

## 65. IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON TAMIL FILM INDUSTRY

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### **ABSTRACT**

Lakhs of workers are dependent on the film industry for their living either directly or indirectly. Since no shooting is taking place for three months now, they are struggling a lot. The commendable gesture of star actors and the workers' unions has helped to some extent. Even as these workers are being provided basic rations from the contributions, their requirements are far from being met. All the workers may not get their work back after the restrictions are lifted. Producers will definitely try to reduce the production cost, leading to the loss of jobs. The post COVID-19 film industry would be totally different, with minimum stars and minimum workers. With production houses slowly shifting to digital platforms to release completed films, the industry is set to transform. This could again lead to massive job losses for lakhs of workers toiling behind the screen.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Film Employees Federation of South India (FEFSI) cancelled all film related work on March 16 as a precautionary measure. FEFSI, an umbrella organisation of 24 craft unions, has since been appealing for support to workers affiliated to the organisation. The 24 different unions under it, right from directors, editors, dubbing artistes, lightmen to mess and cleaning workers, have a membership ranging between 1,200 and 3,500.

A large section of Kollywood workers are daily wagers, including junior artistes, workers involved in production

and post-production, art, transport and catering services. Though wages differ from one department to another, their misery remains the same during the lockdown. The television industry, however, could start working soon as it relies largely on indoor shootings, but silver screen productions require more outdoor shoots, requiring total normalcy to be in place.

### **GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION**

A large section of Kollywood workers are daily wages, including junior artistes, workers involved in production and post-production, art, transport and catering services. Though wages differ from one department to another, their misery remains the same during the lockdown. The workers in general in cine industry get jobs between 12 and 18 days in a month with Rs 850 as wages. We are struggling now without any income and the future remains bleak. Many of our workers are on the verge of starvation. We have nowhere to go". In case of Lightmen union there are around 1,300 members in Tamil Nadu. They are worst affected due to Covid 19 Pandemic Situation.

### **PATHETIC SITUATION OF FILM INDUSTRY WORKERS IN TAMIL NADU AND PONDICHERRY**

Thousands of workers attached to cinema theatres – Tamil Nadu and Puducherry have a whopping 1,571 single screens – are also unemployed due to the lockdown. Considering a maximum of 10 workers employed in urban and rural areas, the number of workers affected could be around 15,000. The inclusion of workers

in multiplexes will add another few thousand.

The associated industries, including suppliers to canteens in these theatres, have lost their livelihood. The life of these workers and their families has come to a virtual standstill. Restoration of normalcy looks distant, considering the present condition. Outdoor shootings are impossible to start now. Getting permission for the shoot and the co-operation of local people could be a difficult task. So, we would need normalcy that existed before the pandemic, for the industry to flourish". The television industry, however, could start working soon as it relies largely on indoor shootings, but silver screen productions require more outdoor shoots, requiring total normalcy to be in place.

## **POPULAR INDUSTRY IN INDIA**

Cinema is immensely popular in India. Every year more than 1800 films get uproduced in various languages in India. Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Chennai, Kochi ,Bangalore and Cuttack are the major centres of film production in India. As of 2013, India ranked first in terms of annual film output, followed by Nigeria, Hollywood and China. In 2012, India produced 1,602 feature films. Indian film industry reached overall revenues of \$1.86 billion (₹93 billion) in 2011. In 2015, India had a total box office gross of US\$2.1 billion, the third largest in the world. In 2011, Indian cinema sold over 3.5 billion tickets worldwide, 900,000 more than Hollywood. With production houses slowly shifting to digital platforms to release completed films, the industry is set to transform. This could again lead to massive job losses for lakhs of workers toiling behind the screen.

## **COVID 19 PAVED WAY TO DIRECT TO HOME RELEASES**

The news surprised that two big Hindi

films, one Tamil and Telugu film, amongst others, are being released on a digital platform next month owing to the uncertainty about theatrical release in near future. Also, the choice and diversity of content on these platforms is much greater. A film theatre has to cater to mainstream audience expectations for business reasons. In the process, many deserving films often miss out on decent screening slots or have to make do with whatever is available. The online platforms do not have to deal with these concerns and offer a good mix of both mainstream and art-house cinema. During the lockdown, some films available on these online platforms have gained a new lease of life. Malayalam film Virus is the talk of the town again owing to its availability on these platforms. Dealing with the Nipah crisis in Kerala, this film is a great reminder of the actions taken by the State government to tackle the crisis. This different approach is well suitable during this Covid19 Pandemic Situation. Also, you could bypass many of the problems of censor certification if you release films on these platforms. Amidst the ongoing pandemic, many film festivals are moving online. Britain's most famous socialist filmmaker, Ken Loach, has made some of his best films available for free on YouTube. Other film streaming platforms are making foreign and documentary cinema available at a nominal fee for a limited time span. However, there is also a grave danger. Access to these platforms is largely limited to an urban demography that can afford an Internet connection, along with the subscription fees which also determines the class character of its potential viewers. If this were to become the norm, it would exclude a large majority of the film-viewing population.

## **ASSISTANCE FROM GOVERNMENT SIDE**

The cash relief from the government of Tamil Nadu to the industry, though minimal, has also been of some help. Even though post-production work restarted for a short while, it came to a halt after the lockdown in Chennai and surrounding districts.

## **COVID 19 PANDEMIC SITUATION HAS LED TO GROWTH RATE TO STANDSTILL**

The Tamil film industry is one of the largest in the country with an audience across the country and the globe. The industry has caught the attention of the global audience with frequent blockbusters, which accounted for over Rs 1,000 crore from theatrical releases in 2019 alone, when the industry saw the release of around 250 films in a single year.

The entertainment industry also contributes to the economy of the state government. In 2018-19, the industry contributed about 0.1% to state gross domestic product, estimated to be more than Rs 1,800 crore. It's contribution to the state exchequer is set to take a hit owing to the lockdown.

While the pandemic-induced lockdown has brought the industry's fast growth history to a standstill, it has left lakhs of workers without jobs and wages.

## **DOMINANT ENTRY OF AMAZON IN FILM INDUSTRY**

Actor Surya decided to release its co-produced Tamil movie "Ponmagal Vandhaal" (Here Comes the Daughter) on Amazon Prime in May. The film stars his wife, Jyothika, as the lead actor with other Tamil heroes cast in supporting roles. Since Amazon offered a premium for direct release of movies on its platform, the price they offered easily covered the film's production costs. The exhibitors, although, were not pleased. "Surya and Jyothika became stars only

because their movies were watched on nearly 1,000 screens across Tamil Nadu. By releasing the film directly on OTT, they have betrayed the interests of thousands of people working in theatres," said R. Panneerselvam, President, Tamil Nadu Theatre Owners Association.

But 30 Tamil film producers jumped to Surya's defence, arguing that OTT release would help producers recover their investments without waiting for a long time. OTT release also makes sure that when theatres reopen, too many movies are not jostling for screen space. Their logic makes sense since over 200 Tamil films are produced in a year and many wait for theatre release as the big productions usually get first preference. Many of them remain unreleased for years before they get telecasted by a TV channel. OTT has changed that business paradigm.

For example, "R.K. Nagar", a small budget film directed by Venkat Prabhu, had been waiting for two years to find a theatre. Using the present rush towards OTT, the producer released it on Netflix and recovered a portion of the costs. "This is the way it will work for small and medium budget films in future. The audience has already shown its preference and the industry has to accept this trend," said S.R. Prabhu, a leading film producer. Similarly, two Kannada films – "French Biryani" and "Law" and a Tamil-Telugu bilingual "Penguin" will also hit the TV screens courtesy Amazon Prime.

## **COVID 19 - SEVERE BLOW TO THE INDUSTRY**

The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the Tamil film industry. Film shoot cancellations and postponement of movie releases amid the lockdown has put hundreds of crores of business at stake and rendered lakhs of film industry workers, mostly daily wage

- Covid-19's first impact came when Reliance Entertainment on March 12 indefinitely postponed Rohit Shetty's film Sooryavanshi. The film starring Akshay Kumar and Katrina Kaif was scheduled to release on March 24. This was quickly followed by Sir, Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar, Haathi Mere Sathi and 83 getting postponed too. Baaghi 3 saw fewer takers in its second week, and Irrfan Khan's Angrezi Medium had to be pulled out of theatres. It eventually released on OTT platform Disney+Hotstar. Similarly a lot of big ticket releases in regional languages have also been delayed.

- Covid-19's ripple effect was felt when film bodies including Federation of Western Indian Cine Employees (FWICE) and Indian Film & Television Directors' Association (IFTDA) decided to halt shooting of movies, TV shows and web series. Major production houses like Balaji Motion Pictures, Dharma Productions and Yash Raj Films also promptly called off all production activity. Amid this, various state governments ordered the closing down of cinema halls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on March 24 of a 21-day national lockdown sealed the fate for several projects.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

- As film producers across India grapple with low revenues and challenges of restarting production post the covid-19 lockdown, top actors who take away almost 50-60% of the overall budget of movies may have to cut down on their big remuneration numbers.

- There is no need for kissing or hugging scenes. The usual crowds at shooting spots could be reduced considerably.

- A film shooting generally requires 125 to 150 workers, and this number could be halved in the future.

- A large section of Kollywood workers are daily wagers, including junior artistes, workers involved in production and post-production, art, transport and catering services. Though wages differ from one department to another, their misery remains the same during the lockdown. Therefore Commission has to be formed to fix a fixed income for Cine Industry Workers for a particular period or for a project.

- The dancers can be trained to switch over to supporting acting roles as a temporary measure.

- Worst affected workers may be from Stunt Union. During this situation, there may be stunt scenes in films. Self Employment training programmes can be organised to enhance their confidence and enhance their standard of living.

- The family oriented subjects should be given due importance by the producers and directors.

- The expenses can be reduced by optimum utilisation local shooting spots.

- Shooting should be conducted with proper precautions once getting necessary permission from the government. For this separate committee has to be framed by the concern producer involving the team of health sector officials.

- The government has to provide special concession particularly in education as regards the childrens of cine industry workers are concerned.

- Credit facility should be provided to the Cine Industry Workers with Very Minimum Interest rates.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is uncertainty in Tamil Film Industry as in other fields, about when the Covid 19 Pandemic will end. What certain though is that with social distancing norms to be followed things will not be same again. Wearing masks will become the norm on the sets and removed only when the situation warrants. The whole dynamic of shooting will have to change and actors may insist on filming independent scenes. Whatsoever it may be, all the workers may not get their work back after the restrictions are lifted. Producers have to definitely try to reduce the production cost, which may lead to the loss of jobs. Hence, concern association and government should join in hands to protect the welfare of the cine industry workers. Impact of Covid-19 on Indian Media and Entertainment industry is a mix of pain, hope and opportunities

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