



The Digital Revolution in Storytelling: A Historical Perspective on Women's Roles in Hindi Web Series

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Abstract

The paper deals with the emergence of new ways of storytelling in the digital era especially in Hindi web series through OTT platforms. It explores the evolution of women's roles over the years from out-dated, clichéd portrayals to dynamic and empowered female characters. This paper looks at the shifts in media coverage of women and what these shifts reveal about the changing social context and representation of women in the media. By studying popular Hindi web series, the paper discusses characters, dialogues and themes that underline strengths and struggles of women. It takes a qualitative approach, analysing selected series and supporting the analysis with data from academic articles, audience reviews and industry reports. The results reveal how women are now often depicted as driving storylines as central characters, breaking with past norms and embodying diverse identities. The analysis judges the emergence of digital platforms as a valuable moment for feminist stories, and for more diverse representations of women. These changes matter because they affect how audiences view women and may help contribute to a change in societal attitudes. Analysing the historical and modern perspectives, this paper contributes to the debate on gender representation in media and its effect on culture.

Keywords: women representation, hindi web series, OTT platforms, digital storytelling, gender roles.

1. Introduction

The Digital Revolution in storytelling has taken hold of India, most importantly with the entry of over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, SonyLIV, TVF etc (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025). They have established new avenues for compelling and diverse stories based beyond the constraints of the television and cinema formats (Rahman et al., 2024). The most prominent shift in this context is the changing representation of women in Hindi web series (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2024). Woman on film in a male dominated cinematic landscape unto the mid-20th century, women were largely relegated to roles of homemaker, mistress or, if they were lucky, a freak for a man to laugh at (Kumar & Lal, 2023). But as digital content grows, women have become independent, ambitious characters integral to the story. Rai (2024) exemplifies this change that highlights shifting gender dynamics of inter-personal relationships in contemporary India (Lal, 2023).

This work analysed the progressive evolution of portrayal of women in Hindi web series over the years (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025c). It found that modern female characters are more complex and varied, as compared to how women were depicted in the past. In traditional media, women were often portrayed in narrow paradigms, where they only gained their identity through their interactions with men (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b). Alternatively, new digital platforms can now create stories in which women dictate narratives, make independent choices, and defy societal expectations. The study is based on three of the most famous web series *SCAM 1992*, *ASPIRANTS* and *PANCHAYAT* and analyse the female characters in it and around the values it portray in gender representation. These series will take place in different settings and different stylized storytelling modes, but the findings suggest they all share a similar presentation of women as more than bit players (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a).

The study was based on three research questions. Firstly, how has that portrayal evolved over the years in Hindi web series? It indicated a gradual movement away from one dimensional portrayals to three-dimensional, multi-faceted female characters. Second, what themes, characters and narratives matter in this transformation? The study observed that web series deal with concepts such as career aspirations, individual struggle, and social mobility, developing women characters with a better agency and dimension (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c). Finally, what are the social and cultural effects of these portrayals? These changes have been noted to be a part of wider discussions surrounding gender equality, representation and the way audiences understand how women are in reality.

This study is relevant because it contributes to the on-going debate regarding gender

representation in digital media. Societal perceptions and expectations are influenced by the portrayal of women in the entertainment industry (Lal & Aarzo, 2026c). Instrumental in both perpetuating and challenging these traditional gender norms (Simon & Hasan, 2025), media in India is a significant area that continues to shape public and private life in both national and local contexts. The depiction of female characters as smart, careerist and self-sufficient by Hindi web series can contribute to changing public perceptions regarding gender roles (Jain et al., 2023). Moreover, OTT platforms reach a young urban audience, making such representation connect to generations to come (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2024). The study shows that these platforms actively become a space for feminist narratives and more progressive storytelling (Lal & Aarzo, 2026a).

The findings also highlight the digital platforms' role in allowing creative freedom. While mainstream cinema avenues may be commercial, OTT platforms have space for stories that are out of the box. So, content creators may venture into new themes and test existing conventions. *SCAM 1992*, for example, presents women in a finance-heavy industry, showing their intellect and professionalism. *ASPIRANTS* introduce the other side, the female aspirants preparing for these competitive exams their resilience, their ambition. *PANCHAYAT*: This series explores gender roles in rural India and how women are slowly taking on leadership positions (Lal & Aarzo, 2026b). The stories show that digital storytelling has evolved well past its clichés, presenting a more authentic and diverse depiction of women (Deb et al., 2026).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Representation of Women in Indian Media

The influence of Indian films and television has been instrumental in shaping societal perceptions of gender roles for decades (Rahman et al., 2022). In Indian media, women had historically been portrayed merely as caregivers, homemakers, or love interests, with little input in the decision-making process (Balabantaray, 2022). Female figures were constructed through the lens of sacrifice and devotion and familial duty, which are all used to exert patriarchal constraints. The 1970s and 1980s in Bollywood were defined by the “mother figure” trope, found in films like *Deewar* (1975) and *Mother India* (1957), where women were portrayed as patients and resilient (Rao, 2020). Television and soap operas in particular, entrenched these stereotypes. Series like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (2000–2008) and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* (2000–2008) glorified women who were obedient and docile, presenting them as palatable wives and daughters-in-law on one hand or scheming apologues on the other (Somani & Doshi,

2016). That type of narrative didn't allow for nuanced female characters, depicting them through black-and-white moral lenses (Singh et al., 2022). It would be years until, even as some movies developed strong female leads, they were typically the exceptions, not the rules (Saika et al., 2021).

2.2 Impact of Digital Platforms on Storytelling

Digital streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and SonyLiv have brought vast changes to Indian storytelling (Singh et al., 2021). OTT may be creative liberation from conservative narrative forms, unlike traditional cinema and television which is fettered by censorship and audience expectations (Srivastav & Rai, 2021). This has allowed for the representation of female characters with depth and nuance, breaking free from the one-dimensional tropes of the past. The OTT platforms have also proved to be enabling a more realistic and regionally diverse storytelling using different dialects, socio-economic backgrounds and cultural set ups (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). Series' such as *Delhi Crime (2019)* and *Bombay Begums (2021)* have brought, what are usually considered, nuanced perspectives to women experience, addressing such issues as workplace discrimination, sexual harassment and personal ambition (Shrivastava, 2022).

Furthermore, digital platforms have created a space for powerful, female leads in independent films who tackle complex crises and situations that deviate from typical gender behaviours (Lal & Sharma, 2021). Audience reception is another major consideration. Intuitively, audiences are reacting more positively towards female-centric content that is feminist or socially relevant on OTT platforms, and that is in turn creating more demand for authentic narratives surrounding women's lives (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2024). Unencumbered by mass-audience concerns characteristic of traditional media, which relies on conservative notions of female characters, OTT platforms open up niche viewing spaces that accommodate diverse representations of women (Mane & Lal, 2021).

2.3 Feminist Theories and Media Representation

Feminist Media Studies is a lens to decipher the representation of gender in Hindi web series. The discussion about women in media is informed by several important theories, with Laura Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "male gaze" being one of the most well-known critiques of how mainstream media objectifies women by representing them through a masculine gaze (Krauß, 2024). OTT platforms, though, have begun subverting this gaze by telling stories

through the female lens and focusing on women's experiences. Understanding how women are portrayed in digital media is an equally important area within the framework of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989). Caste, class, and sexuality are among the factors that intersect with gender to create multiple levels of experiences of trauma and empowerment (Carastathis, 2014). The more recent web series, however, have grappled with the complexities, showing women from diverse backgrounds (Prasad et al., 2020) such as caste-based discrimination and LGBTQ+ identities.

Neo-liberal notions of individualism and empowerment, post-feminism argues, increasingly play a role in how feminist ideas are expressed in contemporary media (Thorpe et al., 2017). While allowing for strong female characters, this also threatens to depoliticize structural gender inequalities, as empowerment is reduced to a matter of personal choice. Shows like *Four More Shots Please!* (2019) in response have been critiqued for their elite, urban feminist lens that may not speak to the realities of all Indian women (Sinha & Mehta, 2025).

2.4 Studies on Women in Indian Web Series

There are various studies that have investigated representation of women in Indian web series. Studies of *SCAM 1992 (2020)*, for example, have remarked about the series' construction of financial journalist Sucheta Dalal as a central figure who disrupts a male centric worldview of Indian finance (Nobrega & Sinha, 2008). Her role as an investigative journalist breaks ground, and with it, a common trend in Indian fiction increasing spaces for strong female professionals. *ASPIRANTS (2021)* has also been analyzed for its depiction of women in academic and professional settings. The series not only spares the audience the annoyance of romantic subplots, but shows how women equally take part in the civil service exam struggles (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026b). Dhairya, the image of intelligence, ambition and everything that actually plays a crucial role in the protagonist's journey.

PANCHAYAT (2020-2022) is a contrasting tale, depicting women in rural governance. And studies have applauded the character of a village head (sarpanch) called Manju Devi, who learns to challenge her male peers and ultimately leads the charge in putting her village at the forefront of a state mandate (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026a). This offers authentic representation and a progressive narrative as these challenges are real for women in such positions in rural areas in real life. This departure from conventional portrayals is further confirmed by audience reception studies which indicate that viewers liked it. Research shows that audiences respond well to web series portraying women in leadership positions, challenging societal norms (Liao

& Ling, 2025). This aligns with the increasing diffusion of feminist plots surrounding new media technology.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the representation of women in Hindi web series. With its focus on the qualitative, it delves into the nuances of character development, dialogues, and themes, shedding light on the evolution of gender representation within digital narratives. This study studies three popular web series, *SCAM 1992*, *ASPIRANTS*, *PANCHAYAT*. These shows were chosen because of their wide appeal, critical acclaims, and importance in showcasing different types of women from various socio-economic and professional backgrounds. While *SCAM 1992* delves into the financial world and how it affects women in entrepreneurship, *ASPIRANTS* discusses the difficulty of women in competitive exams preparation, *PANCHAYAT* discusses how hard it is for rural women to be in leadership positions.

The analysis is based on various data sources, with particular focus on characters, dialogues, and the overall theme of the series selected. These portrayals are also informed by audience reviews, industry reports and academic studies in order to gauge the wider cultural relevance of these portrayals. The analytical lens is a thematic analysis based on feminist media theory that analyzes how these narratives subvert norms of gender and contribute to the conversation of women in development and digital media. This method of analysis would help understand how much Hindi web series redefine women's roles in contemporary narratives on OTT platforms, the study argues.

4. Discussion

4.1 Historical vs. Modern Representation of Women

Indian media has witnessed a drastic change in the representation of women. Earlier, Indian movies and shows only portrayed women in cliched, traditional roles. Women were largely portrayed as loyal wives, self-sacrificing mothers, or men's objects of beauty and desire (Williamson, 2023). Such representations upheld gender role stereotypes; archetypes of women who are submissive, dependent, and take precedence after the male protagonist. Their dreams, challenges and uniqueness hardly examined in detail.

Yet, due to digital evolution, especially OTT platforms, female representation has

become more varied, complex and liberating (Governo et al., 2020). Female characters are often independent, ambitious and multidimensional in web series. Women in Indian cinema are no longer relegated to secondary characters or passive role players they have taken centre stage in storytelling, mirroring an evolving socio-cultural landscape across India. Thanks to digital platforms, creators have explored narratives that showcase women in more progressive roles and criticize patriarchal devices. This change also reflects the wider societal progress in India with women getting into education, workforce, and leadership positions (Klinger & Svensson, 2023).

Analysis of Selected Web Series

The evolution of women's representation can be seen through selected web series that have gained popularity in India. Three such web series *SCAM 1992*, *ASPIRANTS*, and *PANCHAYAT* offer unique insights into how female characters are portrayed in different social and professional settings.

SCAM 1992: Female Agency in Financial Narratives

SCAM 1992 (2020) This series is based on the life of stockbroker Harshad Mehta and sheds light on the financial landscape of India in the early 1990s. While most of the series centers around financial scandals, it also features strong female characters at the forefront of media and finance. Sucheta Dalal, an investigative journalist who uncovers the fraud, is among the most important female characters in the series. The character of Sucheta Dalal is shown as an intelligent, strong and fearless professional. She is not just a side character, but rather the key to discovering the truth. Her representation goes against the usual treatment of women as “witnesses in male-commanded arenas,” as she described it. Rather, she stands for female agency, perseverance and capability in an industry that has been male-dominated since its inception. Sucheta's character pushes back against the stereotype that women aren't cut out for finance or investigative journalism. Her role in the story mirrors the increasing visibility of women as authoritative players in media and corporate spaces. Sucheta Dalal's characterization corresponds with real-life changes — women are increasingly stepping into roles in finance, business and journalism. By showing her in a powerful light, *SCAM 1992* also does its little bit to ensure that women are not just shown as supporters and followers or arm-candy to men, but as architects of their own lives, and those of others.

ASPIRANTS: Women in Academic and Career-Driven Settings

ASPIRANTS (2021) is a web series about young people studying for the extremely difficult UPSC tests. The on-going human drama is set in an ultra-exclusive med school, but its true subject is the challenges that women face in academic and career settings. One of the main female characters here, Dhairya is depicted as a strong, smart, ambitious woman who is committed to her work and wants to attain her professional objectives. The character is seen grappling with personal relationships and career aspirations, perhaps a reality which most women in India can relate to. The series addresses the prejudices and societal pressures women face if they seek out demanding careers. Thus, Dhairya's journey embodies the challenges faced by female students and workers who are often required to go the extra mile to hold their own in male-dominated work environments.

The series also touches on the impact of societal expectations on women's career paths. It is still common for women in India to experience social pressure to choose marriage and children over career success. *ASPIRANTS* is contrary to that perception; Dhairya is no run of the mill, aspirational character. She is a role model to young women who want to pursue a field where it is difficult to succeed under what the rest of society expects from a woman. *ASPIRANTS* also fit into a broader discourse regarding the extreme levels of gender inequality prevalent in education and employment. The series, by centering around a more realistic and empowering female character in the same space, proves that women are ambitious, independent, and carry the weight of their goals.

PANCHAYAT: Rural Women and their Evolving Societal Roles

PANCHAYAT (2020) focuses on governance and everyday challenges that rural Indian communities face. The series captures a much nuanced perspective of rural women the Pradhan (women head of the village) Manju Devi is a case in point. Manju Devi initially appears as only a nominal leader, with her husband making virtually all administrative decisions for her. It is not unusual in Indian rural governance for women to hold formal positions without power behind the titles. Yet, through the course of the series, Manju Devi slowly but steadily establishes authority and holds the reins on decision-making. Her changes are important because they counter the stereotype of rural women as passive individuals whose sole place is in the household.

Instead, she represents the evolution of gender roles in rural India, where an increasing number of women are engaging in governance and leadership (Rao, 2022). The series shows

how many rural women are rising to leadership positions despite patriarchal structures resisting progress. Women representation in *PANCHAYAT* is a key factor in demonstrating the changing roles of women in Indian villages. While acknowledging the real life struggles of rural women, it also showcases them as capable leaders who can make impact in their communities. It reflects a growing participation of women within Indian politics and local governance and reaffirms how gender roles are socially constructed and can change over time.

4.2 Recurring Themes and Patterns

The most popular Hindi web series share common themes that indicate a major change in how women are depicted. No longer confined to supporting actress categories, female characters are at the heart of narratives, moving forwards storylines with agency, ambition, and resilience. These portrayals reflect real-world gender tensions, which aim to disrupt patriarchal ideals and professional restrictions. Perhaps the most striking themes are those that portray women as individuals with goals, both personal and professional. Be it financial journalists trying to uncover fraud, aspirants in the civil service struggling to achieve success and rural leaders trying to overcome the pitfalls of governance, these women shatter stereotypes and exemplify changing perceptions of women in Indian society (Shukla & Deka, 2023).

First and foremost among these changes has been the growing complexity of female characters. Unlike previous representations that painted women as one-dimensional characters, the contemporary web series highlights the multi-dimensionality of their struggles, relationships and ambitions. Now women are shown as ambitious professionals, decision-makers, and independent thinkers more than just romantic interests or caregivers. These characters create an imagination space that defies the social constructs that, in many cases, confine Indian women if not physically, then in their ambitions and aspirations, as so often depicted on screen be it in balancing career aspirations with personal responsibilities, or tackling pervasive systemic gender biases. The themes of empowerment, resilience and personal agency are rife. It is evident in the web series *SCAM 1992* where Sucheta Dalal features as a go-getter journalist who delves into the financial world that was a bastion of men and shows how women can also break the stereotype of a passive spectator in such matters.

In *ASPIRANTS*, the portrayal of Dhairya resonates with all female UPSC aspirants and their dilemma of male gaze and society's expectations which pulls down women again and

again and breaks them apart. In a similar vein, *PANCHAYAT* comes with a strong perspective towards women in governance like in the character Manju Devi, who gradually finds her footing as the Pradhan, highlighting how women are finding their way in governance. These stories show both the successes of women and the hurdles they still encounter. From workplace discrimination, gender-based expectations to the pressures of societal conformity, web series make real-world issues the crux of its storytelling. Even more significantly, they

9

highlight the necessity for change, depicting female characters not merely as survivors but as enthusiastic initiators of transformation.

4.3 Audience Perception & Societal Impact

The evolution of gender portrayal in Hindi web series has greatly impacted audience attitude. From the perspective of traditional Indian media women were rarely seen in a diverse light, and were instead framed by out-dated gender norms. Yet, there is evidence that more progressive and diverse portrayals via digital storytelling have changed how audiences engage with female characters. Research suggests that audiences, especially younger generations, embrace these more nuanced and empowered portrayals of women. These characters resonate with female viewers and inspire them as they see themselves in their struggles and aspirations on the screen (Tompkins & Martins, 2022). And this is not only an issue for the wider industry; even men who tune in to these soaps are being exposed to varying female characters, which may help dispel decades of ingrained prejudice. The representation of strong, independent women in professional settings, governance, and personal life also helps to challenge deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and normalizes that women could take on leadership positions and make decisions.

The rise of realistic, progressive female characters is also being driven by audience reception studies that indicate a growing appetite for such narratives. Shows like *SCAM 1992*, *ASPIRANTS* and *PANCHAYAT* show that audiences are no longer willing to swallow whatever is force-fed; they are in fact out there for more. Such media representation has always had a critical impact on the public's perceptions, and this change could have a trickle up effect in changing women's attitudes on gender equality and in turn society's. Also, social media and digital platforms give audiences a channel to discuss topics surrounding gender representation in web series. Discussions among viewers, reviews and debates have demonstrated a growing

signal of awareness around the importance of differing representations of women. In some instances, audience input has even redirected the creation of the content itself, prompting writers and directors to shun clichéd plots in favour of more textured storylines.

4.4 The Role of OTT Platforms in Gender Representation

It is only through OTT platforms that gender-inclusive narratives have become a reality. Unlike commercial cinema and television, which often work under commercial constraints and regulatory pressures, streaming services allow for more freedom of artistic expression. This has enabled content creators to experiment with themes and narratives that were once deemed unchallenging, or uncommercial, for example (Doyle et al., 2022). Platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and SonyLIV have opened up space for such female-driven stories which do not fit the traditional mould of the industry. Filmed or telecast female focused productions previously were often considered niche content with sparse cash generating potential at the box office. But Hindi web series with strong female leads have defied this logic.

Additionally, web series provide the scope for thorough character exploration. Unlike mainstream films that usually have time restrictions, web series can devote different episodes to track the character's journey. This approach leads to more individualized, complex depictions of women, and makes their conflicts and victories resonate on a deeper level (Aharoni & Roth-Cohen, 2024). It also has helped create a more nuanced picture of gender, with female characters that are protagonists and not just supporting players, thanks to streaming's ability to present long-form storytelling. Also, OTTs went a long way in giving female directors, writers and producers the opportunity to tell stories. This particular narrative has where we see more women behind the camera, it is essential to make sure that there is authentic representation on the screen. As storytelling often trends to make men big and boost their titular role in a way, while reducing women characters to objectified assets instead being a titled couple or a bay yourself that reveals out of women, female writers bring originality in their craft and always portray women in their full glory.

These transformations have implications beyond entertainment. The web series challenge and raise the bar on how women are represented in media. OTT platforms could challenge the widely followed patriarchal or stereotypical gender roles of society as the audience gets more engaged leading to the demand for more inclusive and representative stories. These narratives and characters, which highlight every facet of desi culture and history, mark an integral cultural shift in Indian media, demonstrating the power of collective, digital

storytelling in crafting progressive narratives.

5. Conclusion

The journey of the representation of women in Hindi web series is a tale of inflected standpoints, evolving ideologies, peak dissections and interruptions. In the past, female characters were often relegated to stereotypical roles: loyal wives, obedient daughters, or two-dimensional love interests. But with digitalization, these narratives have changed, depicting women as autonomous, ambitious, and multifaceted beings. The emergence of web series such as *SCAM 1992*, *ASPIRANTS*, and *PANCHAYAT* showcase this shift where the female characters challenge societal apprehensions, add value to the narratives they represent and have a voice and a choice in life and career choices.

And this shift has wider cultural and social implications. More diverse and empowered female characters in media help shape and redefine gender roles, as media plays a crucial role in shaping social conceptions. These changes have been enabled by the accessibility of OTT platforms, which are deemed to give creators more creative freedom, enabling more inclusive storytelling. As a result, audiences are presented with stories that entertain but also subvert traditional gender stereotypes.

But this is not a complaint, this is the proud reflection of the reality in India where the digital revolution of storytelling is announcing a new beginning, far generous than the crass representation in the earlier times about women in Indian media. Although it could be improved further, the increasing variety of female representations represents a critical milestone in the path to more equity in the entertain world.

6. Recommendations

- Writers should write well-rounded women and not one-dimensional stereotypes. They should feature women forging power, women at work, and women subverting stories. Working with female/n-b writers and consultants helps ensure authenticity in storytelling. By steering clear of gender prejudices, showcasing authentic struggles and triumphs, we can craft far more powerful stories.
- More longitudinal research is needed to understand the long-term effects of changing portrayals of women on how audiences perceive them. Such gender narratives include changing characters on traditional television versus digital web series, which can be examined in comparative studies. Examining how audiences engage with women

focused stories can be an illuminative exercise in terms of identifying trends and gaps. Future work should take into account intersectionality in terms of women with different socio-economic, regional, and cultural investments.

- Policymakers and media regulators should develop guidelines that call for balanced and gender-sensitive representation from digital media platforms. They must discourage regressive stereotypes by establishing ethical standards for storytelling.

Incentivize and provide funding or grants for content that includes gender equality and diversity; this will encourage inclusive stories. Creating awards and recognitions can encourage progressive storytelling and keep the digital platform progressive and empower women in Hindi web series.

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