

The Portrayal of Indian Rural Women on OTT Platforms: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Film Jai Bhim

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Abstract

Over the Top, (OTT) platforms in India have significantly transformed the entertainment industry, its content, presentation, and marketing. The rise of OTT (Over the Top) platforms is no longer a piece of news; the new thing which is gaining the researchers' interest is the demographic of its audience. Moreover, here rural India comes into the scene. In recent years The OTT platforms shifted their focus towards rural India for many reasons. They are targeting a vast population that resides in rural India. OTTs are investing crores in acquisition, content, and technology. This study analyses the content of the Hindi Film 'Jai Bhim' released on amazon Prime. The study aims to understand the discourse in rural India's social and cultural context. Critical Discourse Analysis is the method of the study. The research concludes that 'Jai Bhim' portrays the woman in its most potent form, fighting all difficulties for her family. Also, the woman portrayed in the film embedded specific high ethical and moral values derived from the firm root of Indian culture.

Keywords: OTT Platform, Rural India, Hindi Web Series, Cultural Communication.

1.0 Introduction

Entertainment has been an integral part of Indian society for thousands of years. Over time, the medium of entertainment has changed. Earlier, in the assembly of kings, dance was organized with song and music. Sports competitions like wrestling and arena were organized. People were also entertained by events like puppet shows, street plays, and magic shows. With the progress of time, especially with the development of the printing press, stories and poetry dominated the entertainment arena. Then after the advent of cinema, radio, and television, there was a revolution in the entertainment field.

Along with presenting the stories of society, entertainment elements are added to the cinema. Along with songs and music, various programs began to be presented on radio and TV. After the advent of the internet, entertainment content was flooded. Citing freedom of expression, OTT started serving whatever it wanted in the name of entertainment content and creativity. Since a large part of Indian

society resides in villages, OTT also started focusing on the presentation of villages. Meghnad Saha, a noted astrophysicist, stated, "Most things of importance start without people noticing they have started." This assertion appears to hold validity within the context of digital broadcasting. In contrast to several other industries, broadcasting has experienced a significant transformation characterized by digitization and the convergence of content dissemination and consumer hardware. This revolution has occurred discreetly, without generating much noise (Ramachandran, 2021)

In India, the adoration for online video content is nearly limitless. One of the main reasons behind this is the environmental restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole country went into complete lockdown for a lengthier duration. This restriction caused the consumption of OTT to increase day by day.

Over the Top (OTT)

Gonçalves et al. (2014) defined OTT as "video conveyance utilizing the internet protocol over an open system "Over-the-top (OTT) is a media service that provides streaming of audio-video content over the internet. The report of PwC India 2019 says India's entertainment and media market is growing globally and is not to drop the impetus soon. Almost all the major platforms were introduced in India in 2015 and 2016. Hotstar was launched in February 2015, whereas 2016 saw some more launchings, Netflix in January, Voot in March, Amazon prime in May, and Jio TV in the same year (Fitzgerald, 2019)

A report on the OTT platform (2019) published by MICA- School of Ideas says that YouTube and Hotstar are the leaders of the Indian OTT market. YouTube has 265 million Indian active users monthly, whereas Hotstar holds 69.4% of this market. The first and foremost reason to accept these platforms in India is internet accessibility. Secondly, the existing Smartphone devices for the Indian consumer are compatible with online video streaming (Gevers, 2019). The availability of content in regional languages is another reason.

The concept of rural India

Approximately 70% of India's population is in rural areas. Most of the Indian population living in rural areas is concentrated in villages. According to the 2011 census statistics, the recorded data indicates an approximate population of 800 million individuals residing in over 600,000 rural settlements. According to the Planning Commission of India, a settlement characterized as rural in nature is defined as a town with a population not exceeding 15,000 individuals. The panchayat serves as the governing authority inside these rural communities.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative methodological technique that aims to provide a critical description, interpretation, and explanation of how discourses are involved in the construction, perpetuation, and legitimization of social inequalities (Mullet, 2018).

2.0 Theoretical framework

Fairclough's analytical framework posits that language plays a crucial role in both the construction of societal change and the potential for modifying human behavior. Language possesses immense power and influence. In this study, the researchers opt to do a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the portrayal of Indian rural women on OTT platforms through the three-dimensional model of CDA proposed by Fairclough. This model involves three dimensions, i.e., text, discursive practice, and social practices. (Fairclough, 1995). The first dimension is called text. Discourse is the words or characters

selected for communication. By choosing specific words, the communicator shows his/her attitude toward the subject. Discourse is about language as a community.

The selection of words utilized in communication evokes a sense of belonging and inclusion inside the communicator. Discourse analysis pertains to the examination of textual material, wherein interpretation is an inherent component of any given text. In the context of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the concept of dimension two posits that language possesses the capacity to serve as a vehicle for facilitating transformative processes. The way we engage in discourse regarding a certain topic has the potential to influence our perception of this topic. In the realm of three-dimensional analysis, language plays a pivotal role in shaping and characterizing our own perspectives and viewpoints. It facilitates the development of social interactions and cultural behaviours. Language is intrinsically linked to power dynamics and plays a crucial role in the process of communication. The concept of dimension three has the potential to be applicable to the entirety of a given culture.

3.0 Research methodology

The paper investigates the portrayal of the lead female character from Indian content on OTT platforms, selected by applying the purposive sampling technique.

3.1. Research objective

1. To understand the power relationship between the socio-political institution and the public on a gender basis.
2. To investigate the social reality constructed from the portrayal of rural women in OTT Content.

3.2. Research questions

- RQ-1. What messages do the dialogues of the female protagonist convey?
- RQ-2. How does the female protagonist react to challenges in social practice?

3.3. Research design

The present study provides support for the utilization of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough's model encompasses three distinct dimensions, each of which plays a crucial role in the analysis process. The initial dimension is referred to as "text." The communication medium encompasses a combination of speech, written language, and visual representations. The second concept is referred to as discursive practice. It involves the production of text and consumption of text. The third dimension is called social practice. (Fairclough, 1995). The paper analyses OTT content- 'Jai Bhim,' a film released on Amazon Prime in 2021.

The analysis comprises all three steps described in the model. Firstly, we use textual analysis as a linguistic and semiotic tool. Further, we do linguistic analysis on the criteria like parts of speech, code-switching, speech error and repair, and instances of turn-taking. We did the semiotic analysis on the criteria, such as the scene's color setting and the character's signs and symbols. In the second step, we analyzed the discourse from the producer's and consumer's points of view. In the third step, we did the discourse on socio-cultural practices. The criteria used for the analysis are the hidden agenda of the discourse, tracing of underlying ideology, and the impact of the discourse on society.

4.0 Analysis

Jai Bhim

Jai Bhim revolves around the struggle for justice of a pregnant tribal lady called Sengani (Lijo Jose). On false theft charges, police nab Sengani's husband Rajakannu (Manikandan). He is brutally tortured in police custody. When he was missing from police custody, the police claimed he had fled. With the help of lawyer Chandru (Suriya), Sengani files a habeas corpus petition to bring forth the society's hidden/ugly face (Gnanavel, 2021).

This study critically examines the female lead character – Sengini, in the frame of three dimensions of CDA proposed by Norman Fairclough.

Textual analysis

Sengini is portrayed as a tribal woman with the lowest social status. She loves her family the most. She also put the virtue of life above all things. The following dialogues of Sengini reflect her compassion, love, and ethics.

In the opening scene, Sengini and her husband, Rajakannu, are shown catching rats. When Sengini releases one small rat, her husband asks.

Rajakannu: Are you mad? Why did you release the rat?

Sengini: The mouse is a child. You will rot in hell if you fill your stomach by taking a child's life.

These dialogues reflect Sengini's compassion for innocent life, no matter if it is of a mouse.

In the same scene, she responded to her husband's question about family planning.

Sengini: You can do family planning whenever you want. I am a tribal woman and can take care of all the children.

Here, Sengini expresses her self-belief as she and her husband know they are destitute, and it is challenging to bring up a child in that situation.

When sengini was asked to state her problem in the courtroom, she threw her concerns with agony and pain.

Sengini: Police dragged my husband in front of my eyes. Now they say that they have fled; they have not been found. I am pregnant; where do I wander?

Many signs and symbols are used to set the right tone and convey the appropriate message to the audience. Hand impression on brick as a symbol of love as Sengini's husband promised her to gift her a house made of bricks before he dies. In the last scene, sengini is portrayed holding the same bricks when she had her new home. Similarly, train journey in general class depicts that they are inferior. Also, Sengini is illiterate, but her daughter is depicted reading a magazine and sitting beside the lawyer. This symbolism reflects the preparation of modern women to be empowered.

Discursive practice

In India, caste has dictated social life for centuries. Rural communities have been divided into many castes. The lower castes have faced social boycotts and humiliation. The system advocates many privileges for the upper castes and imposes several restrictions on the underprivileged communities.

The life of Justice K. Chandru inspires the character of Chandru (Suriya). Thus, the film is inspired by actual events of a case fought by Justice K Chandru in 1993. At that time, he was practicing as a lawyer in Madras High Court. Years back, Rajakannu was beaten to death during interrogation at Kammapuram police station in the Cuddalore district. Police dumped the corpse at the border of Trichy district and claimed Rajakannu had escaped. Rajakannu's wife, Parvati's habeas corpus petition is the most extended court case in the history of Chennai High Court. The victims of Chandru's legal battle got justice.

Here, the filmmaker intends to raise the issue that has prevailed in Indian society for ages. The aim is to make the audience, the people of India, aware of this social evil and build a sense of equality for all castes of society.

Social practice

In the Indian context, the husband is given importance like God. The women of Indian society respect her husband as he is a god. Sengini, also carries these cultural values in her character. In a scene her husband takes a leave for his duty, Sengini insists on going along with him. His husband makes her understand in the name of difficulties.

Sengini: Wherever you go, take me with you.

Rajakannu: You want to smolder in the kiln fire.

Sengini: I will bear the kiln fire, not the pain of your separation.

The cultural ethics of Sengini's character gets its references from Indian culture. Ramayana, the most popular and cited Indian epic, has the same instance. When Rama gets exiled for 14 years, his wife Sita insists on going with her. However, the same woman decides to live in the forest without her husband to bring up her children. Sengini, also insists on going with his husband despite knowing there would be many difficulties at the brick factory but decides to stay at home without her husband to upbringing her girl child.

Despite belonging to the lowest cast of society and facing problems like untouchability, false accusation, and social torture, Sengini stands up and fight against all socio-political devils for justice and equality. In a scene, when the director general of police (DGP) offers her a handsome amount of money and asks her to withdraw her case, she denies it.

DGP: You cannot win this case. There is evidence that Rajakannu was killed in a road accident. I will talk to the policemen and get you a hefty amount if you want. It will help you in the upbringing of children.

Sengini: I will not be able to introduce this coming child to his father either. However, I will have much wealth. With that wealth, I will feed these children. When they ask me where I got so much money, I will say that your father's killers gave it to me. So, will I tell my children this, sir? Even if we kill ourselves, who is to ask? But it does not mean that we should sell our self-respect. I do not care if this case is lost. I will tell the children that the battle is lost. If possible, get those bloody policemen punished.

This conviction of Sengini reflects that she is a courageous woman. She is empowered enough to raise her voice strongly for justice. Her intention to get the culprit punished is pretty much straightforward, and she does not let anything in the way of justice. Again, this conversation takes us to the great Indian culture. In Indian mythology, there is a mention of a great chaste woman named Satyawati. Satyawati knew that her husband was short-lived. That is why she used to stay with him. When the gods of death

started taking her husband's life, she started following them. On being asked by the God of death, he said that where the husband will live, she will also stay there. On this, he was pleased and revived her husband. In this context, the Sengini reached the High Court and left no stone unturned to get the culprit punished.

5.0 Discussion and findings

Indian cinema witnessed many Hindi films where a female is a central character. To name a few; Mother India (1957), Arth (1982), and Dirty picture (2011). These films are from different eras, like Mother India, released in the post-independent era, while Arth came to the cinema hall in the post-emergency period. The dirty picture hit the theatres in the last decade. The central female character of Mother India is a Hindu woman who carries Indian cultural values in her character (Natarajan, 1994).

It has been observed that many studies on Bollywood cinema assert that female protagonists of Hindi cinema have been portrayed as controlled, surrendering individuals who are afraid of making sacrifices (Mohapatra et al., 2014).

M.K. Gandhi wrote in Young India, "There must be no impatience, no barbarity, no insolence, no undue pressure. If we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant" (Gandhi, 1921). In the film, the police are non-violent and intolerant of forcing some innocent tribals to accept false theft charges. Despite adopting barbaric methods of torture, the police had to succumb to non-violent resistance from Sengani and Rajkannu. Moreover, Chandru, an Ambedkarite, helps them to ascertain justice.

The film 'Jai Bhim' is made to spread awareness among society about the discrimination and social and political torture the tribal community faces in present-day Indian society. National Crime Record Bureau (2020) states that 43 deaths were reported in police custody in 2020. More than 33 custodial deaths are reported for persons on remand. A total of 20 cases were registered against State Police personnel for Human Right Violation in 2020. A total of 6528 crimes were committed against STs by Non-SCs/STs in 2018-2020.

6.0. Conclusion

In the movie Jai Bhim, the character of Sangini is shown as a confident woman. A woman who does not bow down to circumstances does not give in to challenges and sticks to what she decides once. The dialogues spoken by Sangini in the film reveal these qualities of her character very well. It is clear from the dialogues of Sangini that for a rural Indian woman, her family, her husband, and her children mean the most. Even if we give the whole world's wealth to an Indian woman, she cannot be happy without her husband. The dialogues delivered by Sengini clearly state that Indian rural women are the epitome of compassion, love, and sacrifice.

The agenda of this discourse is pretty much clear no matter what the situation, the problems, how difficult the situation is, or if a woman stands up for a cause, she gets it done. The ideology behind the discourse is that Indian woman carries moral values that are being taught in our ancient literature. An Indian woman loves his husband and her children the most and can bear any hardship to make her family happy and prosperous. The film emphasizes the practice of Gandhian ideology vis-à-vis truth and non-violence in the life of tribal people.

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