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## Covid impact: Drive-in theatres may find takers



For cinema lovers, sitting in a theatre with strangers is not a very good way to comply with social distancing requirements. File Photo: Reuters.

- Few existing players have found it tough to discover an audience but things may finally be changing
- Drive-ins are yet to discover the perfect model to license new or recent movie releases

NEW DELHI: Being locked up in closed auditoriums with several strangers may not seem like the best idea for movie-goers when they wish to flock back to theatres after cinemas reopen. Major loss for traditional theatres could turn into an opportunity for open-air, drive-in cinemas that have long remained on the margins of India's entertainment ecosystem with only a handful of properties across the country.

Few existing players such as Sunset Drive-in-Cinema in Ahmedabad, Prarthana Beach Drive-in-Theatre in Chennai, Under the Stars in Bengaluru and Gurgaon Talkies in the national capital region have found it tough to discover an audience so far but things may be finally changing for them.

"With the future of traditional multiplexes uncertain, our prospects look bright and the trend (of drive-in theatres) could really take off post the pandemic," said Abhijit Shah, co-founder at Under the Stars that he started with two friends in November 2017, trying to capitalize on the pleasant Bengaluru weather. Most cities in India are either too warm or too cold for most of the year, Shah said and that doesn't help the cause of open-air screenings. Bengaluru is an exception and the company collaborates with different properties such as cricket or football grounds mostly on the outskirts of the city and brings in food trucks to complement the experience.

"Over time, we've also realized that not everyone owns a car, people might take cabs or two-wheelers to come so we make arrangements for bean bags and chairs," Shah said. Under the Stars works with a projector,

mobile screen and loudspeakers, and Shah says sometimes the other problem can be that the noise tends to irk authorities but that can be taken care of by providing people headphones.

"People love the concept and our average occupancies range from 80-90%," said Shah whose ticket prices hover around ₹300-350. Shah has received around 10 queries to rent equipment for screenings in the past two weeks alone, including from small towns like Aurangabad and Raipur and says the interest is evident in a post-pandemic world.

The other big issue with drive-ins is that they haven't discovered the perfect model to license new or recent movie releases. While Under the Stars usually plays cult classics such as Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge or Jab We Met, Nikita Naiknavare, founder of Pune-based boutique licensing agency Lost the Plot says there is a lot of work to be done in India to get the right distribution channels in place for drive-ins and open-air theatres. "We've pivoted to acquire Hollywood and indie titles instead and have a library of more than 2,000 films," Naiknavare said whose company ties up with open-air venues like bars, cafes and other commercial spaces in Pune, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Gurugram to hold screenings and spent last year showing hits like Bohemian Rhapsody, Home Alone, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and others. While Bengaluru holds screenings almost every week, Gurugram is more active during winters, particularly around Christmas and new year's. Drive-in is a popular concept in countries like the US, where there were nearly 330 cinemas at last count. A report by The Guardian said they are seeing a further boost following coronavirus, which is expected to last beyond the immediate crisis, as people seek socially distanced entertainment.

"It can be a very good option for India given the social distancing requirements and we're definitely expecting a rise in demand," said Rajesh Mishra, chief executive officer of Indian Operations, at cinema distribution network UFO Moviez that runs Caravan Talkies, a travel and touring vehicle that screens sundown movies in India's remotest villages, free of cost to provide an open movie-viewing experience for India's rural population situated in media-dark areas.