

Can OTT be the Solution to the Fate of Film Industry amid Pandemic Covid-19? A Case Study of Tollywood Film Industry

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ABSTRACT

The film is aptly known as the art of arts. Thus, it is a mixed medium of entertainment. Filmmaking can give you everything — right from employment to entertainment. But at the same time, it can take everything from you — the whole of a person's existence, within no time. The Tollywood film industry is being hit hard with no releases in prospect and the shootings and other events suspended due to the scare. The unforeseen halt is more nerve-racking because it comes at a time when a regular stream of films is set for release during the lucrative summer holiday season. The objective of this paper is to look into the prevailing difficulties of the filmmakers, crew and cast of Tollywood in the middle of the unforeseen eventualities befallen due to the pandemic Covid-19; and to examine, with the help of a case study of Tollywood film industry, if Over The Top (OTT) media service could be the solution to address their problems.

Keywords: Andhra Pradesh; Connected TV; Digital Divide; Internet ProtocolTV; OTT; Over the Top; Realism; Telangana; Telugu; Tollywood

INTRODUCTION

A film is a timed sequence of photographs, projected to convey the illusion of motion — often added with sound and/or music. In other words, a film is a roll of such material that can be run through a projector to throw moving images, or images of movement, on a projector screen (Michael Wood, 2012: 6). Of course, the film is also a name for what is projected on the screen as well as the industry of making such images that necessarily include all its components. It is in this sense that we understand the word film in phrases like the filmmaker, film director, film star, film fan or film critic, etc.

A film, when not otherwise specified, is often considered as a feature film of a certain length, narrating a detailed story of role-play characters, the movie plot of a play or a novel that is offered for public consumption. It should be worth noting here that the film stars don't usually act in documentary films or home movies. It is quite obvious that fans love to perplex film actors with their functional roles.

The film is aptly known as the art of arts. Thus, it is a mixed medium of entertainment. Films directly affect two human senses simultaneously — seeing and hearing. This is why the film is an audio-visual medium i.e. film has both sound and sight. A film is conceived, produced and received in audio-visual terms. Films can have a greater effect to sway the receivers of the broadcast called viewers. They are potential enough to have greater effect or impact on viewers.

The audio-visual elements of a film cause the viewers a thrilling experience of realism, where realism can be described as an evaluative feeling based on perception, cognition and habituation (Anna Jerslev, 2002:67). In the specific case of film, the presence of sound becomes both a historical story and a story instilled with cultural, technological, personal and public identities. Sound in this dominion is articulation and entertainment; it is the background / or foreground to the other textual conditions that prevail in the film medium. Sound/music has a great impact when used aptly with the film sequence. For example, the background scores composed by the famous south Indian music director Illaiyaraaja are known for the enhancement of the articulation of a movie plot.

Let it be individual or mass involvement, sound in films is an exercise of exposing the temperament of our sensory and social involvement in forms of media communication and

entertainment. By this definition, we are forced to consider the relationship between sight and sound (i.e. between the visual image and sound and / or music), between one form of communicative presence and another.

Film – the audio-visual medium – is by far the most likely contemporary setting that wisely uses sound/music to gain articulation as well as entertainment. Film editor and sound designer Walter Murch in his foreword to Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, remarks:

The most successful sounds seen not only to alter what the audience sees but to go further and trigger a kind of Conceptual Resonance between image and sound: the sound makes us see the image differently, and the new images make us hear the sound differently, which in turn makes us see something else in the image, which makes us hear different things in the sound and so on. (Graeme Harper, 2009: 2)

In the Indian setting, films are very useful as it surpasses all other mass media due to prevailing high rate of illiteracy in the country; and various other socio-cultural issues, which are specific to the nation-state.

The captioned quote cited at the beginning of this article holds good in the contemporary scenario of Tollywood¹ amidst the ill-effects of the pandemic Covid-19. At an average, more than 200 films are made in the Telugu language in a year. This gives us a clear idea that many people work for the industry in various departments of filmmaking, and they depend entirely on film making. Yes, filmmaking can give you everything — right from employment to entertainment. But at the same time, it can take everything from you — the whole of a person's existence, within no time.

Indubitably, everyone has their own set of encounters and difficulties that preclude them from thriving and living their life to the fullest. This pandemic Covid-19 has taught that everyone needs to be mindful and acquainted of each other's struggles whether at home or in the workplace.

The objective of this paper is to look into the prevailing difficulties of the filmmakers, crew and cast of Tollywood in the middle of the unforeseen eventualities befallen due to the

¹ Telugu cinema is also known as Tollywood. This segment of Indian cinema is dedicated to the production of motion pictures in the Telugu language. Interestingly, the cinema of West Bengal is also known as Tollywood. Since this article is about the research work on Telugu Films, in our context Tollywood means Telugu cinema.

pandemic Covid-19; and to examine, with the help of a case study of Tollywood film industry, if Over The Top (OTT) media service could be the solution to address their problems. Let's begin the discussion with working definitions of film.

WORKING DEFINITIONS OF FILM

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of British English

- A film is — a series of moving pictures, usually shown in a cinema or on television and often telling a story: A report of a current happening or happenings in a newspaper, on television, radio, etc.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary

- A film is — a cinematographic representation of a story, drama, episode, event etc.; a cinema performance; pl. The cinema, the 'pictures', the movie. (Michael Wood, 2012:6)

Films do not exist in a vacuum. According to the Marxist theory of history, the material economic and social relations of a society are the true basis of a society, and that to a great degree — they determine the way a society thinks. This theory on a micro-level can be applied to films and we can thus say that a film is the socio-economic organisation of the film industry — its labour relations, its apparatuses, its resources — that largely determine the values.

Before we take up the case study, it is imperious to understand the significance of films to bring out social changes with an aim to establish the fact films have an unfathomable impact on the masses. Besides, it is imperative also to discuss the overview of the OTT. In the ensuing session, let us discuss the relevance of films for social change.

RELEVANCE OF FILMS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The film is the most powerful mass medium because it surpasses the most important limitation of illiteracy. Films speak the language of universality — because — cinema through its very nature demands a universal language for narrating the story whether it is real or fiction.

By accessing and understanding what makes a universal issue, the audiences can better engage with the world around them. The viewers when sitting in a theatre concentrate fully on the silver screen and forget the external world; they achieve the strapping influential experience unmatched by other media. This unique feature of cinema is linked to society across many social issues.

There have been several distinguished sociological and anthropological studies of the film. There is no doubt that the film has provided a means of social change. Marcel Mauss built his famous paper *Les techniques du corps* around the way that different people learn to move and gesture (James Curran 2012, 18). The cinema was the central modern example of his captioned paper. In his viewpoint, the film has the international mobility and mimetic impact; his argument is based on his analysis about how people start to walk and talk as if they are the members of the cultures they had never experienced personally. Mauss's plan for a renewed discipline of sociology relied on the historical and comparative perspective that drew on cinema as a record of how societies thought above and represented themselves.

Cinema has been used all over the world to bring about positive social change as it is a much more powerful mass medium than television and newspaper. In India, the film industry has done a commendable job by promoting communal and ethnic harmony, highlighting the ways of corrupt politicians, and pointing out other social issues. The film is different from other art forms and is highly captivating. It communicates ideas and emotionally moves us. Films represent and at the same time signify by remixing the real, unreal; the present and past; real-life memory and dream, on the same shared mental level.

In the words of Andrew O'Hagan:

A theatre is not a blank page for editorial, it is not a soapbox or a Tannoy system: it is a conscience that wakes with what is happening in the space, and wakes further still in response to what people are making of

it(<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/11/bad-press-play-gives-journalists-voice>).

The aforementioned statement is very relevant in the context of discussing films for social change. Indian cinema has seen a great transformation since its inception. Other than being a very important means of entertainment, cinema has played a significant role to bring about social changes. In Indian cinema, there has been a considerable space to social issues. Several

films in 1930s such as Duniyake mane and Watan made a strong appeal against social injustices. DoBighaZameen directed by Bimal Roy dealt with common man and exploitation. It was the same film that bagged first film fare award for best film in 1953 (http://www.indianetzone.com/28/landmark_films_hindi_cinema_indian_cinema.htm).

Plurality is the nature of India. So many languages and so many states – unity in diversity — is what India is about. It is noteworthy to say that in as early as the 1930s, Telugu Film industry made some reformist movies like Mala Pilla (A Dalit Girl) in 1938 and MalliPelli (Remarriage) in 1939. Later, in the 1950s, issues such as inter-caste marriage, dowry, child marriages and widow marriages were touched upon in movies like Sangham released in 1954; Kanyasulkam released in 1955. In the later years, movies like Rudraveena released in 1988 has cinematically touched the issue of ill effects of boozing.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, movies no longer remained melodramatic. Most probably this century has witnessed the most films bringing about a social change. The famous movie 3 Idiots of recent origin has changed the way students looked at the education system that moves around marks and grading. The concept of “run after knowledge, marks and success will follow” spread like wildfire throughout the world.

Films can be termed as transformative due to movies like aforesaid. They have the immense potentiality to not only educate the masses but also moulding them as desired. Cinema, with its powerful tools of fiction and nonfiction, can please, transform, and deceive shapes in the audiences’ mind. This very concept, when utilised for better social reformation, could do wonders, for no doubt (Suman Kumar Kasturi & P. Bobby Vardhan, 2017: 367). Let’s examine the overview of OTT in the next session, to further gain entry to the actual case study.

AN OVERVIEW OF OTT

The acronym OTT stands for over-the-top. In the beginning, it was named concerning devices that go over a cable box to give the user admittance to the content of television channels. The very essential point to be noted here is that unlike in conventional cable networks, in OTT channels, content is delivered through an Internet connection — traditional cable or broadcast provider has no role to play in OTT. Even though OTT and video are interwoven, they are not the same. OTT is fairly an altered channel through which video content of all sorts being distributed to end-users.

Video content can be accessed from any device such as computers, smart mobile devices, televisions, OTT devices, and many more. On the other hand, content that comes from an OTT content provider like Netflix can be viewed on numerous devices that include computers, mobile devices, OTT devices, and more. Here in this context, OTT devices mean any device that is not desktop, laptop, or mobile but is used to devour OTT content. For example, Amazon Firesticks, smart TVs, PlayStation, Apple TVs, Chromecast, Xbox, and other streaming devices.

The term OTT is almost identical with subscription-based video-on-demand (SVoD) services that offer access to film and television content. OTT also includes a wave of skinny television facilities that offer access to live streams of linear domain channels, similar to a conventional satellite or cable TV provider. Nonetheless, rather than streaming over a closed, private network with copyrighted equipment such as set-top boxes, it is streamed over the public Internet.

There are various definitions in vogue for OTT as they are defined differently by the numerous associates involved in the delivery, advertising, and measurement streams. As defined by OTT content providers, OTT may include any users accessing OTT content via any device including tablet phones, smart phones and Desktop PCs, etc. However, OTT may also be defined exactly based on the device used to access the content. An imperative point to note concerning OTT advertising is that although video advertising is most protruding in OTT channels, audio-visual advertising also occurs in OTT channels and devices.

It is to be noted that viewers who watch the video employing an app or website that provides streaming video content perceptibly circumvent traditional distribution of the video. OTT is available to Connected TV (CTV) and Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) users. These are the audience who use TV sets connected to the Internet through Smart TV or other devices with functionality such as a set-top box (STB) devices, Blu-ray players or gaming consoles. Similarly, linear OTT video service users subscribe to a service that brings live TV channel packs over the Internet for a monthly payment.

Additionally, common sub-categories of OTT users include users of advertising-based video-on-demand (AVOD), who get access to free-to-watch content which is then monetised through video advertising. While subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) or Subscription

OTT users have a paid payment access to streaming video content, transactional-based video-on-demand (TVOD) users have paid access to definite content through a pay-per-view (PPV) purchase model.

In a nutshell, an over-the-top (OTT) media service is streaming accessible directly to viewers via the Internet, which dodges cable, broadcast, and satellite television platforms. It has also been used to pronounce no-carrier cellphones — all communications are charged as data, circumventing monopolistic competition, or apps for phones that transfer data in this method that includes those that replace other call methods and that update software.

TOLLYWOOD FILM INDUSTRY IN THE MIDDLE OF COVID-19: A CASE STUDY

To examine if the OTT can offer a solution to the privation being faced by the Tollywood film industry, a case study has been taken into consideration, the details of the same are presented in the succeeding paragraphs. Let us begin the discussion with the background information of the contemporary Tollywood film industry.

Background of Contemporary Tollywood Film Industry

The audiences from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the two Telugu states, customarily usher summers in a jovial mood in theatres. Nonetheless, the situation created by pandemic Covid-19 has leapfrogged the entire scenario. If the things would have been normal, many Telugu movies such as Indraganti Mohan Krishna's action-thriller V, starring Nani, Sudheer Babu, Aditi Rao Hydari and Nivetha Thomas would have been released on the silver screen. Nonetheless, the Covid-19 outbreak and the lockdown has thrown the release dates of many movies that have completed post-production activities including censorship. These movies slipped their customary course of action and have put a question mark over the films in progress — because — shootings have come to total cessation. A few filmmakers are intending direct OTT releases, while others are willing to wait and watch for a better period and decision from the competent authorities concerning the opening of theatre halls.

Even though writers, directors and a few composers have been best utilising the time employing the alternate means to work to plot stories and compositions for the future projects, the main problem arises with those movies awaiting release. The agreeable solution to the ongoing problem emerges only when the country tides over the prevailing health emergency. Till then, many such questions as “what will happen to films that are pending release? Will theatres reopen at least after some more time? Will the audience come to

theatres to watch movies in a jam-packed hall, albeit sanitisation protocols are scrutinised? What should be the strategies to avoid the spread of the pandemic at studios and film shootings when people return to work?" would remain unrequited.

Propositions of the Study

The following are the propositions made for this study:

Proposition-I: OTT turns out to be a better option where a small production is concerned for there is no worry about theatrical revenue and other logistics.

Proposition-II: Surfacing of new voices is made possible by OTT platforms. However, it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms.

Proposition-III: The major composition of theatre-going people in the two Telugu states are the masses from lower rungs of the society, who are mostly illiterate. They can't watch movies on the OTT for sundry reasons. This, in turn, would increase the digital divide².

Methodology

The research has been conducted in two stages: Stage 1- Exploratory Stage; and Stage 2 - Survey Stage.

Stage 1- Exploratory Stage: In this stage, a deep and thorough secondary research has been carried out to get acquaintance on the analysis of the pre and post-Covid-19 pandemic scenario of the Tollywood film industry. Also, it has been an endeavour to comprehend the underlying causes for the same.

Stage 2 - Survey Stage: In this stage, opinions of the people associated with the Tollywood film industry (both directly or indirectly) are considered for the research purpose has been assessed for the value-based information. This stage has been conducted through a survey of the information from the respondents (both —members of the film fraternity as well as the mass audience of the Telugu movies). The audiences of these media channels have been interviewed in the selected constituencies to get the categorical answers.

²Digital divide means any uneven distribution in the access to, use of, or impact of information and communications technologies between any number of distinct groups, which can be defined based on social, geographical, or geopolitical criteria, or otherwise.

Geographical Coverage and the Sample Size

For this study, a total of 96 people have been considered, representing all three geographic levels — urban, semi-urban and rural. The categorisation of geographic levels has been done using population data. Each of the geographic levels is covered by 32 respondents from both the Telugu states — Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The respondents have been conveniently selected so that the total composition has an equal representation of the people.

Key Results of the Study

It has been so many days since the activities in the Telugu cinema industry have been put on hold due to the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. The Tollywood film industry is being hit hard with no releases in prospect and the shootings and other events suspended due to the scare. The unforeseen halt is more nerve-wracking because it comes at a time when a regular stream of films is set for release during the lucrative summer holiday season.

The livelihood of several employees, who work for daily wages and paycheck to paycheck, has been worse affected. The pandemic is also beginning to pack a devastating punch to several producers. They are deeply upset over their financial situation if the Covid-19 outbreak extends towards a few more months.

According to some of the Telugu film trade analysts, the present shut down would mean a loss of around ₹8cr per day. According to Tollywood eminence, this is a first-of-its-kind situation where the government has ordered to close the theatres due to a pandemic. It is hard to predict the magnitude of the loss, but it is something that cannot be taken lightly.

Opinions of Eminent Tollywood Personalities

There are diverse opinions among the distinguished personalities from Tollywood on using OTT as the alternative means to theatre exhibitions. For example, Tollywood sensational director Ram Gopal Varma (RGV) made comments on OTT platforms and explicated differences between silver screens and OTT. In a recent interview given to a Telugu news channel, he said that there is no much difference between silver screens and OTT; and according to him, there is no metamorphosis of screen ration between them. While viewing that OTT has an added advantage, he opined that the viewer can handle his sound system according to his interest if he watches the movie in OTT platform. According to him, OTT is disseminating slowly from the past four years and it came into the light once again due to the

Covid-19. Further, he stated that technology is changing in the film industry so need to adopt OTT in the crisis period.

By the same token, TharunBhascker, another famous Telugu Film director, agrees that in the post-Covid-19 phase, people are getting too contented with viewing content at home, or realising the importance of social interaction and stepping out with retribution. Tharun feels the lockdown might also help create a bank of good scripts for Telugu cinemaas OTT platforms grew from strength to strength.

On the other hand, SupriyaYarlagadda of Annapurna Studios opines about this new normal — OTT. According to her, the film industry cannot thrive solely on OTT releases and those projects that promise a grand theatrical experience are likely to hold on till things get better. Correspondingly, Director IndragantiMohanakrishnaconcedes that OTT platforms have helped new voices surface, but feels it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms. He points out that films don't get complete attention while viewed at home. According to him, it turns boring to watch film after film on television or laptop.

Statistical Findings through Primary Data Analysis

This study and its embedded data analysis found that the impact of pandemic Covid-19has a terrible upshot on the masses of all three geographic levels as well as onparticipants — both male and female. The results of this study are appended below:

- Table 1 gives the clear picture of the opinion of all the 96 respondents on the statement that OTT turns out to be a better option where a small production is concerned for there is no worry about theatrical revenue and other logistics.

Geographic Level	Men (Levels of Acceptance)			Female (Levels of Acceptance)		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
	In percentage			In percentage		
Urban	88.22	5.88	5.88	93.33	6.67	0.00
Semi-Urban	77.78	17.68	5.56	85.71	7.14	7.14

Rural	72.73	18.18	9.09	70.00	20.00	10.00
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Table 1: Opinion of the Respondents on the Statement that OTT Turns Out to be a Better Option Where a Small Production is Concerned.

- Table 2 gives a clear picture of the opinion of all the 96 respondents about the statement that surfacing of new voices is made possible by OTT platforms. However, it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms.

Geographic Level	Men (Levels of Acceptance)			Female (Levels of Acceptance)		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
	In percentage			In percentage		
Urban	76.47	17.65	5.88	80.00	13.33	6.67
Semi-Urban	66.67	22.22	11.11	85.71	14.29	0.00
Rural	81.82	9.09	9.09	60.00	20.00	20.00

Table 2: Opinion of the Respondents on the statement that Surfacing of New Voices is Made Possible by OTT Platforms.

- Noticeably examining the above data, it is evident that with an average high level of acceptance of 88.22%, men from all three geographic levels in both Andhra Pradesh and Telanganastates feel that OTT turns out to be a better option where a small production is concerned for there is no worry about theatrical revenue and other logistics. Through the collected data, it is also evident that women from all three geographic levels in the two states accept the captioned fact with a high approval rate of 93.33%. Fig1 gives the graphical representation of the high approval levels of the mentioned statement.

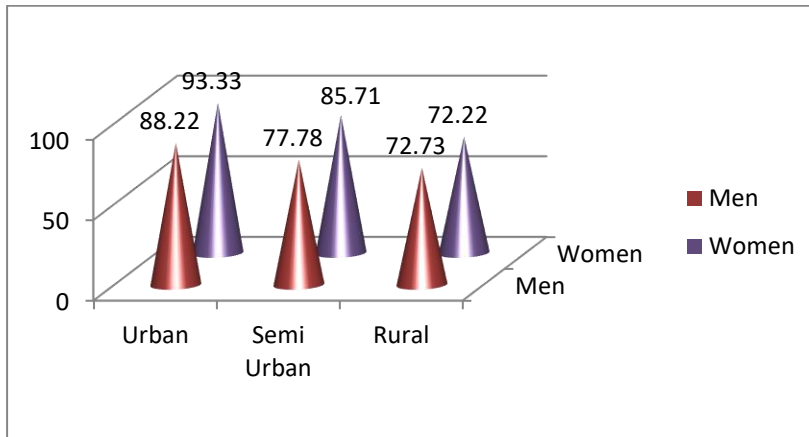


Fig.1 High Approval Levels of on the Statement that OTT Turns Out to be a Better Option Where a Small Production is Concerned.

- In a similar vein, insofar as the statement that surfacing of new voices is made possible by OTT platforms but it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms is concerned, 76.47% males, representing all three geographic areas, opined that the statement holds good. From the other end, 80.00% of women from all three geographic areas discoursed that the statement is valid. A detailed pictorial representation of the high approval levels about the statement that surfacing of new voices is made possible by OTT platforms. However, it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms is given in Fig 2.

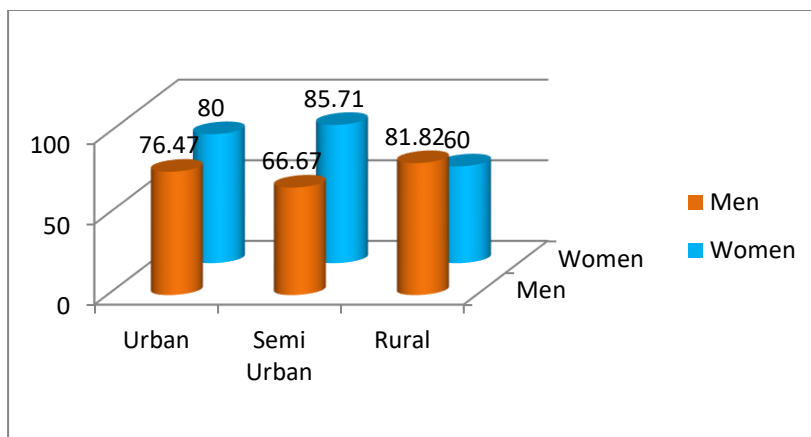


Fig.2 High Approval Levels of the Statement that Surfacing of New Voices is Made Possible by OTT Platforms

- Answering a question about the major components of the film going people in the two Telugu states, almost everyone was putative that the masses from lower rungs of the society take the lion share. They even admitted that they are mostly illiterate.
- In continuation with the above, when asked if they believe that majority of the usual theatre-going people can't watch movies on the OTT for sundry reasons, almost everyone admitted it as a valid statement taking into account of the socio-economic stature of the majority of the film-goers.
- Almost 50% of people among the respondents were not aware of the concept of the digital divide. However, when explained about the same, almost every person admitted that OTT may be one of the reasons that might increase the digital divide levels among the masses.
- Similarly, 82.3% of participants felt that watching movies on OTT channels would not give the feeling of watching a movie in the theatre hall.
- Almost all respondent employees of film industry felt that OTT platforms cannot generate the revenues as that of theatre shows — because — they strongly believe that OTT is not everyone's medium.
- Astoundingly, 69.4% of respondents said that at times they feel that watching movies over the OTT platforms is so sickening that they would switch over to another channel or completely shutdown their systems.
- To the extent that choosing OTT during the pandemic Covid-19 period is taken into account, 61.46% people said that they have opted for OTT channels to kill the boredom during the first and second phases of lockdown. However, they said that slowly they have confined to television channels in the later period.

Findings through Secondary Data Analysis

- It is found that even though many Telugu films have finished their post-production work and obtained a censor certificate for public exhibition, the filmmakers have not preferred OTT as a suitable means for the exhibition.
- The difference of opinions exists among the film fraternity about the merits of OTT during the calamity like pandemic Covid-19. A majority of filmmakers opine that OTT is not the suitable medium as the composition of viewers is barely 15% of the actual.
- As far as low budgeted movies are concerned, the producers of such films believe that taking into consideration the interest being paid to the financiers, it would be better to release their movies on OTT — because —no one knows how long this crisis would last.
- The entire film fraternity thinks that revenue generation cannot be possible over OTT as in the case of public show of films via theatre and multiplexes.

CONCLUSION

The Tollywood film industry has been one of the biggest film industries in the world. At an average, more than 200 films are produced in the Telugu language. Like many other industries have seen a downfall due to the health emergency imposed by the pandemic Covid-19, the Tollywood film industry has also experienced a catastrophic failure. Nonetheless, some of the filmmakers believe that OTT can be better utilised to exhibit the movies. Contrarily, a majority of the filmmakers oppose such an opinion. The case study undertaken herewith empirically establishes the three propositions considered for the study. Thus it is concluded as follows:

- ✚ OTT turns out to be a better option where a small production is concerned for there is no worry about theatrical revenue and other logistics. However, concerning the big-budget movies, this option becomes void.

- ✚ The surfacing of new voices is made possible by OTT platforms. However, it might sign the beginning of the end of theatre culture if more films were to look at direct releases on these platforms.

- ✚ The major composition of theatre-going people in the two Telugu states is the masses from lower rungs of the society, who are mostly illiterate. They can't watch movies on the OTT for sundry reasons. This, in turn, would increase the digital divide.

It is observed by the author that Tollywood cinema can never cease, it has gone deep into the psyche of the masses. It may undergo several reverses in fortune. With other mediums opening up and due to the prevailing situation created by the pandemic Covid-19, there will be a smaller market for films over OTT. Living as we are in a global village today, we are becoming a more discerning audience. Only the best will survive whether on OTT or in theatres. Once the calamity comes to an end, the Tollywood film industry may again gain its past glory!

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