The Age of Renaissance in OTT Platforms – A Critical Analysis of Web Series Family Man and Pataal Lok

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ABSTRACT

This paper would take a qualitative look at the popularity of web series on Over – The – Top platforms. With the advent of social media in the 21st century, and decreasing attention span of audiences, there was a rise of short content programs across platforms. But with the launch of Over -The -Top services especially Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hot star, Voot and many more, the long formats of storytelling are back on screen. Watching habits of viewers, emphasis on quality of content and production. Due to accessibility of the internet Over the top platforms are getting numerous viewership. Whether someone is traveling in flight, bus or car or working spaces, waiting outdoors or indoors, people are hooked up with their mobile phone's screens and catching their favorite new episode of a series or any movie. The objective of the study will be to explore reasons for the popularity of web series that has given a new lease of life to long format content. The researcher would assess reasons behind developing of new likeliness for long form content among viewers with coming of OTT platform which was possible due to binge watching. The paper will deal with long format content available on the Over-the-Top platforms. The study will find the connection between resurgence of long format content and the various Over – the – Top platforms. It will discuss the future content of OTT services and find out the acceptance of Indian audience to watch Web – series as their main preference.

Keywords : *Long format content, Web series, Family Man, Paatal Lok, Amazon Prime.*

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2017 - 2018 will be remembered as the milestone which brought revolution in the world of audio-visual content and halted the popularity of the scrap content of the ongoing television shows from which there seemed no escape. As soon as audiences turned their eyeballs to OTT platforms and such platforms experienced an upsurge in subscribers, without much ado, robust growth in content production was witnessed. Netflix reportedly dedicated close to Rs 600 crore per year for original content in India and on the other hand Amazon invested around Rs 2,230 crore for original Indian content in 2017 (*Exchange4media*). In an interview, Punit Goenka, MD & CEO of ZEE, said that in the next two-three years, a major share of the investment will be made in the digital space. Monika Shergill, Head, Content, Viacom18 Digital Ventures reiterated by saying that 2018 is a year that shows us the early signs of the magnitude and popularity of OTT platforms. She claims that OTT has a huge potential of doing large business and also this large-format content reflects the global standards. However, the launch of the first Indian OTT platform can be traced to 2008 when BigFlix, launched by Reliance Entertainment. OTT gained significant momentum in India when both Ditto TV (Zee) and Sony liv were launched in the Indian market around 2013. DittoTV was an aggregator platform containing shows across all media channels including Star, Sony, Viacom, Zee, etc. As these Over-The-Top services spread their wings, especially Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hot star, Voot and many more, the long formats of storytelling are back on screen. The OTT platforms hold so much importance as the digital entertainment industry is one of the most rapidly growing sectors. There are currently about 40 providers of over-the-top media services (OTT) in India. In fiscal year 2018, the OTT market in India was worth ₹2,150 crore (₹21.5 billion, US$ 303 million as of 2018), and its value grew to ₹35 billion in 2019.

Advancement in subscription of OTT platforms

Over the years, OTT business has only increased and the Covid 19 pandemic which left the entire world flabbergasted, was a blessing for OTT. Amazon Prime Video had 5.83 million subscribers as compared to 4.34 million in 2019. While Netflix added more than a million paying users to reach 3.08 million subscribers in 2020. According to Omdia (which excludes subscriptions from bundled offers), as of December 2020, Disney+ Hotstar had 18.69 million subscribers, a big surge from 5.36 million in 2019 (*Omdia*).

According to the data obtained from The Financial Express, Amazon Prime Video had 5.83 million subscribers — up from 4.34 million in 2019 — while Netflix added more than a million paying users to reach 3.08 million subscribers in 2020. The subscriber count

of Zee5 and SonyLiv stood at 2.7 million (up from 1.99 million) and 1.81 million (up from 6.5 lakh), respectively, in 2020. The reports published by the Boston Consulting Group titled 'Entertainment Goes Online' predict that the Indian OTT market will arrive at $5 billion in size by 2023. The growth in the subscribers will penetrate to the rural market of India. There are plethora of reasons which have contributed towards the immense growth such as affordable data, increased number of mobile users and development of regional content. In the 21st century, the increasing use of social media, and decreasing attention span of audiences has led to a rise of short content programs across platforms. Watching habits of viewers has forced content makers to emphasize on quality of content and production. Due to increasing accessibility of the internet, over the top platforms are getting numerous viewership. Also, because of the launch of over-the-top services especially Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hot star, Voot and many more, the long formats of storytelling are back on screen. The various content on Over-the-Top platform is gaining acceptability and popularity in the Indian audiences. The continuously evolving ecosystem in our country has brought many opportunities for all and most all the industry benefited from it. The busy professionals and the millennial viewers have wholeheartedly accepted the long format content which they can watch at their convenient hour.

Revolutionary content of the OTT platforms

There are some web series like Four More Shots which stand out to showcase women as human beings for a change, who are making their individual identity without depending on men for their upliftment. These web series have challenged the portrayal of women on the screen like never before. The web series are popular as they are uncensored and show what the creator wants to present before the audience (De Das & Agarwal, 2020). Usually the traits like emotionality, prudence, co-operation, a communal sense, and compliance are associated with femininity. On the contrary, masculinity tends to be associated more with traits like rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism and ruthlessness (Aaliya, 2012). Certainly, such narratives are undergoing a change from the past and stereotypes that were dominant (Dey, 2022) before are breaking away from the long shackles of a wronged wife, a domineering mother -in- law, bitter relationships between sisters - in - law. These images resemble, in some way, a certain section of society but considerably fails to do justice with the changing and shifting patterns of identity of women (Mishra, 2015) (Manzar & Aravind, 2019) (Jaggi, 2011). In a content-saturated digital marketplace, brands are constantly looking for ways to grab the attention of the audience. Well-executed long-form content is yet another supreme plan to build your brand's reputation for in-depth research, contextual expertise, and a mastery of your market niche (https://teamthunderfoot.com/).

Popularity of Web Series Streaming on Over-the-Top Platforms

The rise of OTT platforms and web series in India are responsible for a new evolution in the media and entertainment sector. According to Ernst & Young, there has been a 49% growth in digital subscription revenue in 2020. The perception of Indian audiences towards changes in the Indian television and cinema industry changing the convenience of the medium and new experiment. According to the recent PWC report, smart penetration in India is expected to reach around 99% by 2022. And the same with OTT platform are expected to grow at CAGR of 22% by 2022 to approximately INR 6000 Crores. A large number of audiences under 35, OTT platforms will be focus on youth friendly content. The growth in OTT platforms especially in web series (long format content) in the rising level disposable income i.e. an average Indian consumer spends. Amazon prime was first introduced in 2016. Now it has over 38 million unique users.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the paper is to:

- To critically assess the depiction of lead characters of the web series Family Man and Paatal Lok (long format content).
- To analyze the common factors (leitmotif) of the above two web Series streaming on Amazon Prime.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to attain the research objectives, the research methodology adopted by the researcher is qualitative. The research attempts to conduct a content analysis of the web series Family Man 2 and Patal Lok from Amazon Prime. The web series selected for the study were critically analyzed on various parameters such as - storyline, narrative, characterization and similarity of plots. The researcher makes an effort to understand the common themes in both the web series, which makes them so popular with the audiences despite being long format content; and a thorough narrative analysis helps the researcher to discover the common themes hidden in these web series.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Analysis of Lead Characters of Paatal Lok streaming on Amazon Prime

Table 1: Paatal Lok web series

Web series Name	Paatal Lok
Cast	Jaideep Ahlawat, Neeraj Kabi, Abhishek Banerjee, Gul Panag, Swastika Mukherjee, Ishwak Singh, Mairembam Ronaldo Singh, Niharika Lyra Dutt
Director	Avinash Arun, Prosit Roy
Streaming On	Amazon Prime

Plot: Haathi Ram is a constable by profession and has seen a lot of filth and violence in his life while discharge of his duties. Paatal Lok is a crime thriller and portrays Hathi Ram as a man who is honest to the core of his heart who is assigned with the investigation of a high-profile case of a murder attempt of a prominent television journalist Sanjay Mehra (Neeraj Kabi). In the process of judiciously solving the case, he gets quite cynical, to the point of losing his job. Even after that he cannot dissociate himself and is obsessed with the idea of seizing the criminal and lending justice.

Narrative: In the web series the protagonist compares himself to a thrilling bildungsroman. Nine episodes, 45 minutes each, the show underlines India's messy, contradictory realities, and the control of power in Indian police. There's the elite liberal India in Neeraj Kabi who played the acclaimed journalist, Sanjeev Mehra in *Paatal Lok.* In the series, when the audience expects him to come up with the truth and suddenly, he asks the public why must journalists have their integrity when they are being harassed and insinuated, it questions the one in power. When news channels are mixing entertainment with journalism, he pioneered investigative journalism and uncovered many scams without expecting any returns. This lack of social acknowledgment led him to give up his journalistic morals and he joined the bandwagon. When he thought, losing his honesty would make him a powerful man, it just ended up making him lonely, and his close ones faced the consequences. His character was introduced with no backstories and he was just supposed to mimic the 90s journalists. There was a plausibility of the whole thing being caricaturist but his performance penetrated that and the outcome seemed as if he created that character.

Vishal Tyagi aka Hathoda Tyagi, the story of that dead-eyed beast from the netherworld of Paatal Lok who does not hold any compunction for killing more than 45 people with his

hammer might surprise the audience. It shows the layered portrayal of the rot in our society. When Donullia Gujjar entered politics, Tyagi became his most loyal and lethal assassin. Directors have associated his death with a demon from Hindu mythology, *Hiranyakashyap* who could not be killed by a friend or a foe. The quirky, funny boy successfully pulled off what has got to derive from a place of aggression. Gul Panag played the role of Mrs. Hathiram Chaudhary aka Renu Chaudhary, a cop's wife, and a homemaker who resuscitated her family. She adored her son as his father was mentally deranged by social responsibilities. She had this urge of using English words like 'brother' and 'sister' during a conversation which indicates her desire to be in that group of 'elite English-speaking' wives. In a scene, when drunk Hathiram slapped her, she slapped him back before his colleague, to show that being a strong woman she would not tolerate domestic violence. From an Indian perspective, it is never acceptable and she just could not file for a divorce or storm off with her son. She was pulling strings to keep things together.

Swastika Mukherjee was given the role of an immensely affectionate wife of a crooked news editor. When she was anxious, neglected, and insecure, she put all her affection into Sabitri, her pet. She was playing an ebullient Bengali character and when the film began, she got into the skin of the character, she behaved like the character rather than acting like one. She portrayed a woman whose dignity was in question, who failed as a wife, who has insecurities with her own body, and mentally exhausted. Her character broke the streak of a social misconception of labelling people who are taking therapy for their mental welfare and received congratulatory messages from professional psychiatrists. Another character from the series, Jaideep Ahlawat was shown as a middle-class man Hathiram Chaudhary. In the wake of crimes when Delhi was not getting any safer and police ought to follow their duty, Hathiram Chaudhary, a police officer exemplified the simmering, discontented middle class who come across political biasness. When given the first big case he tries to find the root cause of the conspiracy without demur. While investigating the cause of the assassination, he uncovers shocking shreds of evidence and insights that poked the hypocritic systems. Being a government employee and a responsible father who could not afford to make any complaints, his life was no less than hell. However, when he made a communal remark on that suspected Muslim convict that shows he was not free from his own biases.

Ishwak Singh was put in a Kashmiri Muslim junior policeman role of Imran Ansari. He was assigned with Hathi Ram for investigating the case and even in the police department, he faced communal prejudices but brushed it off. He is that wide-eyed idealist with astute perfection, no anger, no disrespect, no intimidation, and a bit sarcastic yet considerate to people. He has a strong sense of justice, loyalty, patience, and a propensity for hard work.

In the series, Jagjeet Sandhu played a loud, foul-mouthed lean guy character from a small village in Punjab, Tope Singh. The character made its first appearance in the third episode and was identified by another name Chakku. Growing up he was often beaten up by his drunkard father, and bullied by the Jatt upper castes which made him ferocious enough to murder them. His narrative portrays communal and casteist India.

Analysis of Lead Characters of the Family Man 2 streaming on Amazon Prime

Table 2: Family Man 2

Web series Name	**Family Man 2**
Cast	Manoj Bajpayee, Samantha Akkineni and ensemble.
Director	Raj & DK
Streaming On	Amazon Prime

Plot: The second season of Family Man 2 is widely popular and pivots around transcending class and nationalities. When one character spattered black ink at the politician it conveyed the victimization of communal violence in the country. The climactic twist of patriots and partisans, and the indictment of personal and national bias have penetrated the political minefield. The masterful tonal variations, technical finesse, the excruciating close-ups make the whole series unpredictable.

Narrative: The story is based on Srikant Tiwari who works for TASC and how his intrepid lifestyle at work does not go along with his dull family life. In the first season, the team TASC got to know about 'Operation Zulfiqar' where ISIS was involved, India's security was being risked, and the next thing was shown mechanics, ISI officers, and ISIS recruits in Pakistan. After first season's threat from Islamic extremists, this season they came together with Tamil rebels trying to choreograph an attack on the Indian and Sri Lankan Prime Ministers. In *The Family Man 2,* directors rectified the 'filmmaking inequity' and showed the discomfiting and perceptive political commentary. The performances of Manoj Bajpai, Priyamani, and Sharib Hashmi, the trust and compassion they have shown to the directors, to the audience have made *The Family Man 2* one of the best so far.

Manoj Bajpayee, the veteran actor was held as the main protagonist in The Family Man season 1. In the series, he was shown to swap between characters, he is a senior analyst in the TASC who works in a fictitious anti-terrorism unit, and also a Family Man. Although he was mild-mannered but never thought twice to pull punches at his enemies. His profession did not allow him to reveal his identity even to his family which left them completely baffled

and put his kids' welfare at stake. He was never a homebody, had this tendency to get involved in hostile conditions. In Season 2, he joined a normal corporate job just to get away from the running and to get back his family. And this Srikant 2.0 became uptight, well versed with his conversations but he wanted something more than formal shirts and modest salaries, that rush was missing. It is said that sometimes knowledge is a burden and when Srikant got to know of his wife's affair, he lost his corporate pretence. And his regret got real with that TASC member's death. He just ditched the western façade and joined TASC again. Suchitra Tiwari whom we have all seen as Srikant's wife in the series was the one to compensate for her husband's prolonged absences. She started as a college lecturer but ended up joining her friend Arvind's start-up. She was a very adoring mother but her impatience took over her sanity. She has been portrayed as a typical working wife, a multitasking woman, and not afraid of responsibilities. Her character also highlighted the phases of common Indian households where the generation gap made it difficult for her to get along with her teenage daughter Dhriti. When she tried to open up to her husband, he was never there which left her with emotional baggage. They even went to a marriage counsellor where Srikant mocked him for mouthing philosophical quotes. After the release, many women came up commenting, alike *Suchi* they want somebody to listen to. In the first season, Srikant was suspicious of Suchi's affair with her colleague, Arvind, but in the last season she finally opened up to him when the guilt took over. But the question *'What happened in Lonavala?'* stays as a cliff hanger, the filmmakers left it to the audience.

In the series, Dhriti Tiwari has become Srikant's and Suchitra's teenage daughter. Just like most teenagers, her rebellious streaks kept putting her in trouble. Even after so much fighting, in the end, she always stood by her family. She fell in love with a person who was associated with a terrorist group. Dhriti is that rebellious teen who never comes back before curfew, outlaws all the rules, never listens to her mother, answers back often, acts too big for her age, and scolds her parents but her character's story arc has added to the TRP. The creepy mind of people sequenced the character in a negative light, as Satyajit Ray mentioned India has a fairly backward audience and it is yet to be changed. Bringing a common phenomenon, the audience started making uncivil personal remarks. They forgot to separate an actor's work from the fictional person they have played. Atharv Tiwari, Srikant's son was that mischievous brat who is his parents' favourite yet irritates them a lot. He was confident enough to flaunt whatever he learned on that particular day. With his father serving the nation and his mother being in corporate he came across multiple challenges like poor communication, lack of empathy, and excessive criticism. The constant conflicts, hostility, and aggression in the family affected both siblings. Sharib Hashmi has jaywalked behind the scenes in MTV Roadies Season 2 to Bollywood cinema. He has played the character

of Jayavant Kashinath Talpade aka JK. He was also working for the National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India. Talpade was basically Srikant's pal and he has been a great help to Srikant's unsettled family. He is ardent in nature, always caring for his friend's dysfunctional life which portrays the cause of his sensitivity. He risked his life multiple times but always stood by Srikant's side. In season 2, he took a bullet, and his pulse almost stopped but being a loyal officer, he kept serving the nation. Even after Srikant left TASC, they were still in contact, discussing critical situations. He always followed the chain of command even in tense circumstances. He was always upfront, never felt inferior yet emerged victorious. Srikant and JK are much alike in MCU's 'Falcon' and 'Winter Soldier'. When people got bored seeing those mindless South Indian actors in multi-crore Bollywood films, Jayavant Talpade has become a stand out by his source of humor in the show. Uday Mahesh's role in Chellam sir in The Family Man 2 was one of the most discussed characters on social media for a while. Even with the cameo appearances, he has put forward with the fans. When Srikant was falling down a blind alley, Chellam sir popped up. Fans even compare him with google, he literally had answers for everything. He was operational in Sri Lanka when Srikant sought his help for the TASC officers' murder case. He was pivotal in Srikant's major downsides. He was shown as an experienced spy who is done with his spy life and does not get involved in daily tasks. His character took the imagination of the viewers. He is the one India's small screen fans were waiting for, his character portrays calm, wise, attentive, and composed expressions. In season 2, Samantha Ruth Prabhu has taken up the role of a Sri Lankan Tamil liberation fighter Raji. She was the military person with few words and fewer emotions. When critics put a flag before her skin tone, it was told that her character is not to preach any context of beauty but it is demanded for nation. Raji's story acknowledged the stories of women in the Eelam war.

Leitmotif of the selected web series

The web series offer pristine content to the audiences which is the chief reason of their earning fame. But interestingly, there are certain leitmotifs that are present in web series analyzed in this paper. Characters in both the web series seem to be difficult and frustrated in their personal lives. Another motif which is strikingly present is the estrange couple hood. In Family Man, the lead couple are seen trying to aid their somewhat broken marriage and the conflict is both internal and external. The protagonist is seen combating the world and his sentiments within. Similarly, the protagonists of Paatal Lok cannot escape the wrath of the internal struggle which is a reflection of the complex characters.

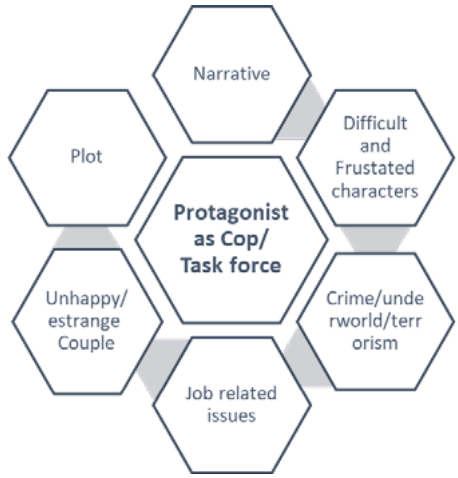


Figure 1: Leitmotif that emerges out of the web series

They are doomed in their personal struggles which portray a failed family life, strained relationships and sadness. The complexities of professional life are often at blame for snatching away the happiness of the protagonist's life and thereby making them 'frustrated'. Indian society has been divided into caste hierarchies and it is obvious that the socio-cultural practices would reflect upon the source of entertainment, cinema. Putting caste in question, it can be argued that *dalits* were forcibly put in line with the dominant culture as meek, docile, shabby, and underconfident individuals. The cinematic narratives do not cover the actual struggle against caste oppression. In *Patal Lok*, four people were detained on suspicion of orchestrating the murder of an acclaimed journalist. In the very first episode, it shows racism against North Easterners, when the policewoman called a northeastern Nepali and used a pejorative term for her. In ep 2, there was Islamophobic content where the Muslim policeman was asked about khatna ie. circumcision, and he was insulted when he failed to catch another Muslim criminal. In ep 3, it was enmity between two Sikh castes. In ep 4, it was religious hatred between Hindu and Muslim policemen, a Muslim policeman was sleeping during the Aarti and others were pissed at him. Also, again Islamophobia when that lady in the upper post insinuated a Muslim civil service candidate for his selection. In ep 5, CBI candidates were shown to have affiliation with ISI and they misled everyone. In ep 6, a woman was seen to feel uneasy on a train just by looking at a Muslim co-passenger eating meat, in the next scene the train stops, and people wearing "Bhagwa", chanting "Ram Lala Hum Aaenge, Mandir Wahin Banayenge" forcibly got in and the Muslim guy was beaten on a rumor of carrying beef, he kept saying that was chicken but nobody listened. In ep 7, scenes are included stereotyping of Dalits and Gurjars where a policeman says Dalits are like

Hindu deity Sheshnag and Gurjars are like dacoits. Ep 8 featured stereotyping of the brahmin community and caste-based slur slurs, a brahmin girl was portrayed as a prostitute when she was asked if her father is aware of her involvement with multiple lower caste people, another example where someone said, 'he is the brahmin lord, he eats and shits sweets'. But somehow the audience has normalized the antinational narratives and shown warmheartedness to the inhuman murderer like 'Hathoda Tyagi' cause apparently, he has a heart too. Both the web series revolve around terrorism/crime/underworld and the main protagonist is a cop/member of task force, which also represents the fact that such characterization attract eyeballs.

CONCLUSION

The digital has brought with itself endless possibilities of the resurgence of original long format content in terms of audio-visual production. The characters of both the web series are woven minutely and the struggles of their daily personal and professional lives are shown with much ado. The way the characters present a picture of the society is also quite interesting. The issue of caste, estrange relationships, power struggle corruption, underworld, politics are raised through the story of the characters and force the audience to question the order of the society and the way forward. With the help of characters like 'Bhagwa', contemporary issues of religion clashes are picked up which are not in lieu with the postulates of a secular state. The study of the web series has definitely raised the popularity and consumption of 'long format content' and the audience's acceptance of long format content and they are remaining loyal to the many sequels of the same web series.

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