Digital cinema – boon or bane assignment

Digital Cinema ??? Boon or Bane! In today's fast paced age, with technology upgrading constantly, soon filmmakers will be opting for more digital rather than analog prints. Digitization is nothing but electronic software distribution without the use of any physical media, utilizing media like satellites & the internet. In the beginning of the decade, if the introduction of multiplexes gave the cinema industry a huge boost, then digitization will usher in the second phase in the resurgence of Indian cinema. But there are still some rough edges to be embellished out.

Digital cinema should be helping young & new film makers. Yet it is only making the big cinemas bigger. How do we change this? How do we make it better? Like everything else, what are its strengths & shortcomings? How do we use it to our advantage? Digitization paves the way for better cinema experience. For this, our industry needs to come together and arrive at a consensus on its implementation to take care of all the players in the industry. The main aim is to provide more people to experience better cinema. Here are some relevant & significant points of contention.

Cost effectiveness: Digital distribution is economic while compared to the physical one. One copy of a digital print may cost between Rs. 17, 500-20, 000 whereas the cost of each physical print comes to around Rs. 45, 000-50, 000. There is a monopoly on the operator side, thus putting the exhibitor in a fix. To change this, more digital operators should come in and even out the playing field. Larger reach: Digitization streamlines the distribution of cinema through satellite technology to even remote towns, thus increasing the reach to a larger audience on the same day of release.

What used to be a gap of 4-5 weeks (sometimes even months) between a big & small city release has now come down to almost zero days. This is advantageous for the big release. But the smaller/average producers should play their game right. Boon for small budget films: Mostly, small movies run on word-of-mouth publicity. The producer should utilize the right windows of opportunity. He can't release his movie in 100 screens overnight just because he can, & expect it to be a hit. Instead release his movie in a smaller number of theatres in the first week and build it up after word gets around.

It's all about strategy. Piracy: Contrary to popular belief, there is clear proof that you can pirate digitized cinema as well. We can only reduce piracy but you cannot eliminate it completely unless the government & the police takes really concrete steps. Digital Assets Management: Earlier film labs used to develop the negatives. Then as the technologies changed to U-matic tapes, then Betas, Digi-betas and now hard disks, the base film was able to transfer it to the appropriate technology properly.

The laboratory was taking of the film negative. Now post-digitization, who is going to take care of the original master file assets? This is an important issue to be addressed. There are solutions to this, but they're expensive. Advertising: The operators treat their digital network as a Tv network where they do a lot of advertising. Now apparently there will be 20 minutes of advertising before the film & 20 minutes during the interval. This kills the experience and the audience will turn away from the theatres.

Moreover, this advertising banks on the playing movie. Who's profiting out of this advertising? How is the producer compensated? Technology brings in advantages but we should ensure that it doesn't hinder the movie experience. There should be a new platform, an e-cinema initiative that safeguards the industry's independence, the interoperable rights. Exhibitors should be educated about the systems & formats. Digital cinema is welcome but industry professionals, should take adequate measures to utilize it in the right way!