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## **EQUALITY & INCLUSION**



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**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN BOLLYWOOD****Naik Sameer**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Movies are a medium of communication and entertainment which bind a very diverse class of audience from various strata of society. Irrespective of the quality, people flock to Bollywood films week after week. But in a country like India where more than 1000 films are churned out every year, the amount of influence that film industry wields on society is unimaginable. Since the relationship is mutual i.e. films reflect societal attitudes and society is influenced by films, gender bias which is prevalent everywhere is also projected in films. Though most of the films are entertaining, but there is a big problem in projection of woman. From the early days of Bollywood, women have been portrayed in stereotypes that promote inequality between the sexes. In the paper effort has to been made to study the effect of gender discrimination reflected in movies. It is an attempt to comment on biased portrayal of women, item songs, misogyny, male gaze, etc. depicted through movies. A comparison is also made between opportunities available in Bollywood for both the sexes and disparity in payments made to them.*

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN BOLLYWOOD**

Biologically gender is based on chromosomes, brain structure and hormonal differences. From sociological perspective it refers to the definition of man and woman by societies which distinguishes and assigns them different roles in society. Gender inequality refers to disparity shown by the society between individuals due to gender. The basic cause of gender inequality in India is based on pre-existing social norms and perceptions which create differences in economic endowments between women and men. The practice of gender inequality which dwells both inside and outside the household, blocks women from participating in social, political and economic activities as well as religious practices. This results in gaps in basic rights, education level, employment opportunities, wage rates as well as high mortality rate amongst girls. As per 2011 census report the sex ratio stands at 940 females per 1000 males. Gender disparity is clearly visible in literacy rates (males – 82.14% and females – 65.41%) and employment opportunities (males – 51.7% and females – 25.6%). The deaths of young girls in India exceed that of young boys by over 2.75 lakhs every year and every 6<sup>th</sup> infant death is related to gender discrimination. Gender inequality in India is so wide spread, complex and deep rooted that almost all women want a son from God.

Films are not only a medium of providing information like the other mass media, but also vehicles of social reforms. Films help in depicting the social, political & economic scenario and also reflect the changes in the society. To most people, movies are a source of entertainment but a good film will provide enjoyment and relaxation along with enlightenment. Indian cinema has today earned the pride of being world's largest cinematographic industry with almost 1000 movies being made in different languages every year. Out of which hindi film industry popularly termed as Bollywood has a powerful role in shaping mindsets and behaviors in India. Bollywood movies have reflected the aspirations of Indians for decades. Bollywood has always reflected the general mood of the Indian mass starting from mythologicals in the 1940s, soft romances in the 1950s & 60s, anger against society in 1970s, confusion in parallel and masala movies of 1980s and the NRI minded progressive cinema post globalization. The role of the male protagonist (hero) has changed through the ages from being a family man (50s) to lover boy (60s) to angry young man (70s) to anti-hero (90s) to a confident global Indian now. Similarly the male antagonist (villain) has also changed from zamindars to rich dads to smugglers to corrupt politicians to anti nationals to terrorists and so on. But the female counter parts have not been that lucky, since Bollywood has always portrayed its women in stereotypical roles either as a support to the hero's journey or as a vamp doubling up as an item girl. Bollywood has always been criticized for almost ignoring issues of gender and giving second tier status to women. Through the decades Bollywood has always cast women into two broad categories i.e. *Damsel in Distress* and *The Vamp*. The damsel in distress had very little to do with the actual plot, serving as romantic foil for the heroes and the object that he would save in the end to prove his bravery and manhood. These damsels in distress were supposed to be moral, proper as per culture, quiet, kind, loyal to traditions, respect elders and treat husbands as God. The vamps were scantily clad seductresses assigned with the task to momentarily take the hero's mind off the prize and inevitable victory. These disrespectful stereotype portrayals do not represent the individuality of women in real life. The only positive aspect being that the damsels in distress gave a notion that women can be strong and supportive, while the vamps expressed freedom in looks and action.



Recently a study of 4000 Wikipedia pages and 880 trailers of movies released between 2008 and 2017 conducted jointly by *Nishtha Madaan* and *Sameep Mehta* of *IBM* along with researchers from the *Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology* and *Delhi Technology University* highlighted the gender based disparities. Some of which were as follows:

- a. On Wikipedia pages of the films, on an average the males were mentioned 30 times whereas the females were mentioned only 15 times. Which suggests that an actress's role is not given importance.
- b. In most films males had superior occupations like lawyers, CEOs, police officers whereas female characters were restricted to popular careers like teachers and secretaries. Nearly 32% of male characters were shown as doctors as compared to merely 3% female doctors.
- c. 80% of the movie plots on Wikipedia pages have more mention of males as compared to females, but the posters of more than 50% movies feature actresses. This shows that in the storyline women are sidelined but are prominently used to publicise the movie, using women as bait to lure audiences.
- d. The soundtrack analysis of the film songs also revealed that women are consistently singing fewer songs than men.
- e. The percentage of women centric movies (with females as the central characters) which was only 7% in 1970s has now gone up only to 11.9% in almost 50 years.

Even though Indian cinema is as old as world cinema and it has progressed in all other aspects like techniques, production values, distribution, etc. but the representation of women has been more or less stagnant over the years. The discrimination towards women characters can be highlighted from the basic fact that on an average a hindi film has 1 women character for every 3 male characters in the storyline. Gender discrimination is also reflected through less screen time, fewer dialogues, powerless and male dependent characters. Discrimination against women in Bollywood is also represented in various ways, some of which have been highlighted as below:

#### **QUALITIES ASSOCIATED WITH FEMALE CHARACTERS**

Women characters are mostly described with surface-level qualities like beauty, attractive, etc. whereas the males are shown as strong, successful, etc. Generally males are introduced as honest officers, aspiring singers, army officers, successful businessman, etc. whereas the female characters are introduced as beautiful girl, daughter/wife/sister of some male character, stage dancer, etc. The demarcation between women is also somewhat standardized; ideal women are portrayed as submissive, self-sacrificing, chaste and controlled whereas the bad woman is always individualistic, sexually aggressive, westernized, etc. Bollywood doesn't identify the real woman who can have a mixture of both these set of qualities at the same time. Bollywood only tries to represent women as decorative objects that dance, pose and seduce men. But even the physical qualities are objectified by focusing on her legs, breast and buttocks rather than whole human being. Bollywood has completely ignored the achievements of woman in general, since very few woman are shown as professionals or successful entrepreneurs or independent woman characters and even if they are shown it is merely a trick in the storyline which will help to accommodate the meeting of the hero & heroine after which the achievements of the woman are totally ignored even by the woman character as she has to be now a mere support to the hero's quest and journey. In addition to being powerless a woman is also shown as carrier of traditions. An apt example being Karan Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* wherein Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) falls for the older Anjali (Kajol), after she has become traditional, caring and shy, whom he had ignored as his college friend, when she was outspoken and a good sportsperson. In the same movie the other female character Tina (Rani Mukherjee) even though presented as a modern woman has to prove that she can uphold religious & cultural traditions by signing a bhajan much to the shock of the other characters.

#### **MALE-GAZE V/S FEMALE-GAZE**

Male gaze is the act of depicting women and the world, in the visual arts and literature, from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. The women on screen are shown as object of desire, signifying a psychological relationship of power in which the gazer is superior to the object. The so called item songs in Bollywood movies are an apt example of male gaze which are completely demeaning to women. Scantily-clad beautiful actresses, oddly referred to as items, dance to vulgar lyrics with provocative gestures, which is nothing but objectification of women. The item girl is shown naughty, sexually alluring, immodest women and erotic in her dance performance. The item songs are specifically accommodated in the storyline to attract male audiences to the theatre. But the objectification is not restricted only to the bad girls, even the damsel in distress is conveniently projected as an item in song &



dream sequences. Justified examples can be of heroines in Raj Kapoor movies, who even though were shown as strong traditional women had to dance under a waterfall in white sarees (Zeenat Aman in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* and Mandakini in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*). There are also numerous examples of leading heroines dancing in the rains in transparent sarees just to lure the hero in reel and masses in real. This objectification of women also defies all logics and attributes of the so called strong women like in *Mohra* wherein Raveena Tandon, playing an independent journalist breaks into a rain dance number in a yellow saree. The male gaze is not restricted only to visualisation of songs but is also propagated through dialogues and lyrics which objectify women and their body parts, one of the reasons being presence very few female writers and lyricists. Another problem with Bollywood is perpetuation of misogyny right from Shammi Kapoor to Salman Khan movies wherein it is conveniently assumed that the hero can harass and mistreat the heroine to win her heart. Bollywood movies spread the wrong idea that it is okay to stalk women and that by persevering one can win over the women successfully. Rather than inspiring social change for women, movies like *Ranjhana*, *Wanted*, etc. promote eve-teasing and misogyny, which has shackled the Indian woman for years in form of acid attacks, rapes, murders, etc. committed out of one-sided love.

Over the decades, Bollywood movies have been abundant with male gaze but the female gaze has been conveniently ignored. Female gaze, in one sense, legitimation of women as subjective, who are capable of sexual desire, and looking at the world from female perspective. While over the years females have been presented as object of attraction for men, the same has not been the case for males, who are presented in a macho way that men would love to see them right from bare chested Dara Singh, Dharmendra to Salman Khan. The attributes of a man from a female perspective have always been ignored. In recent years the towel song in *Saawariya* (Ranbir Kapoor) and the beach scene in *Dostana* (John Abraham), which gained immediate stardom and huge female fan following for both the actors, is a proof that Bollywood has ignored the desires of its female audiences over the years. But movies which try to take cognizance of the women perspective and feelings have to face strong opposition and hurdles from patriarchal institutions. Like *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, a movie depicting sexual liberation of 4 female protagonists, was refused certification by CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification) by citing that it was a 'women-centric' movie. Even though movies like *Queen*, *Mardani*, *Mary Kom*, etc have a strong female characters, Bollywood likes to capitalize off feminist ideology but never ignores the hetero-male supremacy. And there is a long way to go in terms of recognizing women as sexual beings free to act with their body as they please, without a stigma attached to it.

#### FINANCIAL DISPARITY

Gender discrimination is visible within Bollywood in opportunities and financial matters also. There are only a few women directors in the movie making circuit, emphasizing on the fact that Bollywood doesn't trust women to command the ship. In the other departments of film making like production, writing, sound, music, graphics, etc. also the presence of women is very negligible. It might come as a shocker to know that for almost 6 decades up to 2014; women were not allowed as make-up artists by Costume Make-up Artists and Hairdressers Association of Bollywood. When challenged in Supreme Court, the judges expressed shock over the primitive rule, wherein women could be hairdressers but not make-up artists, and adjudged it to be unconstitutional. The whimsical rule clearly shows that women were purposefully kept away to avoid competition by the male make-up artists. Even when opportunities are made available there is great disparity in wage rates paid to them. As per a recent study by Forbes, pay disparity in Bollywood is worst then Hollywood, wherein males are paid almost 3 times of what their female counterparts get for the same job. This clearly shows that payments are not being made on basis of jobs or skills, but on basis of gender. The discrimination is not restricted only to junior artist or technical crew but also visible in the remuneration received by the stars. As per Forbes 2016 list of highest paid celebrities, Salman Khan topped in India with earnings of Rs. 270.33 crores, whereas Deepika Padukone managed to earn only Rs. 69.75 crores with the same number of films. Actresses are paid fixed remuneration per film even though they are crowd pullers, whereas actors have share in profits and distribution rights claiming that they shoulder the film. It is not surprising when movies like *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar*, which was meant to emphasize women empowerment as termed as Aamir Khan movies. One can argue that due to the male dominated mindset of society women are not seen as heroes and male actors pull crowd hence are paid more. But then this needs to change since the same heroes need the female face & body on the posters to attract the crowd.

#### CONCLUSION

Although the hindi movies have been successful in depicting the societal and economic changes in India through their medium, the same cannot be said about their portrayal of women. The image of women portrayed by Bollywood, is not found in real life and is in fact damaging the women in real life. There is an urgent need for Bollywood to change and refrain from portraying women as commodities and sex objects. Filmmakers



should concentrate on portraying women impartially without any gender bias and glorification of attributes like fair-skin, sculpted figures, etc. Studies and research should be made before making a film, to present a film from both male and female perspective. We need more female storytellers so that we can have a proper representation of women's perspective in movies instead of half-baked version of women empowerment. Films should aim at educating women and society in general about laws, women empowerment, etc. There is also a need for the film makers to understand that only 30% of India's population is urban and for the remaining the portrayal of women through item songs, etc. can be sexually frustrating, since they have never seen women around them with such mannerisms, resulting in offences like rapes. Bollywood needs to understand that by objectifying and over-sexualizing women on screen, they are sabotaging progress made by women in their personal and professional spectrum. Bollywood needs to shoulder some responsibility for the sake of India, which they are helping to shape.

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## Growth & Impact of Digital Media (on traditional media in Indian context)

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**Abstract:** - *Digital Media is in various forms like images, audio, videos, etc. which can be transmitted over internet. Traditionally information was exchanged thru mediums like newspapers, books, recorded media, etc. but with the technology of converting analog to digital, almost all information is being uploaded on the internet. In India in last few years due to various factors digital media has grown very fast. Due to change in demographic features like young population who wants entertainment on the go and propensity to spend more on leisure digital media is growing. Due to digital media the traditional media industry had to suffer initial losses, but the same digital media has opened various new avenues of entertainment, information exchange and interactions. In this descriptive paper I have tried to analyse the factors due to which digital media has grown in India. In the study I have also tried to analyse the impact that digital media has had on the traditional forms of media like TV, films, newspapers, books, radio, etc. The study is an attempt to see if digital media is a threat to the old forms of media or whether it is an opportunity for the Media & Entertainment industry to create more revenue.*

### GROWTH & IMPACT OF DIGITAL MEDIA (on traditional media in Indian context)

Digital media is digitized content that can be transmitted over the internet or computer networks. It includes text, audio, video and graphics. Digital media is also translating analog data into digital form like transmitting news from TV channels to websites etc. Earlier calculation and programming were the main purpose of computers but with advent of internet people began to use computers for communication, creative purposes, research

and entertainment. This gave rise to digital media since people now connect with the growing amount of information available from multiple sources and also enjoy the more personal aspect of posting their own views. But in spite of the social, political and educational potential of digital media, it has become the most convenient way of consuming entertainment. As new people join the internet, the amount of information viewed and provided expands. Hence digital media has come a long way in a short span of time and continues to grow.



India is surging ahead as the second fastest growing global economy. India's increasing per capita income, growing middle class and working population is generating huge demand for goods and services- including leisure and entertainment. Currently India has more than 650 TV channels, 120 million pay-tv households, 70,000 plus newspapers and almost 1000 movies produced annually. India's media and entertainment (M&E) industry provides attractive growth opportunities for global corporations, which are well supported by the Government initiatives like Digital India. There are various reasons for the growth of digital media in India which can be briefly elaborated as follows:

1. India's GDP per capita income has risen from USD 1157 in 2008 to USD 1977.29 in 2018, which shows the rise in the income levels of an average Indian. The rise is more dominant in the cities, giving rise to the middle class. A majority of the population of India is working, adding to income generation of families due to which spends on leisure and entertainment is increasing.
2. The young working population between the ages of 20 to 45 years likes to carry their entertainment along which is evident from the increase in amount of smartphone users. The smartphone users in India have risen from 199.08 million in 2015 to 337 million in 2018 and are expected to

cross 450 million mark by 2022. Smartphones are all in one device which supports all sort of digital media from music, videos, social media and news. A recent study by Nokia shows that 77% of Indian smartphone users have at least 30 apps on their device. Digital media is thus satisfying the need for entertainment on the go of young India.

3. While most developed countries first hopped onto the fixed line internet and then moved onto mobile data. India due to geographical and other reasons never had the infrastructure for mass fixed line internet. So it is trying to leapfrog directly to mass mobile internet and this plan is working. Till last year mobile data rates were quite expensive well above the 2% of annual GDP per capita threshold for affordability prescribed by the *Alliance for Affordable Internet*. But with the entry of one player Reliance Jio, by offering free data has forced the telecom companies to cut rates drastically, which now stand at 1.3% of annual GDP per capita. India's 3G and 4G subscribers have tripled to 120 million in 24 months and is growing due to affordability. Currently 80% of the internet usage in India is on mobile and total consumption has increased 9 times in last year. Today people are spending 7 times more time on their phones than on watching television



which shows the drift towards digital media. As per Dept. of Telecom, mobile internet rates crashed by 93% while data usage per year has leaped by over 25 times in three years between 2014 to 2017.

4. India has diverse variety in culture which creates regional markets. Nearly 73% consumption of media sources is by the Tier 2 and 3 towns. While mainstream media like TV channels are unable to satisfy their taste of entertainment, digital media is tapping these markets by creating content to their likings. Due to increase in mobile internet penetration this media reaches the small towns in their palms. Similarly digital media is also producing niche content for the wealthy and urban consumers like home shopping, travel, life style, etc. Thus digital media has created pockets as per the demand and caters to specific tastes.
5. There is active cooperation between Government of India, regulatory bodies and M&E industry to introduce reforms for growth in the sector. The Government has relaxed entry regulations and restrictions like limits on FDI in this sector resulting in more Foreign M&E giants as well as startups to enter the digital media bandwagon.

As it is evident from the above that digital media has covered miles within a short span

in India and will continue the march more aggressively due the same reasons. But it would be interesting to see the impact of this growth on the traditional media. In the analysis below I have tried to study the impact of digital media on the old sources of media like TV, Radio, print media etc. The analyses also try to bring out how the traditional media sources can go hand in hand with digital media by taking initiatives and introducing innovations. While some M&E companies might view the evolution of digital content as an threat with ever growing mobile internet subscribers. But the companies who understand and adapt to the economic & social fabric of the Indian environment can maximize their gains by catering tailor made content and services, which is feasible only through digital media.

- *IMPACT ON TV & BROADCASTED ENTERTAINMENT*

With globalization in 1990s there was an invasion of TV channels which changed the way a household watched television. From the good old Doordarshan days where TV programs were aired for 3 to 4 hours we have reached a stage of almost 650 plus 24 hours running programming channels. Due to various factors like regressive content, changing tastes of youngsters, etc. these channels have failed to maintain interest levels. Another disadvantage is that while TV viewing is a family experience, digital media is a personalized experience which can



cater to individual likings. Hence it can be observed that the viewership for TV shows, especially in urban areas, has taken a beating. But this threat is also converted into an opportunity by TV channels by starting their own mobile apps like Sony LIV, Hotstar, Voot, etc. where the same content broadcasted on TV is made available to viewers on their mobiles. The added advantage being that viewers no longer need to follow the schedules of the channel and can watch the content as per their convenience. In addition to the TV entertainment there are programs specifically made to garner to the taste of internet audience by startup companies like The Viral Fever, All India Bakchod, etc. as well as mainstream entertainment companies like T-Series, Yashraj, Sony, Star, etc. The entertainment is served to the audience on various digital platforms like YouTube as well as specific apps like NetFlix, Amazon Prime, etc. Another advantage of this form of entertainment is that production companies can produce programs targeting the taste of selected audience classified on basis of region, language, age, etc. which is not possible on national television due to constraint of budget and running time. The advent of digital media has also increased the audience participation in the

programs, wherein they register their response or votes through interactive apps during game and reality shows (Live voting thru app in Rising Star a singing contest telecast on Colors TV is an apt example). With the growing penetration of internet and digitalization the days of TV content portals and handheld digital video broadcasting are not far.

• *IMPACT ON PUBLISHING(News & Books)*

Online news consumption is increasing in India by almost 5% every year. But unlike the other countries where with advent of online news print media suffered a setback, in India trend shows that people still prefer printed news over digital information. The reason for this trend can be the variety of options available in various languages in print media with over 1,05,000 newspapers & periodicals circulated in India. Data over the past few years shows that the major printing houses garner more revenue from their regional editions as compared to the English editions. Taking into consideration the growth of the digital stream most of the top Indian newspapers, like TOI, The Hindu, Dainik Bhaskar, etc. have launched their online editions thru apps and websites. Even the 24 hour running news channels like Zee News,



NDTV, etc. have their online portals and apps which air the same news on mobile phones of the subscribers. Most of these apps and portals are free to the consumers and revenues are generated thru advertisement, reason being that Indians are accustomed to low cost print. Another feature of digital news is personalization wherein notifications can be sent to the subscriber only regarding the aspects that he is interested in. The consumer also finds digital news more satisfying since he is no longer an mute audience sitting in front of the idiot box, since he can express his opinions in the comments section.

Digital media has given an option to traditional book reading concept by introducing E-books. Most of these books are available free on the internet and can be accessed through mobile phones or E-book readers like Kindle. It gives the reader the convenience of carry a book in his pocket everywhere. The authors have an option of either selling the book online or offering it free and covering costs thru online advertising. E-books can be translated into any language which is an added feature over the paper edition.

• **IMPACT ON FILMS**

India has the largest film industry, with over 1000 movies produced in hindi and regional languages every

year. This industry traditionally has been battling issues like piracy, copyrights, etc. over the years. With the invention of Video Players in the 1980s the revenue of the films had gone down, since people preferred watching movies in comforts of their homes instead of the theatre. But with great effort the audiences were brought back to the cinemas and now we have the digital platform to compete with films. Although piracy still remains a major concern, proper laws and regulations can reduce the losses. But digital media has opened various additional income avenues for the producers. The producers gain additional revenue by selling audio rights to online stores like iTunes, Gaana, etc. Similarly they are generating income by selling video rights to online & mobile app portals like Hotstar, Amazon Prime, etc. which allow the consumer watch the movie on his mobile as per his convenience. Movies are also telecast directly to the consumer homes through Direct To Home platforms like DishTV, TataSky, etc. wherein the subscriber can watch the movie as per his own timings. Another source of income is through licensing contents for games and apps, wherein special games and promotions are designed using the theme of the movie to encourage audience participation.





Digital platforms are also an boon for small budget movies which do not get the exposure in cinema halls but can garner viewers over the mobile. Producers are also using social media to promote their movies which helps in bringing the audience back to the theatres.

- **IMPACT ON RADIO & MUSIC**

With the advent of TV channels in the 1990s the radio and music industry in India had almost suffered a slow death, since music was now available 24 hours on music channels. Due to which the audience no longer listened to radio channels or recorded music. But with the advent of mobile phones first with the feature phone with radio option and then smartphone with music player option the radio & music industry has got a shot in the arm of revival. Currently almost 50% of the radio listenership is of mobile phone users. The boom in the radio industry can be gauged from the fact that with new spectrum available there will be more than 700 new radio channels launched specifically to connect to Tier 2 & 3 towns and rural areas. The increase in the listeners gives more advertising revenue to the channels. The music industry had to suffer losses in the early 2000s since almost all music was pirated and uploaded on free internet sites, resulting in crashing

sales of audio cassettes and CDs. But with the digital media platform the industry now has additional source of incomes. Firstly the music is now sold on digital platforms like iTunes, Saawn, etc. wherein the subscriber pays to download the music on his device. The impact of this can be assessed from the fact that nearly 65% of music is now sold in digital format and not on prerecorded formats. Another source of revenue is in form of Value Added Services to mobile subscribers, wherein the songs are used as caller tunes, ringtones, etc. Currently the revenue generated thru VAS is shared as 30:70 in favor of telecom operators.

- **IMPACT ON SPORTS & GAMING**

Digital media is changing the way sports are viewed in India. It has revolutionized the interaction of sporting events, since sport stars and clubs can now converse with their followers in innovative ways. It is not only helping promote establish sporting events like IPL through digital platforms like Hotstar, but also give long due importance to neglected sports like kabbadi, hockey, etc. An apt example is the viewership received by ICC Women`s World Cup in 2017 which increased 300% to 180 million as compared to 2013. Due to various apps and notification services the



viewer is no longer required to sit in front of TV to enjoy the sport, since he is kept updated even when on the move.

Earlier the Gamer (who played games on computers or consoles) was perceived as an introvert personality, spending hours in isolated room. But with the advent of digital media and internet the same has changed to a 'cool' activity. Today as a gamer you are not competing with 2 to 3 friends but playing with competitors across the globe on platforms like PUBG or Clash of Clans. Social media is also helping the growth of social games on forums like Facebook etc. where friends compete in addictive games.

Digital adoption in India is at an high point due to various factors and is providing various opportunities to the existing and new M&E players. Indian market is offering various opportunities to cater to a new generation of digital consumers. Instead of considering digital media as an threat the companies need to look at it as an opportunity to raise more revenues. In order to succeed in the Indian market these global and Indian M&E companies need to study the social fabric, pricing, distribution channels and regional nuances. After which they can develop localized content catering to the tastes of the diverse Indian audience, which will help them mitigate financial risks. It is true that M&E companies operating in emerging markets like

India will be exposed to risks like corruption, piracy, local competition, etc. But the structural & regulatory reforms of the Government and proper corporate governance will help digital media scale new heights.

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**CONTRAST IN PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN WOMEN IN TV SERIALS &  
WEB SERIES**

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**CONTRAST IN PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN WOMEN  
IN TV SERIALS & WEB SERIES**

**Abstract**

*Over the last three decades television has become an important part of the daily lives of the common people of India. The television serials influence, dominate and leave their essence on the hearts and minds of a large part of our society. But the depiction of Indian women in these serials is mostly by categorizing them either as the pitiable 'bahu' or the conspiring 'saas' or the home wrecking 'bahaar wali'. In this paper I have attempted to bring out the flaws in portrayal of woman in TV serials by highlighting various issues like the absence of the real working women. I have also tried to bring out the contrast in projection of women in TV series as compared to the new medium of web series. It is disheartening to observe that the woman portrayed on television is far from the real woman, but it is not only being accepted but also influences millions of viewers. The success of web series, which educate and represent the new-age India in the past few years, is an indicator of the changing mindsets of the audience influenced by globalization.*

Mass media are the tools that facilitate dissemination of information to vast number of receivers. With the rapid advancement and technological boom in electronic media over the past few decades (especially after India opened up its economy in 1991) media has acquired such omnipotence that it not only propagates notions but has the power to create, construct or demolish certain ideologies. In this paper I have tried to study the depiction of women in two forms of mass media viz. television serials (available on numerous hindi and regional TV channels with reach to the interiors) and web series (available on internet platforms like YouTube trying to make inroads). It is an attempt to make a comparative analysis of contrast in portrayal of women in both the mediums. The Indian media landscape provides viewers with a plethora of choices in terms of media content. Television has become obsessed with the concept of 'infotainment' – a combination of 'information' and 'entertainment' attuned to profits, revenues and ratings due to which its role as an agent for social and political change is a lost cause. The projection of hackneyed and unoriginal female roles presents a glaring distinction between the 'reel' and the 'real' woman. Though television soaps debate societal issues like marriage, divorce, crime against women, patriarchy and family system but the working



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Indian woman is conspicuous by her absence. This void is being filled up by web series to some extent.

Television in India started with the golden days of *Doordarshan* when there were serials like *Udaan* and *Rajani* which were shows on women empowerment. While *Udaan*, based on life of Kanchan Choudhary first female Director General of Police, dealt with issues concerning a woman's struggle, her dreams of becoming an IPS officer. *Rajani* on the other hand was an inspiring story of a housewife who fights against corruption and creates awareness among lax government officials. In fact even the family dramas like *Hum Log*, *Buniyaad* etc. had strong women characters depicting empowered women. However with the advent of cable and satellite television, things rapidly changed and serials stopped short of projecting those that could prove beneficial for uplifting these maimed section of the society. Although TV industry is run by women producers like Ekta Kapoor, Aruna Irani, Benaifer Kohli, Kavita Barjatya, etc. what they bring out is an incomprehensible string of soap operas that thrive on religious and cultural stereotypes. A UNESCO report of 2009, describes the common images of women in TV serials as "the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother or *bahu*, the devious witch, the hard-faced corporate and political climber." Most of the commercial serials and soaps on television in India today portray women in unrealistic, garish, and unworthy roles where women from every socio-economic strata endlessly fall in love, attend elaborate marriage ceremonies, struggle to fit in with monstrous in-laws, suffer disappointment and betrayal, labor for justice etc. decked up in expensive costume-jewellery and *jardousi* sarees. Following are some of the shortcomings in the depiction of women in TV serials:

### **Imposing Archetypes: The Ideal Woman vs. The Vamp**

A good woman, according to Indian serials, is an ideal homemaker, whose world revolves around her family & home and her family's/husband's opinion becomes her opinion. However, if a woman is ambitious and stands equal to a man, she is portrayed in a bad light. She is the so called 'vamp' of the serial. " *Aisi aurat apne bacho ko kya sanskar degi?* "

*Balika Vadhu* telecast on Colors from 2008 to 2016, started out with a story line to deal with issue of child marriage. In the serial the main character Anandi is married to Jagdish as a child. The serial tries to cover their journey from their childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Jagdish on attaining adulthood leaves Anandi and marries Gauri who is a medical practitioner like him. The issue is the portrayal of both the women while Anandi confirms to all the stereotypes that characterize a 'good woman' like dutiful daughter-in-law, faithful wife who remains mum even when her husband leaves her and as *sarpanch betiya* working for upliftment of her villagers. On the other hand Gauri is represented





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as the ‘other woman’ from city who schemes and plots in the happy life of Jagdish-Anandi ignoring the fact that she has her definite identity as a medical practitioner and has legally married Jagdish. Gauri as pregnant wife of Jagdish has to suffer torments by her in-laws and is denied sympathy. Why ignore Gauri’s perspective and project everything favoring Anandi? This division of projection makes it clear that the media attempts to fall back to propagating ingrained stereotypical notions with the aim to secure their positions and TRPs.

*Uttaran* again a popular serial on Colors running from 2008 to 2016 tells the story of two friends with diametrically opposite backgrounds. Tapasya is the daughter of a wealthy aristocratic couple whereas Ichcha is the daughter of their poor, live-in domestic help. Tapasya is a stock figure, built along typical notions of a spoilt brat of a wealthy family, who torments the life of Ichcha, the adorable poor girl. But very little was developed with regards to the reason behind Tapasya’s action – her desperateness, her helplessness and her emotions are cleverly shunted to focus on the ruined life of Ichcha. Tapasya’s character has basic human follies and shortcomings and it is wrong to present her as a vamp when what she is actually doing is prioritizing herself beyond any superficial social constraints that bind her ambitions & desires. This is caricatured projection of women-folk into categories of either ‘bad woman’ who ravages & destroys or the ‘good woman’ who is meek, modest and most often very soft spoken, homely, caring and nurturing. By presenting real-life situations with sharp demarcations of good and bad, these serials are deviating from modern reality where boundaries between the victim and the victimizer get blurred. Projection of women through monochromatic lens in fact blocks the non-judgmental, unbiased response of audience. When female characters are consistently stereotyped as ‘timid, obedient = good’ and ‘assertive, questioning = bad’, it does add to the innate sexism and patriarchal notions already embedded in the mindset of the masses.

### **Glorification of Evils**

*Balika Vadhu*, which was supposed to fight the bane of child marriages, showed the child dolled up in finery, living in the luxurious mansion of her husband’s family, getting occasionally sad on missing out school. To a family living in a single room tenement in rural Rajasthan, struggling to get two meals a day, that kind of life would seem aspirational for their girl children; hence, the show ended up glorifying child marriage. The real problems in a child marriage like sexual assault and teen pregnancy were completely ignored.

Some of the serials, like *Madhubala*, glorify a man who insults, hurts and abuses the woman, with whom he is in ‘so called’ love and it is always his wife who tries to patch up by massaging his male ego so that they can live a happy married life. What is far more dangerous? It sends out the message that being a



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"bad boy" and treating women badly will make men more attractive to women even in real life.

Instead of having only fair-skinned, slim actors, having characters of different body types and skin tones would help not just in creating positive role models for the youth, but also make the reel world more realistic. But an entire show about the tribulations of a dark skinned girl in *Saat Pher – Saloni Ka Safar* or an over-weight bahu in *Badho Bahu* or an ordinary girl with glasses trying to fit in corporate world in *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* are over the top and don't really help. Normally, the men in these serials are portrayed as mamma's boy who act as financial backbones of the families while their counterparts are restricted as housewives who even go to bed in flashy sarees. Some serials like *Bairi Piya* and *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo* with strong male characters are obsessed with rape and even build up the rapes of their female leads as an event.

### **Absence of the working women**

The real life of a woman is no less than an adventure where she juggles between her family and work, while also looking after herself. There is hardly any popular daily soap where one can find women who share the ambition, drive, strength or vulnerabilities but still preserving the spark of womanhood. The few women who are shown as independent or working are either forced into it, unhappy, bitchy, or just use it as another venue for romance. Plus a working woman is shown working hard to get the blessings of her family and striving doubly hard to take care of the husband, in-laws and children. In *Diya Aur Baati Hum* they spent almost 200 episodes for the protagonist to convince her mother-in-law for joining IPS. She can be a career woman, but not at the cost of her family is the rule for Indian women on TV. So while the housewife is decent and gullible, the working woman is an anti-thesis – she is a vamp dressed in corporate style suits, ultra-modern, hungry for power and perfect in the art of seduction. It is shocking how in a majority of these soaps working women are portrayed in negative light – how they are ambitious and independent, which is a curse for the family and for the society. And shows like *Service Wali Bahu* (Feb. to July 2015) which try to depict the real women don't last long. Why can't we have working women characters without it being a big deal and a main focus of the story? Why does a woman's career still get portrayed as a choice or worse a favor bestowed on her by a generous family?

Web series are similar to TV serials but not dragged over years, short and to the point. Though initially introduced in late 1990s after the boom in internet, they have gained prominence in the last few years with advent of smartphones and cheap mobile internet. Today the young audience is being served a variety of web series in their palms on platforms like YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. The representation of women in this form of media is distinctly different as



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compared to TV. They narrate women’s stories with refreshing honesty which make them more relatable for their audiences. Here there are no decked up bahu or housewives but normal women who work, are independent and follow their own heart & mind instead of being ruled by traditions and customs. The contrast can be highlighted by the fact that Ekta Kapoor who rules the saas-bahu genre on TV has created various women oriented web series like *Dev DD* (a female take on Devdas) and *The Test Case* (challenges for a woman in army) on her web platform ALT Balaji. The true to life depiction of women in web series can be highlighted from some of the shows.

*Ladies Room* in which all six episodes are set in a toilet, where two young women friends banter on everything from unreasonable bosses, unexpected pregnancies and being broke to pay rent. The characters of Dingo and Khanna seem real, flawed and eminently relatable since there are neither black nor white and the depiction of their friendship certainly fills a large and embarrassing gap seen in TV. They are shown as normal friends without falling into the clichés of divine sisterhood. *Girl in the City* depicts the struggle of Meera, a small town girl who dreams of making it big in a city as a fashion designer. The protagonist sticks to her goals, despite of facing troubles at work as well as objections from her father. *Confessions: Its Complicated* and *Its my City* are also about group girls who travel to Mumbai and live as roommates and struggle together to get a foothold in their careers. Tanya from *Permanent Roommates* is a career oriented girl who he is unsure of her feelings and stability of her relationship and freaks out because she isn’t ready for marriage. While women from TV serials sacrifice their jobs for sake of relationship, Shreya from *Pitchers* chooses her dream job in London over her boyfriend, even though she is in a loving and happy relationship, she doesn’t sacrifice her career. Chanchal from *Tripling* feels trapped in her marriage since her husband expects her to be poised and graceful as a bahu of a famous Rajasthani family. Her liberation comes in form of a road trip with her brothers and her strength is visible when she refuses to accept decisions imposed by her husband and brothers. Normally, TV serials shows paint girlfriends as nagging women who crib but not in case of Kavya from *Little Things* who is in a live-in-relationship and tackles all ups and downs in a matured way. Anita from *What The Folks* has absolutely no qualms about being married to a younger man, and calls her parent regressive when they try to hide this fact from relatives. *Alisha* is a show which tells a story of a girl who follows an offbeat career option as a fashion detective. *Girliyapa* is a division of TVF which produces fresh and uncensored stories about women from women’s perspective like their satirical sketch *How I Raped Your Mother*.

Web is leading the way in depicting women like how they are, with themes that effect women. Another advantage of web is that it offers space for every kind of



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story-telling, whether it is about any gender or class. The creators of web series use the female perspective to target the same women audience. Clearly Indian web series makers have a better understanding of millennial women than TV show producers. They have strong, modern and relatable women who can surely help to fill the void created by TV serials in projection of women.

### **Conclusion**

In a modernizing nation like India the chief responsibility of media should be to upgrade its content so as to match the reality outside. Web series which is a new medium has been successful in this regards, but its reach is limited as of now. But television which has the power to influence and shape the thinking of the nation has gone regressive. While one may argue that TV industry is a capitalist and only caters what is been demanded, it is now necessary for them to understand their responsibility and make more programs focusing on the positive aspects of womanhood. The responsibility falls on their shoulder to stress the causes which create pathetic, oppressed condition of women, rather than stereotypical projections of woman-ness and woman character. The TV serials must stop categorizing Indian women and try to present a coherent and conducive picture of the real women. TV serials with their content must inspire women to overcome stifles and join the mainstream of nation's progress. Only then can they succeed in improving the status of this oppressed section of society.

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