

## **Maharashtra - Cinema halls, drama theatres to reopen from 22 Oct, SOPs to be out soon**

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Theatres and auditoriums in Maharashtra will reopen from 22 October while observing all Covid-19 safety protocols, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's office tweeted today afternoon, , a move that comes amid indication that the second wave of the pandemic is ebbing.

The coronavirus protocols that shall be followed is in the works, and will be released soon, CM Thackeray's office further added.

CM Thackeray was speaking at a meeting of the Covid task force, which was also attended by Shiv Sena's Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Raut, state chief secretary Sitaram Kunte, filmmakers Rohit Shetty and Kunal Kapoor, theatre personality Makarand Deshpande, Marathi actors Subodh Bhawe, Aadesh Bandekar, among others.

In the meeting, it was announced that cinema halls and drama theatres will be allowed to function from 22 October, provided they follow all Covid-19- related health protocols.

Earlier on Friday, the Maharashtra government said that all religious places will reopen from 7 October in the state with Covid-19 protocols. CM Thackeray, who made the announcement, urged people not to drop guard and continue Covid-19-appropriate behaviour in view of a possible third wave of the pandemic.

"All religious places will be opened from October 7 (when 9-day Navrati festival starts) in the state. The Maharashtra government has prepared itself for a third wave, but with all precautions, the state is allowing relaxations in various activities," Thackeray said.

The chief minister said though infections are declining in the state the Covid-19 threat persists. "Although daily Covid-19 cases are showing a declining trend, everybody should take care and follow Covid-19 protocols," he said.

"While religious places are going to be opened, people still need to wear face masks and use hand sanitizers. The management of religious places will be responsible for implementation of such measures," CM Thackeray said.

The state government has issued a standard operating procedure (SOP) for devotees and officials managing places of worship to ensure strict implement of coronavirus-related protocols and curb spread of the infection.

These strict measures include non-distribution of 'prasad' (offerings), no sprinkling of holy water, no touching of statues, idols or holy books and staggering the number of visitors to maintain social distancing, a government order said.

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Face mask or covering of the face is mandatory while visiting religious places, it said, adding the minimum distance between two persons should be 6 feet. The state government advised senior citizens, pregnant women and children below 10 years of age to remain at home.

The management of shrines should provide separate entry and exit points for devotees, if possible, to avoid crowding, said the order. People should avoid physical contact while greeting each other, it said.

"Touching of statues, idols or holy books will not be allowed. If possible, people should carry their own prayer mats," the order said. For long, the opposition BJP had been demanding reopening of temples and other places of worship in Maharashtra.

Earlier in August, the BJP had staged protests in several cities of Maharashtra in support of their demand.

After the first Covid-19 wave waned, places of religious worship were reopened in Maharashtra in November last year, but they were shutdown again for people after the second wave started in the state in March 2021.

Maharashtra on Friday reported 3,286 new Covid-19 cases and 51 deaths, which took the state's infection tally to 65,37,843 and the toll to 1,38,776, a health department official said.

With 3,933 patients discharged from hospitals, the number of recovered cases rose to 63,57,012. Maharashtra now has 39,491 active Covid-19 cases.