

Sikkim has immense potential waiting to be unleashed says Arijit Dutta of Priya

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Arijit Dutta Managing Director of Priya Entertainments in conversation with Subhojit Roy about the forthcoming Sikkim Film Festival and the just concluded Temi Autumn Festival and is hopeful about the growth of Eco Adventure tourism

1. Priya cinema was recently acknowledged as a flag bearer of single screen in Bengal, what has been Priya Cinema's role and impact in the 100 years of Bengali Cinema being celebrated.

First, we are truly humbled by the fact that Priya Cinema is still being acknowledged in this day and age of modern multiplex and digital mode of cinema viewing. This acknowledgement only reinforces the fact that struggle and hardship that all single screen owners have had to undergo coping up to the challenges of rapid modernization of cinema industry which actually ends at the exhibitors doorstep, so our recognition is an embodiment of recognition of this struggle of every single screen owner. So many have folded during the past 20 years, but our mantra has been constant up gradation and modernization keeping in tandem with the latest technological changes for the best viewing comfort of our patrons. Priya and Piyali's films journey has been quite a momentous and we have been an integral part of these 100 years of Bengali cinema having been part of it for 60 years. Under the banner of Piyali Films, PEPL has also produced films, most of which have gone on to win major national and international awards. "Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne", "Aranyer Dinratri" and "Pratidwandi" directed by Satyajit Ray, "Chhuti" directed by Arundhati Devi, and "Hatey Bajare" directed by Tapan Sinha, are just some of the unforgettable names. PEPL has received the President's Gold Award for Best Producer, for three consecutive years. Priya Cinema, its flagship single-screen theatre, was the first to screen the most popular Charlie Chaplin movie "CITY LIGHTS" on the 22nd May 1958.

For me the biggest impact of Priya on the Bengali film industry has been the hope, support it has provided for lesser known film directors, actors and has acted as a lifeline for them.

1. How do explain the shift in your focus from cinema exhibition to eco tourism.

I wouldn't term it as a shift. Priya remains the cornerstone of our business. But I have always been an outdoor adventure person and my initial years in the Himalayas as a student shaped my love for the nature, mountains and adventure. So the Eco Adventure ventures at Khairabera and Sikkim are only extension of my love and passion for adventure. As I said maintaining a single screen is an uphill struggle and at some point we had to also source an alternate source of resource

mobilization which has a lot promise and we consciously chose eco adventure tourism and hospitality. We have also set up a multi cuisine restaurant BG at the Priya cinema which is also doing very well and reopening VAULT the underground pub which had become a very popular destination.

But surely the shift in our focus is only to open new areas of revenue generation and keeping with the vision of conscientious business house.

1. Is adventure eco tourism a popular form of travel in India and can the present infrastructure offer quality tourism for foreign visitors?

The popularity is on the increase and Government papers on eco adventure tourism are a pointer in that direction. We must understand the changing nature of mindset of tourists in India. The average age of travellers are coming down, independent solo travellers more number of women travellers who are independent and ready to afford luxuries have actually completely changed the eco system of tourism industry and eco adventure tourism is no different. The infra-structure is being developed and the State Government is an active stake holder and participant in the development of infra-structure. The travel time will have to be cut down from the nearest air and rail connect and roads need improvement but we also need to consider the difficult terrain. The tremendous international connect about Sikkim is the fact that it is a 100% organic state and Buddhist monasteries also attract tourists from the Far East. But initiatives like Eco Adventure Resort at Temi Tea Estate are exactly efforts required for the growth of the industry. This was a first of it's kind initiative where a PPP model was arranged with the Sikkim Government which owns Temi Tea Estate where we transformed a dilapidated heritage Bungalow known as Bada Bungalow into a most modern retro fitted tourist hub. Perhaps that is the way forward and we are happy to be a path finder. I must acknowledge the role of a dynamic IPS Officer in Mrinalini Srivasatava, she truly was instrumental in the development of the area and infra-structure around we completely refurbished the Bungalow.

The recent 3 days Temi Autumn Festival attracted a major footfall of tourists and there quite a few events as a fashion show, music and entertainment which drew large number of visitors.

1. How do you see Sikkim as a destination for cinema in the near future?

Sikkim and the entire North East is a virgin territory as far as cinema industry is concerned. We haven't touched even 10% of the possibilities. The local film industry has enormous potential for regional films and most importantly the locations can be better than any location anywhere in the world. The natural

beauty offers immense possibilities and the Sikkim Film Festival coming up in 28th, 29th February and 1st March 2020 is the first step towards making Cinema an industry in Sikkim and the entire North East. While Assam and Manipur already has a film industry in place but it's exposure in the rest of India is limited and we felt along with Film Federation of India that Sikkim can be a gateway towards the North East being a destination for Indian cinema.

1. Does Sikkim and North East's infrastructure, terrain and topography support the growth of a movie industry there?

Infrastructure needs development, travel time needs to be lessened but other factors are all positively poised towards the growth of a bustling movie industry. Local talent, establishment support, tremendous popularity and enthusiasm about cinema and a young population are all positive indices for a growth in the trade and commerce around the industry. The growth would also depend on the exhibition ie; cinema halls in the region.

I am very hopeful about the growth and these are exactly what we shared with the Governor of Sikkim recently when we met him. Infact he was so excited that he offered to host a formal dinner on the first day of the Film Festival. The Film Festival shall have many Producers, Directors and film personalities from both Bollywood and the Southern film fraternity thus providing an opportunity for Sikkim to showcase it's potential. I strongly believe Sikkim has immense potential waiting to be unleashed.