

Digital Popular Culture and Resistance Narratives: A Case Study of Indian Web Series

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Abstract

The rise of digital technology in the 21st century signifies a momentous disruption in the way human life is conceived and lived. This transformation is evident in the digital re-imagining of the everyday practices that are a part of the public and private lives of people. Punathambekar and Mohan perceptively argue that "digital is now everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is inter-actively everywhere" (26). In this context, this paper attempts to study the OTT (over-the-top) entertainment phenomenon in India and the extent to which it is instrumental in affecting social transformation by changing and creating discourses around notions of self, society, gender, class, race, and caste. Through a study of highly popular web-series like Panchayat, Four More Shots Please, Indian Matchmaking, and Lust Stories, the paper argues that the digital content produced for the OTT platforms has disrupted the manner in which formulaic tropes of mainstream Bollywood cinema have operated. Instead, through a novel representation of characters and themes, transformational narratives about class struggle, caste-based discrimination and violence, women's experiences, queer and same-sex groups, and identity politics have emerged at the core of representation through OTT-based films and web-series. They can be touted as subtle critiques of violence, hypermasculinity, corruption, and exploitative relationships while also registering themselves as anti-establishment voices. However, rather than being a straightforward indictment of regressive politics, Indian digital popular representations are a potent site of cultural conflict and negotiation, what Appadurai and Breckenridge promulgate as "zones of cultural debate" (5) in the context of public cultures. The paper, thus, raises the question as to how far popular digital content becomes a faithful and transformational representation of the aspirational, modern India and to what extent is it complicit in portraying narrow definitions of freedom, individuality, and progress.

Keywords: Social Transformation, Popular Culture, Digital, OTT, Web-series, Identity, Representation.

The 21st century is marked by the advent and rise of digital technology in almost all spheres of daily life signifying nothing short of a momentous disruption in the way human life has till now been conceived and lived. According to G. Vial, digital transformation is defined as "a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies" (118). Indeed, this transformation is evident in the digital re-imagining of the public and private lives of people as it disrupts

the everyday practices ranging from banking and finance, education, travel, healthcare, shopping, and entertainment. The Covid-19 pandemic further ensured that the transformation ushered by digital technologies would be pushed forth in an unprecedented manner with people embracing the “new normal” facilitated by the digital turn as the only way forward. Meghna Bal and Vivan Sharan in their book *The Dazzle of the Digital: Unbundling India Online* (2023) contend that “From being a good to have, digital has become a must-have” (1). Similarly, Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan in their book *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia* (2019) perceptively argue that “digital is now everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is inter-actively everywhere” (26). It is in this context that one can locate the emergence and resounding popularity of new forms of entertainment made available through global OTT (over-the-top) platforms signaling at not only new formats of telling stories but also changing and creating discourses around notions of self, society, gender, class, race, and caste.

Contextualizing the Rise of Indian OTT Platforms

Runa Chakraborty and Sarunas Paunksnis have perceptively argued that the “transition from cinema to streaming platforms in India is crucially connected with the evolution of television as a medium of entertainment and its convergence with the emerging Information Technology (IT) sector” (9). At the turn of the century, India witnessed a transition from closed economy to an open market economy as a result of liberalization-privatization-globalization (referred to as the LPG reforms), heralding a phenomenal transformation in the media industry. As the monopoly of the government in public broadcasting television through Doordarshan was diminished, the Indian consumers were exposed to global information and entertainment content through a spate of television channels dedicated to drama, sports, cartoons, news, fashion, music, geography and exploration, science and technology, nature and even spirituality. Channels like Star Plus, Zee, Sony, ESPN Sports, NDTV 24x7, Star World, Fashion TV, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, History Channel, MTV, Channel V, Aastha TV, and Cartoon Network became household names offering eclectic programmes produced both in India and in the West. It was also an era of the upwardly-mobile middle-class that was fashioning itself as aspirational while at the same time clutching onto traditional Indian value systems pertaining to family, marriage and gender roles. This ambivalent march towards ‘modernity’ was not only the subject matter of Indian television serials but also found expression in the Bollywood blockbusters of the time such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999). The gradual willingness of the Indian population to view, absorb, and appreciate content of diverse nature, however, has found its ultimate expression in the present day digital popular entertainment platforms known as the OTT or “over-the-top”.

In the early 2000s, the internet was expanding at an exponential rate facilitated by the inundation of Indian markets with affordable Chinese mobile phones and better telecom and digital connectivity across geographic boundaries. These developments finally benefitted immensely from the impetus given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government through the Digital India campaign of 2015 and the public launch of Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Jio offering internet services at a staggeringly reduced rate. These developments at the technological, policy and financial level ensured that the takeover of communication and telecom industries through digital technologies in India was now complete. The convergence and shift of traditional information and entertainment media through films and television onto the digital space was initially signaled by the launch of YouTube in India in 2008 whose catchy dictum “Broadcast Yourself” literally became the signpost of the times to come wherein broadcasting would undergo a seismic shift from its earlier formats to become much more personalized, technology-driven, and all-pervasive.

In 2014, The Viral Fever (TVF) produced *Permanent Roommates* which was a first of its kind Indian web series streamed over YouTube focusing on the lives of the millennials. TVF became the forerunner in creating web series like *TVF Pitchers* (2015), *Kota Factory* (2019), *Panchayat* (2020), *TVF Aspirants* (2021) and the recently released *Sandeep Bhैया* (2023). In 2017, Amazon Prime Video released *Inside Edge* followed by Netflix producing its first Indian original content with *Sacred Games* (2019) marking the dawn of “originals” meant for global OTT platforms. Since then, many popular television channels and media companies have floated their own OTT platforms such as Star TV’s Hotstar (later known as Disney Hotstar), Sony LIV, Viacom 18’s Voot, Zee 5 and MX Player. Therefore, the phenomenon of web series in India has tremendously accelerated and demonstrated excellent response to shows like *Sacred Games* (Netflix, 2018), *Ghoul* (Netflix, 2018), *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime, 2019) and *Mirzapur* (Netflix, 2018) that have become synonymous with OTT entertainment in India.

Factors Contributing to the Widespread Popularity of Streaming Platforms

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic that set in at the beginning of 2020, cinema halls and theatres shut down globally for most parts of the year, in turn giving an unprecedented and unexpected push to the quantum jump created by online streaming platforms. As people were confined to their houses, they had nowhere to turn except to their mobile phones, tablets or television screens for entertainment. This phase also provided an opportunity for those sections of society who had been hitherto resistant to digitalization, whether in terms of ordering groceries and household supplies online, carrying out digital financial transactions, or seeking online web-based entertainment.

Commenting on the preference for web series over television soap operas, Raveena Joseph writes, “(e)dgy and fresh, web series, which have made their mark in India, break free from staid television formats – there are no time frames to follow, no censorship issues, and women don’t turn into snakes”. One of the reasons that the consumption of web series has been so humungous is its accessibility. Requiring nothing more than a stable internet connection and a smart device such as a smartphone, smart TV, laptop or a tablet, web series can be streamed anywhere and any time. With streaming platforms, the consumer can watch shows as per his convenience of time, taste, or mood. The control over synchronizing one’s viewing experience is combined with the ease of operating these platforms through built-in options to pause, rewind, forward, or to catch up one’s favorite show from where they had last left them. The incorporation of Artificial Intelligence and sophisticated algorithm ensures that the viewing experience is not only simplified to a great extent but also personalized as per each user and each profile associated with a particular subscriber.

OTT platforms have also presented the audience with a novel entertainment experience by showcasing fresh talent. Today, actors like Jitendra Kumar (*Kota Factory*, *Panchayat*), Pratik Gandhi (*Scam 1992: The Harshad Mehta Story*, *Modern Love: Mumbai*, *The Great Indian Murder*), Vikrant Massey (*Mirzapur*, *Criminal Justice*, *Made in Heaven*), Ali Fazal (*Ray*, *Mirzapur*), Shriya Pilgaonkar (*Guilty Minds*, *Mirzapur*, *The Gone Game*), Abhishek Banerjee (*Inside Edge*, *Paatal Lok*, *Ajeeb Daastans*), Kubbra Sait (*Farzi*, *Sacred Games*, *The Trial*), Jaideep Ahlawat (*Paatal Lok*, *Bard of Blood*), Neeraj Kabi (*Paatal Lok*, *Avrodh*), Shweta Tripathi (*Yeh Kaali Kaali Aankhein*, *Kaalkoot*, *Made in Heaven*, *Mirzapur*), Shobhita Dhulipala (*Made in Heaven*, *The Night Manager*, *Bard of Blood*), Rasika Duggal (*Lust Stories*, *Delhi Crime*, *Mirzapur*), Samantha Ruth Prabhu (*The Family Man 2*), and Naveen Kasturia (*TVF Aspirants*, *Kota Factory 2*, *Breathe: Into the Shadows*) are amongst the most recognizable and saleable talents owing to the resounding success of their web-shows. These actors and actresses represent a new crop of talent that has proved their success in the entertainment business by demolishing the myth of hefty budgets, conventionally considered ‘good’ looks, easy access and launch through godfathers as prerequisites for a box-office success.

Commenting on the possibilities offered by OTT platforms, Priyanka Chopra comments, “What we are seeing in Indian cinema now is the freedom of streaming services in allowing people to have larger thoughts than the formulas that existed before [...] Now, people want to tell great stories that are real and they identify with” (News18).

OTTs have indeed become ‘platforms’ to celebrate creativity and discovering anew a whole host of cinematic content that was once dubbed as “flop” or considered unworthy of a conventional box-office success. Big production houses that have either created allied production wings for OTT or have pivoted in the direction of the digital space as a worthy area to be tapped for business have also facilitated this development. For instance, Karan Johar’s Dharma Productions now has an exclusive Dharmatic Entertainment for the production of OTT-based content. Similarly, Farhan Akhtar’s Excel Entertainment also supports web content through Excel Movies. Zoya Akhtar’s Tiger Baby Films, Ekta Kapoor’s Balaji Motion Pictures under AltBalaji, Zee Studios under Zee5, in addition to Shahrukh and Gauri Khan’s Red Chilies Entertainment, UTV Motion Pictures, Fox Star Studios (Disney Hotstar), Applause Entertainment, Maddock Films and Clean Slate Filmz have been instrumental in changing the landscape of OTT content creation in India. Therefore, an amalgamation of linguistic diversity in digital content combined with the one-stop offerings of the OTT have made it an affordable, accessible, and most popular form of entertainment to people globally.

Social Transformation and Resistance through Indian Web Series/OTT Platforms

If there is one kind of disruption that is attributed the most to digital content produced for the OTT platforms, it is the nature of representation of characters and themes that have shown a marked shift from the formulaic tropes of mainstream Bollywood cinema. Whether it is the issues of class struggle, caste-based discrimination and violence, or the experiences of women, queer and same-sex groups in the public and private sphere, identity politics has emerged at the core of representation through OTT-based films and web series, signaling a wider transformation in society.

One of the main reasons cited for this shift is the relative creative freedom enjoyed by streaming platforms because they are currently outside the purview of government censorship or involvement of the Central Board of Film Certification. Instead, OTT platforms work on the principle of self-evaluated certification wherein it is stipulated that all content must display age-based ratings as well as warnings for sensitive scenes involving violence, nudity, and explicit language use. This purported freedom is predicted to be short-lived as the government plans to consider implementation of curbs and censorship of what it considers “obscene” or “abusive”. On 19 March 2023, India’s Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Anurag Thakur proclaimed at a press conference that “Abusive language in the name of creativity will not be tolerated. The government is serious about the complaints of increasing abusive and obscene content on OTT platforms. If there is a need to make any changes in the rules regarding this, the ministry is willing to consider that” (Medianama). Nevertheless, bolder and more unconventional topics on OTT and the freedom for the viewer to watch these in privacy work in tandem to associate OTT/SVOD platforms with “modernity”/“modern” and “coming-of-age”.

There are ample examples to show that web series and movies made for streaming platforms are transformational in nature as they have been instrumental in making marginalized communities visible in the representation of contemporary India. They are often touted as being subtle critiques of violence, hypermasculinity, corruption, and exploitative relationships while also registering themselves as anti-establishment voices. However, rather than being a straightforward indictment of regressive politics, Indian digital popular representations are a potent site of cultural conflict

and negotiation, what Arjun Appadurai and Breckenridge promulgate as “zones of cultural debate” in the context of public cultures. At the same time, there is no doubt about the fact that the proliferation of digital content has brought about a welcome diversity of themes and refreshing modes of storytelling.

Indian digital popular representations like *TVF Gullak* (2019, 2021, 2022), *Aspirants* (2021), *Pitchers* (2015, 2022), *Guilty Minds* (2022), *Four More Shots Please!* (2019, 2020, 2022), *Kota Factory* (2019, 2021) and *Bombay Begums* (2021) are examples of highly aspirational narratives depicting struggles of men and women, as they navigate professions and relationships. On the other hand, suspense and thriller stories from the hinterland that enmesh the questions of caste identity, corruption, and violence are amongst the most-watched shows on OTT platforms. Web series like *Mirzapur* (2018, 2020), *Khakee: The Bihar Chapter* (2022), *Asur* (2020, 2023), *Yeh Kaali Kaali Aankhein* (2022), *Raktanchal* (2020), *Bhaukaal* (2020), and *Paatal Lok* (2020), not only invoke the rustic energy reminiscent of Anurag Kashyap’s *Gangs of Wasseypur*, but also situate the storylines of gang-wars and power struggles within the socio-cultural milieu to which their protagonists belong. It is owing to the nuanced depiction of caste and gender-based discrimination that these shows have garnered a cult fan-following in India as well as abroad. Related to these are also cop and detective thriller stories which have garnered appreciation for the ways in which they have risen above clichés and stereotypes of unflinching machismo and honor of their protagonists. Whether it be Sartaj Singh (Saif Ali Khan) in *Sacred Games*, Vartika Chaturvedi (Shefali Shah) of *Delhi Crime* (2019, 2022), Hathi Ram Chaudhary (Jaideep Ahlawat) in *Paatal Lok*, Amit Lodha (Karan Tacker) in *Khakee: The Bihar Chapter*, Balbir Singh (Suvinder Vicky) in *Kohrra*, Srikant Tiwari (Manoj Bajpayee) in *The Family Man* (2019, 2021), and Shivani Shivaji Roy (Rani Mukherjee) in *Mardaani 2* (2019), these men and women in uniform are all well-rounded characters, each fighting their own prejudices and inner demons, overcoming their vulnerabilities even as they fight to uphold law, punish criminals and restore law and order in the fictional universe that they inhabit. Rather than embodying the superhero image of a male cop routinely upheld in Bollywood movies like *Dabangg* (2010, 2012, 2019) or *Sooryavanshi* (2021), the personalities of cops (both male and female) in the digital counterparts are in fact humanized to represent their conflicted psychological states and value systems.

Moving on, representations of gender and sexuality have become more frank and realistic with greater investment in female and queer characters in web series and movies. The “Woman Question” is central to shows and movies like *Aashram* (2020), *Sacred Games*, and *Sirf Ek Banda Kafi Hai* (2023) that are severe indictment of the godmen or “guru” figures who sexually exploit women, especially Dalit women, while hypocritically preaching the message of equality and religion. Neeraj Ghaywan’s story “Geeli Puchi” in *Ajeeb Dastaans* (2021) takes a bold step in creating the protagonist, Bharti Mandal (Konkona Sen Sharma) a Dalit lesbian woman, as an unapologetic, intelligent and rational woman who is at the receiving end of patriarchy and caste-based prejudice.

However, popular Indian digital representations also underscore a battle between the emancipatory/transformatory and regressive/resistive images of contemporary India that makes it a contested field open to deeper engagement and questioning. In their study of the SVOD platforms, Runa C. Paunksnis and Śarūnas Paunksnis have argued that SVOD media demonstrates an engagement with social, political and economic problems in a way which is very similar to New Bollywood (8). Focusing primarily on gendered representations, they argue that “rather than interrogating the problems of contemporary India and especially the ones related to the gender questions, [they] aestheticize and commodify them” (8-9). These media representations are implicated in trends reflected by consumer demand and commercial profit and suited to become “one of the best-selling cultural commodities of the twenty-first century” (8-9).

One could cite the examples of shows like *Four More Shots Please!*, *Aarya* (2020, 2021), and *Saas, Bahu, Aur Flamingo* (2023) to argue that even though all of them uphold strong female protagonists, their reckless or violent attitudes are either ignorant of their privileged social positioning or seen to be justified in the context of sexual and economic exploitation by male characters. In *Four more Shots Please!*, there is an attempt to tell the stories of four women navigating their relationships and careers in an unapologetic manner, which however remains superficial and unconvincing. While we are presented with two characters, namely Damini, an aspiring, opinionated writer, and Anjana, a supposedly firebrand lawyer, there is hardly an attempt to invest more in their capabilities and achievements than to their parties and shifting sexual relationships as answers to their professional crisis. In the words of Anupama Chopra, “In attempting to show women who have every problem and yet are also able and more than happy to spend time goofing around with friends, the show does a disservice to all these issues and the women who have to tackle them” (Film Companion, n.p.). While there is an attempt to tackle issues of body-shaming, loss of a parent/spouse, writer’s block, failed marriages and open marriages, the show is unable to uphold any meaningful solutions or situate these crisis within any realistic contexts. Instead, the audience is left only with jarring and hypersexualized images of women in expensive clothes, hopping from one pub to another, with no real self-reflexivity about the nature of problems that plague their lives. On the other hand, shows like *Aarya* and *Saas, Bahu Aur Flamingo* that are driven by exceptional performances by Sushmita Sen and Dimple Kapadia as respective protagonists portray women taking charge of the messy family crisis as men fail to rise up to the occasion. These women are suave, brave, resourceful in dealing with drug cartels and business adversaries while also proving to be caregivers and sensitive mothers. However, soon this emancipatory narrative becomes an imitation of clichés in crime thrillers and the female gaze blurs all along while reinforcing stereotypes and challenging them at the same time. It is as if, “being wronged and sexually violated serve as a route through which redemption and “empowerment” are actualized” (Samanta, n.p.). In a slightly different vein, heroism of female protagonists is seen as a product of circumstances where women are forced to occupy the centre-stage as a result of their husband’s weaknesses or morally corrupt actions. Whether it be Anamika of *The Fame Game* (2022) or Nyonika Sengupta in *The Trial* (2023), women emerge as “strong” protagonists only when the men in their lives fail to prove themselves. These examples can be used to argue that the representations of gender based power relations in the digital space exemplify a simultaneous engagement with feminist as well as counter-feminist impulses that demand a rethinking of the ways in which female gaze is deployed in the narratives.

If the above-mentioned stories vex the terrain of feminist and counter-feminist representations, then there is a category of shows that blatantly reinforce regressive stereotypes about women, marriage, consumerism and female aspirations. Fictional and reality shows like *Decoupled* (2021), *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* (2020, 2022), and *Indian Matchmaking* (2020, 2022, 2023) are riddled with clichés about women’s appearance, while obscene commercialism is seen as driving the notions of matchmaking or leading lives as “Bollywood wives”. The fact that these shows, ostensibly about matchmaking of individuals or infidelity, divorce and everyday lives of a select, hyper affluent privileged class of Bollywood actors and/or their spouses can be subject matters for successful streaming shows forces one to recognize the commercial and artistic impulses that vie with one another while producing content for digital media. It makes one ponder how far popular digital content becomes a faithful representation of the aspirational, modern India and to what extent is it complicit in portraying narrow definitions of freedom, individuality, and progress.

In conclusion, one could argue that representations in the post-millennial Indian digital popular streaming platforms are multi-dimensional and present themselves in all its complexity. Today,

stories on digital platforms can be told in a variety of formats like web series, films, reality shows, documentaries, anthologies and docu-dramas that provide ample room for experimentation with the idea of gaze, creation of gray characters, and dealing with unexplored themes. Tied along with this choice is also the variegated nature of online viewership that makes it imperative for the producers, casting directors, and streaming channels to cater to different tastes and demands of the audience. While speaking to Anupama Chopra in an interview, actress Konkona Sen Sharma attested to the fact that despite having come a long way through the OTT, there is still persistent pressure on the makers to cast “big names” or “stars” to ensure that the business of content creation remains viable (Film Companion, n.p.). One can, therefore, contend that the Indian digital popular space, though highly emancipatory and transformative in a number of aspects, still needs to fully grapple with issues like typecasting characters, propagation of regressive values through seemingly well-crafted shows, or the perpetuation of discriminatory practices related to casting, marketing, or distribution. Nevertheless, the Indian digital popular platforms offer an indispensable, one-of-a-kind space to create incredibly alluring narratives that make an unprecedented attempt to portray all kinds of experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, professions, age-groups, and aspirations. Shohini Ghosh perceptively argues that “popular culture is always popular because it means many things to many people; it is not ideologically coherent” (*Beyond Bahus*). Representations of contemporary India through the Indian digital popular space are transformational and authentic in as much as they open up the possibilities of dialogue, debate, and coming to terms with the realities of people who simultaneously try to be the “woke” or “politically correct” generation while still unable to shrug off the age-old biases that grip our society; of an older generation that is in the middle of finding new forms of self-expression and purpose in life as families further shrink from nuclear or acquire new forms, and as children tend to build their lives separately from their parents; of marginalized sections of society, whether women, queer sections, Dalits, and the underprivileged, who consider this as an opportune moment to find their voice, act with far greater sense of agency, and bring to the fore the overt and covert forms of discrimination, whether it be sexism, Islamophobia, heteronormativity, and racism; and finally, of a nation as a collective that is rapidly consolidating its position as a global power to reckon with on the one hand, and yet struggling desperately to rise above its prejudices and histories of exploitations and violence.

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