

Youth and the Streaming Tradition: Representations and the Indian Turn

Anusha A. J.

UGC Senior Research Fellow

PG & Research Dept. of English, All Saints' College,
Research Centre, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, Kerala, India

Email – anujes10@gmail.com

Abstract: *While the public sphere in India is constantly transformed by the paradigmatic shift in the communicative and media economies, what sustains these changes are most often the representative imagery and the perspectival negotiations that seep in and are informed by the milieu and its cultural tendencies. As a country with one of the most diverse and higher set of youth population, a large part of the consumption have been directed by and towards these groups, However, the query of Indian turn in the relatively new phenomenon have also necessitated a reading of the delegations on the sphere, particularly of its largest target audience, the youth and its nexus of interest with the representations of the cultural and social dialogues in the nation. This paper therefore attempts to read into the variable dialogic interventions and representations of and by the youth in the streaming tradition.*

Key Words: *Youth culture, Representative imagery, politics of representation, national culture, streaming tradition, Indian media.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

To say that there are a number of imaginaries to the definitions of youth and nation which are redefined everyday would be agreeable to anyone who comprehends the notions of politics of understanding. While it has not without been multifarious inscrutable analysis, the boards where these images are compiled upon have changed. While it began with the image board of oral which later became written to old media to new and now the social. Beyond the social media there are also determinate boards of images created which has played to contribute or counter the narratives of existing tropes on India. This paper is an attempt to read into one such emerging tradition with millions of followers, the streaming tradition, here limited to the original productions. This is not big in India currently but there definitely is an ongoing process of cord cutting. The youth of a nation forms the target audience, the consumer as well as most often the bearer of anxiety of the power of the images and the fear of its influence. Despite much being deliberated on the academic and the social media public sphere, there is a lacuna in terms of discerning the images of this palpably problematic equation in the streaming tradition. With greater consumers for Amazon Prime, Netflix and other streaming media servers reaching across the world, it becomes significant to read the visual symbols of narration that lead to the paradigm of India for the world. This paper is therefore an attempt to map the above mentioned national cultural- youth paraphernalia across original productions in the streaming platforms.

2. REPRESENTATIONS & STREAMING IMAGERY :

Social constructivism theory claims that other people socially construct an image about a country or a group of individuals. Along the way new information is added, if they chose to acknowledge that as valid for them. When the academic perceptions and real life instances are taken into consideration, the idea that is perpetuated is that of India seen by the outside world with a Eurocentric view and still does. Media, it is notable that all those were not easily accessible to the world a few decades back. Across of boards, films, and old media, it is notable that all those were not particularly accessible to the world a few decades ago. But with internet, the world of images has exploded. A dynamic India and its images of cultural indentations, the nation, youth and the facets of development yet systemic flaws, the psychogeography of the citizens could be read in these narratives. Originally produced by the global services like Netflix and directed by an Indian ensemble, these productions or narratives are critical to the images propagated. These have a higher production value, currently quasi censored and feature a catchy content.

3. TRACING THE SHIFT :

One of the fastest growing subscription services in the world, Netflix came to India in 2014. However it was in the 2017-2018 period that this became popular. So is the case with most other on demand subscription services as well. This was also a consequence of the Jio Boom. In addition to that the Ernst & Young analysis finds that the “average monthly data consumed by a user almost tripled to 3.9 GB in 2017”(1) post that data bundle initiative. With more data at cheaper rates, the medium became a widely used platform which in turn positively affected the usage of its services,

including these. While another report by Statista, the market research analysis portal, reveals that “over 70 percent of digital Indians subscribe to one or more video-streaming apps”. If the EY-FICCI report is anything to go by then in the year 2017, over quarter million videos were watched online, there by registering an unprecedented growth of sixty four percent from 2016 (2). While analysis experts Ernst & Young have predicted the viewing charts to grow to a level of Five hundred million by the year 2020, India would therefore be attempting to move for the largest streaming video economy in the world lead by the US in front. It is the change in the framework of the services which has been brought forth by its ease of access. Affordability and quality content also boost the growth of the same.

The top revenue-generating streaming service in the country, Netflix initially came with its set of specials and later has tried to begin building its production base with originals in India. With a supposed five million subscribers and growing, it realised that India would need more to place itself in its markets and these originals would have to be content driven. It is believed that *Sacred Games* (2108), Netflix’s first original series in India, has contributed majorly in growing its subscriber base this year.

Rated nine in the IMDB scale, vouching to international viewers, *Sacred Games* is one of the critical pieces of narratives in the representation of India and its youth to the rest of the world. It offers the story of both beyond any visual narrative of a two and hour would do. This was a possibility of making the culturally complex plot better accessible. According to various Audience analysis reports, two out of three viewers watched *Sacred Games* outside India. This is the story of the growth of the metropolis in India and how the nation and the youth is caught between patriotism and the variant trans- institutional identities. This 8 episode series features titles from the great epic Mahabharata and pulls up the images of the “emotionally charged worlds of contemporary India”, in Patricia Leigh Brown’s words, and “in particular the links between organized crime, local politics and Indian espionage that lie below the shimmering surfaces of its economic renaissance”(3). Sartaj Singh, Ganesh Gaitonde and Anjali Mathur, are all part of the larger image of an India that is conflicted at its very roots yet trying its best to move out of the notions of problematic discriminations, but often gets deeply caught in its web instead. The notions of duty of the young Indian police officer, ascribed to and perceived by, becomes to an extent polarising. Not only does it discuss how the young are hinged by glorified imagery into a toxic extreme most at times, it also undoubtedly criticises the politicians and the underlying flaws in the system. There is also the use of the multi linguistic feature of India and to the director to show what has become cliched in being called essence of the Indian identity.

Ghoul (2018), the second production from Netflix in India also deals with the contemporary evils of the society and the trappings of the surveillance enlisted by the societal norms. Directed by Patrick Graham, this series offers a barer vista into the youth schema with Radhika Apte’s character of a young woman struggling to make her mark or even least of all survive in the male dominated caste ridden military camps, the existence of which are according to the narrative, vouched to secrecy. The communal divides, the caste segregation and the gender roles are dealt with vulnerability and rawness. Yet the fact that such things can be deliberated on a platform in art, talks much about the country’s progress in terms of the politics of discussion, all roles that would put one as the bearer of the anxiety of images, and the fears that one would be pushed into in a dystopia. Hers is a traumatic love for asserting her patriotism for the country, and this psychogeography is furthered by the supernatural notion of ghoul, a monster from the Arabic myth. While it becomes essentially a satire on the discriminative tendencies that plague the society, the victims of the metaphorical ghoul often find themselves bereft of the fleshes of lucidity in identity and fear of being helpless and inadequate. The dystopia therefore is every subaltern youth narrative in the current rubric of the nation.

There are stand up specials like *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* (2018) which is however an American original not an Indian but still has the Peabody winning comedian satirising the flawed system and much more in his performative and rhetorical deliberations. These specials, their well reception by the people of India, the diasporic and the people across the world, point to the current engagements with discourse on Indian youth and its narratives. Minhaj’s narrative can be pinned into the words of a youth from a postcolonial country struggling with their identity in the neo liberal yet most often perceived as one of the racist parts of the world. It is summed up in the few statements, “I used to hate being Hasan Minhaj because people could not pronounce my name, people don’t know who I am, they don’t know anything about Indians, What am I? Now I have all these identities. These are superpowers in my utility box. I can use them at any point. It’s cool”. (4).

While Netflix prided itself on marketing its already-popular originals in India, Amazon took the local route right at the outset. It not only acquired the streaming rights for a plethora of Bollywood and regional language films, but also signed up top names in the domestic stand-up circuit to create original shows on the platform. Amazon Studios went on to produce two shows – *Inside Edge* and *Breathe* – as well. But, Prime Video’s striking feature lies in its vast catalogue of Indian films and the larger Amazon customer base in India.

Inside Edge(2017), the series has been streaming to positive reviews as the first original production by Amazon in India. It brings to fore one of the most significant notions in the deliberation of nation and youth, that of sports. While perception of fervour towards cricket in India has been often considered patriotic rather than nationalistic, this is one of the definitive narratives which pours into the ideology of a nation and its superiority. The youth of this country in particular have been much influenced by the faction of how cricketers often become the insignias of the nation and have

been in turn seen becoming or being used towards forwarding other ideological movements. The narrative exposes the flaws that plague the system of selection and development ,that the cricketing youth gets entangled in. The feeling of being one in sports is strewn on the path of corruption and greed and trodden dreams. Despite its overly dramatic images of cricket and the world of young cricketers, the harsh hitting truths of the field and beyond are presented with a honesty. However, the ratings are mediocre when compared to *Sacred Games* or *Ghoul*.

Laakhon Mein Ek(2017) by Biswa Kalyan Rath brings to the front the increasing pressures of the Indian education system, the lack of meritocracy and the struggles of the youth in negotiating with the roles ascribed to himself by the parents and the nation at large. Biswa's experiences in IIT also venture much into the narrative, exploring the politics of growth and survival in the system of education in India. The young man is driven to the extremes as he becomes the centre of conflict with the tropes of tradition, Indian parents' pride, and the military-like discipline suffocating the young. It also discusses the trope of expectations that parents and society as such puts on the youth, especially during their student days to follow a code of conduct primarily filtered and driven by the occupational aspirations of the people occupying the same public sphere as him/her. While it represents the young as trapped in the societal roles, it also points to the ideals that most often than not being young is not necessarily liberating or cool but often a phase of intense trauma in their succumbing to a life of options set out for them by sustained interventions of society.

Comicstaan(2018) and other stand up specials with Kenny Sebastian, Biswa Kalyan Rath,Sumukhi Suresh, Kaneez Surkha and others have broadened up the world of Indian humour to the international audience. These are significant for they are narratives articulated by the youth but have created a community of audience which especially in the urban centres of the country have grown to satire and questioning the choices that they grew up with. They present the introspective world of social satire and discuss the changing landscape of cultural idiosyncrasies. The youth in this country is not only aware but also are making use of their diverse cultural influences whether it is Sumukhi's Tamil phrases, Kenny's broken Malayalam, Kaneez's South African upbringing which allows her to talk about the postcolonial experiences of the two countries that she occupies spaces of as well as Biswa's Odia influence in both language as well as cultural undertones in sets ; all of which attributes to a diversity in comic satire in the streaming platforms.

4. CONCLUSION :

As these narratives build up with an ever increasing group of audience, we could argue that rather these have created a higher quality content and story telling that is often lacked in the majority of the Indian television dominated by saas bahu dramas and the commercial formulaic movies. While independent ventures in movies have a very limited nature of audience, these platforms open up a wider audience but the problem of affordability and kind of audience is still problematic as is the images of the youth and nation propagated. That being said, it is important that these platforms have catered to the young and offer them a larger intervention in terms of representation.

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