

## OTT Platform and Dynamics for Contemporary Indian Theatre

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### ABSTRACT

Needless to say, Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the structural formations in various sectors the world over. Theatre is not an exception to it. The restrictions on public activities shifted directions from established ways to least familiar ways, and the rise of OTT grasped gazes and theatrical live performances of plays in theatre replaced by the performances on OTT or virtual platforms, no doubt it has given an alternative to the theatre industry to some extent. Has the OTT platform successfully assembled a genuine sense of theatrical aesthetic? This question often arises when the extensive popularity of OTT is witnessed everywhere. Likewise, is OTT a future of entertainment? The objective of this research article is to explain how digital streaming platforms have started showing their impact on Indian theatre in particular. How young minds are preferring this mode for entertainment. The gradual shift of presentation from stage to digital platform and its growing impact on theatre industry is the central argument of this paper. The research conducted in this relation comes with the findings that large numbers of viewers agree that over-the-top (OTT) platforms can be an actual menace to the theatre industry. There are a number of factors to claim that OTT is a threat and at the same time, one cannot reject that OTT has become the largely preferred medium in India and across the world for visual content. Theatrical dimensions have entirely altered with OTT since one can now watch digital performances conveniently on a laptop or mobile device. Additionally, the audio and visual quality, sound effects, and accessibility of forward and backward give extra and fascinating features. Plays are designed to be staged performances, and we all know that a play's performance is its heart and soul. Live performances satisfy the stage's requirements and are the lifeblood of the theatrical industry. These qualities are in reality, artistic and natural. The post-covid world's artificial artistic world development may never fully satisfy the aesthetic worth of any creative form.

**Keywords:** *Digital Streaming, OTT, Performance, Plays, Theatre.*

### Introduction:

Indian theatre has a deep-rooted tradition of thousand years, and it has reached an upright place in the course of time through actual mass involvement in different segments of performance. It

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has been among sixty-four indigenous arts. It has accumulated a historical significance in consideration with theatre world over. The Contemporary Indian theatre is diverse, creative, innovative and experimental in theme, technique and subject. At the same time, it is also observed that India is one of the world's leading and rising markets with a huge number of demands and transactions in the entertainment sector. The inclination to spend on entertainment has been increasing in India, with favourable demographics. Also, there is an increase in disposable spending. The swift changes in the world of the internet are still incomprehensible because no one knows where it will take to the world. Change is the law of nature. Sometimes circumstances provide to change, but does it really provide the assurance of genuine representation and aesthetics? No doubt, the internet has provided digital platforms, and these digital platforms, such as YouTube, Amazon Prime, Netflix and Hot Star are successful in presenting the performances effectively.

The platform over the top (OTT) refers to a digital video platform which is disseminated overtly to consumers, bypassing cable, radio, and Satellite TV Channels over the Internet that usually act as distributors of that content. The noticeable increase in Internet consumption over the past few years has pushed ahead the entertainment sector in a remarkable way. The transition from genuine platforms to digital platforms is motivated by faster internet connectivity, smartphones, affordable data plans and time, place and choice flexibility. In recent years, OTT platform has redefined its goals and customer requirements as well as perfectly caught the need of time. Khushaboo Solanki Sharma in her article Are OTT Platforms Taking Over Theatrical Experience argued about theatre and OTT as:

It is noteworthy that several OTT players have been producing original shows and films besides offering live entertainment, which has managed to capture eyeballs. The proliferation of OTT platforms has evoked apprehension among the filmmakers that this may be the death of knell for theatrical experience. It is now not uncommon to see certain films opting for the OTT route to reach out to the appropriate audience target. (Sharma: Web Source)

In reverence to Indian theatre, all plays are performed in theatre to convey the essence of plays. There is a proper arrangement of actor's area, spectators' place, light music etc. The live performances of plays require a lot of care at the side of actors, producers and directors as well as all the technical support staff. Moreover, the actions and dialogues conveyed in performance are not repeated to re-correct or react. On OTT, the theatrical dimensions have changed entirely because on laptop or mobile, one can see the digital performance at a convenient time as well as the quality of video audio, sound effects and accessibility of forward-backward provide

additional as well as exciting factors. Plays are meant to be performed on stage, and as we all know, performance is the soul of a play. The audience is the core of the theatrical world, and live performance fulfils the requirement of the stage. As a matter of fact, these traits are natural and artistic. The artificial creation of artistic world the way post –covid world is going to offer may never absolutely fulfil the aesthetic value of any creative form.

### **Objectives**

The core objective of this research paper is to examine the emergence, and consumption of OTT and how it may be a challenge to the conventional theatre industry. The researchers intend to examine whether the advances of OTT platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix and Hot Star have really affected the theatre industry and what influence these platforms have created on the audience. The objectives can be stated further as below:

1. To analyze OTT and the theatre industry in India.
2. To analyze what influence OTT has created on theatre dynamics.
3. To analyze whether theatre is really benefited or turned into decrement.
4. To analyze viewers' gaze of the theatre after the emergence of OTT.
5. To analyze crucial changes brought in the aspects of theatre under the influence of OTT.

### **Significance of the Topic**

The recent research has proven that in India 250 million individuals watched online videos in 2017 and the growth in recent years has hit everyone by its 64 per cent and it is expected that 500 million people in 2020 will benefit through OTT, and India has become the largest viewers country in the world. These numbers are enough to describe the rapid consumption and preference of people for OTT. Theatres were shut down completely in the midst of a nationwide lockdown, and theatre owners realized that digital platforms will inevitably change the universal experience of watching plays. The enhancement of OTT viewers in India during lockdown for watching plays seems invisible to decrease in the lockdown phase. If, in future, as the climate of the world is unpredictable, OTT will surely stand as a milestone medium for theatrical performances. In lockdown or in any crisis, things have to be closed, and as theatre is a composite art it depends on numerous people. That gap can be bridged by OTT to some extent.

## **Methodology**

The present research is prepared in accordance with the MLA style latest edition. The articles in newspapers, journals, magazines, and websites are taken into consideration for the present research. The data has been analysed through critical and evaluative methods.

## **Review of Literature**

Bhattacharya Ananya, in her article “India's Largest Cinema Chain is Thriving in the Era of OTT” (2019), explains that India is the least screened country at the same time, China possesses around 80000 screens whereas in India still has less than ten thousand screens in comparison. It seems that there are just eight theatres for every million individuals, with two-thirds of Indians losing access to theatre.

Khushaboo Solanki Sharma in her article ‘Are OTT Platforms Taking Over Theatrical Experience?’ (2020) illustrates that the OTT market size is estimated at around 0.5 billion and is projected to rise to 5 billion in 2023. She has also observed that it is common to find certain movies reaching OTT and meeting the intended audience nowadays. According to her, Exaggerating the effects of OTT platforms and equating them with the end of movie theatre attendance is blatantly false. However, it is reasonable to assume that today's clients appreciate the abundance of choices available.

Usmani. A. in his article ‘India's Online Streaming Infatuation is Taking Over Its Love from Cinema’, says that film revenue is projected to rise at a moderate rate to around rupees 19200 crore by 2020, whereas Rupees 22, 400 crore online service streaming during the same time. Samosa. S. in the article ‘Expert Opinion: Do Theatres Feel the Heat the Wave of OTT?’ analyses the parallel changes and the existence of theatre and OTT. The present article efficiently elaborates the growing concern of OTT in India as well as critically opines the comparison.

## **Study of the Problem**

The discernment of the Indian audience regarding media and entertainment has drastically shifted. Indian audience claims that the recently emerged platforms of representation are transforming Indian media culture and the theatre industry. No one believed a year ago that

OTT platform would enhance immensely and will start grabbing the market of entertainment in a noticeable way. The factors such as media convenience, economic affordability, content diversity, innovative experiments, efficiency and feasibility of time have made digital platforms the most preferable. The subscription to one OTT provides entertainment to the entire family, and it is usually watched on TV or laptop instead of big screen. The theatrical dimensions, such as going to the theatre, buying tickets, spending time, and reaching a decided time have been side-lined by OTT. Undoubtedly, the present scenario provides a synthetic overview that OTT platforms have a good future in our country as it is utilized by a number of people, and its subscription is escalating day by day. The reasons to enhance OTT in India are mobility, easy availability of smartphones, choice of content, effective cost and sensational presentation, which have been limited by theatre performance at the same time, certain factors such as aliveness, expressions ambience, and eye-catching moments cannot be enjoyed on OTT. It would be an exaggeration if one would say that people will not reach the theatre to watch live performance. Definitely people will once again reach theatre as they will realize the limitations of technological equipment, but the platform will not be eclipsed entirely. It will remain a challenge and also an opportunity for the theatre industry, but in brief, OTT has definitely created a description to the theatre industry because once the situation will get normal, it will be a challenging factor to attract an audience towards theatre, overcoming the OTT platform.

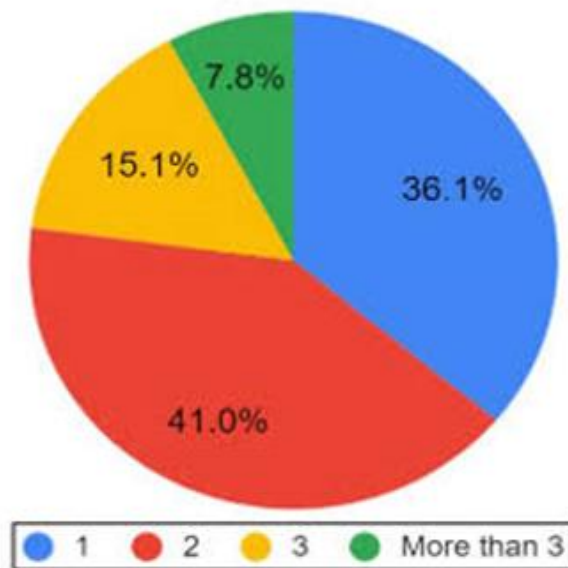
When we comparatively analyze OTT and theatre, we should think about a few increasing numbers in a serious way. In India, an average user holds a minimum of two OTT platforms and use it regularly as well as spends one or two hours in a day. The preferred time to watch OTT in the night and the most preferred language is English. The biggest advantage of OTT is that consumer's access to content in the premium model where OTT platforms offer free content with a specific collection, and there would be an incentive to switch to the paying subscription. When it comes to theatre viewers, they prefer a single screen to watch play. In India, the majority of the audience goes to movies in Multiplex once in a month and spends 150 to 200 rupees for a show. Moreover, when the movie is highly contented, the audience prefers multiplexes, but on OTT with the same subscription charges, viewers can enjoy the entertainment for a month. This difference of charges is crucial in increasing the growth of OTT to other platforms. The oddities of theatre reach the surface in sublime way during lockdown and OTT platforms have surpassed these oddities in an efficient way hence the easy

accomplishment of OTT platforms has surely provoked theatre industry to rethink seriously the theatre dynamics. The words of noted Indian film actress Anushka Sharma are apt to comprehend the emergence, growth and future of OTT. She says:

“I think the digital platforms have, not just because of Covid-19, but over the years, established themselves in a way that they are creating a wave with the content that they are doing. They have a wider reach. Filmmakers like us are able to explore ideas and stories that you otherwise wouldn’t be able to...”  
 (Web Source)

In India, the taste of the theatre audience is enhanced compared to previous phases. In contemporary times, an audience is ready to spend 200 rupees for a live theatre performance, but the recent research has found that the increase in audience over the OTT platform is also astonishing. The time audiences spend on OTT is also remarkable. The research and survey have come to the conclusion that 32.5% of viewers spend one or two hours regularly on OTT. The next highest is around 23.9% of viewers on these OTT platforms. Such enormous enhancement created a deep consideration for theatre that it took many years to attract audience towards theatre but in a short wave of OTT is successful in gripping the audience's minds. The following graph efficiently exposes the increased number of subscriptions to OTT.

Number of Subscriptions Purchase



(Source: MediaNews4U)

The following important issue discussed as far as the purpose of the paper is concerned is the frequency of audience visiting theatre and OTT; the difference is extensive. It is also observed

that 23.9 young minds of India visit the theatre once a month, and the ratio is very much similar with multiplexes the majority of Indian people occasionally visit the theatre, but at the same time, the majority of young Indians spend one to three hours on OTT platforms. The recent research and numbers are terrific to indicate vast differences in the enhancement of OTT platforms in India. The young audience easily prefer the digital platforms to precept the entertainment, and at the same time, it is also observed that the majority of the audience prefers nighttime to watch the content, and less number of the audience prefers afternoon time. Thus, the feasibility and flexibility of time on OTT is one of the major reasons behind the enhancement of OTT as compared to theatre. The paucity of theatre houses in the country, marginal reach of reputed theatre groups to smaller places in the country, expensive tickets, lack of trained technicians and other related issues can be resolved if OTT continues to captivate Indians. The growing use of smartphones, irrespective of age groups and community status, can be considered as a positive sign for the future of theatre through OTT. To state further, the decided aspects of time, money and management of theatre have successfully been overcome by OTT.

When we discuss how OTT is standing as a challenge to the theatre, we must discuss about the financial differences and challenges created by OTT to the theatre. OTT provides certain free subscriptions where the audience can watch certain videos as per their convenience without paying a single rupee. There are some TV channels streaming plays are available through DTH mode. The plays or performances can be enjoyed now at home. Slowly, a response to this mode is increasing. There is undoubtedly a market policy through which OTT attracts viewers, and there is no such facility available as far as theatre is concerned where the audience can see a few performances and then they will make up their minds to buy tickets. In India, approximately twenty per cent of viewers spend hundred to two hundred rupees per month for OTT subscriptions, and 15% of viewers are spending more than 200 rupees per month. In general, the majority of viewers are spending hundred rupees for a month and in comparison to theatre, it is very much high and handsome. Theatre always faces a lack of audience response in India.



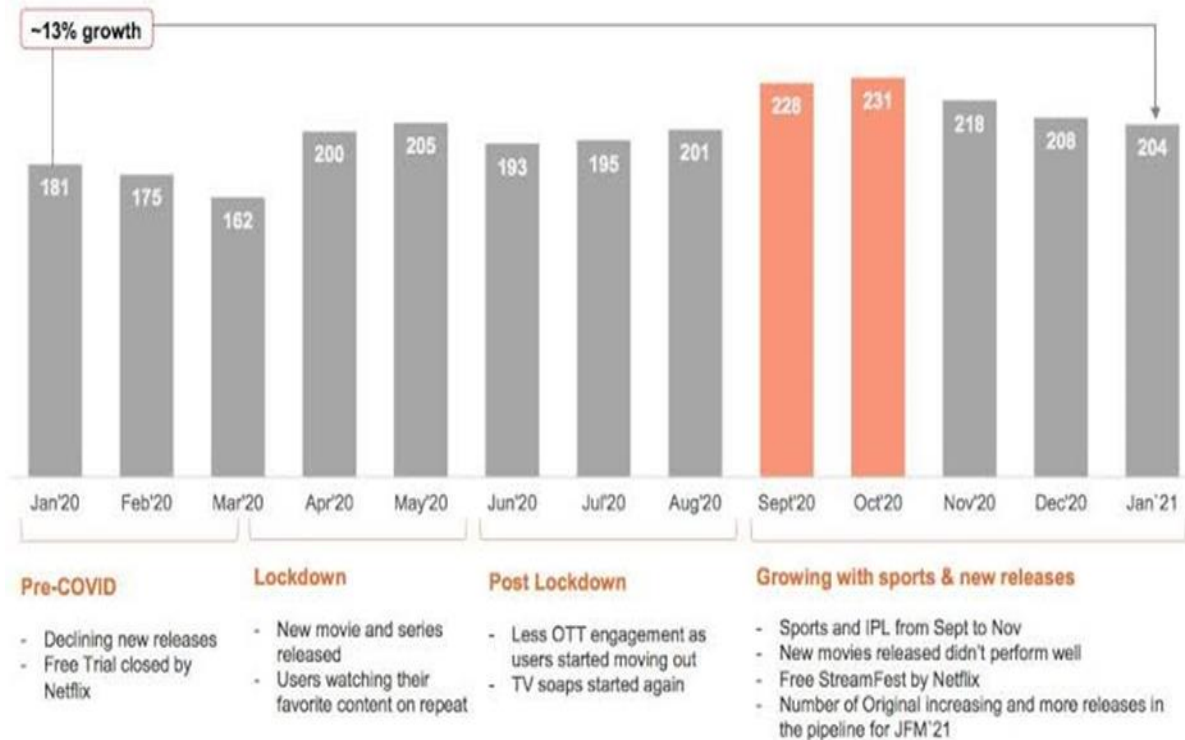
Moreover, it is also one of the major reasons behind the deprivation of theatre in India. But OTT is successful in attracting the audience with minimum charges. This factor is noticeable as far as the rapid growth of OTT and its challenges to theatre. As mentioned earlier, India is a largest market in the world with young minds, where theatre is a little unsuccessful in attracting an audience where OTT has surpassed this factor in the short phase. Shilajit Mitra in his article “Theatre vs. OTT: Who’s Winning the Movie War?” explains the hope of nostalgia of the real theatrical world as:

These are extraordinary circumstances brought on by a global health crisis. So we understand if producers are trying to recover costs and pay off interest. It’s historically proven that streaming cannot match the theatrical business. I’m sure once the lockdown is lifted, the industry will be with us. (Web Source)

It is also noticeable that the average ticket for a theatre show is not less than a hundred rupees. If it is a little costly, the presence of an audience in the theatre is doubtful. Notably, the feeling of attraction created by OTT in India lacks about theatre. The glory, charm and belonging received by OTT in a short time lacks theatre, but no doubt, whatever the earning numbers and subscribers of OTT are but, the real essence of a play can be enjoyed in a theatre house only. It is a matter of fact that the folk performances from different regions of the country for which India is being honoured as a nation of theatre ‘cannot be easily made available on this innovative platform as the participation of the masses is an integral requirement of these performances. Yet a genre is born with its father and mother, and theatre with live performance is the core of the play. It is also true that in the pandemic, where everything was shut, OTT has played a crucial role in keeping theatre dynamics alive. The following image displays the difference in consumption in the pre-covid and post-covid periods as:



Monthly Consumption, OTT Video  
 Bn Mins



Note: Analysis excluding YouTube

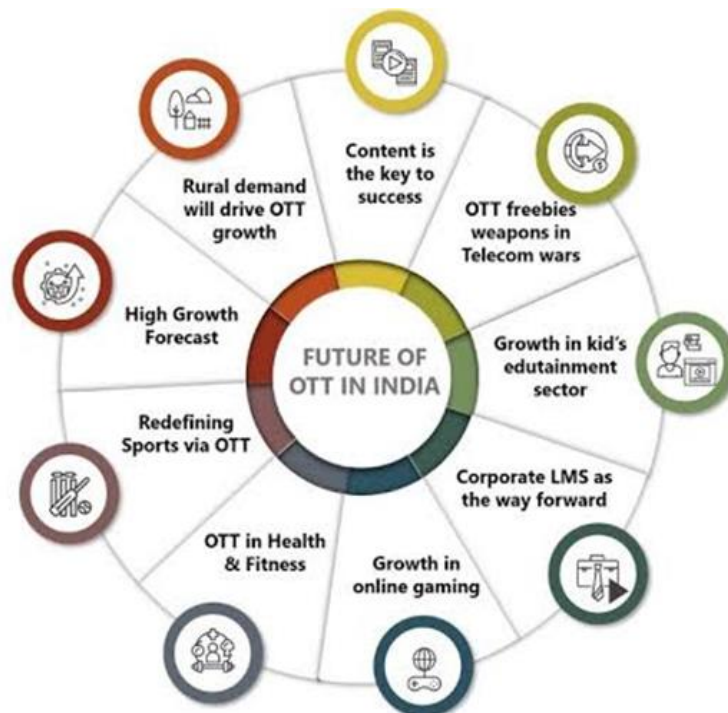
Source : RedSeer IP, RedSeer Analysis

Though OTT is a much-preferred medium of entertainment in India today, the most preferred genres are web series and movies. Still, the viewers of drama are less in numbers if compared to web series and movies. Web series is the core of OTT in India. People are addicted to accomplishing all episodes of web series. Content-driven films are the choices of audiences, and the OTT has strongly established a point that content is king; if there is no content, things will fail to attract viewers. The challenge before the writers of OTT have created is that innovative, new, creative and sold ideas will survive and will keep attracting the viewers. Mansi Prabhakaran, in her article “A New Era: The Rise of Web Series and Television Crossovers” appropriately asserts:

Today, the entertainment world is standing witness to a massive revolution, a pivotal change of immense proportions – the dawn of the era of web series and television crossovers. With the audience’s attention dwindling and the horizons of societal norms widening, OTT platforms with their fresh, novel and path breaking content are the harbingers of this digital revolution. Web series are becoming popular, not just due to their content but due to their easy availability and affordability. (Web Source)

As far as theatre is concerned, there is no idea of rating and views, but on OTT, the popularity and success of any programme is decided by rating and reviews. Ratings are highly influencing

to attract viewers to watch content videos. When a play is much discussed, debated, criticized and objected to by public organizations then only it comes to fame and name. The performance of a play never increases its popularity or solidarity. Convenience is the most solid reason behind the popularity of OTT platforms. It saves time of travelling, money and other factors involved in watching a live performance of theatre. The recent research has also proved that due to convenience, spectators have started preferring OTT platforms. The digital platforms provide a high-quality of video and sound. The quality of the screen and sound is also the reason behind the popularity of OTT. In theatre, the audience sitting in the last row cannot capture all the gestures, voices, and facial expressions of characters, and this oddity is surpassed by OTT. Thus, OTT gives something to attract an audience in a way that it is a commercial platform therefore, never lets any opportunity conquer the minds of the audience. There are large differences between live theatre performances and OTT streaming. However, no one can deny that digital streaming has grasped the minds of the audience. OTT has arrived with certain new aspects which have immensely fascinated and provided comfort to the audience. Therefore, the popularity of OTT is enhancing immensely. The following image efficiently exposes the future substantial of OTT platforms in India compared to other media entertainment.



## Conclusion

The theatre industry and theatrical fabrics, theatre and theatre association should release the play on the OTT platform after a hundred days of theatrical release. It is widely accepted truth that OTT has affected the theatrical production and creative process. The feeling of menace has touched the minds of people associated with theatre that theatre will be replaced by OTT in future. The theatre board should allow more freedom for directors and playwrights to present variable themes without obtrusion. As India is an under-screened country, the number of screens should be increased. The rapid establishment of OTT platforms as a medium of entertainment across the world as well as a preferred medium, stands as a real menace to the traditional ways of entertainment. One should remember that the availability of resources to use OTT platforms in a very handsome way is also a significant reason behind the obtainable development of OTT. Earlier, an artist required a lot of effort to become a recognized face, but OTT platform has tackled that obtrusion where an artist can be popular by a role of twenty seconds. Though it is true but the real aesthetic of play can be enjoyed in theatre by live performance. However, OTT has provided a major subway to the theatre. The vast consumption of OTT has created a serious transformation in the perception of Indians. The growing popularity, strong content, sensation, clarity of message and convenience of the OTT platform will remain a basic challenge for theatre whenever it resumes in future. Undoubtedly, in future, bringing back the spectators to the theatre and creating the same interest as they had in the past for theatre will be a basic challenge. India is a land of theatre lovers; hence the challenge of taking back the audience to the theatre houses would be overcome. But it is a matter of fact that the theatre industry has to compete with OTT in every way of expression. Challenges are mandatory with changing times, so contemporary Indian theatre should gear up to face these challenges and prove its essence.

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