INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture32

Impact of OTTs

Moving on to the impact on the mediascape, cinephilia, and film spectatorship, we see a significant shift due to the rise of OTT platforms. Traditionally, cinema-goers would go to a theater, spend money on a ticket, and watch a film. However, with the advent of OTT platforms, subscribers now face a choice: invest in a subscription for unlimited access to films at a lower cost or pay a higher amount for a single theater experience. This decision-making process reflects a change in how people view value in entertainment consumption.

Chawra believes that OTT platforms are energizing the Indian film industry by elevating it to an international level. This new avenue provides filmmakers with an alternative to traditional cinema, which often involves strict censorship. Although there are some government regulations, OTT content is largely self-regulated, allowing creators more freedom to express their artistic vision. This lack of stringent programming and certification restrictions enables filmmakers to push creative boundaries.

For instance, consider the film *Jaane Jaan*, which recently garnered significant critical attention. In this film, A-list actress Kareena Kapoor takes on a role that diverges from her usual glamorous on-screen persona. The film features a more realistic and content-driven portrayal, highlighting the creative flexibility that OTT platforms offer. This freedom allows directors and actors to explore new dimensions in their work, enhancing the diversity and richness of content available to audiences. The rise of OTT platforms has not only transformed how viewers consume films but also invigorated the Indian film industry by providing a space for greater creative expression and reducing the constraints of traditional censorship.

The shift to OTT platforms has been both surprising and refreshing for audiences and actors alike. For many, it's shocking to see established stars like Kareena

Kapoor debut on OTT platforms in roles that deviate from their usual glamorous personas. This change is not just a departure from their established images but also an opportunity to explore new creative boundaries. The significant production budgets and high production values on OTT platforms are enabling both directors and actors to push their creative limits.

OTT platforms are also providing a space for new and fresh talent. Unlike traditional cinema, which often has limited opportunities for emerging actors, OTT is opening doors to a new generation of performers. For example, the recent release *Lapata Ladies* features young actors who, although they have had minor roles in the past, are now gaining significant recognition for their fresh performances. This film has been critically acclaimed, showcasing the talent and freshness that new faces bring to the screen.

Siddharth Bhatia, the founder and editor of *The Wire*, believes that OTT platforms offer a multitude of opportunities for Indian filmmakers and directors. An example of this is the recent release of *Hiramandi* on Netflix, directed by the renowned filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali, known for his blockbuster films. The availability of such high-profile projects on OTT platforms underscores the evolving landscape of Indian cinema, where new opportunities and creative freedoms are increasingly within reach.

He made his debut on OTT through Netflix. These platforms are not only original content producers but also provide new ways to distribute films globally, beyond their home countries. They are open to experimenting with different forms and themes, something the traditional multiplex model, which requires cost recovery within the first three days of release, often cannot accommodate. Unlike the multiplex model, which relies on early indicators to determine financial success, OTT platforms have the flexibility to experiment and learn from trial and error.

Indian cinema has historically been subject to censorship by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which issues ratings such as A for adults or U for everyone. This traditional system includes mandatory disclaimers, such as anti-smoking warnings, and restricts the depiction of certain content. In contrast, Netflix and Amazon offer filmmakers a new realm of possibilities with fewer restrictions. They use self-regulatory content warnings to inform viewers about

what to expect, including substances, violence, and sexual content, providing greater creative freedom.

OTT platforms have allowed for bold new content to emerge. For instance, *Lust Stories*, a web series where each episode is directed by a different filmmaker, showcases this trend. The series includes contributions from renowned directors like Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, and Karan Johar, and features actors such as Vicky Kaushal and Kajol. Each episode explores themes of female sexuality, reflecting the diverse and experimental nature of content now available on these platforms.

The series *Lust Stories* was groundbreaking in its depiction of female pleasure and sexuality, presenting bold content that had never been seen on television. Unlike traditional media, which often veils or sanitizes such topics, *Lust Stories* explored female sexuality in a direct and unapologetic manner. Another example of this bold content is *Four More Shots Please!*, which portrays the lives of four independent women without adhering to traditional constraints on what they should wear or say. This series also addresses female sexuality and independence in a graphic and unapologetic way.

Similarly, *Sacred Games* pushed creative boundaries with its gritty realism, incorporating foul language, violence, and explicit content. The show's raw, dark edginess made it controversial, leading to calls for self-regulation among OTT platforms. In fact, *Sacred Games* prompted government intervention, with demands for content warnings and a public interest litigation (PIL) filed in the Delhi High Court over a defamatory reference to former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Both *Lust Stories* and *Sacred Games* faced scrutiny for their explicit content and controversial themes.

OTT platforms have introduced a new level of artistic freedom, allowing for detailed and bold content that includes nudity, sexuality, and gender issues. The growth of OTT has been significant, with diverse programming and successful releases like *Shakuntala Devi*, *Lakshmi Bomb*, and *Gunjan Saxena*, which became hits on streaming platforms during the pandemic when theaters were closed. The absence of stringent regulatory bodies has allowed creators to explore hard-hitting content without hesitation, fostering genre experimentation in horror, crime, and thriller, and enabling more graphic and intense storytelling.

In recent OTT content, such as *Arya*, we see a departure from traditional portrayals of women. Unlike the usual depiction of women as solely caretakers, *Arya* features a strong female protagonist who goes to extreme lengths to protect her children, even resorting to violent measures. This represents a shift towards more intense and hard-hitting narratives, reflecting real-life scenarios where a mother's protective instincts can lead her to drastic actions.

Another notable example is Netflix's *Ghoul*, a 2018 horror series rooted in Arab folklore. *Delhi Crime*, also on Netflix, received international acclaim for its portrayal of the Delhi rape case. On Amazon Prime, *Mirzapur* gained fame for its depiction of two families vying for control over the titular city in Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, *Sacred Games* showcased a diverse array of complex characters. *Soni*, a realist film about a female police officer, premiered at the Mumbai International Film Festival, highlighting the diverse and individualistic content emerging on OTT platforms.

The rise of OTT platforms in India has ushered in a wave of innovative and provocative content that contrasts sharply with the traditionally censored and self-censored film industry. These platforms cater to a young, upwardly mobile audience accustomed to instant access and diverse storytelling.

However, the provocative nature of this content has sparked controversy. Issues such as drug use, nudity, and political themes in shows have led to national debates and demands for censorship. The public's reaction can lead to boycotts, particularly if the content touches on sensitive national or political issues.

In response to these challenges, OTT platforms and the government have developed self-regulatory mechanisms to navigate the complex landscape of content production and distribution.

The Indian government has mandated that OTT giants like Netflix and Amazon establish grievance officers in their Indian offices. This requirement aims to address content-related complaints and ensure compliance with Indian laws, thereby safeguarding national sovereignty. The government has introduced a three-layer oversight mechanism and potential content blocking powers, which raises concerns about the impact on logistics and creative output. While this mechanism aims to regulate content, it also poses risks related to the blocking of programs and potential disruptions to creative processes.

OTT platforms have emerged as a new space for talent, particularly for yesteryear's stars whose careers were waning. Actors like Saif Ali Khan, Vivek Oberoi, and Abhay Deol have found new opportunities on these platforms, effectively reinventing their careers. This space also serves as a global launchpad, exemplified by the debut of young actors in *Lapata Ladies*, who, despite previous roles, are gaining prominence through these platforms.

OTT providers also offer significant opportunities for artists, particularly writers, who are now commanding higher fees. Shows like *Four More Shots* highlight women in lead roles and tackle topics such as sex and relationships—subjects that are often overlooked in traditional TV serials. This shift provides both artistic exposure for writers and prominent roles for women, expanding the scope of content and representation on these platforms.

Amazon has supported Indian writers and directors by hosting workshops in the US, where they could discuss episodic structures, character development, and content creation for Amazon Originals. This initiative highlights Amazon's commitment to enhancing the skills of those working on their content, providing valuable opportunities for professional development.

The rise of OTT platforms has fostered a new form of cinephilia and gentrification in film appreciation. Traditional gentry, which valued parallel cinema and realism, is being replaced by a new elite focused on content quality and accessibility. This shift reflects the evolving landscape of film criticism and viewer preferences.

However, affordability remains a contentious issue. In India, where a Netflix subscription costs around ₹500 per month—making it the most expensive streaming service—access is largely limited to the urban elite. Many people in India are reluctant to pay subscription fees, often opting for torrent downloads or questioning the value of paying for entertainment.

To address this, OTT platforms are considering incorporating advertisements to make their services more affordable and accessible. This approach is similar to other channels that generate revenue through ads.

Despite these challenges, OTT platforms provide crucial distribution opportunities for indie cinema. From a viewer's perspective, streaming services offer the convenience of waiting for films to be released online rather than visiting cinema

halls. For example, if watching a film in a theater costs ₹250, a monthly Netflix subscription at ₹499 provides access to an extensive library of content, making it a more cost-effective option.

As a result, audiences are increasingly choosing to wait for films to become available on streaming platforms. For instance, the film *Zara Hatke Zara Bachke*, which was released in theaters last year, only recently debuted on an OTT platform. This trend underscores how viewers are adapting their consumption habits to take advantage of the benefits offered by streaming services.

The advent of OTT platforms has profoundly transformed the landscape of Indian cinema. These platforms have become crucial not only in distributing independent films but also in creating and curating extensive digital archives. This means that Indian films, including those in regional languages, are now accessible globally, thanks to the inclusion of English subtitles. This accessibility extends the reach of regional films to a broader audience that might not have had the chance to view them otherwise.

Take *Tumbbad*, for example. This critically acclaimed horror film, which initially had a limited theatrical release in Maharashtra, found a wider audience after its release on Amazon Prime. This pattern—where films become available on OTT platforms only after their theatrical run—illustrates how these platforms can prolong the visibility and life of a film.

However, there are concerns about the sustainability of the OTT model. One significant challenge is the subscription-based model, which is proving difficult for many consumers outside of tier-one cities. In these areas, people are often reluctant to pay for multiple subscriptions, and the cost can be prohibitive. This reluctance could pose a threat to the long-term viability of OTT platforms in India, particularly if they cannot expand their subscriber base beyond urban elites.

Moreover, the high subscription fees for platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime make them accessible primarily to a small, affluent segment of the population. Many consumers in smaller cities or rural areas might find these fees too high and may opt for illegal downloads or other more affordable entertainment options.The OTT market is also facing the issue of potential saturation. With the

proliferation of multiple platforms and intense competition, maintaining subscriber interest requires continuous innovation and unique content offerings.

Additionally, regulatory pressures are starting to weigh on OTT platforms. The government's push for grievance officers and oversight mechanisms could affect the platforms' operational flexibility and their ability to manage content. As these platforms navigate these new regulatory requirements, they will need to balance creative freedom with compliance.

While OTT platforms have revolutionized the way Indian cinema is distributed and consumed, their future success in the Indian market will depend on their ability to address these challenges, adapt to evolving consumer preferences, and navigate the regulatory landscape.

The sustainability of OTT platforms in India is increasingly becoming a pressing concern, particularly in the context of revenue challenges and consumer payment preferences.

One significant issue is the widespread sharing of account passwords. Many users share their credentials with friends and family, which means that a single subscription can be used by multiple people. This practice undermines the revenue potential of these platforms, as they lose out on the income from additional subscriptions. In response to this problem, Netflix has implemented measures to limit the number of devices that can access a single account. The aim is to curb excessive sharing and ensure that subscriptions reflect actual paying users. However, while these measures may reduce some of the revenue losses, they might not completely resolve the issue, as users may still find ways to bypass restrictions or opt for more cost-effective alternatives.

Another critical challenge is the consumer payment preference in India. Indian audiences tend to prefer implicit payment methods rather than direct subscription models. Many people are more comfortable with paying for data charges that allow them to access content on an ad-hoc basis, rather than committing to a recurring monthly subscription fee. This preference poses a barrier for OTT platforms that rely on subscription revenue.

To address this challenge, OTT platforms are exploring alternative strategies. One potential solution is the introduction of bundled packages. These packages

would offer access to multiple OTT services for a single fee, providing a more attractive option for consumers who are reluctant to subscribe to multiple services individually. This approach could make the subscription model more appealing by offering better value and aligning with the price sensitivity of the Indian market.

Overall, the success and sustainability of OTT platforms in India will depend on their ability to adapt to these consumer preferences. The market is evolving, and platforms will need to experiment with different pricing models and bundling options to find a strategy that meets both their revenue goals and the needs of their diverse audience. The future of OTT in India will likely involve a combination of innovative pricing strategies and content offerings to address these challenges and capitalize on the growing demand for digital entertainment.

Certainly! Here's a more fluid, paragraph-based overview of the future prospects and directions for OTT platforms in India:

The future of OTT platforms in India is likely to be shaped by several key factors, given the remarkable growth seen during the pandemic. Platforms like Netflix successfully captivated audiences with their binge-worthy content, turning the act of binge-watching into a widespread cultural phenomenon. Moving forward, these platforms will need to navigate challenges such as payment models, content adaptation, and revenue protection to sustain and build upon their current success.

One of the primary challenges is finding a balance in payment models. The traditional subscription-based approach has encountered resistance from Indian audiences, largely due to high costs relative to income levels and a preference for implicit payment methods. To address this, platforms may need to explore a blend of subscription and ad-supported models. By introducing more flexible pricing structures or bundled packages that offer access to multiple services for a single fee, OTT platforms can appeal to a broader audience and address price sensitivity.

In addition, content adaptation will be crucial. With a significant portion of the Indian audience accessing OTT services via smartphones, it is essential for content to be optimized for mobile viewing. This means ensuring that shows and films are engaging and accessible on smaller screens. Furthermore, continued

investment in localized content that caters to India's diverse linguistic and cultural demographics will be necessary to capture and retain viewers.

Another pressing concern is the control of account sharing. Platforms like Netflix have already begun implementing measures to restrict password sharing, but this will need to remain a focus going forward. Balancing the need to prevent revenue loss due to unauthorized access while maintaining customer satisfaction will be critical.

Advertising could offer a viable solution to some of the financial challenges faced by OTT platforms. Integrating advertising models could help generate revenue, but it must be done in a way that does not compromise the user experience. Effective targeted advertising can enhance relevance and engagement, but platforms must carefully manage the balance between ad content and user enjoyment to avoid alienating their audience.

Despite the rapid growth of OTT services, traditional cable TV is likely to coexist with these platforms for the foreseeable future. While OTT is expanding rapidly, the affordability and established presence of cable TV mean it will remain a significant part of the media landscape. Young professionals and millennials may drive the shift towards OTT, but a substantial portion of the population will continue to rely on traditional television.

Finally, technological infrastructure will play a crucial role in the future of OTT platforms. The rollout of 5G and advancements in internet technology are expected to enhance streaming quality and expand access. Improved connectivity will support higher-resolution content and provide a smoother viewing experience, which is essential for maintaining user engagement.

The OTT sector in India is at a crossroads where it must address challenges related to affordability, content adaptation, and revenue generation while leveraging advancements in technology. How well platforms navigate these issues will determine their ability to sustain growth and maintain their competitive edge in the evolving media landscape.