

Article

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“Amazon Gives Us Wings”: Streaming Platforms and the Hindi Film Industry



This article examines the sweeping changes transforming the Indian mediascape as it grapples with the ‘disruptive innovations’ being introduced by the deluge of global and home-grown video-on-demand (VoD) platforms that is reportedly ‘undermining cable TV’ (Izardar 2019), and is anticipated to become ‘as big as the Indian film industry’ (Gupta 2019). What are the implications of emergent online digital media platforms (aka over-the-top/OTTs) for the Indian film industry, and their immediate and long-term impact on film cultures, cinephilia and spectatorial habits of Indian film audiences? How are OTTs affecting existing business models established in the Indian cinema ecosystem, specifically in terms of online distribution, and their impact on traditional modes of theatrical exhibition? What are the likely barriers and challenges to the continued

expansion of OTTs in India and what are its future directions and prospects for growth? Can OTTs and web content generators encourage ‘a membership mind-set’ (van Eeden and Chow 2018: 17), and develop a subscription-based, pay-on-demand model of revenue in India, traditionally averse to such kinds of expenditure on entertainment? Will OTTs remain an urban phenomenon with primarily elitist creative content?

According to a 2018 Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)-Frames report, ‘digital media grew 29.4% in 2017, with a 28.8% growth in advertising and 50% growth in subscription. India will be the second largest online video viewing audience in the world by 2020’ (Shrivastava 2018). There are several favourable intersec-

tional conditions and factors that are driving the exponential growth and market congestion of OTTs. The number of internet users in India has risen fivefold since 2011. The aggressive launch of telecom service provider Reliance Jio in September 2017 has shaken up the Indian telecom sector resulting in even cheaper data prices, expanded geographic coverage, and improved Internet and mobile connectivity. As a result, the amount of time that Indians spent on video and entertainment apps rose by 85% in 2017 from the year before, according to the market research group App Annie. Netflix founder and CEO, Reed Hastings, told an audience in New Delhi in February 2018 that ‘even we couldn’t predict the last two years of Indian internet growth...It’s the most phenomenal example anywhere in the world in terms of lower data costs, more people online, expansion of 4G [mobile data].... And we didn’t see that coming’ (Bengali 2019). According to PwC, ‘mobile Internet TV is one of the biggest growth areas in India and a third of smartphone users are watching TV on their devices’ (Verma 2018). For S. Sadagopan, professor and director of the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Bangalore, factors enabling this growth are the ‘near universal availability of mobile phones, millennial driving the growth [and] reduced attention span of everyone’ (2018).

The conjunction of favourable economic, technological, infrastructural and demographic factors in recent years has enabled increased Internet usage, affordable smartphones, cheaper data packages, faster broadband and cellu-

lar data connectivity, and improved bandwidth resulting in one of the fastest growing and most competitive markets for online streaming and OTT platforms and content providers in the world. With the entry of global players Netflix and Amazon Prime, the VoD platform of the Seattle-based online retailer, adding a competitive edge, the Indian OTT ecosystem has been further energized, and is witnessing a fierce battle between homegrown platforms, Disney+ Hotstar, ViaCom18’s Voot, Zee5India, Balaji Telefilms’ ALT Balaji and Sony’s SonyLive, independent players like Spuul, MUBI India, and the two global streaming platforms.



‘Amazon Gives Us Wings’: Impact on Indian Mediascape, Cinephilia and Film Spec-tatorship

What has the creation of local content by these global streaming giants meant for the film industries of India, and especially Bollywood? Film journalist, author and New York Indian Film Festival director, Aseem Chhabra believes that ‘OTTs are *energising* the Indian film industry, taking it to an international level, and impacting in a big way. The film

industry is very excited about OTTs as it gives the industry an alternative option' (interview 2018). Frank D'Souza (from PricewaterhouseCooper India) points out that:

given the regulatory arbitrage that OTT platform currently enjoy in India (for that matter even in most parts of the world), i.e. (sic) the content exhibition on OTT is not restricted by any of the programming and certification or censorship restrictions that may apply to programming that has to be viewed in movie theatres and televisions [...] this arbitrage provides two unique opportunities to the ecosystem involved in creating content for OTT platforms. Firstly, it can push the boundaries of creativity, and aided by significant production budgets, up the production values; and secondly, give space to new and fresh talent, in a manner more amiable than that currently exists. As both Amazon and Netflix beef up their content production teams and get hands on, this can be viewed as the second coming of the foreign 'studios' in India. However, they need to avoid the mistakes of the past Studios (sic) in their earlier avatar, i.e. (sic) namely of undue reliance on few cast and crew, and unfeasible investments on key projects (2018).

At this point in time the consensus among those this author spoke to suggests that online streaming platforms promise to liberate filmmakers and artistes in more ways than one. It could continue to usher in a refreshingly new era for filmmakers and actors who traditional-

ly could only choose between film and television. As Sidharth Bhatia, the founder-editor of *The Wire* observes:

the OTT platforms will offer a multitude of opportunities for Indian film makers. To begin with, some of these platforms are original content producers, who may finance films. In addition, they provide a new way to distribute, not just in the home country but all over the world. I think it will also influence content - film makers may be willing to experiment with form and theme, which the multiplex model, with the need to recover costs within the first three days, does not allow. Most of all, these OTT platforms are not 'censored' by government bodies allowing for much more freedom (2018).



Truly it is unprecedented for creative industries to not have any censorship restrictions or even self-imposed censorship, a common practice in film industries of India. Indian cinema has historically been subjected to the most whimsical, arbitrary and often draconian censorship rules and regulations by the State-controlled Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) which mandates the display of its censorship certificates onscreen before

films begin, and at cinema halls. From doing away with the mandatory anti-smoking disclaimers to the unbridled freedom to show characters cussing, kissing, or killing in visceral ways, Netflix and Amazon has opened up a whole new world of possibilities for filmmakers and artistes.

Consequently, bold new content has been produced by Netflix, namely, *Lust Stories* (2018), an anthology film and sequel to the 2013 Bollywood anthology film *Bombay Talkies*, comprising of four separate stories, directed by four well-known filmmakers Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee and Karan Johar that depict female sexuality from the perspective of four women in a graphic, direct and unapologetic manner, previously unimaginable on either the silver screen or the telly. This new-found creative license may account for the popularity of *Sacred Games* (Seasons 2, 2018-19) that brought to life, with gritty realism and a dark, raw edginess, the sordid diegetic world populated with inimitable characters from Mumbai's criminal underbelly. Unsurprisingly, the series became controversial for featuring high incidences of visceral violence, profane language, nudity and sexual imagery resulting in demands for OTT players to start self-regulating after a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the Delhi High Court for an allegedly defamatory reference to India's former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. For Chhabra, both these Netflix Originals were 'unprecedented in terms of nudity, sex, abusive words' (2018).

Amazon Prime's *Inside Edge*, that showed the ugly nexus between underworld, politicians and cricket, featured graphic scenes that, although seemingly true to life, would have been inconceivable in a film today. The gripping web-series appeared to be partially inspired by incidents surrounding the popular annual T-20 Cricket series held in India that often finds a place in newspapers reports and television news debates. The very first shot of the gripping web-series featured a sexual act and was parallel cut with a cricket match; besides the expected effect to titillate, the former was included to infuse dramatic tension and more than summed up why it could never have been possible in any other medium or era (Chintamani 2017).



Overall, there has been a growth spurt in innovative, diverse content, offering a wider variety of programmes, and a new liberating space created by these global players by freeing creative content generators from the age-old shackles of censorship norms and protracted power struggles with regulatory bodies. This has encouraged genre experimentation, specifically, horror/supernatural and the crime drama/thriller genres as gore, torture and graphic violence can now be viscerally portrayed as evident from Amazon

Prime's sensational series *Paatal Lok* (2020), Disney+Hotstar's hit series *Aarya* (starring Sushmita Sen), Netflix's original film *Bulbul* (2020), and its second original series, *Ghoul* (2018), a horror mini-series starring Radhika Apte, and based on a Arab monster folklore; *Delhi Crime* (2019), based on the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case in New Delhi that had caused global outrage; Amazon Prime's original series *Mirzapur* (2018); the wildly popular *Sacred Games*; and *Soni* (2018), a realist, slice-of-life feature-length film about the trials and tribulations of two female police officers which premiered to critical acclaim at the 2018 Mumbai International Film Festival whereupon it was directly released on Netflix without a theatrical release, now a viable option in terms of extended film exhibition. Apart from the crime genre, the stand-up comedy/political satire genre is enjoying a boom period not just globally (HBO's multiple Emmy award-winning *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2014-) available on Hotstar, Netflix's *Trevor Noah: Son of Patricia* (2018) and *Patriot Act* (2018-) with Hasan Minhaj are a few examples), but also in India with Netflix streaming its first Indian comedy special *Abroad Understanding*, featuring one of the country's leading stand-up comedians, Vir Das, who says he 'love[s] working with Netflix. They are spearheading comedy across the world right now. Every major comic I love watching is innovating on their platform,' and has signed a two-programme deal (First Post 2018).

Thus far, due to the proliferation of OTTs,

there is a growing audience for innovative, provocative, often expletive-ridden, graphic content on Indian screens in an unprecedented manner. For far too long Indian audiences have been infantilized by the state, the censor board and self-censoring film industries. The kind of audience that would have been considered staple for a Saif Ali Khan or an Anurag Kashyap film have happily gravitated to online streaming platforms. Besides, the upwardly mobile, young audience, accustomed to instant access and gratification, would be easier to attract online as opposed to being enticed to the cinema hall. OTTs are encouraging the production of creative content for grown-ups by minimizing censorship and giving access to a wide range of audience across different age-groups (Chintamani 2017), especially catering to millennials who form a sizeable and growing demographic, India having one of the largest under-24 youth populations in the world. As Prithish Nandy, chairman of Prithish Nandy Communications (PNC) points out, 'We have a new generation that already consumes entertainment differently. Hopefully, they will be the harbingers of change, offering them content they want at their convenience - anytime, anywhere and on any device of their choice' (Verma 2015). Vikram Malhotra, chief executive of Abundantia Entertainment, a content provider for Amazon Prime, speaks of 'changing tastes in entertainment in a country that has long been defined by the extravagant, genre-mashing melodramas of Bollywood cinema. The Indian audience is maturing' (Bengali 2018).

OTTs are creating a much needed ‘third space’ or ‘third screen,’ beyond film and television, for the reinvention of stars like Saif Ali Khan, Vivek Oberoi and Abhay Deol, giving them more options when their film careers flounder. While Saif Ali Khan’s Bollywood comedy-drama film *Chef* (2017) was a miserable box-office failure, he has subsequently reinvented his career with his sensitive portrayal of a conflicted protagonist Inspector Sartaj Singh in *Sacred Games* (Seasons 1 and 2). Streaming platforms are also offering exciting opportunities for nurturing newer acting talents such as Radhika Apte, synonymous with Netflix; Saloni Batra and Geetika Vidya Ohlyan in *Soni*, Rasika Dugal in *Delhi Crime*; Mithila Palkar, who stars in the Netflix Original film *Chopsticks* (2019); and more recently, Jitendra Kumar, delineating the main protagonist Abhishek Tripathi in the delightful comedy-drama Prime series *Panchayat* (2020). In fact, Amazon Prime is on a mission to ‘go seek talent,’ including actors on the edge of the Hindi film industry (Chhabra 2018), and reviving careers of such talents as Jaideep Ahlawat, Raghubir Yadav and Neeraj Kabi.

OTTs players provide a unique global launch pad and guarantee instantaneous visibility for new actors and creative talent in India. As Vir Das points out, ‘*Abroad Understanding* took me to an audience across the world’ (First Post 2018). Reportedly, Netflix would like to introduce Indian actors in [...] U.S. productions and encourage more Indian talent to work on its U.S. productions, citing the example of director Ritesh Batra (*The Lunchbox*)

who helmed the video giant’s recent original film *Our Souls at Night*, starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda, which reunited the two five decades after 1967’s *Barefoot in the Park*. And in terms of showcasing acting talent, Netflix’s *Sense8* featured Indian actress Tina Desai in a prominent role (Bhushan 2018).



Chhabra, in our tele-interview, also draws attention to the important fact that marketing is taken care off by these global streaming giants, citing aggressive advertising campaigns undertaken by Netflix followed by Amazon Prime Video. Known for investing in heavy out-of-home (OHH) advertising in U.S., Netflix India reportedly spent approximately Rupees 5-6 crores (or 50-60 million) on outdoor advertising to promote its first original series, *Sacred Games* (exchange4Media 2018). Its spending power for authoring hype and acumen for creating ‘buzz’ for its original web series, including *Lust Stories*, were evident from its huge advertising billboards installed on expressways, malls and footbridges in metros.

Additionally, for Indian artists, the entry of Netflix and Amazon has opened new opportunities for storytelling as writers, historically overlooked and underpaid by film and television industries, are earning higher fees than

they typically did in Bollywood where budgets are opaque and set aside mainly for directors and actors. ‘These platforms provide an unparalleled opportunity for writers,’ opines Datta Dave, a partner in Tulsea, India’s first talent agency representing writers and directors, which has more than thirty clients working on programs for Amazon, Netflix and other online platforms. ‘Experienced feature film writers are given the opportunity to be showrunners, which essentially elevates them to a producer role [...] Up-and-coming writers get the chance to contribute to writers’ rooms. There’s a renewed respect for the profession, which is a wonderful step toward creating better content’ (Bengali, 2017).



Rangita Nandy, creative director at PNC, and producer of the Amazon Prime web series *Four More Shots Please!*, dubbed India’s *Sex and the City*, observes that Indian dramas rarely featured such women in lead roles or dealt frankly with issues like sex and relationships. ‘You’ve seen Indian women in villages, women who’ve had crimes done to them, who’ve been victims,’ says Nandy. ‘You haven’t seen a group of women like this who try to do what women in the rest of the world do’ (Bengali 2018). Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti’s critically acclaimed web series *Made in Heaven*,

about two wedding planners in Delhi, created by Excel Entertainment, and released in March 2019, on Amazon Prime Video, is also a case in point. It delves into sensitive societal issues from which film and the television industries have hitherto shied away, and has touched a chord with educated, financially independent, upper-middle class female audiences, a historically overlooked demographic. In addition to having bigger budgets than usual for Indian TV shows, Nandy reveals that Amazon brought in a U.S. showrunner to run a workshop for its Indian writers and directors, and as her creative team had never written for television before, it received assistance in episode structure and character development (Bengali 2018). She says: ‘Amazon gives us wings. We can develop content we always wanted to do without worrying about censorship or the box office. All of us are doing pieces we’ve wanted to make but haven’t had the platform for’ (Bengali 2018).



Increasingly shorter theatrical runs for the average film suggest that OTTs are fast becoming viable alternatives for the continued exhibition of films that either did not fare well in cinema halls (such as *Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota Hai*/Men Don’t Feel Pain which premiered at MAMI to critical acclaim in 2018), or were unable to secure or were inappropriate

choices for wide theatrical releases and saturation bookings (for instance, Sujoy Ghosh's fourteen minute mythological Bangla thriller *Ahalya* (2015), starring Radhika Apte, was released only on YouTube). OTTs provide a much-needed platform for the distribution of 'indie' cinema. From spectators' perspective, they can now wait for films to release on streaming platforms instead of visiting cinema halls, for reasons of comfort, convenience, affordability, safety, or enjoyment of individualized viewing spaces; or waiting for DVD/Blu Ray releases.



Another favourable disruptive aspect of OTT players is the creation and curation of a digital archive of Indian-language cinema accessible anytime, anywhere in high-definition image resolution (unlike the bootlegged, grainy, distorted versions of films that may be available on YouTube). They have made possible easy availability of regional language cinemas which are usually restricted to theatrical releases in specific geo-linguistic areas. Additionally, English subtitles make regional cinema, comprising of classics and new releases, accessible to a wider audience within India. For instance, acclaimed Marathi films *Anandi Gopal* (2019), *Faster Fene* (2017),

Killa (2014), *Sairat* (2016), *Kaccha Limboo* (2011); a range of critically acclaimed Malayalam films *Kappela* (2020), *Moothon* (2019), *Chola* (2019), *Virus* (2019), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018), *Angamaly Dairies* (2017); and small budget, neo-realist Assamese films *Village Rockstars* (2017) and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) directed by Rima Das are available on various streaming platforms. However, issues of constant, uninterrupted availability and permanent storage of these streamed films are valid concerns, especially for film scholars and educators. Nonetheless, these are early, exciting times for India's streaming revolution, and once the novelty fades, only time will tell if this currently congested OTT market will continue to thrive or whether consolidations, acquisitions and mergers will result in a more streamlined entertainment segment.



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