

The Social Experience of Cinema-going in Single Screen Theatres: An Ethnography of Audiences in an Indian Small Town

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ABSTRACT: This research is an attempt to understand the audience preference for single screen movie theatres in an Indian small town i.e. Raebareli town in Uttar Pradesh. The research revealed that though the audience from nearby suburban/rural areas of Raebareli went to the theatres to escape the daily grind, yet movie going is not a particularly popular leisure activity among them. By virtue of belonging to the same “culture area”, these rural/suburban respondents were found to share similar notions of conviviality, underlined in terms of collective pursuance. On the other hand, single screen movie theatres enjoyed a certain amount of patronage from the town based middle and upper middle class. The hedonistic tendency and preference for individualized entertainment forms made them to choose theatre going as a popular form of leisure activity. Though they recognized that multiplexes offered better facilities and amenities, the upper middle class respondents did not display snobbishness in terms of the choice of theatres (as they watched movie in both single screen and multiplex theatres), movie genre (enjoyed movies from classics, parallel cinemas to commercial films), or choice of movie directors. Thus, the upper middle class respondents can best be described as ‘cultural omnivores’, whose choice of movies and the ambience to watch them is characterized by heterogeneity. The paper therefore adds to the homology thesis of Pierre Bourdieu by pointing out that there can more than isomorphic relation between people’s class affiliation and leisure preferences. The paper reasons that the heteromorphic taste of the upper middle class in terms of the contagious effect of the culture of the locality/environment. In sum, it is argued that consumption practices of a class is defined not only in terms of its purchasing power but also in terms of the peculiarity of the social environment in question. The study used urban ethnography to unearth the intricacies and details of theatre going, with the main tools of data collection being observation and interviews.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been an unprecedented growth of movie industry in the Asia Pacific region, which is demonstrated by the fact that box office for all films in the region surged by 13 per cent (US\$ 14.1 billion) in 2015 (Theatrical Market Statistics, 2015). It

is a matter of pride to share that in the ranking of the top 20 international box office markets, India is positioned in the fourth place (Theatrical Market Statistics, 2015).

Despite the fact that there are currently 2,950 multiplex out of 9,600 screens in India, multiplexes are growing because they allow the views to choose

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from a variety of films and earn more than half of the theatrical revenue in India (KPMG Media and Entertainment Industry Report, 2015). This is corroborated by the KPMG report of 2017 which states that on an average 3-4 percent of the single screen theatres have been shutting down every year and 250-300 single screen theatres have permanently closed down their operation in the last five years. The intriguing part however is; single screen movie theatres continue to survive, if not thrive, in some parts of the country. This paper therefore attempts to understand the survival of single screen movie theatres in a north Indian small town, with reference to the city of Raebareli. In the process, the paper also examines 'movie going' as leisure preference among the residents of a small town. This paper therefore attempts to reason the survival of single screen theatres in terms of prevailing leisure activities of the audience in the town and surrounding areas. While in the contemporary era there is hardly any hamlet or countryside untouched by the forces of globalization, survival of single screen movie theatres (and non-establishment of multiplex) in Raebareli is an interesting case, judging by the fact that it is located at a meagre distance of 100 kms (approx.) from cities like Lucknow and Allahabad. Before detailing out the methodology and findings of the study, let us familiarize ourselves with the domain specific literature review.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Rao (2007) in her study highlights on the portrayal of Indian identity in Bollywood films and how the lower middle class audience perceive such portrayal. Her essay discusses how Bollywood under the influence of forces of globalization and capitalism, create a dreamworld that majority of underprivileged Indians cannot relate to. The paper exemplifies the "recognizable disconnection" between what is shown on the screen and the lives of the audiences. She argues that in creating a world of fantasy, movies alienate the audience. Exaggeration is further in the depiction of the life of diasporic Indians in the movies, where success is amplified, and failures are concealed. The NRIs are depicted as dutiful Indians who keep the good old Indian values and traditions intact. In sum, Rao deliberates on how Bollywood movie

content consciously ignore the lives and reality of unprivileged Indians.

Athique (2011) in his study of Indian cinema halls posits that cinema hall is a contemporary addition to public life, not only because of updated technological apparatus it used but also for its reorganizing of public space. Stated differently, cinema halls offer a liberal public space where people, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion, watch films together.

Gerritsen (2016) in her study discusses how fandom of particular movie stars in South India unfolds in the familial space. For example, she elaborately narrates how in family brothers fight over the favorite film star, wives shift their allegiance to their husband's favorite actor, and families have their favorite film star, who they admire for generations together. The admiration and devotion to the favorite film star is so intense that people continue to spend money on fan club, even after they have serious familial responsibilities. At times, the photograph of the film star becomes a proxy of the physical presence of the film star in the household.

In her book, "House Full: Indian Cinema and the Active" Lakshmi Srinivas (2016) engages in anthropological understanding of movie-theatre audience in India. Underlining the characteristics of audience in single screen movie theatres, Srinivas highlights that audience in such theatres engage in active viewing. For instance, the viewers applaud loudly at particular scenes, sing when a soundtrack is being played, pass comments at important junctures, throw coins at the screens, etc. More so, audience even converse with each other while watching the film and this acts as a filter in understanding the film. Even some of the viewers are "repeaters" as they view the same movie more than once. And they consume the movie in fragments, often coming in and out of the theatre. Srinivas contends that most viewers in such theatres come for viewing their favorite actors or actresses, snappy dialogues or exciting fight scenes. In sum, Srinivas argues that single screen movie theatres are all about "active viewing" of films.

Srinivas *et al.* (2018) in their study explore the transformation of single screen movie theatres and Hindi dubbed 'South Indian films' in the present context. The paper argues that Hindi dubbed Telugu

and Tamil blockbusters are screened in north Indian single screen theatres because their distribution rights are available for a modest amount. Further, the movies of the popular genres are more likely to be dubbed in Hindi and in some cases the Hindi version of the films are released on Youtube prior to the release in original language.

Sreesanth and Balasaravanan (2020) explore the strategies adopted by rural single screen theatre in Kannur district of Kerala to reach out to the audience and survive the onslaught of digital cinemas. Rani Talkies Vengad, the theatre in question, thus survived by adopting modern publicity methods and techniques. For instance, social media platforms (like Facebook) were used to advertise film change and show timings, for scaling the evaluation of the audience and for getting suggestions for improvement.

The literature discussed above broadly outlines the audience behavior in single screen theatres, how movie halls have redefined the concept of urban space, how single screen theatres have strategized their survival. However, the above mentioned studies does not adequately highlight the perspective of the audience, understand the uniqueness and reason of their preference (multiplex vs single screen movie theatres), and in the process examine the survival of single screen movie theatres. Further, this research offers a glimpse of the peculiarities of leisure habits in an Indian small town.

The arguments made in the paper traces its origin in the arguments made by Pierre Bourdieu (1979) in his work 'Distinction.' In this work, Bourdieu introduces us to the concepts of structural homology and habitus. Habitus refers to the cultural structure present in the minds and bodies of individuals that shape their thoughts and behavior. As a corollary, the 'structural homology' argument puts forward an isomorphic relation between people's class affiliation and aesthetic preference (Coulangeon and Lemel, 2009). This implies that societal elites are likely to display refined cultural taste and 'highbrow' habits while the commoners are likely to be 'lowbrow' or

crude in their tastes and habits. Illustratively, the highbrows are likely to exhibit affinity for classical music and operas, gourmet dining, finer dressing habits, preference for classic literature and poetry, sophisticated table manners, etc. By contrast, lowbrow cultural taste would mean predisposition to punk music, informal dressing habits, graffiti, grotesque mannerisms, etc. Thus, the difference between highbrow and lowbrow essentially narrows down to the distinction between refined and coarse art forms. Further, as highbrow culture is practiced by the elites, it is a source of exclusionary status.

This paper therefore analyzes the social experience/preference of movie going (single screen theatres vis-à-vis multiplexes) among the middle class in an Indian small town and its surrounding areas, with special reference to Raebareli town in Uttar Pradesh. This is because modernity has not evenly percolated in different pockets of the country and to borrow Rajagopal's ('96) term—modernity in Indian can best be described as "*incomplete modernity.*" *Such modernity entails "a contested and contradictory set of values."* (Rajagopal, '96). Against this backdrop, the paper examines the survival of single screen movie theatres in the era of consumer-centred multiplexes. Stated differently, the research investigates the perception of small town audience about movie going in different theatrical settings and as a form of leisure.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines the peculiarity of movie going trends in a small town with special reference to Raebareli. Raebareli is a city in Uttar Pradesh and has a municipal board. The city is located 82 kms southeast of Lucknow and has a population of 191,056 (Census of India, 2011). Furthermore, the city has a literacy rate of 81 percent and a sex ratio of 941. The labor force participation in Raebareli district is 46.22 percent for the year 2017-18 and the per capita income is Rs. 34, 227. Raebareli city has two single screen movie theatres-Milan and Manika. Some of the relevant details of the theatres is provided in the Table 1.

TABLE 1
Some details of movie theatres in Raebareli

Details	Milan	Manika
Location	PNT colony Raebareli Uttar Pradesh	Firoz Gandhi Nagar Raebareli Uttar Pradesh
Establishment year	1965	1980
Show Timing	09:30am,12:30pm,03:30pm,06:30pm,09:15pm	10:00am,01:00pm,04:00pm,07:00pm
Price of Ticket	Gold – Rs.100., Diamond – Rs.150.	Regular–Rs. 80., Balcony–Rs. 100
Movie Screen Type	Single	Single
Refreshment Facility	Yes	No

For the purpose of this research, the audience in the theatres (Milan and Manika) of Raebareli were interviewed. Interviews were carried out for a month at different show times to access the views of diverse sets of audience.

Moreover, interviews were conducted in various neighborhoods of Raebareli town. This was done to assess the views of those who do not go to theatres/ these theatres to watch movies. Questions were regarding the demographic profile of the respondents, the kind of movies they prefer to watch in the theatres, description of their last movie going experience, their experience of the auditorium, etc. The aim therefore was to understand vignettes of the trips. 80 interviews were conducted in total and respondents were mainly middle class residents of Raebareli town and the surrounding rural areas. Further, to keep the demographic difference constant, interviewees mainly belonged to the age group 25-45 years. The age group was purposefully chosen to access the views of those who were economically independent to spend money on watching films and engage in other related expenditures. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and they were conducted over a period of six months. Some interviews were conducted in the theatres itself, others at the residence or workplace of the respondents. Sometimes, the author watched movies in the theatre alongside the respondents to gain a better understanding of their perspective and choice. To gain in-depth understanding of movie going preference of the respondents, interviews at times were carried out in multiple sessions. Often the discussion about films and theatres went along the conversation on socio-economic issues. Resonating Griffiths ('93), this helped *“to understand the social and cultural networks that often situate an individual viewer.”*

Class position of an individual was identified by his/her income level and Abhijit Banerjee and Esther

Duflo's (2008) definition of middle class was used for identifying the participants. Banerjee and Duflo (2008) based their survey in 13 developing countries including India and defined middle class as those who spend between \$2 and \$10 per capita per day, measured at 1993 PPP. Precisely speaking, the lower middle class are those who spend between \$2 to \$4 per day while the upper middle class spend between \$6 to \$10 per capita per day (Krishnan and Hatekar, 2017). So, the upper middle class are those who have a sufficiency of disposable income at hand and are well above the poverty line (ibid). They are mainly the service sector professionals who are engaged in services like education, health, finance, insurance, administrative services, Information Technology (IT) industries, Business Process Outsourcing, etc. Additionally, in terms of asset ownership, the upper middle class is distinguished by the ownership of four-wheeler vehicle (Krishna and Bajpai, 2015). On the other hand, the lower middle class are mainly engaged in manufacturing, trading and construction activities and typically owned two-wheelers like a motorcycle or a motor scooter (ibid). In reporting the findings, the names of the respondents were replaced with alpha-numeric characters to maintain confidentiality of the research subjects.

FINDINGS

The research found that audience in movie theatres of Raebareli went for “time-pass” and to escape the drudgery of life and hence they preferred movies that are action or thriller based. As Respondent K posited:

“We go to movies to relax and to forget the drudgery of our life for 2 hours. We thus like movies with thriller or action plots that take us far away from the problems in our lives.”

Another reason for going to the movie theatres is that they offered entertainment at an affordable rate. As respondent S mentioned:

“I go to theatres once in a while and for Rs. 100 it is good form of entertainment in an air-conditioned environment.”

Most of the respondents were found to be not picky about movie theatres and only looked for basic amenities in the theatres. For instance, amenities like the picture and sound quality, seating arrangements mattered to them and they did not look for other extravaganzas in watching movies. Therefore, the facilities offered by Milan and Maneka theatres in Raebareli were considered to be sufficient by them. As Respondent X pointed out:

“I don’t want to spend more than Rs. 100 for watching a movie and Milan offers decent facilities at this price.”

Respondent C similarly echoed:

“Factors like screen size and clarity, sound quality, seating arrangements, air-conditioning are some of the basic or essential facilities that a movie hall should offer. I am personally concerned with these factors only...Expecting facilities beyond these are a luxury and suits people who have sufficient amount of disposable incomes.”

Likewise, another respondent V posited:

“One can get to watch newly released Bollywood movies in AC environment. What more does one want?”

Due to unavailability of multiplex movie theatres in Raebareli, respondents were asked whether they travelled to nearby cities (like Lucknow/Allahabad) to watch movies in multiplex and if they would have opted for multiplex if there was one in Raebareli. Respondent W clarified his reluctance of going to nearby cities to watch movies in multiplex in the following words:

“Yes, I agree picture quality in multiplexes is much better. However, the nearest Multiplex in Lucknow is 100 kms away and hence it is exhausting and illogical to travel 200 kms (up and down) for 4 hours to watch a movie of 2 hours. Apart from the bus tickets, there is additional expense on food (lunch)...The multiplexes are generally situated in malls and it means that you will be tempted to indulge in unnecessary expenses as

you enter the mall. Further, while watching a movie you feel like munching something especially when others are also eating and snacks is very pricey in a multiplex...The entire trip to Lucknow with family will cost a bare minimum of Rs. 2000, which is expensive for a middle class family like us.”

The above-mentioned response came despite the acknowledgement that multiplexes offer better amenities and facilities. These respondents, who were mainly from the nearby rural areas of Raebareli, considered movie going just as any other form of entertainment and it does not deserve expenditure beyond a certain amount. As respondent M shared:

“Movie going for us is ‘a’ form of leisure activity and not ‘the’ form of leisure activity. Even if there was a multiplex in Raebareli town, I still would have preferred Milan or Maneka. I feel completely out of the place in a multiplex and I don’t want to waste money on an alienating experience.”

It is argued that because the respondents from nearby rural areas like Fursatganj, Nigoha, Sultanpur, Gauriganj, Tiloi, Jais, etc. belong to the same ‘culture area’¹, they shared similar habits, tastes, and similar likings. This paper contends that such similarity of cultural taste results from the communal bonding that members of rural/semi-urban community share and higher levels of multiplexity (interaction overlapped across different institutional spheres) that people typically encounter. It is no wonder that the homogenous nature of the community made their expectation and perception about movie going being underlined by certain level of uniformity.

Thus, respondents revealed that leisure activities in the small town and surrounding rural areas is not restricted to self-indulgence activities like shopping, dining out, and watching movies. It involves activities like visiting friends and relatives, involving oneself in civic activities, organizing and participating in community festivals, involvement in local political activities, other pastime activities like visiting parks and temples, playing ‘shatranj’ (chess) and cards, flying kites and playing other outdoor sports, hanging out with friends, etc. As respondent N shared:

“You should understand that social life in a small town is not defined only in terms of shopping and eating. Movie-going is another form of hedonism that is not popular in the small towns. The leisure time in

these areas are social in nature and does not necessarily involve spending money.”

Moreover, it was found that leisure activities were kept largely discrete by the respondents. Thus, most respondents, did not combine movie going with shopping or dining out. It may be said that their limited disposable incomes did not allow them to club various

leisure activities together. The trend sharply contrasts to the habits of upper middle class urbanites who tend to combine leisure activities together in an attempt to maximize their gratification. The table below contrasts the popular leisure habits of the rural vs urban respondents. Interviewees were asked to reveal their engagement/participation in various leisure activities and table below summarizes their choice.

TABLE 2
Engagement/Participation of the rural vis-à-vis urban respondents in various leisure activities

Popular Leisure Activities/Pastime	Rural Respondents (30)	Urban Respondents(30)
Gupshup (chatting) Friends and Relatives	27	18
Involvement in Civic Activities	25	14
Organizing and Participating in Community Festivals	24	17
Shopping	13	27
Dining Out	14	26
Movie Going	14	27
Playing Games (Outdoor)	20	17
Playing Games (Indoor)	16	22
Visiting Parks, Temples, Melas	28	19
Playing Mobile Games, Watching Video, and Chatting on Phones	16	23
Going for Religious Pilgrimage (Vaishnodevi, Amarnath, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Haj yatra)	23	14
Participation in Bhajan, Kirtan, Katha, Jagran	22	9
Enjoying Nautanki (drama)	24	6
Spending Time with Family	27	25
Going for Long Drive	6	16
Availing spa and beautification treatment	4	19
Use of OTT Services	13	22

A closer scrutiny of the preference of leisure activities of respondents (as mentioned in the Table 2) reveals that there is a clear preference for activities that are to be performed in collectivity among the rural respondents. Thus, leisure activities like ‘gupshup’ with friends and relatives, involvement in civic activities, participation in community festivals, visiting temples and religious pilgrimage, enjoying ‘nautanki’ and participation in ‘bhajan’, ‘kirtan’, ‘katha’ are essentially collective leisure activities and are performed with family and friends. Since the structure of a society determines its leisure (Modi, 2012), it is contended that popularity of such leisure activities can be explained from the nature of the society the respondents live in. Stated differently, it is argued that leisure in semi-urban and rural area is social in nature because the structure of the surrounding society is collective and group-oriented. Most of the rural respondents were thus found to be infrequent movie goers i.e. they went to the theatres less than

once a month. Movie going is not a popular pastime among these respondents because it may not always be feasible to take the entire (mainly joint in rural areas) family out for movie going. The practice of taking one’s spouse and children out for a movie in the city leaving other members behind was not found to be an acceptable practice in the rural areas. Respondent R clarified:

“In a joint family one cannot suddenly declare that one is going for a movie (or for that matter any other leisure activity) and he wants to take my wife and child along. That’s not done. If I go, I take the entire family with me. That’s not always feasible because everyone has his/her own schedule. Even if they all agree, how am I going to manage the conveyance and logistics?...Plus, the decorum of the hall demands silence and adherence to other urban mannerisms. With members in the family from different age groups, is it possible for adhere to do all that?...It will not be an enjoyment for us.”

Another respondent T shared:

“I often go to Raebareli for my business. I have every opportunity to watch movies in the theatres. I abstain simply because I don’t want to enjoy without my family. For us, if we to enjoy a leisure, we are to enjoy together.”

Moreover, because movie-watching in theatres demand independent engagement with the movie and not with co-audience, the rural and lower middle class audience chose single screen movie theatres that allowed active viewership. Respondent E elaborated:

“Whenever I go to movie with my friends, we talk among ourselves over particular scenes and applaud loud at certain dialogue or dance sequence. After all we are going for fun....But this is not appreciated by many of the co-audience. We therefore choose halls where we have little bit of freedom like this.”

Now, the question arises as to whether the upper middle class in the small town behave any differently and whether they remain untouched by the forces of urbanism. Unlike the rural respondents, the upper middle class were found to be increasingly driven by ‘erlebnis’ or hedonistic urge (Brosius, 2010). They revealed that for movie watching as a regular form of entertainment and for any average grossing Bollywood films, they went to the single screen movie theatres in Raebareli. Nonetheless, they were found to be not satisfied with the facilities offered in the theatres. Sharing the some of his expectations from movie theatres, Respondent U1, a college professor, highlighted:

“The screen size is small. The hall has limited snacks options: popcorn and cold drinks.”

Highlighting similar concerns, respondent G2 observed:

“Air condition facility is not centrally located. Hence, cool air is not evenly distributed in the hall... Plus, the brightness of the screen is not up to the mark.”

Complaining about the seating arrangement in the Raebareli movie theatres, respondent M1 remarked:

“The auditorium is small and the chairs are not very comfortable. Seating arrangement as such is interesting... Gold and diamond seats are essentially the same. The front row seats are called gold seats

and the seat at the back are referred to as diamond seats. There is no difference in cushioning or flexibility of the chairs.”

Acknowledging the superiority of multiplexes over single screen movie theatres in terms of amenities and facilities, Respondent D2 mentioned:

“Watching movies in theatres of Raebareli is like watching movie on a big TV. Sound quality is not that good.....There can be no comparison with multiplexes in Lucknow.”

A senior bank manager, K1 similarly shared:

“Multiplexes are beyond comparison. Watching movie in a multiplex is an experience in totality. Starting from the picture and sound quality, variety of refreshment available, comfort level of the seats, multiplexes have redefined the concept of movie going. Additionally, there is standard shopping and dinner facilities available within the same compound (referring to malls)....Whenever there is a super-hit movie or blockbuster, we go for multiplex in Lucknow.”

Another reason why the upper middle class respondents were not particularly fond of single screen movie theatres is because of the quality of co-audience. They shared that in single screen movie theatres audience often engage in participative viewing/unruly behavior and do not maintain the decorum of the hall. Specifically speaking, they mentioned about constant chatting among the audience, hooting or passing comments at particular scenes, or engaging in obscene behaviors to be particularly disturbing and offensive. Echoing her concern, respondent R2 shared:

“I remember going to Milan theatre for watching Bahubali blockbuster. The hall was packed. It was a complete mess. Empty bottles of coke, chips and popcorn packets, napkins were littered all over the floor...Not to mention of the audience. They hooted very loudly when Bahubali lifted the shiv linga or when Babubali’s ladylove appeared on the screen for the first time....Some of them (audience) do not come to the theatre to watch movies. They come with their girlfriends and engage in all kinds of obscenities in the dimly lit environment.”

Respondents preferred multiplex because they offer a differentiating place. They opined that higher ticket prices of multiplexes and subsidiary costs is functional because they allow for selective entry into

multiplex and thereby ensure certain amount of civility in the environment. Respondent N1 remarked:

“The multiplexes offer 360 degree digital sound, wide screens, spacious and comfortable seating arrangements, variety of snacks and drinks, free and easy parking, etc. Moreover, in multiplex, you get a decent crowd. The co-audience belong to our class (upper middle class) and some of them even belong to the upper class. They know how to maintain the decorum in movie theatres and enjoy movie in a civilized environment.”

Echoing Hubbard (2003), the author contends that upper middle class respondents were driven by concerns for ‘bodily comfort’ and ‘ontological security’. Their concern regarding audience engaging in participative viewing in single screen movie theatres could be interpreted from Norbert Elias’s (1994) perspective in his work “The Civilizing Process.” Elias argues that in “advanced societies” individuals suppress their affective and emotional impulse in order to be classified as “civilized.” Thus, impression management is a part of the modern society and people disdain “strong emotions” in the public domain.

Moreover, restrictive entry in multiplexes in lieu of higher ticket prices, makes movie watching in multiplex an exclusive experience. Thus, apart from the bodily comfort and ontological security that multiplexes offered, multiplexes are status differentiators. By watching movies in the multiplex, the upper middle class are not only able to gratify themselves but also able to show others who they are. Since audience engage in individual viewing and not participative viewing in multiplexes, they broadly served as sites of ‘dissociative consumption’. The peculiarity of such consumption lies in the fact that it not only embodies consumption of the movie but also that of the place/theatre. It is a gratification of senses that is to be experienced in totality. Because movie watching is an embodied experience for the upper middle class, they tend to value the ornamental dimensions of theatres as well. Stated differently, apart from the screen size and brightness, sound quality, and comfortable seats, the upper middle class valued factors like availability of car parking facilities, availability of a variety of quality refreshment and snacks options, central air-conditioning, foyer of the movie hall, quality of co-audience, etc. Theatre for

them is a site of hedonism and most the respondents were found to be frequent movie-goers (i.e. they went to the theatre at least once a month).

Despite such preference of amenities in theatres, the upper middle class were not found to solely patronize the multiplex and totally shun the single screen movie theatres. Their reason was peculiar and to cite the remark of respondent L1:

“Where I will go for a movie depends on the movie per se. For a movie like ‘Sonchiriya’, I will go to one of the single screen theatres in Raebareli. However, for a movie like ‘Avengers: Endgame’, I will certainly attend a multiplex in Lucknow.”

Another upper middle class urbanite, X3 argued differently:

“Look, Milan is located very near to my house. Someday even if a multiplex comes up in Raebareli, I would still go to Milan. I personally look for entertainment that is easily accessible and I am not stubborn or picky about watching movie only in multiplex. Yes, I have preference for the facilities offered by multiplexes, yet preference does not automatically translate to choice....Regarding maintaining distance with the ‘crowd’ in single theatres, I can easily do it by purchasing a diamond ticket.”

Likewise, respondent F3 opined:

“People go to the theatres for relaxation. Now going to a multiplex would mean increasing your expenditure three-folds. For movies like ‘Motichoor Chaknachoor’ or ‘Pati, Patni Aur Woh’, I will never go to multiplex despite my monetary affluence.”

Now, the question arises that whether the upper middle class would have seen movie only in multiplex (and not watched movie in single screen movie theatres) if there was one in Raebareli. In other words, it was investigated if unavailability of multiplex in the city was inhibiting their choice. The interviews revealed that even if there was a multiplex in town, respondents would have decided to attend it based on the quality of the movie in question. As respondent A1 elucidated:

“Even if there was a multiplex in town, I would go to multiplex only when I have some shopping to do at the mall or when a superhit movie is screened. I will reserve movie going to multiplex for such special occasions... It is for the attraction of the mall that I will

go to multiplex.”

Some upper middle class respondents shared that they would prefer multiplex only when going out with their family. This is in consideration of the fact that multiplexes offer a secure and comfortable set-up for watching movie with family. Another respondent D1 said:

“For regular movie watching by myself, I will prefer single screen theatre. However, for going out with family, I will opt for going to multiplex. Automatically, such outing would involve eating in some restaurant at the mall and perhaps some shopping.”

Respondent S1 similarly responded:

“I will reserve going to multiplex for special occasions like January 1st, marriage anniversary, for the premier of any movies or for 3D movies.”

Moreover, the upper class respondents were not found to be particularly choosy about particular movie forms and genre. They enjoyed movies irrespective of the genre, provided the movie had a proper storyline. In fact, the respondents did not show any specific preference for art movies and watched movies irrespective of its producer and director. In other words, most of the upper middle class respondents did not display snobbishness in their choice of movie genre, their actors, or their directors. Movie-going for them is a form of entertainment and for most not an artistic pursuit. As respondent Y1 revealed:

“We go to watch a movie to escape the daily grind. It’s a deroutinization process for us. Often, we don’t google the review of a movie before going for watching it in the hall. For us, the very act of going to the theatre is itself an entertainment apart from watching the movie on screen.”

Another respondent F1 mentioned:

“Last week I watched male chauvinist movie ‘Kabir Singh’ and this week I watched social awakening movie ‘Article 15’. So, you can see that I don’t have a preference for any specific genre.”

Respondent C2 similarly responded:

“I am not finicky about watching parallel cinemas or watching only the movies of Mani Ratnam, Mira Nair or Rajkumar Hirani. I watch movies for entertainment and so watch movies of every genre and kind.”

The findings therefore reveal that the choice of

the upper middle class with regard to the theatre, movie forms and genre, movie directors, etc., cannot be described as ‘highbrow’ (exclusive preference and affinity for classical art forms) but rather as ‘omnivore’ (in lieu of their choice of both single and multiscreen movie theatre, different movie genres, and diversity of directors). In other words, there is no well-defined genre of movie or theatre that they attend and their choice is characterized by ‘hybridity’. Movies are watched for the sake of enjoyment and not for engagement. Similarly, there is little engagement with the aesthetics of the theatres in question. Their affinity towards the multiplex comes from the varied sensory gratifications, exclusionary elitism that they offer, and also because of its convenient location in the mall. In fact, some upper middle class respondents believed that multiplexes if detached from the malls, will have fewer footfalls. However, their preference for multiplexes does not translate into attendance and frequent visits.

In concordance with Van Eijck (2000), it may be argued that since many of middle class in our sample traces its origin in the lower middle and lower class, their tastes do not bear the sophistication of the highbrows. The upper middle class respondents are ‘nouveau rich’ individuals who have acquired the desire of consumption sans the refinement of the highbrows. One may also reason that compared to the upper middle class in the megacities or metropolitan cities, the upper middle class respondents in a small town are relatively shielded from the varied nuances of high end consumption and typical urban ways of life. We therefore argue that consumption choices of a class in question is not only defined in terms of its purchasing power but also in terms of its location/environment. In other words, we contend that in a small town like Raebareli, the contagious effect of the cultural habits and tendencies of people in general influence and shape the consumption pattern of the upper middle class.

In fact, some of the respondents also clarified that the real reason why they prefer going to mall is because malls offer varied services under one roof. They shared that their increasingly hectic work schedule and familial responsibilities leaves them with very little time for leisure. They increasingly experience ‘life cycle squeeze’ and consumption as a

means of narcissism and self-pampering seems to be the way out. Therefore, most upper middle class respondents first go to shopping mall and then opt for going multiplex and not the other way round. Respondent P1, a member of a dual-career household, elaborately illustrated:

“I and my wife are both having jobs. We meet our children late at night. We hardly have time to spend with each other. Because I am a doctor, I am away on the weekends as well. This way the life is very monotonous and children rightfully complain about missing us... Once in a month we go to Lucknow. For that we prepare our ‘things to do list’. We start quite early in the morning in our car and head to Anandi Water Park/Zoo or Hazratganj. This is followed by shopping at the Phoenix Mall, then having lunch at Barbeque Nation (in the mall), and finally watching a movie. So, you see that it is not for the multiplex we go to the mall but it is for the mall that we go to the multiplex.”

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to understand the audience preference (which is a crucial determinant for survival of single screen theatres) for single screen movie theatres in an Indian small town. Audience in the single screen theatres of Raebareli not only included residents of the town but also inhabitants of nearby rural/suburban areas like Tiloi, Fursatganj, Gauriganj, Nigoha, Jais, etc. For the rural/suburban audience, movie watching is just ‘another’ form of entertainment and for which excessive expenditure (in the form of watching movie in multiplexes) is unnecessary. Further, movie going was not found to be particularly popular among them as it involves individual engagement of the audience with the movie. Thus, rural/suburban audience looked for basic amenities, like picture and sound quality and seating arrangement in the theatres and the single screen movie theatres of Raebareli town served their purpose. Their notion of leisure is different—it is a ‘collective endeavor’ to be enjoyed in the company of family and friends. Therefore, leisure activities like chit chatting with friends, involvement in civic activities and community festivals, playing games, visiting temples, parks, ‘melas’, attending religious pilgrimage, participation in ‘bhajan’, ‘kirtan’, ‘katha’, ‘jagran’ appealed to them. The paper argues that by virtue of belonging to the same ‘culture area’,

rural/suburban audience have similar cultural habits and tastes, and similar notions of conviviality. We thus witness a peculiar situation in which the cultural setting of a place (rural/semi-urban in this case) forges a commonality in cultural habits among its residents that cuts across the class backgrounds of individuals.

On the other hand, the upper middle class of the town went to the movie theatres to escape the daily grind. In fact, we found that single screen movie theatres of Raebareli survive because of certain amount of patronage they receive from upper middle/middle class residents of the town. Though the respondents were found to be cognizant of the better amenities and facilities (like better screen size, brightness, sound quality, central air conditioning, cosy seats, variety of snacks options, parking facilities, better foyer, etc.) offered by the multiplexes, yet their preference does not translate to regular attendance. They went to multiplexes whenever they went to malls in Lucknow/Allahabad and not the other way round.

Unlike the rural audience, they exhibited consumerist tendencies and were individualistic in their cultural tastes. Thus, they exhibited preference for leisure activities like movie going, shopping, going for long drive, undergoing spa and beautification treatment, and enjoyed OTT services. Moreover, driven by hedonistic tendencies, the upper and upper middle class often clubbed leisure activities together to optimize their time and celebrate their success. The trend is not uncommon in the modern societies where ‘life style squeeze’ makes the upper/upper middle class to gratify their consumerist urge to its maximum by combining leisure activities together. Their preference for movie going as a leisure activity stemmed from their fondness of dissociated entertainment types. As movie watching demands individual engagement of the audience with the movie, the leisure found popularity among the upper middle class. Dissociation is a mark of status in modern society and upper and upper middle class respondents were therefore drawn to entertainments that are individualized and convenience oriented.

However, such snobbishness was not observed their choice of movie theatres, specific genres of movies (classic/Hollywood/Oscar winning, etc.) or for movies of particular directors. They were found to be

omnivore in their taste of movies and watched movies mainly for entertainment and not for engagement. Further, they did not totally discard the single screen movie theatres and in fact visited them often for regular movie watching. Perhaps their omnivorous leisure preference can be explained in terms of their lower middle/lower class origins and the contagious effect of the 'culture area' in which they reside. The research therefore adds to the homology thesis of Pierra Bourdieu by positing heteromorphic relation between people's class affiliation and aesthetic preference. The paper thus locates certain peculiarity in the leisure activities of the upper middle class of a small town who are relatively shielded from high end consumption patterns and urban ways of life in megacities. Consequently, it is argued that consumption choices of a class in question is not only defined in terms in its purchasing power but is also influenced by its social environment. In a small town like Raebareli, the omnivorous taste (in terms of movie theatres/genres) of the upper middle class is shaped by the leisure and cultural habits of the surrounding rural and suburban societies. The upper middle class are not "urban consumers" in the perfect sense of the term.

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