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The Identity Layering of Prostitution in Modern Indian Hindi Web Series

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Abstract

Gone are the days when the brothels were shown as a source of satisfying sex cravings. In the current scenario, the Hindi Web Series uploaded on various OTT platforms in the last two years showcase that these places are more secret keepers of information, money, ornaments, or weapons instead of mere sexual pleasure. Web series *Murshid* on ZEE5 and *Heera Mandi* on Netflix are examples of these productions, which clearly illustrate the role of brothels in the crime or freedom movement.

They usually say that the media is the medium of the message. Prostitution typically refers to the exchange of sexual services for money or goods. It can take many forms, including street-based work, escort services, brothels, and online platforms. Prostitutes have historically played unexpected and often pivotal roles as informers, especially during times of political unrest or war. Their roles were usually dismissed, allowing them to operate under the radar. During the Pre-Independence era, brothels were often located near military or political centers, making them ideal for gathering intelligence. A web series is a show made of a series of videos released on the internet, typically in episodic format. These can be scripted or unscripted and cover a wide range of genres-from drama and comedy to thriller and documentary.

Nowadays, Web series and online streaming content are becoming the heart of the youth. Web series are replacing television and have seen a boom in online streaming and web series content produced in India. Many big companies namely Amazon, Netflix, Sony Liv, Hotstar, and Eros Now, have invested heavily in regional content. Web series have gained popularity in India in the last few years because they take us where television won't. Web series and online streaming allow their audience to watch shows at their convenience (Dhiman, 2021).

Though widely acknowledged as vital to law enforcement, social scientists have largely ignored the practice of confidential informing (Miller, 2010).

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Connecting Prostitution with the Web Series

The times when brothels were only portrayed as places to satiate sexual desire are long gone. Prostitutes were frequently shown in the traditional cinematic imagination as morally reprehensible objects of pleasure, their identities reduced to physicality. However, this story has changed in recent years due to Hindi online shows that are hosted on over-the-top platforms. Instead of being places of illegal yearning, brothels are increasingly portrayed as socio-political hotspots. They are portrayed as guardians of political secrets, cash, weapons, cultural knowledge, and information.

Particularly in the past three years, programs like *Heeramandi : The Diamond Bazaar* (Netflix) and *Murshid* (ZEE5) have portrayed brothels as complex establishments connected to economic networks, criminal activity, subversive intelligence sharing, and revolutionary action. Once excluded from politics, characters such as prostitutes are now reclaimed as informants, cultural scholars, money managers, and underground revolutionaries. The exchange of sexual favors for material or financial gain is commonly referred to as prostitution. Street work, escorting, brothels, and online platforms are some of the ways it manifests. In the past, prostitutes also had important but little-known social functions. Sex workers, courtesans (tawaifs), and brothels close to political hubs were frequently the locations of covert information exchanges in pre-Independence India. They were useful informants, knowledge carriers, and defenders of revolutionary networks because they were invisible in the formal social realm. Web series, or episodically published digital entertainment, have emerged as a key popular form in today's media culture. They are now more enticing to young people than television (Dhiman, 2021). Indian digital storytelling has exploded thanks to major over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix, Hotstar, SonyLiv, ErosNow, Amazon Prime, and ZEE5. New depictions of prostitutes have been made possible by their readiness to deal with daring, intersectional topics. They are portrayed as change agents managing the power dynamics of capitalism, politics, caste, and patriarchy rather than as merely sensual figures.

Concepts of intersectionality a paradigm developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw that emphasizes how a person's lived experiences are shaped by many identities, such as gender, class, caste, and sexual orientation help to better understand this transition. In the instance of prostitution, women are marginalized not just due to their occupation but also on the basis of gender, caste, and socioeconomic status. This intricacy has started to be highlighted in contemporary web storytelling. It is true that the media serves as "the medium of message," and Hindi web shows are actively reshaping society's perception of prostitution. However, scholarly interest is still scarce. Miller (2010) and other academics point out that there is a dearth of study on the intelligence and confidential informing roles of prostitutes.

As a result, the portrayal of these roles in web series gains cultural and scholarly significance.

This study looks at how prostitution is portrayed in contemporary Hindi web series from an intersectional perspective, emphasizing how it is related to crime, political intelligence, and power structures.

Objective

- To investigate how prostitution is portrayed in a few contemporary Hindi web shows.
- To investigate new portrayals of brothels as covert and politically significant locations.
- To examine how media narratives about prostitution have been shaped by OTT platforms.

Literature Review

In the past, prostitutes were depicted as seductresses, victims, or unimportant characters with little agency. They were primarily moralized in Indian cinema through tragic ends or redemption stories. Despite being cultural performers, courtesans in classic movies (*Pakeezaa* , *Umrao Jaan*) continued to be socially excluded.

Prostitutes underappreciated political achievements are also noted in research. During the fight for independence, many courtesans in colonial India served as informants. Miller (2010) talks about how confidential informants have not always been acknowledged.

With the emergence of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, academics like Dhiman (2021) contend that web series permissive censorship, rich character worlds, and vast episodic structure enable artists to investigate alternate narratives.

Courtesans are portrayed as political figures influencing nationalist history in recent web series such as *Heeramandi*.

In a similar vein, *She* shows how drug and weapons trafficking is hidden in brothels. These pieces' multi-layered narratives have changed the conversation.

Therefore, the lines between prostitution, politics, and power are blurred in contemporary depictions. They dispel the myth that prostitutes are helpless by substituting dynamic descriptions linked to criminal organizations, intelligence networks, and revolutionary endeavors.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative content analysis to look at how some Hindi web series depict prostitution and brothels and how these depictions relate to themes of crime, power, and resistance. The researcher can critically assess narrative patterns, character depictions, socio-political situations, and symbolic meanings incorporated into visual texts by using content analysis. Web series like *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* (2024), *Murshid* (ZEE5), *Rangbaaz* (2018–2022), *She* (2020–2022), *Ratri Ke Yatri* (2022), *Paro* (2024), and *Bribe* (2024) were chosen through purposive sampling because of their thematic relevance to prostitution and the covert networks of information, weapons, and economic exchange.

These online series were examined for recurrent themes that illustrate how the idea of brothels has evolved from being merely places for sexual commerce to becoming politically fraught locations that serve as financial hubs, crime shelters, and intelligence centers. The narrative arcs, character development, dialogue, and visual storytelling that depict the intersections of prostitution with gender, class, caste, and power hierarchies were all methodically examined as part of the investigation. The way that each series portrays brothel-based characters—as victims, agents, members of underground networks, or catalysts in sociopolitical movements—was noted. Depictions of prostitution interacting with trafficking, criminal activity, emotional trauma, and resistance initiatives received particular attention.

The study was supported by secondary data, such as scholarly articles, reviews, and media studies literature, which helped place the results into broader historical, social, and media frameworks. This research approach enables the study to assess how OTT platforms are impacting public perceptions about prostitution in contemporary India and interpret current digital storytelling as a mirror of evolving cultural narratives.

Web Series on Prostitution, Crime & Hidden Power (2022–2025 + *Rangbaaz* & *She*)

This document lists web series between 2022–2025, along with *Rangbaaz* and *She*, that revolve around themes of prostitution, crime, hidden weapons, goons, and black money. Each description is written in a humanised way for easy understanding.

Series Name	What it’s about (in simple words)	Year	Who made it	Why it stands out
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Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar	Lahore's glamorous courtesans fighting for love, survival, and power while tied to politics and freedom struggles.	2024	Sanjay Leela Bhansali	Gorgeous sets, royal drama—but behind the silk curtains, secrets and betrayals ruled.
Jubilee	Post-independence Bombay: film stars, courtesans, and shady financiers shaping Indian cinema's birth.	2023	Vikramaditya Motwane	Not just about films—it's about money, control, and survival.
Ratri Ke Yatri	Five men enter a brothel for the first time, each walking out with a life-changing story.	2022 (S2)	Anil V Kumar	Emotional tales set in a brothel—hidden truths everywhere.
Paro (Ullu)	A young bride trapped in trafficking, forced into sex work—an innocent pulled into darkness.	2024	Ullu Production	Raw, dark, and disturbing—it pulls the curtain off human trafficking.
Bribe (Ullu)	A widow trades her dignity with powerful men just to get her pension released.	2024	Ullu Production	Shocking reminder of how corruption pushes women into exploitation.
Rangbaaz	Real gangster tales—guns, goons, politics, and black money, using every cover possible.	2018–2022	Navdeep Singh, Bhav Dhulia (various seasons)	The real face of crime, politics, and underworld.

She	A timid constable goes undercover as a prostitute, discovering brothels hide drugs, weapons, and criminal deals.	2020–2022	Imtiaz Ali, Arif Ali	Perfect undercover drama mixing prostitution and crime.
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Conclusion

An analysis of current Hindi web series shows that the way prostitution and brothels are portrayed in India has undergone a dramatic change. These digital narratives portray brothels as intricate socio-political spaces where information, power, money, and resistance circulate, rather than being limited to the narrow lens of sexual trade or moral deviance. In web shows like *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar*, *Murshid*, *Rangbaaz*, *She*, *Ratri Ke Yatri*, *Paro*, and *Bribe*, sex workers are shown as important players in criminal networks, political conflicts, and intelligence sharing, rather than just as helpless victims.

This change reflects a changing cultural perspective that acknowledges the many identities of sex workers that are influenced by history, caste, gender, and class factors.

The usage of over the top (OTT) channels allows for complex storytelling that is unrestricted by mainstream censorship, elevating narratives that emphasize vulnerability with resilience and exploitation alongside agency. These depictions dispel long held misconceptions and compel viewers to reevaluate the socioeconomic systems that support prostitution in India. In the end, Hindi web series contribute to a larger conversation on marginality, representation, and justice by highlighting the covert connections between prostitution, crime, and power. This suggests that these kinds of stories have the power to change public perceptions and promote better-informed policy interventions.

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