film producer and president Film and Television Producers Guild of India Siddharth Roy Kapur said: "We are looking at exactly the same measures what other sectors are doing. Unfortunately, shoot resumption is in the same lines with cinema resumption. It is the last thing to be started. The biggest issue for us is if there is going to be some sort of curtailment on the number of people you can congregate at the sets. Especially when it comes to film units it is larger as compared to TV units. But the challenge is you need to have a bare minimum number of people on the set to make it productive."

Agarwal feels that the capacity issue is not entirely going to affect the film fraternity as the majority of the people are working from home. The concept of weekend shows faring better than weekdays will not make sense now. He thinks that because of this the negative impact will be neutralised.

"I think a lot of producers and distributors will get signals from how these films are performing at box-offices. When the first lot of people come to cinemas, it is then important for cinema halls to give an impression that we have got our acts together," said PVR Pictures Limited CEO and chief business planning & strategy PVR Pictures Kamal Gianchandani.

There are very few movies ready in different languages. Answering whether there is a strong need of releasing movies in all different languages, Telugu film producer studio owner, exhibitor and distributor Daggubati Suresh Babu says, "This idea of dubbing films across languages from Telugu to Hindi or Hindi to Bengali should be done not only in Covid times but post-Covid era also. A few films like Bahubali or Robot have been working like that. There is a huge scope for a lot of regional movies to reach the Hindi market. Usually, the films that do well in dubbing are the ones that are not provided by local films. Now Vijay's movie Master will have a very big release. Now, is he willing to wait till theatres open up? It is something we need to look at."

Daggubati also mentioned about his meeting with Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu. He said that the government is very positive about re-starting the shooting. He also pointed that within a week they will get intimation from the CM's office about resuming the shoot with restrictions. After that, they will explore the possibility of cinema theatres opening up.