



Transgender content: First among equals on acceptance

The success of Taali reiterates that transgender content has a significantly wider appeal in the Indian market than LGBTQIA+ content in general

Published on September 25, 2023

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Summary

- With an estimated 19 Million viewers in India, and an Ormax Power Rating (OPR) of 61, JioCinema's transgender-themed web-series Taali is an undisputed success
 - Taali's success reaffirms that transgender content enjoys significantly higher traction among Indian audiences, compared to content on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sub-communities
 - Using transgender content as an example, the authors argue that adoption of Western terminologies to India needs customisation and contextualisation to the socio-culture of our audience
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JioCinema's August 2023 launch, Taali, a web-series based on the life of Shreegauri Sawant, played by Sushmita Sen, is a breakout success. The show is expected to be watched (at least

one episode) by 19 Million Indians over its first six weeks, which puts it at no. 6 on the list of most-watched Hindi web-series of 2023 so far.

Along with viewership, Taali has also managed to garner audience appreciation. Its Ormax Power Rating (OPR) is a healthy 61, putting it in the top 10 list of most-liked web-series of 2023 so far. Ormax Power Rating (OPR) is our proprietary metric to measure audience likeability of all content, ranging from theatrical films to streaming originals to linear television shows. Audiences who have watched the content (e.g., a minimum of one episode for a web-series) are asked to rate it for likeability. OPR is reported on a 0-100 scale, and can be seen as a representation of the show's inherent content strength, and is also a surrogate for its advocacy, i.e., % audience who are likely to recommend the content to their friends or family after watching it.

Taali is one of the first Indian web-series that's single-mindedly dedicated to telling the story of a transgender protagonist. The success of the show raises a pertinent question: Does Taali's success indicate that Indian audiences are open to watching good LGBTQIA+ content, at least on streaming platforms?

To answer this question, it is important to deconstruct the term "LGBTQIA+" in an Indian context. The term is essentially of Western origin, though it's now being used globally. A problem with adoption of Western terminology to an Indian context is that much can be lost in translation. LGBTQIA+ has seven different parts, even if one excludes the "+". We may use it as an abbreviation, but in India, each of the seven components are operating at different levels of awareness, comprehension, pop culture representation, and acceptance.

Intersex is probably the one with least awareness and comprehension. Queer may be known as a generic word, but there would be a lack of specific understanding in a sub-community context. Asexual's meaning may be known/guessable, but apart from the recent *Satyaprem Ki Katha* (where it was used as an alibi to another issue of rape trauma, and not as the real issue itself), there hasn't been any other significant media reference to this term in India.

The other four are sure to have better awareness, though the comprehension of 'Bisexual' can be the one that people can get confused about, because media exposure is virtually non-existent. Among the remaining three, Gay and Lesbian are more recent entries into the pop culture/ media, with exposure only in the last decade, and that too being limited to web-series and multiplex-centric films. While some of this content has met with reasonable success, the breakout level (such as that achieved by *Taali*) has not been reached.

The depiction of gay and lesbian characters primarily revolve around their sexual orientation. The nature of this conflict often requires depiction of physical intimacy in their relationships, and that makes the depiction visually specific, causing discomfort, and making acceptance reluctant.

But depiction of transgenders does not face this audience 'challenge'. To begin with, transgenders are a part of our mythology and culture, known by various names, including *kinnars*, *hijras*, eunuchs, etc. There has been pop culture representation, through villains like those in *Sadak* (1991) and *Sangharsh* (1999), protagonists in films like *Super Deluxe* (2019) and *Laxmii* (2020), and also through a Hindi GEC protagonist, Soumya in *Shakti: Astitva Ke Ehsaas Ki* (2016-2021). While *Shakti* may not be the most authentic

representation of the community, the show remained true to the issue for much of its length, and was a high-rated show at its peak, that lasted more than a year. Its impact on creating awareness and sensitization towards the transgender community has been mentioned in a lot of Ormax Media’s work over the past few years.



So, Taali is only taking this representation forward, through a real-life story, and not entirely venturing into a uncharted territory. Moreover, the conflicts faced by the protagonist in Taali are more universal in nature, like her fight for her identity, justice, and motherhood. This makes it easier for a wider audience to be emotionally invested in the protagonist and her conflicts, irrespective of their viewpoint on the LGBTQIA+ community, or even on the transgender community in particular.

In summary, we need to be more mindful of the nuances while looking at LGBTQIA+ as a collective, as individual components may be at different stages of the acceptance curve in India at least. And the component “Transgender” is the one that’s ahead of the others.

The larger point here is also about how Western terminologies can enter Indian lexicon, and in the absence of customization or contextualization, lead to an over-simplification of nuanced themes and causes. Now that's something content creators and marketers must guard against.