

Article

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Corona Snares Cinema into Existential Crisis



“Don’t open the pod bay doors, Hal. We need social distancing.” – 2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968.

Nothing can be alarmingly apocryphal than the above lines from the nearly four-decade old film. “Social Distancing” has become the new lingua franca of human transaction in this pandemic time with the whole world trying to adjust itself to the new social order of communication and entertainment consumption. Yes. Nothing can be truer than for the world of films and entertainment industry.

Change being the only constant, disruption has become new global order the way businesses are transacted. Sure. After a great gambol run for 125 years since its birth, the moving images industry, more prominent by its popular moniker - Entertainment Industry – has been finally zapped by existential crisis pressing the rethink button.

The entire industry has been brought on its knees world over. It is as if the industry which was sailing on the placid waters of regimental

movie making has now simply keeled over with a new surreal Sisyphean dilemma.

Like a bolt out of the blue, the film industry, which scripted and spun, sagas after sagas, having entire humanity in its thrall, from bygone silent to talkies to celluloid spools to modern day digital domain era has been stumped by its nemesis. These 125 years has been snared by a real-life script whose cataclysmic repercussions it could not have fathomed, despite its own flight of fancy disposition.

But then one sci-fi script writer indeed foresaw the day when entire humanity would be shaken and stirred for survival a decade ago. What he did not foresee was the very industry he represented would also be sucked in its whirlpool. It looks so apocalyptic today, in hindsight.

Harsh reality

Contagion (2011) by Steven Soderbergh, consumed as fanciful, febrile imagination, purely to give its watchers heebie jeebies

edge-of-the-seat experience as the thriller trundled towards its climatic denouement, has indeed become a harsh reality today.

Thanks to Corona, vicious virus that simply snuffs out life catching people gasping for breath, taking octopus grip on their genetic system. Even Soderbergh could not have envisioned such a blockbuster thriller would actually happen in real life when his very own “Contagion,” hit the screens to fade out without much fancy or fanfare.

The life altering Corona has sent shockwaves through the global ‘entertainment’ industry gnawed by angst and anxiety, fitfully and fearfully, left staring into an abyss of uncertainty working out its losses in billions and crores of dollars and rupees, respectively.

Film festivals after film festivals have had to go online with no end in sight as to when the pandemic would let humanity breathe easy and normalcy returns back. Streaming films and seeking donations to sustain the industry and organisations from sure death has become the way of life today.

Further, rubbing salt into the festering wound afflicted by the Corona is the Social Distancing norms. With no succor or survival in sight, you had a bevy of producers, with huge cache of investment locked in their unreleased films, left with no choice, but boarding the OTT bandwagon.

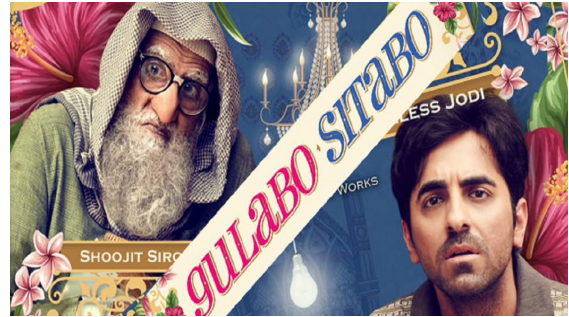


Series of releases

The first to do so being Shoojit Sircar’s *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020) featuring the irrepressible and ageless baritoned Big B. Then you had Tamil film *Ponmagal Vandhal* (2020), *Penguin* (2020), followed by Malayalam film *Sufiyum Sujatayum* (2020), Hindi film *Dil Bechara*

(2020), *Shakuntala Devi* (2020), among host of others with more to follow.

In Karnataka you had two actor Puneet Rajkumar’s production house – PRK Productions releasing both their films - *French Biryani* (2020) and *Law* (2020) on OTT platforms rather than wait for things to settle down and let their investments frozen without any immediate returns and test the fate of their fares through theatrical release.



The Over-The-Top streaming media service which is offered directly to viewers via the Internet bypasses cable, broadcast, and satellite television platforms seemingly the available alternative to fight the virus and ensure the entertainment industry’s lifeline which has been pushed into the ICU.

Yes, the once Rock of Gibraltar of Entertainment that staved through tectonic shifts that sought to shake its very foundation in these 125 years seems to have finally found its nemesis in the face of Big C. Yes – Corona, that spells dread, doom, death, and destruction in the diaspora.

The film industry has been pushed into self-introspection and some quick calculus. ‘Social Distancing’ becoming the new currency to insulate and isolate citizens from contracting the virus. Entertainment industry’s very survival, which thrives on audiences’ thirst for ‘escapist’ entertainment and congregation at malls and multiplexes, finds itself totally in tatters and teetering into uncertainty times.

With people dreadful of contracting Corona, not wanting to venture into crowded theatre, in this Internet & Mobile Age, streaming provides plausible answer in these tough times where huge sums have been bankrolled and one needs to recover investment made

and timeline commitments kept.

With analysts predicting a bloodbath for the industry staring at \$20 billion plus loss, the industry is in for a long haul. Corona seems to have sent local producers on the mend. Film makers and producers are rethinking shooting strategies. Instead of exotic locations they are scouting locales within country even putting on hold shoots.



Humungous loss

With movie theatres shut and feeble chance of screens opening anytime soon, estimates state that exhibition companies alone are expected to lose about 35% revenue about Rs 4,000 crore worth box office collection in 2020, when compared to same period, last year.

Post the pandemic, 'Social Distancing' being new normal for moviegoers, it is to be seen how the entertainment industry will navigate the new disruptive dynamics of film making, marketing and audiences consuming film for entertainment rather than engagement.

With masks and sanitisers additional gears for safety if one were to have their passage of rite into theatres, it is to be seen how these extra appendages and expenditures are going to affect the film going habits of the diaspora, especially, in India, where cinema is an opiate.

With the return of die-hards itself a big question mark as to how one would savour the film watching experience with the anointing of posters, tall cutouts that fans would then douse in several gallons of milk deifying their screen idols and heap glory on their films spraying coins, certain to be a thing of the past cinema viewing will never be the same again.

Given that cinema is a collective experience with strangers and friends in the darkened theatre all this is sure to change post-Corona world. While cinema halls, including the plush and posh multiplex theatres facing a bleak future despite all the safety SOPs in place ensuring virtually no human contact scenario, OTT platform seems the only window of opportunity for now.

For a few years now, theatres around the world have rued the decrease in footfalls and this has traditionally been blamed on the rising popularity of streaming services. Due to the pandemic, people are now filling the void of out-of-home entertainment with streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

The threat of Covid-19 which has brought cinema — the making of films, screening, and viewing — to a standstill, and the impact is being felt across segments. With OTT as the new platform here to stay, differentiated content and diligent scripts needs to be the order of the day if films are to covet the attention of audiences and make them loosen their purse strings to the streaming platforms where their favourite films are featured.



Sure enough, the industry needs to self-introspect as also adopt a more realistic approach as to which would work, and which will not on the OTT and digital platforms. The enterprising newbies in the business have shown that if one is able to tweak the content to suit the picky palate of audiences who are fed up of dross dished out in the name of 'family entertainment'. One other aspect is also the fact that new age actors and directors who are ready to experiment with nuanced, uncharted topics OTT would best serve their interests.

Yes, pushed to the brink of 'rejig' and 'revive' mode, it is crystal clear that mindless entertainment will no longer suffice to see surge of audiences. Even good content may not be sufficient. Only good filmmaking in true sense of the language of cinema will.

The exposure of audiences in this digital age and times to craft of cinema has made the art of filmmaking and the way the narrative is structured and dealt with in a nuanced manner has become a necessary component in addition to having just a good tale to tell.

No quick-fix solution

A taut screenplay, better understanding of the grammar and idiom of cinema, realistic and relatable portrayals and technical virtuosity are sure to make digital home viewing experience as effective as theatrical viewing.

Needless to state, there is no single quick-fix solution to the situation. The entertainment industry per se must pose the questions and seek the answers itself. Mere artistic freedom will not do. There is more to cinema and movies than peddling stuff in the garb of entertainment and that is what the audience want.

Any crisis it is seen throws open several possibilities to break the standard pattern. Will the need for new and engaging, differentiated and truthful content break the existing patterns of filmmaking and distribution/release?

Will one witness another new resurgence in the wake of the crisis? How engaging and emphatic will these films be with the intended audiences may be the real test of character of both the film and its makers.

The basic unique selling proposition of OTTs being one can watch the film of one's choice at one's own pace and several times over and switch from one film to another depending upon the mood and preference.

Furthermore, OTT platforms come with oodles of freedom. The hassle of online booking, mask and sanitiser, arriving punctual at the show timing, and concurrent cost beyond

the film in terms of a coke or a popcorn or a burger or a samosa to whet one's appetite or satiate one's thirst, eating into one's already poor pocket given the price of a show's ticket.

According to Pricewaterhouse Coopers, India will be the tenth-largest market for OTT in terms of revenue in 2022, with mobile internet subscribers increasing to an estimated 805 million from 406 million in 2017.

Similarly, Ernst & Young-FICCI 2020 report on Media & entertainment states that paid OTT subscriber base which is around 10 million in India now is expected to see further spike thanks to the new situation, while theatre-going audience numbers 100 million.

With no new films and footfall in movie halls, theatre owners are looking at a new avenue for launching their projects — over-the-top (OTT) platforms such Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and other international and regional counterparts.

Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar were once the favourite online streaming services available in India. But now homegrown brands such as MX Player, ZEE5, SunNXT, Manorama Max and Jio Cinema are gaining ground.

Win-win situation

But for small films OTTs seem the best bet. It is a win-win for both the producers and the streaming platforms. A film released on an online platform means the producer is not just paid for it but also need not worry about distributors and expenses for theatrical exhibitions. The OTT platform gains because a new film premiered means more subscriptions for the platform, thereby leading to a revenue surge for streaming services.

The fear of catching the big C, people may surely think twice in catching a film at the theatre. However, online platforms which provide an alternative to big-screen halls are constrained by the fact that their reach is limited and is primarily dependent on who has subscribed to which platform.

Multiplexes who till the other day were shy of providing premium slots to regional films will perforce have to change their approach for, with OTT and digital platforms changing the way audiences consume cinema, henceforth, it is bound to impact the footfall at the theatres with new habits like watching movies at one's convenience, place and time becoming the new order of entertainment.

Monopoly of multiplexes may be a thing of the past as the biggest differentiator of digital platforms being their easy accessibility and convenience of consuming entertainment in the cozy confines of one's living/bedroom, even while on the go in one's car or while waiting for friends.

But then, industry watchers believe that people will always prefer the theatre to watch films for it is not just the story or film but also the experience. Cinematic experience cannot be enjoyed on hand-held devices or large screen TVs.

Cinema being more of a collective experience there seems to be a semblance of hope in the words of Christopher Nolan. While movies will continue to be an integral part of India's social fabric, the industry is hopeful as director Christopher Nolan, wrote recently for *The Washington Post*, "when this crisis passes, the need for collective human engagement, the need to live and love and laugh and cry together, will be more powerful than ever."

God Send crisis

In hindsight though, Corona seems to be God Send. It provides the film industry such as Kannada film industry chance to rethink, rejig and revisit its monumental mistakes and assumptions "this is what audience wants" and we give it to them. This gives the men/women that matter much food for thought. With Corona sending them back to drawing table provides them headwinds to chalk out

what is best in the interests of the industry and the audience per se.

From eschewing expenditures on Big Ticket productions that hardly bring back expected Return on Investment, to Scripts, which, on paper, looks promising, turning out duds, needless and fanciful excursions to exotic locations to film a song or two, sheer waste of precious capital.

Will Corona, in its aftermath, bring about complete changeover in the way 'entertainment' industry functions henceforth in near future, only time can tell?

Will the Mandarins of Movie Business, think beyond 'Entertainment' to 'Engagement' & 'Socially Conscious Aesthetic Cinemas' we have to wait & watch?

Will soothsayer Nolan's words come true? Only time will tell. Until then OTT will be passage of rite for the entertainment industry as it finds its feet back and ensure the return of the golden days of theatrical experience to savour and soak in the magic and marvel of movies.

For now though it is indeed a Sisyphean sojourn as Corona provides the Entertainment Industry a golden opportunity to clean its Augean Stables and take a 360 degree turn for better to provide more engaging, enterprising, and ensemble cinemas, rather than take a blinkered box office view and churn out dross after dross in the name of entertainment.

Yes, it all depends on the ideators, the movie makers and their innate cinema sensibilities and approach to the very idea of cinema and its larger socio-cultural and aesthetic purpose beyond pure play entertainment. Well-thought narratives, with new engaging content, compact and crisp budget films could just be best bet. But then can our filmmakers see the writing on the wall and change for the better?

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