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Digital Democratisation: Local Narratives and Marginalised Voices in Indian Over The Top Content

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Abstract

By democratising content creation and upending the monopoly of mainstream films, the emergence of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms in India has revolutionised the media landscape. This study explores at how Indian web series on platforms like Amazon Prime Video and Jio Hotstar democratise storytelling by highlighting marginalised voices and regional stories. Using a qualitative thematic content analysis of four highly acclaimed web series—Panchayat Season 4, Dupahiya, Gramme Chikitsalay, and Chutney Sambar—the study investigates how gender, caste, class, and regional identities are portrayed and challenged in episodic storytelling. Using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory as a guide, this study demonstrates how OTT platforms are becoming more and more capable of humanising commonplace events in order to both amplify subaltern voices and rebuild collective imagination. True democratisation is hampered by platform economics and algorithmic filtering, but the examined series show how web-based storytelling may act as a cultural archive and a catalyst for change.

Key words : Over the top democratization regional narratives gender culture

Introduction

Images carry cultural connotations; the camera angle used, the subject's placement within the frame, the lighting used to emphasise particular elements, and any impact produced by colour, tinting, or processing might all have social significance. The films construct a social world through the details of the mise-en-scene in form of narratives – they tell stories. Story provides us with an easy, unconscious and involving way of constructing our world, narrative can be described as a means of ‘making sense’ of our social world, and sharing that sense with others.

Indian cinema has immense reach, access, and influence in constructing public perceptions and realities of a social structure.

For many decades, Indian cinema has featured storylines dominated by socially and politically powerful or, in some cases, dominant elements of society, resulting in ignorance of the challenges and concerns of those who are marginalised. The engagement of under-represented social groups in cinematic art and the diversity quotient have been impacted over time due to this trend. These social groups may be based on caste, creed, gender, or any other vulnerable sector. (Wankhede, 2024). With the onset of the digital era and the emergence of a plethora of over-the-top (OTT) media service platforms, the door was opened for a new generation of talented and creative visual storytellers who have the capacity and courage to break down stereotypes and use their artistic freedom and creativity to serve something appealing. Bollywood is well-known for perpetuating stereotypes, which have led to a variety of societal problems. The shift in consumption patterns has been accompanied by a variety of audiovisual formats other than feature films, such as web series, short films, documentaries, and shorts, highlighting the lives of marginalized and underprivileged sections of society that were previously unheard in mainstream cinema's conventional storylines.

The significance of OTT platforms stems from its potential to democratise content creation and delivery, providing content producers with a direct path to global audiences without the need for conventional intermediaries. By avoiding conventional gatekeepers like television networks, film studios, and censorship, OTT platforms provide a fair playing field for independent filmmakers, artists, and storytellers to display their work and interact with viewers on a worldwide scale. In the realm of digital media, this democratisation of content production has promoted creativity, innovation, and cross-cultural interaction by amplifying a variety of voices and stories. Short films are used to expose the lives of marginalised and poor members of society that were previously unheard in mainstream cinema's typical storylines (Roy, 2019). The present study extensively examines selected acclaimed OTT content, revealing how these audiovisual contents not only address critical social issues but also distinctively portray the lives and struggles of marginalized groups. These include various communities, from marginalized beings to the minority communities and even disadvantaged rural and small-town women. OTT series have played a pivotal role in breaking stereotypes concerning women, religious minorities, marginalized communities, and LGBTQIA+ community. In fact, OTT web series have spawned new discourse in the portrayal of the subaltern, both structurally and creatively.

Review of Literature

Pandey and Gaur (2025) explore the concept of *Antyodaya* in cinema, focusing on the portrayal of the most oppressed in Indian films. They argue that while cinema has the potential to initiate discourse on marginalization, mainstream Hindi cinema often reflects the perspectives of

dominant classes and marginalizes others by absence or stereotyping. To widen the spectrum, the researchers have taken three films from three different languages released over the last decade. The researchers attempt to understand the depiction of characters and the themes that emerged from this narrative and how they are treated. In addition to challenging preconceived notions and highlighting the transformational power of inclusive storytelling, it investigates the historical, cultural, and social aspects of film depictions of oppressed people.

Simlote et al. (2024) provide a macro-level analysis of changing audience preferences from cinema to OTT, driven by convenience and personalized content, but do not delve into content politics, particularly related to marginality. Uniyal and Mirza (2024) analyze how OTT platforms disrupt traditional gatekeeping in media production and distribution. They emphasize that OTT content often provides space for more diverse gender representations, including strong, independent female characters, and calls attention to social inequalities and gender dynamics.

Tiwary (2020) provides an infrastructural critique of platforms like Amazon Prime Video, arguing that their integration into broader digital ecosystems affects not only content consumption but also content creation. While such platforms democratize access, they also serve capitalist goals that may limit truly radical representation. Netflix's remarkable success has opened the way for the rise of other OTT behemoths such as Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Disney+, each carving out a unique niche in the competitive streaming environment. These platforms provide viewers with extraordinary variety and freedom, catering to a wide range of preferences and interests, and altering the global entertainment scene. OTT platforms continue to innovate and extend their capabilities, presenting both possibilities and problems to the entertainment sector. While they give a venue for various perspectives and storylines to thrive, they also present challenges to conventional cinema, forcing movie theatres to adapt and innovate in order to remain relevant in an increasingly digital world.

Khadia and Gupta (2024) highlight how tribal communities in Indian films are consistently depicted through reductive stereotypes — as either mystical or violent — thereby stripping them of complexity. They contrast these portrayals with more authentic documentary films that attempt to represent tribal lives with dignity and nuance. Their analysis reveals that there is potential for more nuanced and empowering portrayals of tribal communities, particularly as filmmakers engage more deeply with tribal cultures and break free from traditional narrative frameworks. The findings underscore the importance of broadening the scope of tribal representation in Indian cinema to include a diversity of voices, narratives, and perspectives.

Jaiswal (2025) examines how representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in Indian media affects societal attitudes. Mental health challenges, arising from societal rejection and lack of acceptance, further highlight the urgent need for inclusive policies. Her findings show that although media portrayals have evolved from caricatures to more realistic characters, deep-rooted biases persist, suggesting that media impact is not uniformly progressive. Positive

representation can contribute to awareness and normalization, while biased or stereotypical portrayals may perpetuate discrimination.

A critical discourse analysis by Pandey et al. (2023) on the film *Jai Bhim* indicates that OTT platforms can offer richer narratives around rural and marginalized women, countering dominant discourses perpetuated by Bollywood. Similarly, Mukherjee and Khan (2025) argue that digital media narratives give voice to women at the intersection of caste, class, and gender, often absent in traditional media narratives.

While several studies explore broad representations of marginalized communities, gender roles, and digital platform ecosystems, few engage in deep thematic analyses of specific web series narratives. Audiences are increasingly engaging with OTT-exclusive series over films — yet scholarly analysis hasn't kept pace with this cultural shift. The literatures mention titles (like *Aligarh*, *Jai Bhim*, *Taali* etc), but does not offer detailed textual or visual analysis of plotlines, character arcs, recurring motifs, or narrative strategies. There is a lack of focus on episodic storytelling, an essential characteristic of web series formats which the present study aims to fill in.

Theoretical Framework

The democratisation of narrative on OTT platforms may be critically examined using a multidisciplinary theoretical lens. Stuart Hall's Representation Theory emphasises how media builds meaning and identity, making OTT platforms important in redefining depictions of marginalised people. These forums provide chances for challenging prejudices and presenting more complex viewpoints. Media Convergence Theory and Participatory Culture Theory explain how digital technologies blur the distinction between creators and consumers, allowing for audience involvement, content production, and localised narratives. Public Sphere Theory, particularly its digital applications, sees OTT as a platform for alternative voices and counterpublics, promoting democratic discussion. Cultivation Theory delves deeper by investigating how repeated exposure to information on OTT platforms gradually shapes audience perceptions and social reality. However, Platform Capitalism Theory offers as a cautionary tale, emphasising how corporate control, data-driven algorithms, and economic motivations may limit access and exposure, thus undercutting the very democratisation that OTT platforms claim to support.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the representation of marginalized communities (such as women, LGBTQ+, rural populations, and tribal groups) in selected web series on OTT platforms.

- To identify the narrative themes, character constructions, and storytelling techniques used to portray marginalized voices on OTT content

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using thematic content analysis to examine the representation of marginalized communities—such as Dalits, LGBTQ+ individuals, rural populations, and tribal groups—in selected Indian web series available on OTT platforms. The web series selected were either released in 2024-2025. The research will employ purposive sampling to select 4 web series from major platforms like Amazon Prime Video and Disney Hotstar that prominently feature marginalized narratives. The films are selected on the basis of high IMDB ratings. Each selected series will be analyzed through a textual and visual analysis framework, focusing on character development, dialogue, plot structure, visual symbolism, and production elements. Thematic coding will be used to identify recurring narrative patterns, tropes, and representational strategies. Special attention will be given to the intersectionality of caste, gender, region, and class in shaping the characters and their story arcs. The analysis will be guided by Stuart Hall's Representation Theory and supported by insights from Cultivation Theory, ensuring a critical lens toward how these portrayals may influence audience perceptions and societal discourse.

Thematic Analysis

Panchayat

Season 4 (8 episodes) of the webseries ' Panchayat' , set in fictional village, Phulera , Uttar Pradesh have two major focuses – the upcoming election and the wait for Abhishek's MBA results. The latest season continues with the signature elements that have made the series a hit. The silly political games, the rivalry between the villages, and the unspoken feelings between Abhishek and Rinki.

Grassroots Politics : The electoral contest between Manju Devi–Pradhan Ji and Kranti Devi–Bhushan becomes a stand-in for a broader ideological clash: status quo vs performative change, development vs display, and loyalty vs opportunism. Election symbols—bottle gourd for Manju Devi and pressure cooker for Kranti Devi—become metaphors for everyday rural life, showing how familiar objects are rebranded for vote-bank marketing, reducing governance to image and identity politics. Populist tactics dominate the campaign—from free potatoes to last-minute infrastructure gimmicks like generators and toilet cleaning, both sides treat governance as transactional rather than transformative. Abhishek Tripathi , the idealistic Secretary from previous seasons, eventually succumbs to political prejudice and openly campaigns for Manju Devi. His arc symbolises the increasing difficulties of being impartial in a heated atmosphere where morality and bureaucracy are continually in conflict. His transition from spectator to

participant blurs the distinction between administration and politics, demonstrating that local governance is rarely apolitical, despite institutional goals.

Class and Regional Divides : The stark contrast between the village's east and west sides—pucca houses on one side, destitute residences on the other—reflects the broad socioeconomic divides that impact election outcomes. Infrastructure differences, such as clean lanes or access to solar electricity in Phulera west, area of Pradhan ji , have become emblems of political incentive systems. The unequal growth also demonstrates how rural India is not homogeneous—village life is influenced by micropolitics, caste boundaries, and regional political blocs. Vinod when invited for a dinner at Pradhan ji's house was happy at the simplest arrangements and was referred to have a good appetite hints at scarcity and struggles of Vinod and villagers in his area.

Female Agency in Local Governance : Both women actively participate in grassroots democracy, not as substitutes for masculine personalities, but as independent political candidates. Manju Devi, previously a symbolic sarpanch, has grown into a confident speaker and decision-maker, symbolising growing empowerment. Kranti Devi, on the other hand, represents the more confrontational, populist side of leadership, yet she is as good at mobilising support. Their campaign speeches, door-to-door visits, and strategic partnerships challenge traditional perceptions of women as inert or apolitical in rural administration. The fact that the village's major power battle is between two women represents a significant shift in the gender narrative of rural India.

Dysfunctional Infrastructure : The horrible, unusable school toilets reflect a greater lack of basic hygiene, particularly in public institutions intended for children. The fact that political candidates battle about bathroom cleanliness during campaign season demonstrates how public hygiene is used as a piece in electoral games. Instead of long-term sanitation plans, the issue is reduced to photo-ops and competitive cleaning drives

Dupahiya

Prime Video's, Dupahiya (9 episodes), Set in the fictional village of Dhadakpur, Bihar, revolves around Banwari Jha and his family. Durlabh, a prospective groom, pays a visit to the Jha home to meet Banwari's daughter, Roshni. However, when Roshni discovers that Durlabh's brother, Kuber, resides in Mumbai, she announces Kuber her preference instead. Meanwhile, Durlabh wants a bike as a wedding gift. Despite their financial difficulties, Banwari manages to purchase the bike using his money. But trouble begins when the bike is stolen, and chaos ensues when the theft is revealed. The central themes reflected in the narrative:

Dowry and Consumerism: The motorcycle—the titular "Dupahiya"—is a symbol of dowry culture, in which weddings are turned into financial transactions. Groom value is determined by employment, appearance, and urban status. Pushpalata, village Panch, sarcastically cautions that such presents would increase the groom's "rate card" in adjacent villages, transforming a social custom into an economic trend.

Rural vs Urban

Roshni and her brother Bhugol romanticise Mumbai's glamour and freedom, shaped by social media's curated allure. Roshni's dialogue with her mother about urban life questions whether the migration to cities actually brings fulfilment—or just disconnection masked as independence. Yet, the village offers emotional intimacy and collective care, captured in the poignant line: "City mein aap happy ho ya sad, kisi ko farak nahi padhta. Aur gaon mein aap happy ho ya sad, poor a gaon aapke saath hai."

Gender Dynamics and Women's Agency: Nirmal, though initially dazzled by laser treatments, eventually rejects superficial standards of beauty, influenced by a dark-skinned woman doctor who embodies self-worth and agency. Pushpalata, Nirmal's mother, the only female panch among men who drink and plot behind closed doors, emerges as a capable, strategic leader in a male-dominated system. Roshni though initially aspiring city and modern life, eventually rejects her groom and decides to become self-independent. Despite outward support for women's rights, Pushpalata faces exclusion, her leadership undercut by secret male meetings and political games

Community, Culture, and Local Colour : The web series thrives on village cultural elements—*launda naach*, wedding songs, folk references—adding layers of authenticity and charm. Madan, with a subtle hint of a LGBTQ+ character was shown in a positive light. He is the WhatsApp admin of village group for local news and a wannabe journalist. His character represents the new-age rural media voice—enthusiastic, and hungry for attention. Village WhatsApp groups become new forms of social surveillance and gossip, subtly mocking the digitisation of small-town politics.

Gram Chikitsalay

The story of Gram Chikitsalay (5 episodes) released on Amazon Prime follows Dr Prabhat as he comes to a village called Bhatkandi in Jharkhand as Medical Officer, only to find that the primary health centre (PHC) there is deserted. No previous medical officer has made an effort to see patients at this PHC, and the people have turned to the village quack. Determined to turn things around, Prabhat sets out to bring order and functionality back to the center. In doing so, he

faces opposition not just from within the system but also from villagers. The central themes reflected in the narrative:

Rural Healthcare Crisis: The road leading to the PHC, now overgrown with crops and out of use, represents how medical services in rural areas have devolved into just formalities. The rusty equipments, faulty BP machine, and empty medication shelves are more than just props; they represent a system that exists in name but not in spirit. Patients are carried on bikes to the village quack, revealing both infrastructural failure and people's complete loss of faith in formal healthcare.

Rural-urban disconnect: Chetak Kumar (Vinay Pathak), the local quack, is not just a comic figure; he embodies the emotional vacuum left by absent institutions. Despite his Google-diagnoses and dubious "pink booster dose" treatment, he commands unwavering loyalty because of the genuine bond he shares with the villagers. In contrast, Prabhat, the newly appointed doctor from the city, remains distant and unable to build rapport. This tension highlights the rural-urban disconnect—where qualifications are no match for emotional embeddedness in a tight-knit community.

Cultural beliefs – Dialogues like touching machines on Vishwakarma Puja is considered inauspicious portrays cultural beliefs of the community. Mental illness and chronic disease are both mystified and stigmatized in the village leading to lack of health literacy . Folk songs are used in the narrative not just for entertainment of viewers , but as tools for character introspection and social reflection.

Politics and Corruption: The PHC becomes a site of petty corruption and moral flexibility. From issuing fake medical certificates to government teachers, providing written evidence of a violent attack in a court of law and dealing with a well-dressed, bike-riding sweeper who never actually works, the series shows how roles exist in name but not in action. The apathy of police is also highlighted .Their non-responsiveness to public needs highlights how rural law enforcement is often a tool of the powerful rather than a protector of the vulnerable.

Gendered Injustice : Female characters in the series carry the weight of both caregiving and social expectation. Whether it is the nurse running vaccine camps alone, or the single mother navigating stigma while raising a traumatised child, the series brings out the gendered layers of marginalisation. Women are often veiled, silent, or backgrounded in public spaces, but when they act—especially in caregiving roles—they anchor the moral centre of the narrative

Chutney Sambar

Chutney Sambar (6 episodes) is a 2024 Indian Tamil-language web series available on Jio Hotstar. It is a story about a dying father admits that he has another kid from a previous

relationship with his first son. How will his coming affect the family? It's exactly how the other son arrives furious and then goes joyful on a positive note, and what changes in him and the family.

Class & Cultural Dichotomy: The clash between Ooty high society (café culture) and Chennai street life (dosa stall) provides an engaging backdrop for talks about class, etiquette, and cultural expectations. Sachu's unfamiliarity and direct genuineness conflict with Ooty's standards, prompting both friction and intimacy. The series questions whether riches and sophistication actually bestow belonging, or whether simplicity and honesty may bridge societal divides.

Search for Identity : Sachu's journey is not just geographic—it's personal. As he grapples with rejection—body-shaming by his stepmother—he retains self-respect while yearning for acceptance. Sachu responds to a comment on him, "Why are you making fun of my hair? It represents my identity". When Elango makes a similar body-shaming remark, Karthik stops him off and points out his error. It's self-aware, but it's also one-sided since, early on, Sachu mocks someone's nose to make a joke. His evolution from an angry stranger to a loved family member becomes the emotional backbone of the series. This arc questions whether identity is inherited or earned through character and connection. Vani Bhojan as Sophie yearns for independence and plays an effective supporting role as a steadfast and strong woman who can walk out of the lives of toxic people.

Findings & Discussion

Some of the major findings of the study are :

- *Panchayat* and *Dupahiya* challenge gender roles in rural India. *Panchayat* portrays Manju Devi and Kranti Devi as active political candidates, demonstrating how women are increasingly taking on more than just symbolic roles in administration. Pushpalata, the lone female Panch in *Dupahiya*, maintains agency against male exclusionary measures, highlighting the true challenges that women confront in public service.
- *Dupahiya* introduces Madan, a subtle but positive LGBTQ+ character functioning as a digital news voice in the village. His role highlights a shift in representation—from urban stereotypes to rural inclusivity, reflecting a democratization of LGBTQ+ presence in non-metropolitan stories.
- *Gram Chikitsalay* and *Panchayat* extensively examine the lives of rural and tribal people, viewing them as groups recognising their agency in the face of dysfunctional systems rather than as passive consumers of help. These programs challenge the metropolitan lens by depicting villages as both victims and critics of governing mechanisms.

- Characters such as Abhishek (Panchayat) and Dr. Prabhat (Gram Chikitsalay) face moral and emotional challenges, representing internal conflicts between responsibility and disillusionment in bureaucratic structures.
- All four shows use satirical humour to draw attention to ingrained social problems. Chutney Sambar combines class critique with familial drama, Panchayat turns toilet cleaning into an election spectacle, and Dupahiya parodies consumerist dowry culture, demonstrating how humour can be used as a tool for introspection and resistance. Gram Chikitsalay deliberates on the rural healthcare crisis. Rural comedy is a genre now.
- *Dupahiya's* portrayal of WhatsApp groups as tools for rural news, gossip, and surveillance questions the digitisation of caste and class systems, providing insights into how technology reshapes community relations. In *Panchayat* too, Rinki utilises Facebook for Manju Devi's election campaign at the Panchayat level.
- In *Gram Chikitsalay*, deserted clinics, corrupt officials, and misplaced faith in quackery represent the institutional neglect of tribal populations. *Panchayat* and *Dupahiya* also reflect similar themes through broken school toilets, transformer blackouts, and performative last-minute development—treating public services as electoral barter.
- *Chutney Sambar* centers on Sachu, a stepchild and outsider who navigates body shaming, class alienation, and emotional rejection. His journey challenges notions of family, legitimacy, and self-worth, especially for characters born outside socially sanctioned relationships. Nirmal and Roshni in *Dupahiya* also embody journeys of self-worth and finding identity.
- The series explores the conflict between maintaining conventional roles and striving for contemporary identities. Whether it's a girl dreaming of urban life, a doctor trying to modernise a PHC, or a woman rejecting dowry norms, these moments represent a pushback against normative structures.
- The shows are rooted in the cultural and linguistic patterns of their regions, such as folk songs in Jharkhand, Bhojpuri dialects in Bihar, or Tamil slang in Chutney Sambar, creating authenticity. Panchayat use electoral symbols (bottle gourd vs. pressure cooker), while Dupahiya utilises the bike as a dowry sign to emphasise how common goods are politicised or commodified, integrating realism and satire.
- Rural stories are no longer "niche"; they're the mainstream. Institutions, when humanized, are reservoirs of endless storytelling possibilities. Narration based on everyday realities can be as engrossing as big-budget productions.

Conclusion

Armed with technology's transforming possibilities, creators set out on a mission to create immersive and transcendent experiences that captivate and enrapture audiences all over the world. It's a voyage into the unknown territories of the imagination, where boundaries are blurred and possibilities are endless. However, in this wave of invention, there is a beacon of hope: the promise of diversity and inclusiveness that illuminates the route forward. The entertainment business, as a forerunner of culture and expression, has the enormous potential to develop better understanding and empathy among people. By embracing the diverse range of voices and viewpoints that make up our world, the industry can construct a story of togetherness and connectivity, crafting a future that honours the mosaic of human experience.

The continually high demand for local content has prompted foreign VOD platforms in India to actively acquire and distribute material. The success of the discussed webseries demonstrates OTT platforms' transformational power in changing cultural narratives and fostering social change. By promoting varied representation and elevating under-represented perspectives, OTT platforms have helped to challenge gender stereotypes and promote more diversity in media content. Moving ahead, ongoing initiatives to encourage diversity and representation on digital platforms will be critical to promoting gender equality and establishing a more inclusive media environment. OTT platforms have accelerated changes in media consumption habits, threatening the dominance of linear television and traditional cinema. Advances in digital storytelling and multimedia technology have enhanced the presenting of new viewpoints on gender issues, allowing people to artistically express their lived experiences and challenge dominant preconceptions. Some web series are gaining popularity among viewers who have become tired of the typical, repetitive, and exaggerated depictions in mainstream films, which frequently include well-known actors. It may be correctly concluded that the internet sphere has arisen as a powerful forum for expressing the opinions of marginalised and underprivileged parts of society.

Limitations and Suggestions of the Study

This study has taken four web series from two OTT platforms of different languages which is a small sample size. This is only due to the lack of time and constraints related to a research paper. Moreover, this study encourages further study on this topic and includes more similar films, web series and reality shows.

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