

[The Digital Popular in Indian context \(2010-2019\)](#)

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The Digital Popular in Indian context (2010-2019)

Post by: Deepali

The last decade, 2010-2019, has brought about a radical shift in India's cultural trends which has not only redefined the domain of 'popular culture' but also the ways in which we analyze, consume, create and think about it today. Popular culture, like any other cultural form, is a constantly evolving field and any attempt to historicize it would require us to supplement the previous narratives of globalization and liberalization with new a description of the digital advancements in the present. The 1990s had marked a shift in 'the popular' by the introduction of internet, cable Television sets, revamping of Indian cities into multinational hub leading to changes in lifestyle and consumer behaviour etc. The 1990s is also seen as a moment of Westernization where Bollywood, India based TV channels "adopted the glossy styles of the West but kept the storyline and content Indian." (Dasgupta, Sinha & Chakravarty 2011) This led to drastic change in "mediascapes" resulting in creation of U.S. based cultural hegemony in Indian entertainment market including Bollywood. (Appadurai 1996)

This book is an endeavour to explore cultural shifts and markers through which popular culture has been digitally re-shaped in the intermediary decade, particularly from 2010-2019, of the post-millennial age. The book looks into the question of what constitutes new forms of digitally produced Indian popular culture and how new notions of Indianness is produced through the same. Indian popular culture has always remained fluid and inundated by diverse studies from multiple viewpoints but it has vastly remained within the purview of the limited genres including fiction, graphic novels, films, Bollywood, television, music and comics. As this decade has witnessed emergence of the new digital platforms in the form of OTT, Smartphone Apps, genres such as web-series, docudrama, memes, etc., this book contributes towards the still emerging studies in the post-millennial Indian popular. In doing so,

the book also looks at the recent developments made in media studies, an area which is both interdisciplinary and excessively in vogue at present, as the popular culture in the said decade is largely constituted in the digital format through different media. The book will be indispensable in understanding that the notions of self, society, culture and social relations are equally dependent on technologies in twenty-first century than any traditional objects of analysis. (Kay 7)

The most significant factor responsible for redefining Indian popular culture is the rise of new media platforms leading to the emergence of what we may call a “digital popular culture”: “Social networks, multiple TV channels, mobile phone updates are tools that did not exist in India two decades ago...People expect rapid, direct, relevant, and heartfelt communication from people in charge... But what has bridged the urban-rural divide is the usage of mobile phones, growing annually at 34 per cent. In 2011, there were 290 million mobile phone subscribers in rural India alone” (Singh 2014). The advent of internet has become an old phenomenon by now but what is more significant is its access on different digital devices and platforms leading to formation of novel genres of popular culture. For example, the comedy content which had to be refined and limited to the notions of respectability and censorship has now moved further with stand up comedy on youtube channels, memes and gags on social media and web-series on OTT platforms. This has enabled users to freely access the content on internet devices such as computers, tablets, mobile phones, smart TVs without any limitation to watch socially acceptable content along with families or being judged for laughing on insensitive remarks. This has not only increased consumption of few social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, Instagram, etc. but the easy access of these platforms on handy devices at cheaper rates and comparatively with less technical literacy have played a crucial part in defining India’s new popular culture. It is through this digitally generated popular culture, we witnessed participation of people from the lowest section of society in the mainstream culture (created by multinational corporations) by generating trends, ratings, likes, comments, subscriptions, share, etc., thus reversing the entire claim of popular culture as the culture of masses.

Alternatively, the difference between classes can also be easily demarcated within digital popular culture based on the consumption patterns of these platforms which contribute towards formation of cultures. The middle class uses mobile phones mainly to order food, do online shopping, make wallet payments, mobilize mass movements, leisurely consuming online content and for social media interaction.

The working class uses them to create content as a way of escapism and have an insight into a socially uplifted and better world from their own. The working class

mostly inhabiting rural parts of India use mobile phones due to its limited demand of power supply and cheaper mobile data availability for internet access. Apart from connectivity, their aim of using mobile phone primarily rests on creating and consuming audio and video entertainment content such as watching videos, films, drama series or listening to songs, news, etc. In comparison to laptops and computers, mobile phones provide working class with a platform to make it big in their life and earn fame and money through content creation at minimal expenditure. Access to social media via mobile phones gives them an opportunity to feel one with the elite, uplifted and empowered sections of society without carrying any social baggage of their background. It helps them navigate their class and caste by momentarily self-transformation when they create videos for platforms like Tiktok, Youtube, etc. “Broadly, this group consists of those who came of age with the promises and consumerist practices of liberalization (circulated in great part through television) and who feel entitled to a certain cosmopolitan status.” (Desai-Stephens 2017) One of the best examples of consequent emergence of Indian digital popular culture from Smartphone explosion can be seen on social media in the form of reels, selfies, viral content, participating in online surveys, etc. Impressions of Smartphone based food culture can be seen through birth of food influencers who savour on local and ethnic delicacies by going live on social media accounts, taking food photos for Instagram and reinventing “the home delivery” or “takeaway” concept of food through apps like Zomato, Swiggy, UberEats leading to an alteration in Indian eating habits. Usage of internet for dating and marriage apps has redefined social relations too. Smartphones have also contributed in the popularity of realty shows which continue to be the only source of voting for the favourite contestant.

This digitized popular culture has also led to the rise of OTT platform that significantly gained prominence during the second half of the decade and reached its peak during COVID lockdown. Smartphones have been the game changer in this case too. The average cost of mobile data in India has been the cheapest in the world today. Added to this is the free subscription facilities of OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime offered along with mobile recharge packs has made OTT the new entrant in the entertainment industry. The content running on these OTT platforms such as Hotstar, Netflix, Amazon Prime, SonyLiv, etc., is significantly attentive about the background information of the consumers watching them. The middle class today has been categorized as “the prosperous, young, metropolitan, predominantly upper caste, and Hindu white collared professionals who feels as at home in India as in the West and have consumption patterns similar to their western

counterparts. They have gained dominance as their interest converges with the market, media, and an increasingly neoliberal state.” (Singh 2014) This dominance has led to major reshuffling in urbanscape of India which further contributed in the shaping up of popular culture on the basis of geographical region. Henrike Donner (2012), highlights that upward mobility of new middle classes ensured their movement towards metropolitan cities in search of better opportunities and improved lifestyles. This resulted in creating more pressure on cities thus transforming suburbs into extensions of these cities. The suburban areas constituted by slums, migrant workers and informal markets were now remodelled with townships where private investors promised luxurious living with best health care, education and entertainment facilities. “It appears that the reordering of urban space in the case of post-liberalization India is very much driven by middle class desires, the realization of which involves a top-down approach, whereby a nexus of experts (planners), bureaucrats, politicians and private investors focus on projects indexing a “global city” status and where local regeneration follows suit.” (Donner 2012). The resultant working class which had earlier moved to cities in a newly liberalized economy was now forced to move back to the periphery with a group of men living in overtly crowded areas in small rooms covered with tin roofs. Their entire focus was to earn livelihood not only for themselves but also for their families living in villages because of their inability to afford the cost of living for entire family in these ultra modernized cities. This peripheral shift reached its peak in the second decade of millennial era when they were forced to return to their villages due to unaffordable cost of living and no housing facilities with the onset of COVID in 2020. This ultimately led to the sharp contrast between two sections of society thus widening the class gap more than ever. On one hand we have the big city dwellers and on the other hand there are small townspeople who were conveniently overlooked for the surrounded overcrowding, filth, squalor and their inability to fit in with the newly acquired notions of modernity. The OTT platforms airing random shows have become so successful only because of their ability to relate and strike a chord with these two sections of society. They offer a break from stereotypical, old-fashioned mainstream TV shows revolving around ideal families with all pervasive morality. They also come with the promise of convenience in watching them anywhere and anytime with utmost content diversity in regional languages making OTT a new favourite among youth from both rural and urban as well as middle and working classes today. “Steven Miles (2006) contends that the idea of youth subcultures emerging as a resistance to dominant cultures is no longer relevant and needs to be replaced by the concept of youth lifestyle, in which young people become consumers of mass media to derive meanings of self... in the digital age...”

(Parmar & Pandit 2021) Most of the shows aired on these platforms such as *Mirzapur*, *Sacred Games*, *Scam 1992*, *Bhaukaal*, *Panchayat*, *Kota Factory*, *Manphordganj ki Binny* are all stories from small towns and villages unravelling the struggles, everyday life and the subconscious desire of making it big in their lives for working class individuals. Likewise Indian series like *Lust Stories*, *Four more Shots Please!*, *The Family Man*, *Made in Heaven* and West based series like *Orange is the New Black*, *Game of Thrones*, *Money Heist*, *Stranger Things*, etc., reflect the lifestyle attitudes, preferences and choices of an urban middle class individuals.

The three tentative sub-themes for chapters include:

Social media
Mobile phone apps
OTT platforms

Abstracts of 300-350 words are invited (along with a short bio of 100 words), addressing the broad issues raised above in the wake of the emergence of what can be called as “digital popular” in India. Well-researched and empirically rich papers that analyse the recent technological innovations, development of new genres, practices of cultural consumption, wider social and economic discourses within which such shifts are placed and their relation to the changing aspects of politics etc. are most welcome.

Contributors may send their abstracts on indiandigitalpopular@gmail.com latest by 20th January 2022. Selected abstracts will be notified about acceptance within a week. Palgrave has expressed interest in publishing this collected volume.

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