

MOVIES

An industry in the doldrums

A film in these economic slowdown days is deemed a success if it just about breaks even



Screenshot of visual effects from *Drimed Kuenden*



Making of *Sheychangma*

(Picture courtesy: Tandin Bidha, Facebook)

Tshering Dorji

Norling Drayang produced its first blockbuster film *Jigdre* in 1998. That was also the year when only one Bhutanese film was made.

Producer Ugyen Dorji recalls how a simple film with an ordinary concept turned out to be a big hit. He invested Nu 900,000. The return was more than double.

After that initial success, Ugyen Dorji and his company Norling Drayang made several blockbuster films like *Bhu Tashi*, *Rangdol & Yangdon*, and *Tshey Ngoen Ley Thro*.

It was a new age for the Bhutanese film industry. Many more Bhutanese films were released, based on varying themes. And then it hit a dead end of a sort.

Last year, Ugyen Dorji tried something new that the Bhutanese film industry had never witnessed before. He produced the highest budget film ever made in Bhutan, *Choegyul Drimed Kuenden*, based on the legend of an exiled prince.

Investment shot up to Nu 18 million. The film was a big hit, of course, but it did not make money for Ugyen Dorji. So far, the film has not recovered even 40 percent of the money Ugyen Dorji put into its making.

Ugyen Dorji spent more than Nu 2.5 million on visual effects alone, which was required to portray the ancient atmosphere.

"Be it technical aspects or concept, or even the investment, the difference between *Jigdre* and *Drimed Kuenden* is huge," Ugyen Dorji said, reflecting on the transition that the movie industry in Bhutan has seen in just a decade and a half.

The *Jigdre* actors were paid between Nu 5,000 and Nu 10,000 in 1998. Today, established actors demand as much as Nu 300,000 per film.

Good films require big investment, Ugyen Dorji said. But it is the absorptive capacity of the market that decides the fate of the films.

"I'd like to produce better films than the last I did," Ugyen Dorji said. "But we have a small audience, which does not make any sense to make big investment in filmmaking."

After production of the first feature film, *Gasa Lamai Singye*, in 1989, the growth of the film industry stagnated until 2000. After that, film industry saw a boom, with more than 20 films a year, hitting a record high of 31 films in 2010.

However, the economic slowdown in 2013, because of rupee shortage and various

"The digital age knocked us out of cassette business. And now, with very limited films produced ever year, our business is drying up"

The owner A recording studio Thimphu

restrictions in place, hit the film industry hard. The number of films in that year dropped to 14.

Mila Tobgyel, president of Bhutan Film Association (BFA), said that was the period when businesses were hit, investments had gone down, and inflation was skyrocketing. Consequently, people's income was affected. "This hit the film industry in the form of low viewership."

Almost 60 percent of the producers had availed for loan from financial institutions.

The economic slowdown also hit the film-related businesses, like recording studio and distributors.

The owner of a recording studio in Thimphu said that, currently, only two of the five recording studios are sustaining, in sharp contrast to growth they saw in the late 1990s. "The digital age knocked us out of cassette business. And now, with very limited films produced ever year, our business is drying up." Pg.4

A small member of a big film crew

Thinley Zangmo

It is Sunday and the sky is grey, pregnant with rain. In a two-storey traditional house in Motithang, crew-members working with film director Tshering Wangyel are enjoying their free time before the next shot.

The small man, Azha Namgay, 59, who is loved by all, is there too.

Azha Namgay, like the rest of the crew-members, has been living in the house that belongs to Tshering Wangyel. Lodge and food are free.

Known for his humour and gentle speech, Azha Namgay, says he is really grateful to Tshering Wangyel.

"I don't have anyone here in Thimphu. The crew-members have become my family," Azha Namgay said. "We take care of each other like siblings."

Whenever they run short of

money, Tshering Wangyel gives them pocket money and helps them with groceries.

Kumar, 23, a crew-member, brings hot tea for Azha Namgay, who receives it with a gentle smile.

The crew-members are mostly away from Thimphu for about two months, because they are busy shooting a film.

"I've been to most of the places in the country. I've also been to Bangkok too," says Kumar. "Working in film industry takes me to different places and it's a good experience."

After shooting a film, the crew-members get paid about Nu 15,000 to Nu 20,000.

"For now, life is good with people, who are willing to help and look after me," Azha Namgay said. He plans to be in the film industry as long as Tshering Wangyel requires him.

"Here, we are a big and happy family," says Azha Namgay.



Kumar and Azha Namgay

COVER STORY

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"... I appreciate those, who invest big time in films, irrespective of market size. Industry needs such investors to encourage growth"

**Tshering Wangyel
Filmmaker**

From Pg 1

Today, there are only 30 full-time film producers in the country. Some of them don't produce even a single film in a year.

Mila Tobgyel said that more than 100 producers gave it a shot producing films. After one or two failed attempts, they called it a day. "But more than the intention to make money, some producers put

money just to promote or launch their sons, daughters and relatives. A few invest out of sheer interest."

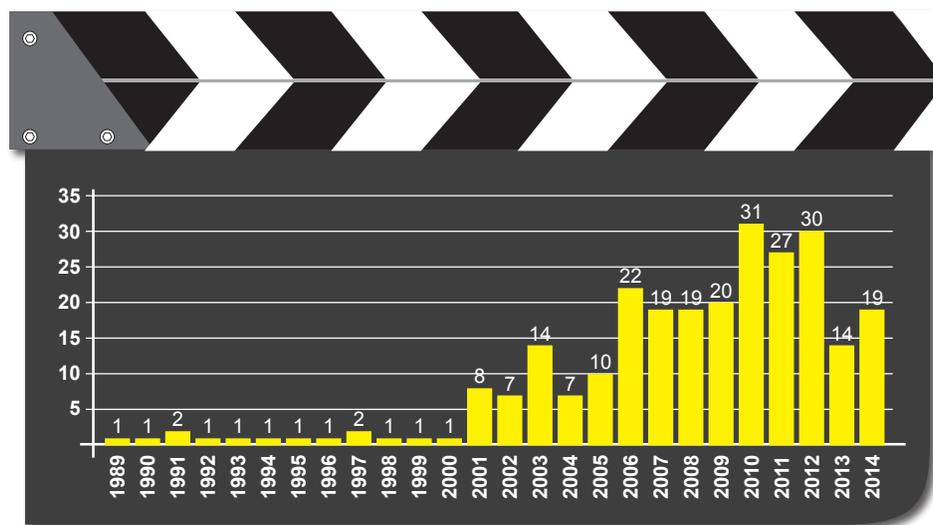
What has been observed is that the taste of the Bhutanese audience changes very fast, and filmmakers are facing a difficult time to adapt to the change.

Filmmaker Tshering Wangyel seems to have developed a strategy of success where all the rest are failing.

"As a filmmaker, I crave to do something very artistic," he said, acknowledging that, on average, his films only cost between Nu 2.5 million and 3 million. "I have to make sure that there's at least a breakeven in the end."

Tshering Wangyel said that time has not yet come for Bhutanese audience to demand exceptionally made films. "And we can't make Hollywood-quality films. So there's a unique taste that develops among the audience."

It is content-driven films, with



Number of movies produced since 1989

(infor courtesy: Bhutan Film Association)

stories that connect the audience that sell in Bhutan. Making such films doesn't necessarily require big investment.

"But I appreciate those, who invest big time in films, irrespective of market size. Industry needs such investors to encourage growth," Tshering Wangyel said.

With only 11 cinema halls in the whole of the country, many films do not reach the audience.

Even if films are taken to

different dzongkhags and gewogs, it just adds to the cost. Earning from ticket sales is less than the expenditure for hiring of people, equipment and logistics.

However, change is bound to happen, said Mila Tobgyel. BFA has received support from the department of information and media. Korea has agreed to donate about 60 sets of screening equipment.

About 91 distributors in 71

different locations will be assigned to set up temporary halls and take care of the equipment. "In the long run, they'll be able to come up with theatre."

Besides benefiting filmmakers, this is expected to make entertainment accessible to the larger audience in remote locations. Producers will be able to screen their films at 71 different locations at the same time, saving on travel and logistics cost.