

Indian cinemas reopen after going dark for months amid virus

NEW DELHI, Oct 15, (AP): Seven months after screens went dark, cinemas reopened Thursday in much of India with mostly old titles on the marquee — a sign of the country's efforts to return to normal as the pace of coronavirus infections slows but also of the roadblocks that remain.

The return to movie theaters comes as India is registering the highest number of daily cases globally and is expected to soon top the list worldwide in terms of total number of reported infections, passing the United States. But trends also suggest the spread is beginning to slow. Nearly 10,000 theaters closed in mid-March when the government imposed restrictions to fight the virus, which has torn through India, killing more than 110,000 people. Cinemas are among the last public places to reopen — a hugely symbolic move in a country known the world over for the lavish productions pumped out by its Bollywood film industry.

Every year, the \$2.8 billion juggernaut produces more than 2,000 films that feature complex dance routines, singing and spectacularly large casts, serving to unite a diverse nation of 1.4 billion people. The industry's success over the years has embedded moviegoing into India's contemporary culture and been a boon for the economy, which, since the pandemic began, has nosedived to its slowest growth on record.

But even if theaters are reopening, filmmaking still hasn't rebounded. Reeling from zero box-office returns in this pandemic year, Indian filmmakers have so far not lined up any new big-ticket releases and have pushed any films they have made directly to online streaming

platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime.

Such struggles can be seen the world over as the pandemic has devastated the entertainment industry. Earlier this month, a major American movie theater chain said it would temporarily shutter hundreds of locations in the US and the UK.

Movie theaters pose some of the biggest infection risks since they put people in a closed space, where the virus can spread easily, for an extended period of time.

Mandatory

To minimize the danger, Indian cinemas have separated seats, staggered show times and are encouraging digital payments. Masks and temperature checks are mandatory.

"We have put everything into place, maybe more than what has been prescribed," said Gagan Kapur, regional head of the PVR Cinemas in New Delhi.

Still, some Indian states have been cautious.

Authorities in Mumbai, the home of Bollywood, put off reopening cinemas for the time being. The southern state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, is the worst-hit in India, with more than 37% of the country's COVID-19 fatalities.

With few new films coming out of Bollywood, theaters on Thursday mostly re-released earlier hits, though one new film, "Khaali Peeli," a typical Bollywood potboiler, came out.

Older films like "Tanhaji," a historical epic about a Hindu warrior who rises against the Mughals, "Thappad," a social drama on domestic violence, and "Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan," a rom-com featuring a gay couple, were played across multiple screens. "PM Narendra Modi," an unabashed hagiography of the Indian prime minister that was released last year, also ran in some places.

The reopening of cinemas comes as trends suggest a decline in new infections.

India saw a surge in July and added more than 2 million in August and another 3 million in September. But it is seeing a slower pace of coronavirus spread since mid-September, when the daily infections touched a record of 97,894. It is recording an average of just over 70,000 cases daily so far this month.

But some experts say that India's tally of more than 7.3 million total infections may not be reliable because of poor reporting and inadequate health infrastructure. India is also relying heavily on antigen tests, which are faster but less accurate than traditional RT-PCR tests.

Health officials have also warned about the potential for the virus to spread during the religious festival season beginning later this month.

"The next two and a half months are going to be very crucial for us in our fight against corona because of the winter season and the festival season," Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said Wednesday. "It becomes responsibility of every citizen to not let our guard down and follow COVID-19 appropriate behavior to curb spread of the infection."

Film

Variety



Post Malone accepts the top artist award at the Billboard Music Awards on Oct 14, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. (AP)

Music

Legend shines onstage

Post Malone owns Billboard Awards

NEW YORK, Oct 15, (AP): Walking into the show with 16 nominations, Post Malone won nine honors at the 2020 Billboard Music Awards, where John Legend gave a heartfelt performance that was dedicated to his wife.

With his voice aching as he sang passionately from the piano, Legend told viewers "this is for Chrissy" before singing "Never Break," which includes the lyrics "we will never break." The performance comes two weeks after Chrissy Teigen announced she had a miscarriage, explaining in a heart wrenching social media post that she and Legend drove "home from the hospital with no baby."

"John, that was so beautiful," host Kelly Clarkson said following Legend's performance. "All my love to you and Chrissy."

It was one of several performances that were pre-taped for Wednesday's show. Other musicians attended and performed at the empty Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles during the three-hour show, which aired on NBC. After announcing that Malone won the show's biggest honor, top artist, Clarkson wheeled out eight more trophies for the hitmaker.

"I'm honestly blown away by the love everyone's shown to me," said Malone, who also won top rap artist, top male artist and top rap album. "It's kind of big deal to me and everybody involved because we work our (butts) off."

He beat out Eilish for the top prize, but she was still a winner, taking home top Billboard 200 album, top female artist and top new artist.

The 18-year-old, wearing a face mask, told viewers to "please vote, please wear a mask, please wash your hands."

Others had similar messages. Khalid, who won five honors, told fans "your voice matters now more than ever." And Lizzo wore a black dress with "vote" printed across it.

She also gave an encouraging speech, telling viewers to find their voices and don't change to meet society standards.

"I just want to say I've been thinking a lot about suppression and the voices that refused to be suppressed. And I wonder, 'Would I be standing here right now if it weren't for the big Black women who refuse to have their voices be suppressed?' And I just want to say right

now, if you're at home watching this and you were thinking about changing yourself to feel worthy, this is your sign to remain true to who you are," Lizzo said onstage after winning top songs sales artist.

"Let me tell you all something — when people try to suppress something, it's normally because that thing holds power. They're afraid of your power. There's power in who you are. There's power in your voice. So whether it's through music, protest or your right to vote, use your power, use your voice and refuse to be suppressed."

Other winners included Lil Nas X, who took home four honors and was on-hand to accept top Hot 100 song for "Old Town Road," which set the record for most weeks at No. 1. Kanye West, who released two gospel albums last year, also won four prizes: top gospel artist, top gospel song, top gospel album and top Christian album.

Performance

Luke Combs followed with three wins, and after his performance he offered positive words to his fans and the crew working on the awards show.

"I know that everybody has been through so much this year. I wanna thank the crew that is working on this show tonight because they have gone through some insane stuff to make this happen for you guys. I hope everybody is staying safe there at home," he said.

Garth Brooks accepted the Icon Award from Cher, who called the country star "a true music legend and my friend Garth Brooks." Brooks, who is the only artist to have nine of his albums sell more than 10 million units each and reach diamond status, performed a medley of his hits.

Other performers included BTS, Alicia Keys, Kane Brown, Khalid, Swae Lee, Sia, Brandy, Bad Bunny, Doja Cat, SAINt JHN, En Vogue and Demi Lovato, who sang her new song aimed at President Donald Trump called "Commander In Chief."

Clarkson kicked off the show singing Steve Winwood's "Higher Love," which became a dance hit last year after Whitney Houston's cover of the song was remixed by Norwegian DJ-producer Kygo and became an international hit. Clarkson was joined by drummer Sheila E. and a cappella group Pentatonix for the performance of the song, which earned Houston a posthumous nomination for top dance/electronic song. Hou-

ston died in 2012.

Guitar rock legend Eddie Van Halen, who died last week, was honored as the show aired a clip of his Billboard Awards performance from 2015. And rapper-activist Killer Mike received the Change Maker Award.

This year's Billboard Awards were originally supposed to take place in April but were postponed because of the pandemic. It's the reason why some of the nominees in the 55 categories may feel dated.

For instance, all five nominees for the main song award were nominated for Grammys earlier this year in January. And nominees for top Billboard 200 album included Ariana Grande "Thank U, Next," released in Oct. 2018, and Swift's "Lover," not her recent release "Folklore." Some of the nominees were even big contenders at the 2019 MTV Video Music Awards — held more than year ago — including Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" and Lizzo's "Truth Hurts."

List of winners in the top categories at the 2020 Billboard Music Awards:

- Top Hot 100 song: "Old Town Road," Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus
- Top Billboard 200 album: Billie Eilish, "When We Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?"
- Top artist: Post Malone
- Top new artist: Billie Eilish
- Top female artist: Billie Eilish
- Top male artist: Post Malone
- Top streaming songs artist: Post Malone
- Top song sales artist: Lizzo
- Top radio songs artist: Jonas Bros.
- Top duo/group: Jonas Bros.
- Top R&B artist: Khalid
- Top rap artist: Post Malone
- Top country artist: Luke Combs
- Top rock artist: Panic! at the Disco
- Top Latin artist: Bad Bunny
- Top dance/electronic artist: The Chainsmokers
- Top Christian artist: Lauren Daigle
- Top gospel artist: Kanye West
- Top social artist: BTS
- Top touring artist: Pink
- Chart achievement award: Harry Styles
- Icon award: Garth Brooks

See Also Page 13

Features

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NEW YORK: Stacey Abrams, the voting rights activist and former Georgia gubernatorial candidate, also has a career in writing novels. Her next one, the Supreme Court thriller "While Justice Sleeps," come out May 25.

Announced Wednesday by Doubleday, her book centers on a young clerk for an ailing Supreme Court justice who unexpectedly learns of possible wrongdoing in "the highest power corridors" of Washington. Abrams, widely seen as a rising star in the Democratic Party, draws upon her background in law and politics.

"A decade ago, I wrote the first draft of a novel that explored an intriguing aspect of American democracy — the lifetime appointments to the US Supreme Court," Abrams said in a statement. "As an avid consumer of legal suspense novels and political thrillers, I am excited to add my voice into the mix."

Abrams' previous books include the nonfiction "Our Time is Now" and "Lead from the Outside" and several romantic suspense novels under the pen name Selena Montgomery. (Agencies)

SEOUL, South Korea: South Korea's Big Hit Entertainment, the company that manages global pop sensation BTS, had a dynamite trading debut Thursday in Seoul, helped by the zeal of its loyal fans.

Big Hit's shares nearly doubled after their initial public offering netted more than \$800 million. The strong start was widely expected by analysts given the huge fan base for the seven-member boy band that has been dominating Billboard charts. Its market value stood at about \$7.5 billion by the end of trading.

Despite the concert-killing COVID-19 pandemic, Big Hit has prospered thanks to huge demand for its online content, including livestreamed BTS concerts that reportedly attracted more than 1.7 million fans.

The company's shares opened at 270,000 won (\$236), about double their initial public offering price. They surged 30%, hitting the daily trading limit, before falling back and closing at 258,000 won (\$225), bringing the company's valuation to 8.7 trillion won (\$7.5 billion).

Big Hit has a tight grip over its

revenue streams, with BTS merchandise and other products exclusively sold through its "Weverse" e-commerce platform.

Big Hit raised 926.6 billion won (\$841 million) in what was South Korea's largest IPO since 2017.

"The company has managed to grow beyond the traditional revenue sources of album sales and concerts and diversify its



Abrams



Jungkook

business through online channels," wrote **Ahn Jin-ah**, an analyst from South Korea's E-Best Investment and Securities, in a report that described Big Hit's stock market entrance as a "drop of dynamite."

BTS accounted for more than 80% of the company's revenue during the first half of 2020, according to a separate report by Samsung Securities.

BTS launched in 2013 and has a legion of global supporters who call themselves the "Army." It became the first K-pop act to top Billboard's Hot 100 chart last month with their first all-English song "Dynamite."

The band — consisting of **J-Hope, RM, Suga, Jungkook, V, Jin** and **Jimin** — has performed in sold-out arenas around the world

and was even invited to speak at the UN General Assembly last month.

BTS is a source of national pride, with some lawmakers even arguing that its members should be exempted from the 2-year military service that's mandatory for most able-bodied males, saying that the singers have already done much for the country. (AP)