

# (Re) Imagining 'Pop Culture'

New Possibilities of Gendering in a Hyper Digital World

**#ViolenceIsNotFilmy**

by Breckthrough



## Context and Background

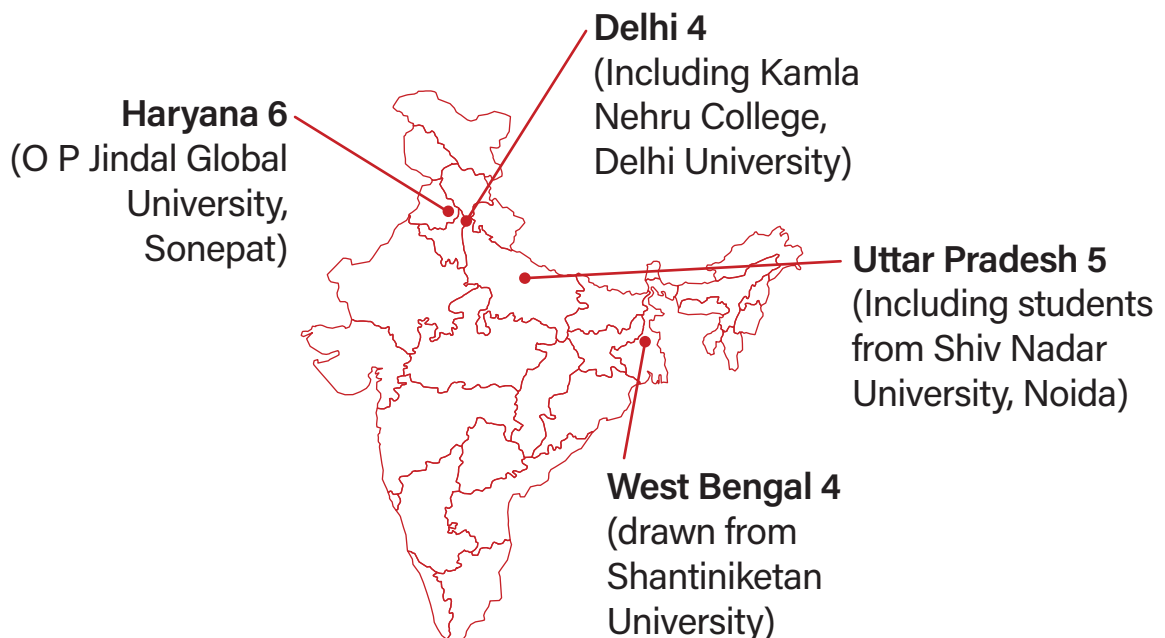
The research segment of a larger project on Popular Culture was envisioned as a study with a two pronged objective- one to map the online content consumption habits of young people, and secondly, to juxtapose these findings with ideas around violence and gender that content creators of popular culture work with. The central goal is to facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how gender and violence are deployed as popular culture tropes and how alternative ways of content creation/presentation maybe envisioned accommodating progressive narrative arches. The purpose would be to imagine content that does not normalise and glorify violence generally and gender based violence in particular.



# Methodology

In order to ascertain online content consumption habits of young people, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were identified as an ideal method to track overall patterns and thrust areas. The FGDs were largely conducted during Phase I of the study, whereas Phase II consisted of talking to content creators about their perceptions vis a vis content creation and varying constraints involved in the same. The study also incorporates KII (Key Informant Interviews) to provide richer context and nuanced understanding of the issues that have emerged as part of the project.

As part of Phase I, 19 FGDs were completed. Most FGDs are, on an average, 2.5-3 hours long.



13 In-Depth Interviews and Key Informant Interviews were conducted with content creators and pop culture experts were conducted with content creators. The following presents a break up of the categories of creators contacted for the study.

*A Commissioning Editor*

*3 Script writers*

*An Actress and an Actor*

*A Media Research Agent*

*A Satirist*

*An Advertising professional*

*A Social Media Influencer*

*A Singer/Musician*

*2 Pop Culture Scholars*

Cumulatively, their responses coupled with findings from the FGDs provide a layered perspective on the many ways how gender is deployed in popular culture. It also helps ascertain the relevance and appeal of violence as a narrative device and how stereotypical and formulaic representation of gender tropes become a tool to perpetuate or cement "differences" and bigotted mindsets.

# Key Findings

Research 1.0 was envisioned and undertaken as an exploratory study to ascertain the complex terrain of contemporary popular cultural production and consumption. A hyper globalised world and the reality of the pandemic with its attendant restrictions including movement curtailments have pushed content creation to exciting possibilities while introducing new challenges. The times are ripe for an in-depth investigation of the shifts in the material realities enabling popular culture so as to imagine and incorporate progressive messaging within this space. This study is the inception of such an attempt to arrive at a more granular understanding of pop culture creation to facilitate long term and holistic change.

The insights drawn from the study have been broadly demarcated into two sections – one on consumption and the other on representation. Though the division is not airtight and both areas tend to overlap, such a break up helps the reader to better comprehend the thrust of the study and its diverse dimensions.



## I. Consumption

This section deals with various dynamics of consumption. It brings to the fore questions of digital accessibility and literacy and its vital role in influencing online consumption habits. It also explores the criticality of examining local cultural patterns while understanding the hybridity of pop culture these days. It not only draws attention to widespread changes affecting the social and economic fabric of Indian society and its role in shaping cultural trends but also the underrated and understudied role of market research agencies in cultural production. Cumulatively, these elements help us understand how production works in today's times and how it impacts patterns of consumption. A more robust understanding of how culture is manufactured will help us imagine and introduce change more effectively.

### **Foreground and Understand India's Massive Digital Divide**

One of the most salient findings to emerge from the exploratory study pertains to the need to foreground India's gaping digital divide while attempting to understand how varying sections of people access and consume content. Without discerning the

complex circuits of consumption and the specifics of each medium and format with regard to content it is not possible to envision long term and sustainable transformative change.

Patna based research scholar Amol pointed out the interesting economies that have opened up with regard to consumption in small town India. In tier 2 cities such as Lucknow and Benaras, and other small towns particularly in the East, 'parlours' have opened up where downloaded content could be accessed. So even if a significant majority of people might not have the wherewithal to consume content on the prevailing data plans as available on their mobile phones, they were able to purchase Rs.50 worth downloaded content which could then be circulated amongst a pool of friends. However, this remains a highly gendered space with more boys resorting to such strategies.

### **Explore Linkages Between Privilege and Consumption**

There is an organic link between privilege and consumption wherein limitations induced by larger socio-economic factors dictate the way a vast majority of young people in rural and peri urban India access online content. Even as the larger social media eco-system might make it seem that OTT (Over The Top) platforms and social media platforms such as Instagram are immensely popular, these avenues remain outside the reach of a vast majority of young people in India. In terms of online content, YouTube- the streaming platform- remains vastly popular particularly amongst the economically underprivileged strata of the youth. Individuals such as Khan Sir (Patna based social activist/teacher), YT stars such as comedians Anubhav Singh Bassi and Abhishek Upmanyu, motivational speaker Sandeep Maheshwari, online prankster Ashish Chanchlani were some of the prominently cited names. Shows such as Anupamaa, Scam 1992, The Kapil Sharma Show were some of the most cited shows.

### **Unpack Homogenous Categories of Pop Culture/Audience/Consumer**

In our current times of heightened globalisation, it is important to unravel particulars of local cultures as they blend with other cultural trends and transform into this hybrid pool of global, regional and local cultural currents. Hence it is paramount to understand regional and target audience dynamics to better discern the appeal of specific kinds of pop culture.

Participants in Gosaiganj, UP cited Bhojpuri songs as an example of local pop culture- identified by both male and female participants as derogatory. The lyrics were pointed to be extremely sexist and offensive. Artists included Khesari Lal, Pavan Singh. A similar point was made by participants from Jhajjar



*YouTube thumbnail of a popular Bhojpuri song*

and Rohtak, Haryana who talked about how Haryanvi songs were insulting to women.

### **Understanding the Appeal of Small Town India**

The surge in appeal and demand of small town stories (as seen in cinema and OTT content) is a complex one- linked to larger economic and political shifts in the country, rise of multiplexes and migration patterns of middle classes to metro locations. Burgeoning aspirational middle classes in the cities have been linked to an increase in appetite for stories set in small towns these groups left behind in their pursuit of a better life. So there is a demand for such stories.

Moreover, actor Zaheer pointed out how a lot of people now involved in the production of OTT content and films were from small towns, hence they understood these stories better as it was a window into their own lifeworlds.

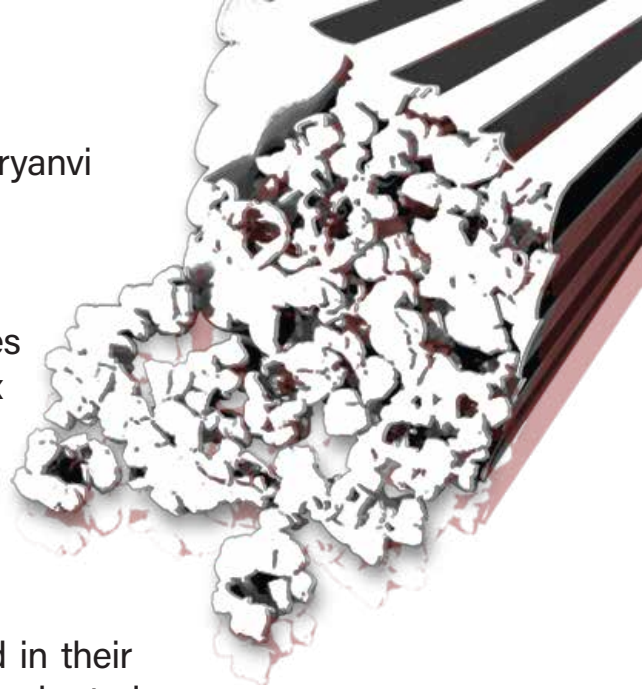
### **Crucial Role of Market Research Agencies**

Research agencies play an important role in assessing areas of appeal and consumption and have a major say in matters of cultural production as in many ways they become purveyors of appealing and commercially viable content.

Anamika, a commissioning editor with a prominent web platform, pointed out how it was important to understand how people of specific regions think and like in order to get a show/film to succeed. "For example, we try to understand what people in Gorakhpur want. The idea that all content will work equally everywhere is a myth," she said. Often market research agencies were roped in to facilitate this process of understanding what kind of content appealed to people of varied regions and backgrounds – i.e. to determine viability.

### **Correlation between Mediums, Viewership Patterns and Nature of Content**

Mediums accommodate viewership patterns. For example, Janardhan who is with a prominent research agency that works a lot with TV production houses pointed out serials were envisioned bearing in mind the busy and chaotic lives of homemaker women. Popular serials were aired during prime time which was also the time when most households have dinner. This means that women would be cooking and handling the kitchen whilst watching the serials leading to significant dramatic pauses in the narrative styles of TV Serials to provide adequate time for super busy moms to get from the kitchen to the TV.



## II. Representation

The question of representation foregrounds a key area of intervention. During discussions with content creators and those involved in cultural production in various capacities, the question of representation was repeatedly invoked. Representation in itself denotes a complex question. It involves the idea of reel representation- how women, transgenders and people of various sexualities, dalits and other marginalised communities, people from various part of the country particularly East and South etc. are shown on screen. It also refers to how diverse people are incorporated into the actual material processes involved in making content. Both aspects carry significance and need to be systematically addressed. Simultaneously, the idea of progressive messaging is ingrained into the notion of representation – why and how we tell our stories. The following points are an indicator of the various facets that frame the debate around representation.

### **More Women Representation and Incorporating the 'Female Gaze'**

Increased representation- both reel and in the creative and material processes involved in producing content- was provided by numerous content creators as an important mechanism to check misogyny and sexism in content. Scriptwriter Pallavi talked about how her presence in some of the working rooms enabled a healthier conversation on how certain narrative threads pertaining to gender were handled. The work of women scriptwriters such as Kanika Dhillon, Juhi Chaturvedi, Alankrita Srivastava etc. attest to the fact that involving more women in the processes of production lead to better handling of the gender question or perhaps more complex women characters and not cardboard cut offs.

### **Reimagining the Liberated Empowered Woman**

The critical need to imagine the 'empowered, liberated' woman better emerged both during the FGDs and IDIs. She is repeatedly shown in a hyper sexualised manner, often chain smoking and consuming liquor. Inability to imagine stories that resonate with the everyday lives of regular ordinary women is a serious limitation within the content currently available and something that was flagged by numerous participants.

Often, shows by TVF and daily soaps such as 'Anupamaa' fill that vacuum in a way. It is important to tell stories which reflect the lived experiences of women and important to cast women in powerful roles. Must resonate with their own social realities.



*A still from the daily soap 'Anupamaa'*

The absence of role models was another theme that emerged from the FGDs, particularly the semi-urban ones. Numerous women found it difficult to cite reel or real examples of inspiration and women who they looked up to. Recent shows and films that were created and advertised as women friendship oriented stories, such as *Veere di Wedding*, *Four More Shots Please* etc., were largely lost or unknown to young women in rural and semi urban areas. Narrative arches celebrating female camaraderie, considering the long history of paying homage to enduring male friendships in Hindi cinema, is a necessity.

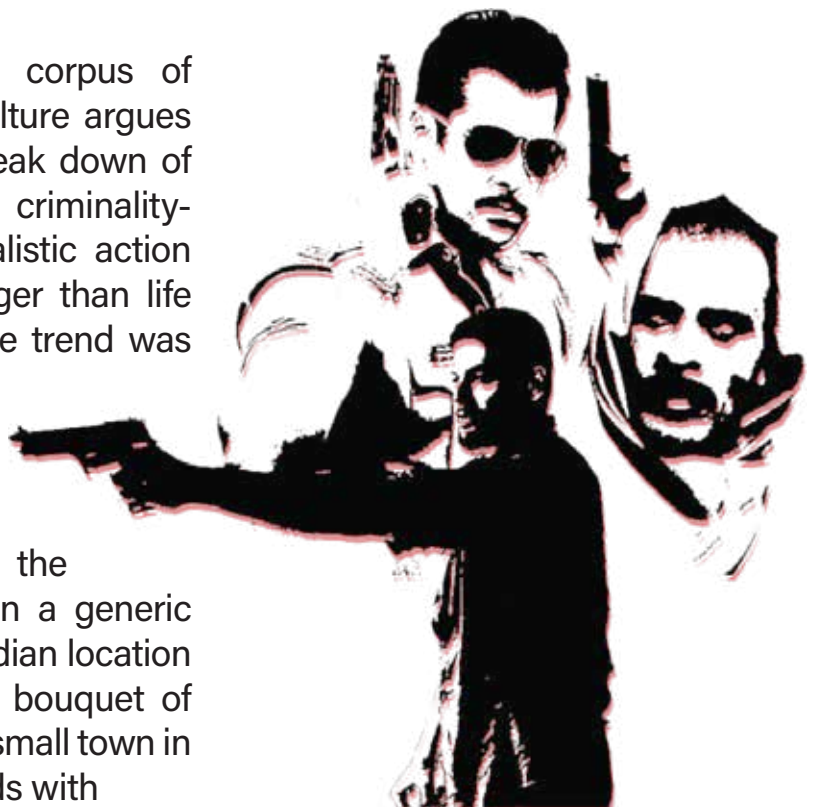
### **Women as Agents of Patriarchy**

It is also important to unravel the subterranean mechanisms of patriarchy, prominent being the notion that women are women's greatest enemy. It is vital we understand how and why women themselves often become the greatest tools and perpetrators of patriarchy. Most onscreen depictions of women's relationships reaffirm this seeming age-old adage- what screenwriter Pallavi referred to as the practice of depicting women undertaking "patriarchy's dirty work". Cultural representation of conventional *saas-bahu* depictions coupled with anecdotal experiences of women working towards harming other women drawn from family or surroundings is a vicious circle that needs to be broken and it has to be done at the level of culture and via healthier/wholesome representation.

### **Why Violence and Abuse?**

Screenwriter Dhanush points out how violence is often an easy and convenient narrative tool for most scriptwriters to bring in dramatic overtures sans creativity. Producers have also figured out that it has appeal hence the modes to break this pattern remains tricky.

Researcher Akshaya who has a corpus of scholarship on Bhojpuri popular culture argues how 'lawlessness' – a complete break down of law and order, eruption of criminality- accommodates the need for unrealistic action sequences and then to have a larger than life saviour in the form of the Hero. The trend was sparked by the massive success of films such as *Wanted* and *Dabangg*, which were in turn remakes of hit South Indian films. He also crucially points out how the small town in these stories is often a generic assemblage of some vague north Indian location sans any particularities enabling a bouquet of options in terms of representing the small town in whatever form the story line demands with





liberties taken in language and colloquialisms.

Here, abusive language is somehow taken to denote authenticity in representing the small town. The idea that colloquialisms lend credibility might be relevant but this shift to unbridled use of abusive language is also indicative of the success of certain templates initiated by the likes of Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* which the initial (expansive) freedom of OTT pushed in series such as *Mirzapur*.

### **Importance of Telling Good Stories**

Engaging modes of storytelling is perhaps the most effective way of promoting progressive narrative arches vis-a-vis gender and violence. Numerous FGD participants, particularly boys, said that they didn't want to be 'preached' to. If it's a good film with a good story line then there will always be an audience.

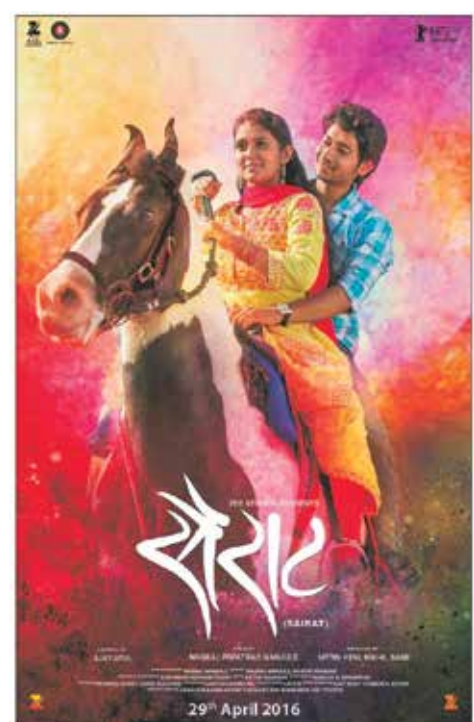
### **Messaging is Vital and Moral Compass is Key/ Good Art Vs Titillation**

Both actors who were part of the study highlighted the critical importance of messaging while telling a story. Actor Zaheer says the messaging of the content is vital. In the context of violence he said that it was necessary to question the use of violence. "Is violence used to titillate? To what purpose is it used?" He provided the example of *Bandit Queen* where considerable violence is shown in the first half but it is employed to set up the plot.

Scriptwriter Prakrit who was with AIB provided the example of the Marathi film *Sairat* – how the first half was set up completely different to the violence that unfolds in the second half. However, the film was a powerful example of how violence at the confluence of gender and caste might be cinematically interrogated. Another forceful example is that of *Sonchiriya*.



*Promotional posters for 'Sonchiriya' (left) and 'Sairat' (right)*



# Potential Alternatives

## (as cited by our study participants)

This section presents a brief overview of the promising alternatives currently in existence which could be mined and explored while imagining change and generating progressive messaging.

TVF (The Viral Fever - touted to be the first digital entertainment segment to bring out web series as a format), with its overall 'clean' material, was cited by many FGD participants as a viable alternative particularly considering how TVF shows (Aspirants etc.) have managed to connect with young people owing to their innovative content/ideas. TVF also has shows such as Engineering Girls and Girls Hostel representing a minuscule percentage of online content dealing with women/girl centric themes without overt sexualisation and glamorisation.



### Regional Industries such as Malayalam and Tamil

Malayalam films such as The Great Indian Kitchen and Kumbalangi Nights have sparked pertinent debates around gender both in Kerala and in other parts of the country and how cinema can potentially engage with issues in a progressive fashion. The work of 'Women in Cinema Collective' (WCC) in the Malayalam film industry- first of its kind in India- is a crucial intervention and provides a concrete example of how mechanisms to challenge misogyny and sexism in popular culture and film industries may be devised.



*Promotional poster for 'Super Sharanya'*

A recent film, Super Sharanya, represents one of those rare instances of depicting female camaraderie in a fun and realistic manner in a college setting. Similarly, over the last few years Tamil cinema has been undertaking some powerful experiments with regard to caste. Films such as Asuran, Karnan, Kabali which were also commercially successful are important examples.

### Shorts Films on YouTube

Many participants talked about content on YouTube particularly Short films such as Methi Ke Laddoo, Kheer, Chutney etc. as pushing the envelope creatively while remaining sensitive to endemic social issues.

## Finer Depiction of Masculinity and Women characters on Celluloid

Even as numerous study participants felt cinema, particularly mainstream Hindi, was not doing enough to challenge rampant misogyny and sexism prevalent in the industry, examples were provided for the occasional reel characters that countered conventions, Bollywood formulas and conservative mindsets.

### Examples offered by FGD participants as better representation and characterisation of male and female characters.



**Tapsee Pannu in Thappad** - Her character and the story line was mentioned as relatable owing to the fact that her role didn't seem like an 'outlier.' She occupied a space right in the heart of the family- an almost "ideal bahu" yet chose to take action against what she felt was an unforgivable act.



**Rani Mukherji's character in Mardaani**

**Konkana Sen Sharma in Geeli Puchi** - one of those rare films in Hindi that explored how gender and caste were closely entwined in India creating a specific format of patriarchal oppression. Neeraj Ghaywan's works such as Masaan were praised for its overall sensitivity.



**Amitabh Bachchan's character in Piku** who understood and respected his daughter as an independent being with fierce ambition and sexual desires.



**Characters of Ayushman Khurana and Raj Kumar Rao such as Dream Girl, Badhai Ho, Stree**

Romance and a male lead's ability to handle rejection by a woman in a mature fashion was highlighted by numerous FGD participants as an important cinematic trope. In this regard few of the young participants provided the example of **Ayushman Khurana in Meri Pyaari Bindu** as opposed to Dhanush's character in Raanjhanaa.





*The study was undertaken by independent consultant and researcher Manjusha Madhu for Breakthrough with support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.*

**Breakthrough** 

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