

# Coping with covid: A study of new ways adopted by Bollywood during country wide lockdowns

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## Abstract

Adaptability has been a substantive character of Bollywood as an industry since its formative years. It has successfully dealt with turns and twists of situations in past in its own naïve ways. During recently imposed countrywide complete lockdowns to curb spread of covid 19, Bollywood possibly saw its worst phase as most of its operations ceased at almost every level. There was ban on shooting, offices could not function, post-production came to a halt, exhibitions were stopped, and much more. Like every meritorious industry, Bollywood came up with innovations in the functional framework, technological interjections, and devised manners to cope up with the situation. In its own way, every department of film production devised method to carry on its function during this tough times. This paper aims to present innovative methods adopted and developed by Bollywood, as case studies. Through semi structured interviews, this paper intends to gauge the feasibility and impact of those methods and practices.

**Keywords:** Covid 19, Bollywood, Innovative methods, tech interventions, lockdown.

## INTRODUCTION

Based in Mumbai, the Hindi language film industry, which is popularly known as Bollywood is the most prolific producer of cinema in India in terms of revenue and popularity. India's censor board figures the year 2018 suggests that more than 1600 films of all Indian languages were produced in that year the country. Out of these 325 were Hindi language films produced in Bollywood. As per the KPMG report of 2018, in terms of net box office revenue, Bollywood has the largest share of 43 percent of the total net box office revenue in India. This is followed by Tamil and Telugu cinema at 36 percent jointly. The remaining 21 percent of revenue comes from other regional language cinema.

It is the Impact on the lives of Indian people which makes Bollywood such a significant force that it is sometimes called as soft power of India which promotes songs and dances along with composite Indian culture (Diwanji, 2020). This

Impact is not just limited to fashion and lifestyle. In the nascent years of India as a modern times nation, Bollywood has helped shape a national and cultural identity for the people of India who were otherwise divided into many identities of language, region, culture and cast. Bollywood has a revered stature among its audience. Many see the stars and makers of cinema as role models where each production powerhouse is a temple of desire (Mishra, 2001). Bollywood also plays a significant role in bridging different cultures within and outside the borders of India. In its recent effort, Bollywood has played an important role in improving India-China relations by making Chinese people aware of Indian culture in a positive way (Hong, 2021).

Though in size Bollywood is not a big competitor of Hollywood but in terms of impact and enthusiasm of its audience it is a significant world player. After India's adoption of economic liberalization in 1990s, the Indian film industry has undergone a dramatic change

(Cullity, 2002). Deregulation of Indian media, abolishment of quotas and granting industry status to Indian film making industry has paved the way to the global spread and popularity of Indian cinema.

## COVID 19 AND BOLLYWOOD

First covid-19 related lockdown was imposed in India in the month of march in the year 2020. Bollywood as an Industry has seen an overall decline since then. Many of the big film projects have been shelved or postponed for indefinite time. Prompting major losses to producers, exhibitors, and distributor. There were massive job losses across the country due to halt in the production process in Bollywood. About a thousand theaters comprising of multiplexes and single screen across the country had to shut down permanently. This is a massive number considering the total number of screens in India stands at 9527 (Ernst & young 2020) Losses incurred to Indian exhibitors are estimated to be around 120 billion rupees. Beginners and mid-level artists and technicians in the industry have been impacted tremendously as there was uncertainty in the minds of people.

Amitabh Bachchan starrer 'Gulabo sitabo' was the first big budget movie which was deferred many times for a release in the theaters but later streamed on OTT platform. Many other films followed the same path in coming months. This saw a sharp rise in the growth of OOT in India. The expected growth of Indian OTT market is projected at 31% from year 2019 to 2024. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, a consultancy firm, the expected revenue of Indian streaming market is 2.7 billion dollars by the end of year 2024. Powered by high internet speed and economic data charges, the OTT has penetrated rural and urban Indian markets with the rapid rate. Laxmmi Bomb, Radhe: Your Most Wanted Bhai, Sooryavanshi, and Coolie No. 1 were a few big banner films whose theatrical release got affected by the lockdown and subsequently their businesses were suffered. Later they were also released on OTT. Research agencies recorded a steady drop in the interest level of the audience in watching movies in theatres. This drop is largely attributed to the upsurge in the popularity of streaming services. Till the year 2017 there were just over 4.5 billion smartphone users in the world and now the

number of mobile internet-connected devices have surpassed the total number of people living on this planet (Anderson, 2019).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Indian express article published on 29 April 2020, the foremost and most early impact of covid-19 was announcement by Reliance Entertainment about the postponement of Sooryavanshi a Rohit Shetty multi starrer of huge budget. Angrezi Medium starring Irrfan Khan had to pulled out of theaters and later it was put on OTT. The article further reports that in the month of march Indian Film and television Directors association along Federation of western Cine Employees decided to call off the shooting of movies web series and television shows. Another big budget and much awaited flick Gangubai Kathiawadi had its sets ready in film city waiting for the shoot to begin which never started. Brahmastra, another much anticipated and hyped flic starring Alia Bhatt, Amitabh Bachchan and Ranbir Kapoor had to cease its shooting.

According to FICCI report of 2021, Though Hospitality, Aviation and Tourism were the most impacted sectors, it was closure of theatres in the malls which affected the footfall in the malls and subsequently affecting retail sector. Due to job losses and decline in income the overall consumption went downhill.

According to a report published in Hollywood reporter on May 10, 2021, the producers of television shows which were based in Mumbai utilized indoor sets and minimal crew could continue their production. Other who went to neighboring states like Goa where lockdown restrictions were not very stringent initially, were also able to complete their production. Making a note of this, a few production houses temporarily shifted their base to such locations. National Capital of Delhi which is among the huge favorite locations of many filmmakers, had rigorous of the curfews. This resulted in virtually zero shoot in the region during the peak lockdown.

However, this presented the opportunity to the film industry to adopt innovative methods in production and distribution. Wherever possible the production had adopted remote work protocols. There would be smaller units working

in bio bubble observing rigorous covid protocols. Library assets which were lying for nothing were rebranded and released on streaming platforms. Films which completed their post-production but did not have star power required to guarantee a great theatrical release, were huge success on streaming platforms.

## **METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:**

This research presents cases studies to put forth its arguments about innovative methods adopted by makers of movies in Bollywood. Focused group discussions and semi structured interviews conducted using online medium with some of the filmmakers and actors have been studied and using a critical discourse analysis method, this study has tried to find reasons behind the behavior, consumption, and commodification of technology which was used during a series of country wide lockdowns by the filmmakers of Bollywood between year 2020 and 2021. This study uses political economy of communication as its theoretical framework.

## **CASE STUDIES**

Use of online food delivery app riders as media couriers

After a few days of halt of all the major productions of films in Mumbai, many makers tired of sitting idle and to overcome anxiety cause by sudden confinement to their homes, decided to start the processes which can be done remotely. The hard disks containing raw footage from a fresh shoot which were laying with producers were transported using bike riders working for online food delivery apps like Zomato and food panda to the editors. These rides who could roam freely in many parts of the city were their best bet for the situation. Editors who did not have any setup in their respective homes downloaded free video editing apps to work on primary cut. This would then be shared using FTP sites to the directors for feedback.

Upsurge in the use of casting apps for casting

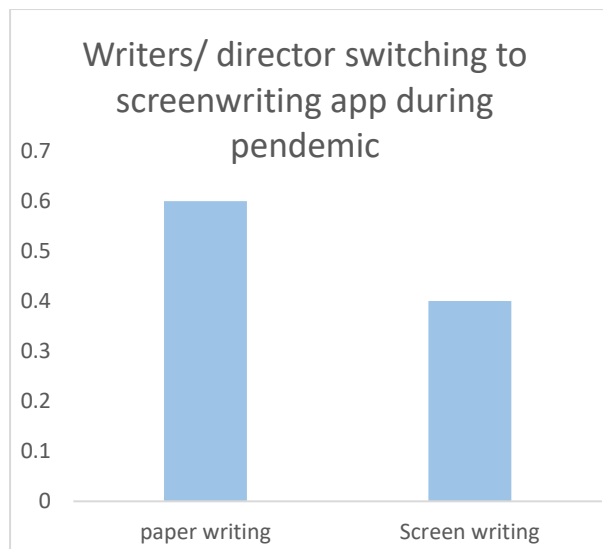
The casting directors also joined the wagon soon. They started using apps such as Online Casting Director, WoB Casting: Bollywood

Audition, Audition Hub – Bollywood & serial Audition Updates, and Actsophia (ios). Some of the casting directors simply started accepting screentest videos which were shared using WhatsApp. Some of these Apps came in particularly handy. Casting directors were able to generate a template of a particular role for which they were looking for talent. This template is then shared with many aspirants using the App. In return the actors would record their screentest according to the template shared by the casting director which would then reach casting director immediately through the app. This made their life easier.

Fact is that these Apps were also present before the pandemic, but a very few bothered using them. The pandemic also presented opportunity to large number of talents who are otherwise called strugglers in the industry. They are called so because they have so far failed to bag any significant project for themselves. The tinsel town of Mumbai is full of such luck and opportunity deprived yet talented people. These strugglers keep trying to bag one opportunity for years. Some of these are stuck in Mumbai for decades without luck where the hope of landing a project for themselves someday is the only reason for them to stick around. That hope was lost during the pandemic. This presented them with unique opportunity to go back to their native places in the country forever.

Upsurge in the use of screenwriting apps

Some writers who would earlier prefer to write on paper have learnt to use software like final draft and celtx to function professionally. Earlier they would write on paper which would later be dumped on to the software by some assistant. They now see learning to use this software as something which is inevitable.



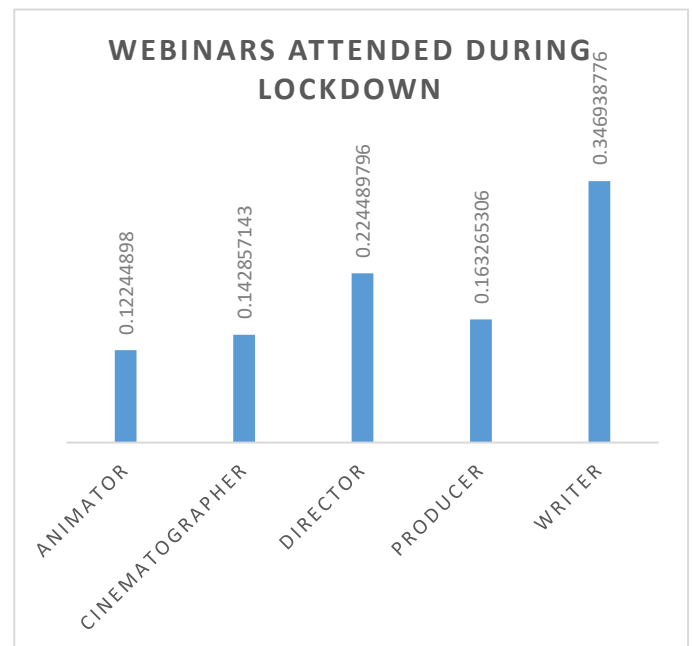
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two out of five directors/ producers who were interviewed have started to attend webinars related to their field of interests. They acknowledged gaining new insights and latest information from these webinars. Two out of five such interviewed professionals intend to use their newly gained knowledge in their upcoming film projects.



Rate of downloading of casting apps for the purpose of Audition increased manifolds and has become a preferred choice of many casting directors and actors. Every third actor interviewed downloaded new App for the purpose of casting related reason. About 70

percent of the casting directors have also developed template for the purpose of auditioning. As many as 80 percent also used zoom for longer sessions with select actors.



More than 70 percent professionals aggregated that technology is inevitable and helps them to be on the top of their game. 20 percent professionals said that they updated their mobiles during lockdowns to cater to the demands which had direct relation to their professional field.

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