Extended Abstract

Fading Screens, Enduring Communities: Single-Screen Theatres in the Age of Multiplexes

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ABSTRACT

The cinema in India is not merely a form of entertainment. Cinema has long been an integral part of Indian culture and has helped shape values, emotions, and everyday social life. In the early twentieth century, movie theatres began to appear in cities and towns across the country. These theatres gradually became spaces where people from diverse social backgrounds could come together. People visited movie theatres to watch stories, to dream, and to share collective experiences. Single-screen theatres, in particular, emerged as powerful symbols of community life, affordable leisure, and popular culture, fostering a strong bond between cinema and the masses.

The rise of multiplexes in the 1990s and early 2000s marked a significant shift in India's cinematic landscape. Multiplexes were widely perceived as symbols of modernization and economic growth, and they transformed the movie-going experience by offering greater comfort, advanced technology, and premium amenities. However, they were also more expensive, altering audience expectations and consumption patterns. In contrast, single-screen theatres began to face multiple challenges. High maintenance costs, declining footfall, ageing infrastructure, and the need for technological upgrades placed considerable strain on their operations. The emergence of digital streaming and OTT platforms further intensified these pressures, making survival increasingly difficult for single-screen cinemas. As multiplexes continued to reshape movie-going practices, single-screen theatres struggled to keep pace. This shift has resulted in the gradual decline of single-screen theatres, many of which find it difficult to sustain themselves in a rapidly changing media environment. Their decline signifies not only an economic loss but also the erosion of shared cultural spaces that once played a vital role in shaping India's cinematic and social imagination.

Existing studies (Irfan & Patel, 2018; Dutta & Sen, 2020; Mathur, 2010) on cinema exhibition in India largely focus on multiplex growth, technological transitions, and urban consumption patterns, while comparatively little empirical attention has been paid to the lived realities of single-screen theatres. There remains a clear gap in understanding how single-screen cinemas continue to function as cultural and community spaces, particularly in Tier-II and semi-urban contexts. Moreover, limited comparative research examines the operational dynamics, audience experiences, and socio-cultural meanings of single-screen theatres across different urban hierarchies, such as a state capital versus a smaller town. This study addresses this gap by comparatively analyzing single-screen theatres in Lucknow and Raebareli, foregrounding audience perceptions, community roles, and socio-economic challenges, while also briefly engaging with a multiplex cinema to highlight structural and experiential contrasts rooted in mall culture, exclusivity, and individualized consumption.

The objectives of the study are as follows: First, it aims to understand the cultural and community role of single-screen theatres by analysing how they shape shared viewing practices and functioned as spaces of social congregation. Additionally, the study seeks to explore audience perceptions and nostalgia associated with single-screen viewing. Secondly, the study analyses the socio-economic challenges faced by single-screen theatres in India. Thirdly, the study seeks to compare the operational dynamics of single-screen theatres in a Tier-I capital city with those in Raebareli, a Tier-II city, in order to understand how urban context influences their functioning and sustainability. To better situate this transformation, the study includes a brief examination of a multiplex cinema as a comparative reference point, highlighting how commercialization, technological upgrades, and consumption-driven spaces have reshaped movie-going practices in contrast to single-screen theatres.

The theoretical framework draws upon the concept of the "third place," originally articulated by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. A third place refers to informal public spaces—distinct from home (first place) and the workplace (second place)—where people gather, interact, and build community. Single-screen theatres, in this sense, operate as third places: they are not merely sites of consumption but spaces of social bonding, cultural exchange, and collective nostalgia. By situating theatres within this framework, the study underscores their role as community anchors that extend beyond cinematic exhibition. Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, cultural capital, and social reproduction further explain how single-screen theatres are embedded within class structures, cultural accessibility, and everyday practices. These theatres largely cater to working- and lower-middle-class

audiences, reflecting localized tastes, affordability, and social networks, while also preserving regional cultural forms and resisting homogenized, elite-oriented multiplex culture. Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model illuminates audience engagement in single-screen cinemas by emphasizing that viewers actively interpret films based on their social positions, memories, and cultural contexts. The communal environment of single screens intensifies negotiated and oppositional readings, transforming film viewing into a shared meaning-making process. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a comprehensive understanding of single-screen theatres as cultural, social, and interpretive spaces, rather than merely declining exhibition formats.

Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative case study approach encompassing three single-screen theatres and one multiplex cinema, selected to facilitate a focused yet meaningful comparison between traditional and contemporary exhibition formats. Four theatres—Pratibha Theatre and Novelty Theatre in Lucknow, and Devgn CineX (formerly Milan/NY Cinema) in Raebareli—were purposively selected to represent diverse operational contexts: two in Lucknow, a Tier-I capital city, and two in Raebareli, a Tier-II city where single screens remain central to local entertainment. The selection was based on criteria of historical continuity, audience accessibility, and the willingness of theatre owners to participate in interviews. Data were collected through ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews with owners, staff, and audiences, and archival research on cinema exhibition practices. The multiplex was included as a supplementary case, serving as a comparative benchmark rather than a primary research site.

The findings are organized under four thematic headings. First, Why Single-Screen Theatres Continue to Survive: despite economic decline, they endure due to loyal audiences, affordable ticket pricing, and deep embeddedness in local culture. Second, Reel Nostalgia: audiences recall single screens as spaces of childhood memories, family outings, and community celebrations, reinforcing their symbolic value. Third, A Tale of Two Cities: comparative analysis reveals that Lucknow's single screens face sharper competition from multiplexes, while Raebareli's theatres retain relevance due to limited alternatives and stronger community ties. Fourth, Socio-Economic Challenges: theatres grapple with infrastructural decay, rising operational costs, and lack of institutional support, threatening their sustainability. Observations from the multiplex further reveal how contemporary cinema-going has shifted toward regulated, consumption-driven environments, thereby accentuating the social, cultural, and affective distinctiveness of single-screen theatres.

In conclusion, the thesis argues that single-screen theatres, though marginalized in the contemporary exhibition landscape, remain vital cultural third places. The contrast with multiplex cinema underscores that the decline of single-screen theatres is not merely a result of technological lag but reflects a deeper transformation in the social meaning of cinema-going in contemporary India. Their survival is therefore not only an economic concern but also a question of preserving community spaces that embody collective memory and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Single-screen theatres; Multiplex cinemas; Community spaces; Third place theory; Audience nostalgia; Socio-economic challenges.