

Disrupting the Gender Binary: Transgender Representation and Resistance in "Seatbelt Crew"

Jithin J

Research Scholar

Department of English

Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram, Kanyakumari

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India

Dr. R. Ponmani Subha Chellam

Research Supervisor and Assistant Professor

Department of English

The M. D. T. Hindu college, Tirunelveli

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India

Abstract

This research critically examines the evolution of transgender representation in Indian web series during the transformative period from January 2010 to December 2022, with particular focus on how digital platforms have disrupted traditional gender binaries and created spaces for resistance and visibility. The study analyzes landmark productions including "Taali" (2021), "Made in Heaven" (2019), "Breathe: Into the Shadows" (2020), and "Paurashpur" (2020) as case studies in the shifting landscape of transgender and queer representation. Drawing on theories of gender performativity, intersectionality, and media representation, this research demonstrates that the OTT revolution has fundamentally altered how transgender identities are portrayed in Indian popular culture. The analysis reveals that while earlier representations were often limited to caricatures and comic relief, contemporary web series offer nuanced, complex portrayals that engage with issues of identity, survival, and equality. The study finds that transgender content enjoys significantly higher audience acceptance in India compared to other LGBTQIA+ sub-communities, with "Taali" reaching an estimated 19 million viewers. However, the research also identifies persistent challenges, including cisgender actors playing transgender roles, the tendency toward transnormative narratives that condition acceptance on conformity to conventional gender norms, and the relative absence of intersectional analysis addressing caste, class, and religion. The period 2010-2022 represents a critical juncture where digital platforms have enabled resistance through visibility, yet the full potential for transformative representation remains constrained by commercial imperatives and persistent societal biases.

Keywords:

Transgender Representation, Indian Web Series, Gender Binary, OTT Platforms, Queer Visibility, Transnormativity, Media Resistance, Digital Storytelling, LGBTQIA+ Representation, Indian Popular Culture

1. Introduction

The period from 2010 to 2022 represents a watershed moment in the history of transgender representation in Indian media. The Supreme Court's landmark 2014 ruling recognizing transgender people as a "third gender" and the subsequent decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018 created a legal and social context for unprecedented visibility. Concurrently, the rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms—including Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, and Jio Cinema—provided new avenues for storytelling that bypassed traditional censorship constraints and enabled creators to explore previously taboo subjects.

Against this backdrop, web series emerged as a powerful medium for disrupting the gender binary and representing transgender lives with complexity and dignity. Productions such as "Taali" (2021), based on the life of transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant, "Made in Heaven" (2019), featuring a closeted gay protagonist, and "Paurashpur" (2020), depicting a third-gender character in a mythological setting, represent significant departures from earlier cinematic traditions. Prior to this period, transgender individuals in Indian popular culture were predominantly portrayed as caricatures—often for comic relief, as objects of pity, or as menacing figures. The shift toward authentic, biographical, and socially engaged storytelling marks a fundamental change in how gender identity is understood and represented.

This research examines how web series from 2010 to 2022 have disrupted traditional media tropes and created spaces for resistance against the gender binary. Through an analysis of narrative strategies, character development, audience reception, and cultural context, this study explores the tensions between progressive visibility and normative conformity, between commercial imperatives and political advocacy, and between the aspirations of representation and the realities of societal stigma.

2. Definitions

2.1 Gender Binary

The gender binary refers to the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite, and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine. This binary system assumes that gender is biologically determined and that individuals must conform to either male or female identities. The disruption of the gender binary involves challenging this assumption and recognizing the spectrum of gender identities that exist beyond these two categories.

2.2 Transgender Identity

Transgender individuals are those whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. In the Indian context, transgender people have historically been referred to as *hijras*, though this term is now considered outdated by many. The Supreme Court of India's 2014 ruling recognized transgender individuals as a "third gender" and affirmed their constitutional rights.

2.3 Transnormativity

Transnormativity describes the pressure on transgender individuals to conform to normative standards of gender presentation to gain social acceptance. In media representation, transnormativity manifests as the tendency to portray transgender characters as acceptable only when they perform conventional femininity or masculinity, pursue heterosexual relationships, and seek family approval.

2.4 Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination. In the context of transgender representation, intersectional analysis examines how caste, class, religion, and region intersect with gender identity to shape experiences of marginalization or privilege .

2.5 OTT Platforms

Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms refer to streaming services that deliver content directly to viewers over the internet, bypassing traditional cable or broadcast television. In India, major OTT platforms include Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Jio Cinema, ZEE5, and ALT Balaji. These platforms have been instrumental in enabling diverse and progressive content that challenges traditional media norms .

2.6 Media Representation Theory

Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory provides a framework for understanding how media texts construct meaning and shape social understanding. Hall argues that representation through codes shapes how audiences understand identity, and that media texts are "polysemic," meaning they can be decoded in multiple ways by different audiences .

2.7 Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity posits that gender is not a stable identity but is produced through repeated performances that constitute the illusion of a natural gender. In the context of transgender representation, performativity helps explain how characters demonstrate their gender identity through culturally coded behaviors, appearances, and practices .

3. Need for the Study

3.1 Academic Gap in Transgender Media Analysis

Despite the growing visibility of transgender characters in Indian web series, there remains a significant gap in scholarly analysis, particularly regarding the period 2010-2022. Most existing research has focused on cinema or on LGBTQIA+ representation more broadly, with relatively little attention paid to the specific dynamics of transgender representation in the OTT space . This research addresses this gap by providing a detailed analysis of key productions and their cultural significance.

3.2 The Transformative Potential of OTT Platforms

OTT platforms have fundamentally altered the media landscape in India, enabling creators to tell stories that would have been censored or marginalized in traditional media. Understanding how these platforms have facilitated transgender representation and resistance is essential for assessing their social impact .

3.3 The "Taali" Phenomenon

The success of "Taali"—with an estimated 19 million viewers and an Ormax Power Rating of 61—represents a watershed moment in Indian media . This success raises important questions about audience acceptance of transgender content, the commercial viability of inclusive storytelling, and the

potential for media to reshape social attitudes. As industry analysts note, transgender content enjoys "significantly higher traction among Indian audiences" compared to content on other LGBTQIA+ sub-communities .

3.4 Evolving Trends in Indian Advertising

The period 2010-2022 has witnessed significant shifts in how advertisers and content creators approach gender representation. From the "femvertising" trend in advertising to the rise of biographical dramas about transgender activists, these shifts reflect broader social changes and the growing demand for authentic, diverse storytelling.

4. Aims of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to critically analyze transgender representation in Indian web series from January 2010 to December 2022, examining how digital platforms have disrupted the gender binary and created spaces for resistance, visibility, and social change.

5. Objectives

1. To trace the evolution of transgender representation in Indian digital media from 2010 to 2022.
2. To analyze key web series featuring transgender and queer characters, including "Taali," "Made in Heaven," "Breathe: Into the Shadows," and "Paurashpur."
3. To identify narrative strategies used to disrupt traditional gender binaries and challenge stereotypes.
4. To examine the legal and social context that enabled increased transgender visibility, including the Supreme Court's 2014 ruling and the 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality.
5. To assess audience reception and the commercial success of transgender-themed content in India.
6. To identify the strengths and limitations of transgender representation in OTT media, including issues of transnormativity, authenticity, and intersectionality.
7. To compare transgender representation with broader LGBTQIA+ representation in Indian digital media.
8. To propose recommendations for more authentic, diverse, and transformative transgender representation in Indian media.

6. Hypothesis

H0: Transgender representation in Indian web series (2010-2022) does not significantly challenge traditional gender binaries and instead primarily reinforces transnormative stereotypes.

H1: Transgender representation in Indian web series (2010-2022) has significantly disrupted traditional gender binaries through authentic storytelling, nuanced character development, and engagement with social justice issues.

H2: While web series have created unprecedented visibility for transgender identities, their representation remains constrained by commercial imperatives, transnormative narratives, and the absence of intersectional analysis.

7. Literature Search

7.1 Historical Context: Transgender Representation in Indian Cinema

Transgender individuals have a long but problematic history in Indian cinema. Prior to the 2010s, hijras were often portrayed as caricatures, comic relief, or menacing figures in films and popular culture . Iconic but problematic portrayals include Amitabh Bachchan as a eunuch in "Laawaris" (1981) and Rishi Kapoor's transvestite performance in "Rafoo Chakkar" (1975). These representations, while providing visibility, often reinforced stereotypes and failed to represent the complexity of transgender lives.

In the 2000s and 2010s, films such as "Laxmii" (2020), an adaptation of the Tamil film "Kanchana" (2011), continued this problematic tradition by centering transgender identity around supernatural possession and horror tropes .

7.2 The Legal Context: Supreme Court Rulings

Two landmark Supreme Court rulings fundamentally altered the legal and social context for transgender representation in India. In 2014, the Supreme Court recognized transgender people as a "third gender" and affirmed their rights as citizens. As one analysis notes, "Eunuchs were not even recognized in the nation until 2014. Their existence was not substantiated by any legal documents. They were ineligible for government aid of any type, adoption, marriage, or driving" . The 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality further expanded the scope for authentic representation .

7.3 The OTT Revolution

The rise of OTT platforms in India from the mid-2010s has been transformative for queer and transgender representation. As one study notes, "The representation of queer in the Indian OTT in web series has become progressively nuanced and diverse in a contemporary media society. While earlier depictions of queer portrayal were often limited to stereotypes and caricatures, modern web series have taken a more complex approach" .

7.4 Key Productions and Their Impact

"Taali" (2022) : The Jio Cinema web series starring Sushmita Sen as transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant represents a landmark in transgender representation. The series traces Sawant's journey from being a young boy named Ganesh to becoming a prominent activist, covering her battles for "identity, survival, and equality" . The series was a commercial and critical success, reaching an estimated 19 million viewers .

"Made in Heaven" (2019) : The Amazon Prime series features a closeted gay protagonist, Karan Mehra, and explores his struggles with identity and acceptance in a society where homosexuality was still criminalized .

"Breathe: Into the Shadows" (2020) : The series featured actress Shruti Bapna in a lesbian role, including intimate scenes with co-star Nithya Menen. Bapna noted that she approached the role by "diving into the psychology" of her character and did not feel apprehensive about the intimate scenes .

"Paurashpur" (2020) : The ALT Balaji and ZEE5 series features Milind Soman in the role of a third-gender character in a mythological setting. Soman described the character as someone who "is always fighting for the rights of third-gender people" .

7.5 Audience Reception and Commercial Success

Industry analysis suggests that transgender content has significantly wider appeal in the Indian market than LGBTQIA+ content in general. "Taali" was expected to be watched by 19 million Indians over its first six weeks, placing it at number 6 on the list of most-watched Hindi web-series of 2020 . The series received an Ormax Power Rating of 61, placing it in the top 10 of most-liked web-series .

7.6 Critical Perspectives: Transnormativity and Intersectionality

Critical scholarship has identified limitations in transgender representation, including:

1. **Transnormativity**: The tendency to condition acceptance on conformity to conventional gender norms .
2. **Lack of Intersectionality**: The absence of attention to caste, class, and religion in many representations .
3. **Cisgender Actors**: The persistence of cisgender actors playing transgender roles, which raises questions of authenticity .

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive, analytical, and qualitative research design, combining textual and visual analysis of selected web series with secondary analysis of scholarly literature, media reports, and industry data.

8.2 Primary Data Sources

The primary data sources for this research include:

1. **"Taali" (2021)** : Jio Cinema web series directed by Ravi Jadhav, starring Sushmita Sen as Shreegauri Sawant .
2. **"Made in Heaven" (2019)** : Amazon Prime Video series directed by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti .
3. **"Breathe: Into the Shadows" (2020)** : Amazon Prime Video series featuring Shruti Bapna in a lesbian role .
4. **"Paurashpur" (2020)** : ALT Balaji and ZEE5 series featuring Milind Soman in a third-gender role .

8.3 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources include:

1. **Scholarly Literature**: Peer-reviewed articles on transgender representation, media studies, and gender theory .

2. **Industry Reports:** Viewership data and audience analysis, including Ormax Media reports .
3. **Media Reports:** News articles and interviews with creators and actors .
4. **Critical Reviews:** Academic and journalistic critiques of representation .

8.4 Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis is guided by several theoretical frameworks:

1. **Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory:** To analyze how media texts construct meaning and shape audience understanding .
2. **Gender Performativity (Judith Butler) :** To examine how gender identity is performed and constructed through culturally coded practices .
3. **Transnormativity:** To assess the extent to which representations condition acceptance on conformity to normative gender roles .
4. **Intersectionality:** To identify the absence of attention to caste, class, religion, and other axes of marginalization .

8.5 Analytical Procedure

The selected web series were analyzed through the following procedure:

1. **Narrative Analysis:** Examination of plot structures, character arcs, and key plot points.
2. **Character Analysis:** Assessment of protagonist and supporting character development, particularly regarding gender identity, agency, and complexity.
3. **Visual Analysis:** Examination of visual elements including costuming, makeup, settings, and lighting.
4. **Audience Reception Analysis:** Review of public responses, critical reception, and industry data .
5. **Contextual Analysis:** Examination of the legal, social, and cultural context .

8.6 Limitations

1. The study focuses primarily on Hindi-language web series and may not represent regional productions.
2. The analysis is interpretive and reflects the researchers' theoretical perspectives.
3. Audience reception data is limited to industry reports and may not capture the full diversity of responses.
4. The study covers the period 2010-2022, with some productions (like "Taali") released in 2021, extending slightly beyond the period.

9. Strong Points of Transgender Representation

9.1 Unprecedented Visibility

The most significant strength of transgender representation in web series during 2010-2022 is the unprecedented visibility it provides. For the first time in Indian popular culture, transgender individuals are portrayed as complex human beings with agency, aspirations, and emotional depth. As one viewer commented, "Thank you for giving me someone I can aspire to be on screen. For the first time it feels like my story matters".

9.2 Biographical and Authentic Storytelling

Web series like "Taali" have brought real-life transgender stories to mainstream audiences. Based on the life of Shreegauri Sawant, the series traces her journey "from Gaali to Taali" and her fight for legal recognition of transgender people as citizens. This biographical approach provides authenticity and emotional resonance that fictional narratives often lack.

9.3 Engagement with Social Justice

Transgender representation in web series has engaged directly with issues of social justice, including:

1. **Legal Recognition:** "Taali" depicts Sawant's struggle for Supreme Court recognition of transgender people as a "third gender".
2. **Parental Rights:** The series shows Sawant's battle to become a mother, highlighting the fight for the "identity of mother".
3. **Employment and Education:** The series addresses the importance of "employment, education, and social acceptance for the community".
4. **Family Acceptance:** The series depicts both rejection and eventual acceptance, with Sawant's father initially unable to "understand his predicament" but ultimately supporting her.

9.4 Challenging Stereotypes

Web series have challenged long-standing stereotypes about transgender individuals. "Taali" explicitly addresses the stereotype of transgender people as those who "clap near people while asking money." Sawant's character asks one such individual, "Do you need a job or money?" and offers a visiting card. The series presents transgender people as professionals, activists, and citizens with diverse aspirations.

9.5 Commercial Success and Audience Reach

The commercial success of transgender-themed content demonstrates that Indian audiences are receptive to inclusive storytelling. "Taali" reached 19 million viewers, placing it at number 6 on the list of most-watched Hindi web-series of 2021. As industry analysts note, transgender content enjoys "significantly higher traction among Indian audiences" compared to content on other LGBTQIA+ sub-communities.

9.6 Expansion of the Digital Media Landscape

OTT platforms have enabled transgender representation that would be difficult or impossible in traditional broadcast media. The absence of censorship constraints has allowed creators to explore complex themes, including intimate relationships and social justice issues, with greater freedom.

10. Weak Points of Transgender Representation

10.1 Transnormative Narratives

The most significant weakness identified in transgender representation is the tendency toward transnormative narratives. In "Taali," the protagonist achieves acceptance only after transitioning and conforming to conventional ideals of femininity. As the series progresses, the protagonist becomes a "social worker and activist, fighting for the rights of others like her, sari-and-big-bindi in place, striding at the forefront of her flock". This suggests that acceptance is contingent on performing recognizable, culturally sanctioned femininity.

10.2 Cisgender Actors in Transgender Roles

A persistent issue in transgender representation is the casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles. Sushmita Sen, a cisgender woman, plays Shreegauri Sawant in "Taali". Similarly, Milind Soman, a cisgender man, plays a third-gender character in "Paurashpur". This practice raises questions about authenticity and the denial of opportunities to transgender actors. As one critic notes, "No one could have done what she did," referring to Sen's performance, but this praise also highlights the absence of transgender actors in lead roles.

10.3 Lack of Intersectional Analysis

Web series representation often "ignores important issues such as caste, class, and religion, creating a clean and idealized version of what it means to be transgender in India". Shreegauri Sawant's journey is depicted as a narrative of individual achievement rather than a struggle shaped by intersecting systems of caste, class, and regional marginalization. As one analysis notes, "While the web series and movies in question addresses a broad spectrum of societal issues, including casteism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, queerphobia, transphobia... it predominantly frames these issues through the lens of upper-caste perspective".

10.4 Depoliticization of Transgender Experience

The representation in "Taali" focuses on individual triumph over adversity, but it may also "sidestep the systemic violence, discrimination, and marginalization that most transgender people face". The series depicts scenes of trauma—such as a trans friend dying by suicide and "the hospital throws her body on the ground next to the overflowing bin"—but it also offers a feel-good narrative of eventual triumph that may obscure the ongoing struggles of the transgender community.

10.5 Commercial Co-optation

As with cause-led marketing, transgender representation in web series raises questions about commercial motives. The success of "Taali" on a free platform (Jio Cinema) suggests that OTT platforms are leveraging social issues for commercial gain. While this visibility is positive, it may also dilute the political potential of transgender narratives. As one critic notes, "the writing is so cheesy and one-dimensional that none of those performances ever manages to register an impact".

10.6 Limited Representation of Diversity

Most web series focus on a limited range of transgender experiences. The protagonist of "Taali" is a middle-class, upper-caste, urban activist. There is limited representation of transgender individuals from lower-caste and rural backgrounds, non-binary individuals, and those who do not conform to

conventional gender norms. The representation of marriage and motherhood as the telos of the transgender journey also reinforces heteronormativity.

11. Current Trends

11.1 The OTT Revolution and Diverse Content

The period 2010-2022 has witnessed a "progressive shift in how LGBTQ+ characters are being written, portraying them with nuances and complexity". OTT platforms have become the primary site for diverse and inclusive storytelling, with creators increasingly willing to tackle taboo subjects.

11.2 Biographical and Real-Life Narratives

There is a growing trend toward biographical web series based on real-life transgender individuals. "Taali" (2021) is a prominent example of this trend, telling the story of Shreegauri Sawant's life and activism.

11.3 Commercial Success and Mainstream Acceptance

Industry data suggests that transgender content enjoys "significantly higher traction among Indian audiences" than other LGBTQIA+ content. "Taali" reached 19 million viewers, demonstrating that inclusive storytelling can also be commercially viable. This success is likely to encourage more OTT platforms to invest in transgender content.

11.4 Cross-Platform Collaboration

Collaborations between production houses and streaming platforms have become a key trend. "Paurashpur" was a joint production of ALT Balaji and ZEE5. This collaboration allows for larger budgets and wider distribution, enabling more ambitious storytelling.

11.5 Regional and Mythological Contexts

The representation of transgender characters is expanding beyond contemporary urban settings into regional and mythological contexts. "Paurashpur" is set in a mythological kingdom, presenting "a fictional empire in a mythological setting". This expansion allows for exploration of transgender identity in diverse cultural contexts.

11.6 Increased Audience Engagement

Web series have enabled greater audience engagement and community building around transgender narratives. The positive reception of "Taali" on social media reflects a broader shift toward empathy and understanding. As one viewer noted, "The show will force you to consider things, and you probably won't instantly roll up your car glasses the next time you see a transgender person at a stop sign".

12. History of Transgender Representation in Indian Media

12.1 Pre-2010: Caricatures and Stereotypes

Prior to 2010, transgender representation in Indian cinema was predominantly shaped by stereotypes. Hijras were often portrayed as figures of ridicule, comic relief, or threat. Iconic but problematic portrayals include:

1. **Rishi Kapoor in "Rafoo Chakkar" (1975)** : A male actor playing a transvestite role .
2. **Amitabh Bachchan in "Laawaris" (1981)** : A eunuch character played by a male superstar .
3. **Horror and Supernatural Tropes**: Films like "Kanchana" (2011) and its Hindi adaptation "Laxmii" (2020) used trans identity as a vehicle for horror tropes .

12.2 2010-2014: The Legal Catalyst

The period 2010-2014 saw growing visibility, catalyzed by the 2014 Supreme Court ruling recognizing transgender people as a "third gender" . This legal recognition created a context for more respectful and authentic representation. Before this ruling, "Eunuchs were not even recognized in the nation... Their existence was not substantiated by any legal documents. They were ineligible for government aid of any type, adoption, marriage, or driving" .

12.3 2015-2018: Early OTT Experiments

The mid-2010s saw the emergence of OTT platforms and early experiments with transgender representation. "Made in Heaven" (2019) was released during this period, representing a landmark in LGBTQIA+ representation in the Indian OTT space. The series showcased the timeline "from the period when gay relationships or same-sex relations were illegal as a part of Section 377" .

12.4 2018-2020: Post-Decriminalization Expansion

The 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality opened new possibilities for representation . The period 2018-2020 saw a significant increase in LGBTQIA+ content, with series like "Four More Shots Please!" (2018), "Sacred Games" (2018), and "Made in Heaven" (2019) featuring queer characters . "Breathe: Into the Shadows" (2020) featured a lesbian character played by Shruti Bapna .

12.5 2021-2022: Mainstreaming and Acceptance

The period 2021-2022 witnessed the mainstreaming of transgender content, with large-scale productions and significant audience engagement. "Taali" (2021) represents the culmination of these trends, achieving both critical and commercial success .

13. Discussion

13.1 The Dual Nature of Transgender Visibility

The findings of this research reveal a fundamental tension in the representation of transgender identity in Indian web series. On one hand, digital platforms have created unprecedented visibility for transgender individuals, providing complex, nuanced portrayals that challenge stereotypes . The success of "Taali" demonstrates that Indian audiences are receptive to transgender narratives .

On the other hand, representation often operates within a "transnormative" framework, where acceptance is contingent upon conformity to normative ideals of femininity and heterosexuality . The protagonist of "Taali" achieves validation through traditional markers: bridal attire, lipstick, classical dance, and marriage. She does not challenge patriarchal norms; she seeks inclusion within them.

13.2 The Politics of Representation in a Commercial Context

"Taali" exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of progressive representation in a commercial context. The series' commercial success demonstrates that inclusive storytelling can align with market

imperatives. However, the political potential of such representation is constrained by commercial pressures. The series presents a "sanitized" version of transgender identity that is "palatable to a broad audience" .

13.3 Authenticity and Casting

The casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles remains a contentious issue. While Sushmita Sen's performance was praised, critics note that "No one could have done what she did," highlighting the absence of transgender actors in lead roles . This raises questions about authenticity and the denial of opportunities to transgender performers.

13.4 Intersectionality and the Erasure of Difference

The relative absence of intersectional analysis in transgender representation erases the diversity of transgender experiences. The protagonist of "Taali" is depicted as coming from an "affluent, presumably upper-caste family that can afford to support her transition" . This framing erases the experiences of transgender individuals from lower-caste, economically marginalized backgrounds who face compounded forms of discrimination.

13.5 The Kerala Context and Regional Progressive Politics

Kerala has emerged as a particularly progressive site for transgender representation, though "Taali" and other productions are pan-Indian in scope. Kerala's 2015 Transgender Policy, its high literacy rates, and its cinematic tradition of exploring gender fluidity have created a cultural environment conducive to progressive representation .

14. Results

14.1 Key Narratives and Their Impact

Web Series	Year	Platform	Key Characters	Key Themes
"Taali"	2021	Jio Cinema	Shreegauri Sawant (Sushmita Sen)	Identity, survival, equality, motherhood, legal recognition
"Made in Heaven"	2019	Amazon Prime	Karan Mehra (closeted gay)	Identity struggle, Section 377, social acceptance
"Breathe: Into the Shadows"	2020	Amazon Prime	Natasha (Shruti Bapna, lesbian)	Intimacy, identity, psychological exploration
"Paurashpur"	2020	ALT Balaji/ZEE5	Boris (Milind Soman, third gender)	Rights, mythological context, historical representation

14.2 Audience Reception

Metric	Finding
"Taali" Viewership	19 million viewers (estimated)
"Taali" Omax Power Rating	61 (top 10 most-liked web-series)
Transgender Content Acceptance	Significantly higher than other LGBTQIA+ content in India
Viewer Impact	Increased empathy and reduced stigma

14.3 Representation Strengths

Strength	Description
Visibility	Unprecedented visibility for transgender individuals
Biography	Real-life stories of transgender activists
Social Justice	Engagement with legal rights, employment, education
Stereotype Challenge	Countering stereotypes of transgender identity
Commercial Success	Market viability of inclusive content

14.4 Representation Weaknesses

Weakness	Description
Transnormativity	Acceptance contingent on conformity to gender norms
Cisgender Casting	Transgender roles played by cisgender actors
Intersectional Erasure	Lack of attention to caste, class, religion
Depoliticization	Sidestepping systemic discrimination

Weakness	Description
Commercial Co-optation	Social issues used for commercial gain

15. Conclusion

15.1 Summary of Findings

This research has examined the evolution of transgender representation in Indian web series from January 2010 to December 2022, with particular attention to how digital platforms have disrupted traditional gender binaries and created spaces for visibility and resistance.

The findings reveal a significant transformation in how transgender identities are portrayed in Indian popular culture. OTT platforms have enabled unprecedented visibility for transgender individuals, with productions like "Taali," "Made in Heaven," "Breathe: Into the Shadows," and "Paurashpur" offering nuanced, complex portrayals that challenge stereotypes and engage with social justice issues. The commercial success of these productions, particularly "Taali" with its 19 million viewers, demonstrates that Indian audiences are receptive to inclusive storytelling.

However, the analysis also reveals persistent limitations. Representation often operates within a transnormative framework, where acceptance is contingent upon conformity to normative ideals of femininity and heterosexuality. The casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles raises questions of authenticity. The relative absence of intersectional analysis erases the diversity of transgender experiences, particularly regarding caste, class, and religion.

15.2 Hypothesis Testing

The findings support the alternative hypothesis (H2): **While web series have created unprecedented visibility for transgender identities, their representation remains constrained by commercial imperatives, transnormative narratives, and the absence of intersectional analysis.**

The hypothesis is supported by the following evidence:

- Progressive Visibility:** Web series provide unprecedented visibility and complex portrayals of transgender identities.
- Transnormative Framing:** Acceptance is often conditional on conformity to conventional gender norms.
- Commercial Constraints:** Representation is shaped by market imperatives that limit political potential.
- Intersectional Absence:** Caste, class, and religion are largely absent from representation.

15.3 Implications

The findings have significant implications for how transgender representation in Indian media is understood and developed. The commercial success of transgender content suggests that inclusive storytelling can be market-viable, encouraging further investment in representation. However, the limitations identified suggest that visibility alone is insufficient. Transformative representation

requires attention to authenticity, intersectionality, and the structural inequalities that shape transgender lives.

15.4 Contribution to the Field

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on transgender representation in Indian media by providing a comprehensive analysis of web series from 2010 to 2022. It highlights both the strengths and limitations of current representation and provides recommendations for more authentic, diverse, and transformative portrayals.

16. Suggestions and Recommendations

16.1 For Content Creators and Platforms

Authentic Casting: Platforms should prioritize casting transgender actors in transgender roles to ensure authentic representation and provide opportunities for transgender performers .

Moving Beyond Transnormativity: Creators should strive to represent transgender individuals in diverse contexts that do not merely conform to normative gender roles. While visibility is valuable, representation should not condition acceptance on performance of conventional femininity or heteronormative life trajectories .

Addressing Intersectional Realities: Creators should attend to the intersectional realities of transgender lives, including issues of caste, class, religion, and region. This would avoid creating "a clean and idealized version of what it means to be transgender in India" .

Balancing Aspiration and Authenticity: While aspirational narratives are valuable, they should be balanced with attention to the real challenges transgender people face. The creative team of "Taali" acknowledged that the series "depicts a utopian situation," but it's important to "not create unrealistic expectations or erase the marginalization that most transgender people face" .

Community Involvement: Creators should involve transgender individuals and communities in the creative process, ensuring that "at any cost was to alienate the LGBTQIA community in any way" . Community consultation should be part of the creative process rather than an afterthought.

16.2 For Regulatory Bodies

Anti-Discrimination Guidelines: Regulatory bodies should develop guidelines for the representation of transgender individuals in media, ensuring that such representations are respectful, accurate, and non-stereotypical .

Diversity Requirements: Regulators should consider requiring platforms to demonstrate diversity in their content, including representation of transgender individuals .

Incentivizing Inclusive Content: Industry awards and recognition should be given to productions that demonstrate excellence in inclusive representation .

16.3 For Educators and Researchers

Developing Critical Media Literacy: Educators should develop media literacy curricula that teach students to analyze transgender representation critically, including understanding "the difference between progressive visibility and substantive challenges to normative structures" .

Expanding Research: Researchers should expand the study of transgender representation in Indian media, analyzing multiple productions across different platforms and regional contexts .

Intersectional Analysis: Research should adopt an intersectional approach, examining how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, and other categories of identity .

16.4 For Brands and Advertisers

Authentic Integration: Brands should integrate inclusive representation authentically into their content rather than treating it as a tactical strategy .

Long-Term Commitment: Brands should demonstrate long-term commitment to inclusion rather than engaging in one-off "cause-led" campaigns .

Supporting Transgender Talent: Companies should support transgender talent by hiring transgender actors, writers, and directors .

17. Future Scope of the Study

17.1 Emerging Research Areas

Longitudinal Analysis: Future research should conduct longitudinal analyses to track how transgender representation in web series evolves over time, identifying patterns and shifts .

Regional and Linguistic Diversity: Research should examine transgender representation across Indian languages and regions, including Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi productions .

Comparative Studies: Comparative research on transgender representation across countries would reveal how cultural, legal, and commercial contexts shape representation .

Audience Reception Studies: Empirical studies of audience reception would provide insight into how different groups decode transgender-themed content and its impact on attitudes .

Intersectional Analysis: Research examining the intersection of gender with caste, class, religion, and region would provide a more nuanced understanding .

Transgender Creators: Research on the perspectives and practices of transgender creators would provide insights into authentic representation.

17.2 Opportunities for Policy and Advocacy

Guidelines for Inclusive Content: There is a need for more detailed guidelines for the representation of transgender individuals in media .

Promoting Transgender Employment: The entertainment industry should be encouraged to hire transgender professionals in creative roles .

Supporting Transgender-Led Content: Funding and support for transgender-led media production would counter commercial co-optation and enable more authentic representations .

17.3 Future Industry Trends

AI and Data-Driven Storytelling: The increasing use of data-driven advertising may make it easier for platforms to target specific audiences with inclusive content, though it may also lead to segmentation .

Globalization and Cultural Exchange: Globalization may lead to the adoption of international standards of representation, including greater inclusion of transgender individuals .

Consumer Activism: Increasing consumer awareness of brand ethics will likely put pressure on platforms to be accountable for their representation .

References

1. Yadav, A., & Verma, A. (2021). Hope, Inspiration, and Social Injustice of Transgender: Review of the film *Taali*. *Journal of Communication and Management*, 4(1), 56-59.
2. ABP News. (2020). Breath 2 में समलैंगिक किरदार में हैं श्रुति बापना. *ABP News*.
3. Swami Vivekananda University Press. (2021). Portrayal of Transgender in Indian Cinema, with special reference to 'Taali', an Indian webseries - A critical review.
4. ETV Bharat. (2020). 'ब्रीद 2' में अपने समलैंगिक किरदार पर बोलीं श्रुति बापना.
5. IJARPS. (2021). Voicing the Silence of "Taali" Through the Lens of Media: A Sociological Analysis. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Progressive Spectrums*, 2(2).
6. Sangbad Pratidin. (2020). Milind Soman in third gender character in Paurashpur. *Sangbad Pratidin*.
7. Kapoor, S., & Thakkar, M. (2021). Transgender content: First among equals on acceptance. *Ormax Media*.
8. Maitreyi College. (2020). LGBTQ+ Representations in Popular Culture. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*.
9. Scientific Temper. (2020). Queer Representation on Indian OTT Platforms. *The Scientific Temper*, 15(2).
10. Gujarati Mid-day. (2020). Mira Nair creates series on lesbian relationships for Netflix. *Gujarati Mid-day*.
11. INFLIBNET. (2022). LGBTQIA+ Representation in Indian Web Series.
12. Amar Ujala. (2020). Ekta Kapoor's new web series on lesbian relationships. *Amar Ujala*.
13. Social Studies Foundation. (2021). Intersectionality in Indian Media.
14. Prisma. (2020). Vilom: LGBTQ Life in India.
15. Mizoram University. (2021). Media Representation of Third Gender: A Study of Select Hindi Web Series.
16. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
17. Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
18. Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. Harvard University Press.
19. Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding. In *Culture, Media, Language*. Hutchinson.



20. Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage.
21. Mathew, S. M., & B, M. (2020). Representation, stereotypes and change: transgender narratives in Indian advertising. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.
22. Paul, R. B., & Benziker, P. T. (2021). A Critical Analysis of Transgender Visibility and Respectability in Bhima Jewellery's 'Pure as Love' Campaign. *International Journal of Research - GRANTHAALAYAH*, 13(7), 135-142.
23. Saradhambika, K., & Kumar, A. (2020). "Sneaky Sexism" in Indian TV Commercials: A Study of Gender Representation in Selected Ads. *Journal of Creative Communications*.