



Sound and fury: A wallpaper of Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*.

NEW REVENUE STREAM

Production houses bet big on audio cinema

With a subscriber base of 1.5 mn in 11 months, experts say the number may touch 4-5 mn consumers by March

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Caught up in a traffic snarl? Waiting for someone at an office or a hotel's lobby? You may want to reach out for your mobile phone to download and enjoy an audio version of your favourite movie.

Audio cinema—last heard of when radio stations used to play out film synopses in the early 1980s—is slowly emerging as a new revenue stream for production houses. Three-hour films are being squeezed into 15-30 minute audio features, complete with narration, dialogues and songs.

Popular titles, from Ramesh Sippy's classic *Sholay* to Aamir Khan's *3 Idiots* and Prakash Jha's more recent *Raajneeti*, are already available.

"Content is king, but access is even more important," said Manish Agarwal, chief executive of **UTV New Media Ltd**, which has tied up with mobile service providers such as **Bharti Airtel Ltd**, **Vodafone Essar Ltd**, **Idea Cellular Ltd** and **Reliance Communications Ltd**, among others, to offer audio movies on mobile handsets.

Agarwal's firm is looking to sell films produced by its sister concern, **UTV Motion Pictures**, in addition to movies from other production houses such as **Mukta Arts Ltd** and **Reliance Big Pictures**.

Last year, **UTV New Media's** audio cinema catalogue comprised 12 titles. This year, the number is likely to touch 250, with Hindi movies accounting for every two out of three titles. Films in regional languages, such as Marathi, Bhojpuri, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada will make up the rest.

That is because production houses are targeting customers in smaller cities and towns, who have fewer entertainment options than those who live in metros, and thus rely on more accessible channels such as mobile phones.

Industry estimates peg the

market for audio cinema at Rs100 crore. It will grow at 10-12% month-on-month, said Agarwal. "Audio cinema has managed to rake in a subscriber base of 1.5 million consumers in a matter of 11 months. We expect this number to touch 4-5 million consumers by March."

Shireesh Mukund Joshi, director of marketing and communications at **Airtel**, said production houses have to follow consumers wherever they are. "So if consumers are spending more time online and on their mobile phones, then it's in their best interest to be there."

His company launched its audio cinema service branded **Airtel Talkies** early this year.

Mukta Arts is another production house exploring new media avenues to sell its movies. Following their theatrical debut, its films are released in formats such as home video, satellite, broadcast, web and mobile.

"You don't want your content to be overexposed. So you ensure that you control the number of releases and monetize it on different platforms to keep the interest going," said Chaitanya Chinchlikar, business head, digital media, **Mukta Arts**.

The company currently has 33 titles in its audio cinema library, including *Karz*, *Khal Nayak*, *Kalicharan*, *Karma*, *Ram Lakhan*, *Iqbal* and *Joggers' Park*, and is looking to add to the list.

Chinchlikar said although the revenue from audio cinema is close to negligible right now, it had a lot of potential to grow. "There is no recurring cost."

Universal Music India Pvt. Ltd purchases the entire soundtrack of a movie when negotiating for music rights. "This is a huge opportunity for us to monetize such content," said Rajat Kakar, managing director.

Kakar said older movies, too, will be popular in audio format, as there was a sense of nostalgia associated with the radio narrations of three decades ago.

His company has titles such as *Deewaar*, *Qurbani*, *Satte Pe Satta* and *Sholay* in its catalogue, and has converted five-six titles into audio cinema so far. "We have over 1,000 films, so we have a large roster to go through before we reach culmination point," he said. "Suffice it to say that movies with powerful dialogues will do very well."