

## **MASTER'S THESIS**

GLOBAL MARKETS, LOCAL CREATIVITIES

ERASMUS SCHOOL OF HISTORY, CULTURE & COMMUNICATION

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# **BEFORE & AFTER 2018: NETFLIX & THE PATTERN OF WOMEN-LED PRODUCTIONS IN BOLLYWOOD**



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## Abstract

*This research investigates the claim that OTT platforms, particularly Netflix India, are amplifying women-led productions in Bollywood, an industry known for its antiquated male predominance. Using a mixed-method approach, it takes Netflix India as a case to gauge the nature and degree of change instigated by OTT platforms in Bollywood concerning women-led production from 2018-2022.*

*The paper constructs a historical account of gender bias in Bollywood's production landscape from 1913 to 2022, revealing that gender discrimination in the industry historically intersects with identity elements like religion, class, and social status. It also highlights that gender disparity in contemporary Bollywood is heavily influenced by family background and social capital, contributing to discussions about nepotism in the industry. Next, Netflix India's strategic initiatives are critically analysed to understand how efficient they are to combat the persistent gender disparity in Bollywood, particularly to make key production roles more accessible for women. The study points out the company's conscious effort to establish itself as a benevolent one in India while also underscoring its lack of intersectional perspectives. Even though Netflix India does not have any explicit policy or quota to involve women in lead production roles, quantitative analysis depicts that significantly more women occupy such positions in Netflix India's Original films, compared to mainstream Bollywood. However, while studied as standalone data, women representation in lead production roles of Netflix India seems far from equal, especially in technical specialization. Empirical findings suggest Netflix India's preference for mid-career women professionals and new female talents, which signals a shift from traditional Bollywood bias that allegedly favours people who are either established figures or associated with film families.*

*On the basis of these findings, this research concludes that women representation in Netflix India's Original film productions reflects a notable change in the historically gendered field of Bollywood, but a full-scale paradigm shift toward gender equality remains elusive.*

**Keywords:** Over-The-Top (OTT) Platforms, Women in OTT Platforms, Netflix India, Bollywood, Women behind the camera, Gender Bias in Bollywood, Intersectionality, Women in creative industries, History of women in Bollywood

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Background

***“Waiting for Bollywood to give women a platform like OTT has”***

- Shefali Shah, actor, and director<sup>1</sup>

***“Definitely streaming platforms are more democratic. There’s more space for diverse voices and women.”***

- Alankrita Shrivastava, director, and screenwriter<sup>2</sup>

***“If it (Yeh Ballet) had been financed by conventional producers for theatrical release, I would have got two rupees to make it.”***

- Sooni Taraporevala, director, and screenwriter<sup>3</sup>

Mirroring the opinions of Shah, Shrivastava, and Taraporevala, a notable number of industry practitioners and media personnel have recently asserted that Over-the-top (OTT) platforms are engendering a shift in India’s film landscape by providing women unprecedented opportunities in leading production positions. Such discussions frequently compare this shift with the gendered production practice of mainstream Bollywood,<sup>4</sup> which is one of the most dominant film industries of India. But are there really more women involved in leading production roles of OTT platforms? If yes, who are they? Are they new faces or already

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<sup>1</sup> Women’s Day Adda | Interview with Anupama Chopra | Netflix | Film Companion, 2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4pivYIM9es>.

<sup>2</sup> Dore, Bhavya. “Streaming Services Spell Opportunity for Bollywood’s Women - CSMonitor.Com.” Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2020/1016/Opportunity-strikes-More-women-behind-Bollywood-s-cameras>.

<sup>3</sup> Dore, Bhavya. “Streaming Services Spell Opportunity for Bollywood’s Women - CSMonitor.Com.” Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2020/1016/Opportunity-strikes-More-women-behind-Bollywood-s-cameras>.

<sup>4</sup> By ‘Bollywood’, this paper refers to the Mumbai-based Hindi language film industry of India. And the phrase ‘mainstream Bollywood’ is used to characterize the production scenario in the industry that includes only traditional players like film studios, theatres, and distributors, but excludes digital media and OTT



established Bollywood celebrities transitioning to the new medium? This research paper seeks answers to these questions, aiming to decode the nature & degree of shift brought by OTT platforms regarding women-led production in Bollywood. This study will take Netflix India as a case study and investigate its specific role in driving the aforementioned perceived shift concerning women-led production in Bollywood.

Bollywood, the more than 100-year-old Hindi-language film industry, is based in Mumbai, and has been entertaining people — both at home and abroad. Since its inception, the industry has been infamous for reflecting India's entrenched patriarchal and classist values.<sup>5</sup> But it is crucial to note that the call for cultural representation across the global media, especially in the post-me-too movement era,<sup>6</sup> has also reached the shore of Bollywood. The rise of OTT platforms in India,<sup>7</sup> combined with the advent of original content distribution, has led multiple scholars, film personnel, and entertainment media to speculate that OTT is instigating a shift regarding women's representation in Bollywood films.<sup>8</sup> Although quantitative research and scholarly articles have yet to validate the claim, especially concerning women's involvement behind the camera, a significant number of industry personnel, OTT officials, and media outlets assert that this is indeed the case. OTT officials argue that they have more women with decision-making power in the production process, while media outlets interpret OTT platforms as a key catalyst in generating more diverse content with strong female protagonists. This perspective is further endorsed by industry practitioners in many recent interviews, podcasts, and panel discussions as well.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sanghita Sen, "Breaking the Boundaries of Bollywood: Women in a 'Man's Industry,'" in *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, ed. Mary and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (New York & London: Routledge, 2017), 121–37.

<sup>6</sup> Rocío Garrido and Anna Zaptsi, "Archetypes, Me Too, Time's up and the Representation of Diverse Women on TV," *Comunicar* 29, no. 68 (July 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3916/c68-2021-02>.

<sup>7</sup> The Indian OTT streaming video market is currently in its 2nd expansion phase and is projected to generate revenues of approximately \$3 billion by the end of 2022. At present, this market captures 7-9% of the total revenue and share of India's entertainment industry.; Vibhu Agarwal, "India's OTT Platforms," *The Times of India*, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/indias-ott-platforms/>.

Even though the first OTT in India, BIGflix, was launched in 2008, India did not see an original film solely distributed through OTT platforms before Netflix India launched its first original film "Love per Square Foot" in 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ragini Saxena and P R Sanjai, "Netflix, Amazon Rewrite Bollywood Rules with Focus on Women," *Bloomberg.com*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-15/women-rewrite-rules-of-bollywood-thanks-to-netflix-amazon?leadSource=uverify%20wal>.; The Economic Times, "Shah Rukh Khan on Future of Bollywood, Gender Equality, Parenting and More | FULL INTERVIEW," *www.youtube.com*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHRTnvLxpFc>.

<sup>9</sup> Film Companion, "O Womaniya! 2022 Adda | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, Ormax Media, Prime Video," *www.youtube.com*, August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwD3bupm6fY&t=2263s>.; Standard, Business. "How the Rise of Netflix and Prime Has Women Rewriting Rules of Bollywood," October

And in such conversations, Netflix India is applauded very often for its role in involving women in lead production roles. Netflix, a leading global streaming platform, has branded itself as a “stree-ming platform” in India since 2020, where *stree* translates to women in Hindi.<sup>10</sup> Over the ensuing seven years, it has been trying to be more accessible by localising the content, price, and user experience.<sup>11</sup> In the Indian OTT market, Netflix India is faced with tough competition against other OTT platforms like Prime Video and Disney+ Hotstar, which offer lower subscription rates.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in 2018, Netflix India became the first ever OTT platform in India to release an “Original” film.<sup>13</sup> From then to 2022, it has released 51 Netflix Original films, of which, 46 are in Hindi (Table 6). These films are mainly co-produced with multiple Mumbai-based production companies, but Netflix India owns their local and international distribution rights. The officials at Netflix India are very upfront about the company’s interest in having more women-centric and women-led content. A study focused on Netflix’s global programming reveals that a comparatively higher number of women are involved in leading production roles under the umbrella of the company,<sup>14</sup> whereas specific data for its operation

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16, 2020. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/entertainment/how-the-rise-of-netflix-and-prime-has-women-rewriting-rules-of-bollywood-120101600224\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/entertainment/how-the-rise-of-netflix-and-prime-has-women-rewriting-rules-of-bollywood-120101600224_1.html). ; India’s Top Female Filmmakers Talk Movies on Women’s Day | Vogue India, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgQs6hO2wGk>; Christian Science Monitor. “Opportunity Strikes: More Women behind Bollywood’s Cameras.” Accessed April 25, 2023. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2020/1016/Opportunity-strikes-More-women-behind-Bollywood-s-cameras>.

<sup>10</sup> Sunam, Paawan. “How Netflix Championed Itself as a Stree-Ming Service | Social Samosa,” March 3, 2022. <https://www.socialsamosa.com/2022/03/how-netflix-championed-itself-as-a-stree-ming-service/>. ; In Conversation with Women of Netflix | Now Streeming | #TakeCharge, 2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptCkzv34msl>. ; The Women of Netflix Ft. Prashasti, Supriya, Niveditha & Kaneez | Now Streeming | Netflix India, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSG33ln\\_MnE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSG33ln_MnE).

<sup>11</sup> James, Nandana. “How Netflix India Is Making Itself More Desi and Accessible,” October 2, 2020. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/variety/how-netflix-india-is-making-itself-more-desi-and-accessible/article32750789.ece>.

<sup>12</sup> Reuters. “Netflix to Roll out Cheaper Mobile-Only Plan for India.” July 17, 2019, sec. Media Industry. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netflix-india-idUSKCN1UC2R9>.

<sup>13</sup> “Originals” of an OTT means the films or shows that are commissioned, produced, and distributed by a particular platform. There are four different types of “Netflix Originals”:

a) **Original Programming:** In this case, content are commissioned and produced by in-house Netflix production crews,

b) **International Distribution Rights:** In this case, Netflix only owns the exclusive international distribution rights of the content, but might not have the right to market it as a “Netflix Original” in the home market,

c) **Co-production:** In this case, content is co-produced with other companies, but Netflix has the right to market them as “Netflix Originals”,

d) **Continuation projects:** In this case, Netflix acquires the right to a project previously owned by other companies and continues producing it after they have been discontinued for various reasons.

In India, “Netflix Original” films mostly fit into the co-production category.

<sup>14</sup> The Economic Times. “It’s All about Inclusion: Netflix Has Higher Number of Women Directors, Producers & Writers, Says Study.” March 1, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/its-all-about-inclusion-netflix-has-higher-number-of-women-directors-producers-writers-says-study/articleshow/81272750.cms>.



in India is not available. However, Monika Shergill, Vice President of Content at Netflix India, remarks that more than 50% of Netflix films released in India (in 2020) have a woman producer or director.<sup>15</sup>

Such claims by the organization and such degree of applause by both the media and industry personnel necessitate a case-based investigation into the real scenario. This is what I set out to do with the present study. For this, I rely on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. At the beginning, I identify, first, the factors that bar women to take on leading production roles in Bollywood, and second, the factors that enable women to participate in leading production roles in Bollywood. Here, based on a systematic literature review, I construct a historical timeline of Bollywood from 1913 to 2022 to comprehend its historically gender-biased production sites. Moreover, using the intersectionality framework, I analyse multiple case studies focused on women who assumed production roles in the given time period to have a comprehensive understanding of the situation. In the second part, I use Critical Discourse Analysis and Stakeholder Analysis on Netflix India's initiatives, policies, campaigns, and branding strategies in India. The aim of this part is to understand if Netflix India contributes to – a) remove the factors that bar women to take pivotal production roles, and b) create driving factors to involve women in key production roles. To provide an exhaustive understanding of the company's contribution, I also analyse case studies of three selected women who have already assumed leading roles in the productions of Netflix original films. The last part of the study, based on data from 2018-2022, adopts a quantitative approach to investigate if the number of leading women involved in the production process of Netflix Original films is any different from that of mainstream Bollywood. I inquire, through a quantitative comparison, if the women involved in key production roles of Netflix Original films were already established figures or newcomers. By utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, I not only ensure an in-depth investigation into Netflix India's claim regarding women-led productions, but I also aim to inspect the contribution of OTT platforms (specifically Netflix India) in creating more accessible spaces for women in a historically male-dominated industry like Bollywood.

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<sup>15</sup> Ragini Saxena and P R Sanjai, "Netflix, Amazon Rewrite Bollywood Rules with Focus on Women," Bloomberg.com, October 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-15/women-rewrite-rules-of-bollywood-thanks-to-netflix-amazon?leadSource=uverify%20wal>

## 1.2. Research Question

### **Comparing the situation before and after 2018, what is the nature & degree of change brought by Netflix India regarding women-led production in Bollywood?**

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions will be addressed throughout the paper:

1. What are the factors that bar women from taking on decision-making roles in the production process of Bollywood? How different are the present factors from the past ones?
2. What are the factors that constitute the “switching power”<sup>16</sup> of women who assume leading production roles in Bollywood? How different are the present factors from the past ones?
3. Statistically, how many Netflix India Original films have women in key production roles?
4. How does this number compare with the count of women occupying key production roles in mainstream Bollywood during the period of 2018-2022?
5. What initiatives has Netflix India undertaken to foster the participation of women in leading production roles in Bollywood? Are they effective enough to eradicate the aforementioned barrier or create catalysts that drive women to assume such roles?
6. Who are the women that are assuming key production roles in Netflix India Original films? What were the specific barring factors for them to assume key production roles in Netflix India Original films? What did Netflix India do to remove the barriers for them? What constitutes the “switching power” of these women? What did Netflix India do to enable them?

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<sup>16</sup> Switching power theory, initially hypothesized by Arsenault Castells (2008), studies power structure in a social system, which makes it relevant to investigate how women attain the power to charter through supposedly masculine and patriarchal production sets of Bollywood. Discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

### 1.3. Research Gap and Contribution

Even though the interrelation between cultural products (films, art, music, and literature) and aspects of social life has been a conundrum for modern social science for a long time,<sup>17</sup> some scholars suggest that popular media's messages about gender can take normative roles and have the ability to influence perceptions in the real world. It has also been highlighted in media effects research that entertainment media messages can evidently impact stereotypical beliefs and expectations regarding gender roles.<sup>18</sup> India is the largest producer of feature films in the whole world and made a Guinness world record in 2015 by having the annual highest rate of cinema-goers in theatres,<sup>19</sup> which clearly indicates how influential cinema is in this particular country. However, it is also undeniable that India stands at a grim 135 among the 146 countries in The Global Gender Gap Report 2022,<sup>20</sup> and the rate of crime against women there (only reported ones) witnessed a significant rise of 26.35% in the last 6 years (2016-2022).<sup>21</sup> Considering these two details and the findings of media effects research, it becomes evident that there is a clear need to analyse how women are being represented in Bollywood, which is one of India's most prominent film industries.

The world of academia does have a number of in-depth, qualitative research on the history of female representation in Bollywood, with some studies discussing the recent changes in women's representation both in Bollywood and OTT content. But the majority of the research concentrates only on the on-screen representation of women, overlooking their role behind the camera. One might ask: does the gender really matter in terms of storytelling? Do we really need to look at who is telling the story to ensure better on-screen representation of women? To answer this, an increasing body of quantitative research focused on Hollywood states that

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Monaco and Will Wright, "Review of Cinema and Society.," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 507–10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778322>.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana E. Mastro, "Mean Girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies on Emerging Adults' Gender-Based Attitudes and Beliefs," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (March 2008): 131–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900808500109>; Sue Lafky et al., "Looking through Gendered Lenses: Female Stereotyping in Advertisements and Gender Role Expectations," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 1996): 379–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909607300209>.

<sup>19</sup> Guinness World Records. "Largest Cinema Attendance (Current)." Accessed April 18, 2023.

<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/69877-largest-cinema-attendance-current>.

<sup>20</sup> Tuba Chauhan, "Global Gender Gap Report 2022: India Ranks 135 out of 146, Slips Drastically in Health and Survival," *Feminism in India*, July 28, 2022, <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/07/29/global-gender-gap-report-2022-india-ranks-135-out-of-146-slips-dramatically-in-health-and-survival/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Gender%20Gap%20Report>.

<sup>21</sup> Geeta Pandey, "Rising Crimes against Indian Women in Five Charts," *BBC News*, September 12, 2022, sec. India, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62830634>.

women in leading production roles can influence storytelling. One, the number of women on screen is more when films have women in decision-making positions behind the camera; i.e. directors and producers. Two, when women are at the helm, films are more likely to depict “thought-provoking” stories.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to have a comprehensive understanding of female representation in Bollywood, it is imperative to investigate how gender inclusive the production scenario really is. And the age-old scholarly allegations against Bollywood for misrepresenting and stereotyping women make the research even more essential. Among the very few books, book chapters and journal articles focused on women’s participation behind the camera in Bollywood, most centre on the early period in Bollywood history and highlight early women filmmakers and producers. That indicates a clear research gap regarding the involvement of women in the production process of contemporary Bollywood, including both mainstream and OTT. As more and more industry personnel, and film journalists continue to praise OTT for involving women in key production roles, investigating the nature & degree of change in this regard becomes crucial.

Scholarly research on women representation in Bollywood is relatively scarce compared to the extensive range of literature focused on the Global North, especially Hollywood. Furthermore, according to Conor, Gill, and Taylor (2015), the cultural and creative industries (CCI) appear to be paradoxical in terms of providing fair opportunities. On the one hand, they are described as places where rigid social hierarchies don't exist. On the other hand, these industries, such as film, television, music, and the arts, are still marked by significant and growing disparities when it comes to gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and disability. Although gender inequality is pervasive across the labour market of most fields, the specific dynamism of gender bias in the creative industry has been relatively under-researched.<sup>23</sup> So, while my research centres on

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<sup>22</sup> HuffPost. “Gender Imbalance in Best Picture Nominated Films from 1977 to 2006,” March 5, 2008. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gender-imbalance-in-best-b\\_90072](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gender-imbalance-in-best-b_90072). ; Shawcroft, Jane E., Sarah M. Coyne, Jessica D. Zurcher, and Pamela Jo Brubaker. “Depictions of Gender Across Eight Decades of Disney Animated Film: The Role of Film Producer, Director, and Writer Gender.” *Sex Roles* 86, no. 5 (March 1, 2022): 346–65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01273-6>.

Lauzen, Martha M. *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2010*. Center for the study of women in television and film, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> “Where Are the Women? Gendered Indian Digital Production Cultures Post #metoo - Smith Mehta, 2022.” Accessed May 13, 2023. <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1177/15274764221135798>.

the gendered production dynamics of one particular film industry in India, it also acknowledges the continued presence of gender-based inequality in the CCI.

#### 1.4. Sources & Methodology

This research applies methodological pluralism to address the research question. Morse (1994) suggests that combining more than one research method simultaneously or sequentially brings a balanced and holistic approach.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the mixed approach here is deliberately designed to ensure that the methodologies, namely extensive literature review, interviews, case studies, and comparative analysis, can complement each other and include perspectives of various stakeholders. Moreover, the complexity of reaching the industry personnel in Bollywood and the time limit made it imperative to rely on a wide range of secondary sources in order to find a thorough answer to the research question.

First, I present a historical trajectory of Bollywood's gendered history (1913-2022) prepared from secondary literature, which includes journal papers, book chapters, newspaper articles, recorded interviews, and podcasts. The historical trajectory includes multiple case studies focused on women who assumed key production roles in Bollywood. To identify the factors behind the gendered production scenario in Bollywood, an intersectionality framework is operationalised on the case studies. Intersectionality, as a concept, talks about the ways in which unequal systems based on gender, race, colour, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other discriminatory forms 'intersect' to create dynamics and impact.<sup>25</sup> Even early work related to interdisciplinary research on film and gender includes social positions, like race, class, sexuality, age, and geographical location.<sup>26</sup> This thesis also centres on a film industry that belongs to a society marked by racial violence, high casteism, sexism, classism, and religious, ethnic, and sexuality-based discrimination. Therefore, it is crucial to include discussions related to race, social class, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion here.

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<sup>24</sup> Morse, Janice M., and Seung Eun Chung. "Toward Holism: The Significance of Methodological Pluralism." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200302>.

<sup>25</sup> Hobson, Janell. "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1/2 (2002): 45–59.

<sup>26</sup> Sutherland, Jean-Anne, and Kathryn M. Feltey. "Here's Looking at Her: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Power and Feminism in Film." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 618–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1152956>.

A detailed analysis of all these factors is beyond the scope of the paper, but the framework will enable an in-depth investigation into the gendered nature of Bollywood productions, including both mainstream and Netflix India.

In the second part, the objective of the research is to evaluate if initiatives taken by Netflix India have any impact on making lead production roles more accessible for women in Bollywood. To do so, I first identify relevant policies, CSR campaigns and branding efforts of Netflix India that reflect the company's commitment to involve women in key production roles within Bollywood. Then I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Stakeholder Analysis on the policies and campaigns to assess their efficacy and understand their public representation.

CDA helps me to investigate the often-obscure link between “discursive practices, events, and texts,” and “wider social and cultural structures, relationships, and processes,” which are at once causes and consequences of power dynamics and conflicts over power.<sup>27</sup> In this case, while studying Netflix India's CSR activities and branding efforts, CDA enables the investigation of power dynamics within Netflix India's discourse, which is crucial given the historical gender imbalance in the film industry. Moreover, as suggested by Van Dijk (1993), CDA can be helpful to understand Netflix India's ideologies in their non-neutral CSR and branding messages.<sup>28</sup> CDA's sensitivity to broader socio-political contexts (Wodak and Meyer 2001),<sup>29</sup> attention to particular language choices, and interpretation of discourse as an agent of social change (Fairclough 2003)<sup>30</sup> makes it even more effective as a research tool in this case. It can situate Netflix India's campaigns on the conjuncture of the transitioning socio-political climate of India and Bollywood, while examining their language choice for wider assumptions and ideologies.

Stakeholder Analysis helps me have a more comprehensive understanding regarding the efficacy of the campaigns. As per Bryson (2004), stakeholder analysis compares the campaigns against the expectations and interest of key stakeholders, while also highlighting the challenges and opportunities.<sup>31</sup> In this case, internal stakeholders are the employees of the organization,

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<sup>27</sup> James Paul Gee. *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Dijk, Teun A van. “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis on JSTOR,” 1993. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/stable/42888777>.

<sup>29</sup> Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer. *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. SAGE Publications, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> “What to Do When Stakeholders Matter.” *Routledge 6*, no. 1 (2004): 21–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719030410001675722>.



and the external stakeholders include industry personnel, viewers and subscribers, government and regulatory bodies, civil society organizations, and media. Opinion from viewers and subscribers are out of the scope of this paper, but from a diverse range of sources such as newspaper articles, press release, blogposts, podcasts, and interviews, I assess how the campaigns of Netflix India is perceived by industry personnel (specially women), media, government and regulatory officials, and civil society organisations. I go in depth in my analyses the case of three selected women who are currently involved in key production roles in Netflix India's original films. These analyses identify the factors that may have barred these women to assume leading production roles, and also highlight the factors that enabled them. By delving deep into these case studies, I aim to ascertain if Netflix India contributed to remove barriers for the women or to enable them in this regards.

In the last part of the research, I investigate the degree of change that came to be under Netflix India concerning women-led Bollywood productions. I highlight the difference between the number of women in leading production roles in mainstream Bollywood and that of Netflix India during 2018-2022.<sup>32</sup> To do so, first, I compile a complete list of all Hindi-language Bollywood films that premiered in theatre during the period of 2018-2022 based on the data from IMDB and Book My Show (Table 1 – Table 5). Then I compare this to a separate list of all Netflix India's Original films that were released during the period of 2018-2022 (Table 6). Both of these lists include the names of women who occupied leading production roles in each film during the given period. Due to incomplete data and to the hierarchical production practices of Bollywood, the data collection focused on five key production roles, which are: director, producer, screenplay writer, cinematographer, and, editor. I draw a comparison between mainstream Bollywood productions & Netflix India productions during 2018-2022 on the basis of these key metrics:

- Percentage of films with at least one woman in a leading production role
- Percentage of films with at least one female director
- Percentage of films with at least one female producer
- Percentage of films with at least one female screenplay writer
- Percentage of films with at least one female cinematographer
- Percentage of films with at least one female editor

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<sup>32</sup> Here, the specific period is 2018-2022 because Netflix started to produce originals in 2018.

Comparing the numbers of the given period, I investigate whether Netflix India has really succeeded in involving more women in leading production roles compared to mainstream Bollywood. With this quantitative approach, coupled with qualitative analysis, this research is able to evaluate the claim that Netflix India is invoking a shift regarding women-led productions in Bollywood. While I acknowledge that gender is a non-binary and fluid concept, I had to resort to sorting production personnel into a gender binary for the purposes of this statistical analysis. In doing so, I acknowledge the limitations of my approach, and it might be misrepresenting LGBTQI+ professionals. The reader should be aware that there might be people who have deliberately concealed their identity to avoid unfavourable reactions from their community.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations**

This chapter is aimed to introduce the theories that will be used in the research to answer the primary question. Intersectionality will be a key theory here to understand the challenges and facilitators within the gendered production scenario of Bollywood, whereas switching power theory will be used to explore how women wield power to assume leading production roles in the male-dominated industry.

### **2.1. Intersectionality**

Intersectionality studies how gender, race, colour, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other discriminatory forms ‘intersect’ to create dynamics and impact of inequality and discrimination.<sup>33</sup> The concept allows us to examine how the experience and opportunities of marginalised communities are deeply impacted by the confluence of multiple systems of oppression. The early history of intersectionality is entangled with the research and activism of Black women in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as Sojourner Truth spoke of how the nature of discrimination within the suffragette movement varied from White

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<sup>33</sup> Hobson, Janell. “Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1/2 (2002): 45–59.

women to Black women.<sup>34</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term “intersectionality”, argued that discrimination against Black women could not be fully comprehended through singular identity element such as gender or race. The interrelated dynamism among the identity elements such as gender, race, and colour have to be included as they co-construct and interrelate with one another to maintain the larger pattern of opportunity and drawback.<sup>35</sup> Intersectionality was also significant to acknowledge that gender discrimination can be faced differently by women situated in different social positions of race, class, sexual orientation, and nationality. For instance, the study of Reskin and Padavic (1999) provides an in-depth analysis of how segregation and pay inequality exist at high positions for all women, but it is comparatively much worse for Black women and Latin women.<sup>36</sup>

Over time, many scholars have adapted the intersectionality framework in light of more broad and detailed identity elements including gender fluidity, sexual orientation, caste division, and migration in various parts of the world. In the case of India, caste is crucial a factor in the intersectionality framework. For example, early feminist study in India used a key concept called ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’, which explores the nature of Indian patriarchy — heavily characterized by both caste system and gender. Dalit feminism also speaks of intersectionality by pointing out the three layers of oppression faced by them due to their gender, class, and caste position.<sup>37</sup> Scholars like Pan (2021) argue that the interplay between caste and gender remains a central theme in influencing opportunities and inequalities for women in India,<sup>38</sup> while Haq (2013) recommends including religion, race, and colour as well.<sup>39</sup> With case-specific scenarios such as the violence against Manipuri women, Riddle (2020) asks for

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<sup>34</sup> Metcalf, Heather, Dorian Russell, and Catherine Hill. “Broadening the Science of Broadening Participation in STEM Through Critical Mixed Methodologies and Intersectionality Frameworks.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 5 (May 1, 2018): 580–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218768872>.

<sup>35</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” 1989.

<sup>36</sup> Robinson, Zandria F. “Intersectionality and Gender Theory.” In *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*, edited by Barbara J. Risman, Carissa M. Froyum, and William J. Scarborough, 69–80. *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_5).

<sup>37</sup> Dalits are considered the lowest caste in India. They are excluded from the four-fold Varna/caste system of Hinduism and are treated as Panchama/fifth caste. Historically they have been considered “untouchables”, and consequently they have faced a high degree of caste-based social exclusion and oppression. Here, Dalit feminism refers to the school of feminist thoughts that focus on the intersection of gender, class, and caste bias faced by Indian Dalit women.; Pan, Anandita. “Gender, Caste and Subjectivity: Revisiting the #MeToo Movement in India,” 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Pan, Anandita. *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*. SAGE Publications, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Haq, Rana. “Intersectionality of Gender and Other Forms of Identity: Dilemmas and Challenges Facing Women in India.” Edited by Edwina Pio and Jawad Syed. *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 28, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 171–84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-01-2013-0010>.

understanding intersectionality in India through a religious and ethnic hierarchy, whereas in cases of surrogacy and immigrant Indian women, multiple scholars have urged to take economic class and immigrant status into account.<sup>40</sup>

Based on the discussion above, it becomes clear that a single-axis analysis is not enough to understand the discrimination against Indian women. Keeping that in mind, the framework proposed by Crenshaw (1989) and later developed by Collins (1990) seems more effective here as it includes the confluence of multiple discriminatory factors. It is a key argument in Crenshaw's framework that a system of oppression cannot be studied in 'isolation'.<sup>41</sup> This perspective is crucial to study the gendered practice of Bollywood, where gender discrimination regularly intersects with other forms of discrimination like casteism and classism. In addition to that, Collin's Matrix of Domination becomes even more relevant for Bollywood since it includes broader societal and institutional factors, especially industry norms and practices. It enables discussion about how patriarchal beliefs, casteism, class-based biases, and other factors of systemic power can create a 'system of domination' affecting individuals. This particular framework also acknowledges the agency of marginalized individuals and groups by viewing them as agents of change, rather than as mere victims.<sup>42</sup> As it explores the 'empowerment' and 'resistance' of marginalized communities to study their strategies to challenge gender-based discrimination, it becomes further suitable to study the production efforts of women in male-dominated Bollywood.

## 2.2. Switching Power Theory

Switching power theory, initially hypothesized by Arsenault Castells (2008), studies power structure in a social system, which makes it relevant to investigate how women attain the power to charter through supposedly masculine and patriarchal production sets of Bollywood. "Switching power" is the ability possessed by a critically located node (in this case, women in Bollywood) to connect one network cluster (such as political affiliation or industry network) in a sphere to another sphere (such as international network or access to social elites), or rather

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<sup>40</sup> Saravanan, Sheela. "The Postcolonial Paradox and Feminist Solidarity." In *A Transnational Feminist View of Surrogacy Biomarkets in India*, edited by Sheela Saravanan, 129–57. Singapore: Springer, 2018. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6869-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6869-0_6).

<sup>41</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," n.d.

<sup>42</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055>.

interconnect a diverse range of networks to achieve a concerted goal. Through the case study of Rupert Murdoch, CEO of NewsCorp, Arsenault and Castells (2008) argue that Murdoch connects the multiple networks and clouts he possesses in the economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres to fulfil the goal of his business organization.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Rai (2020) argues that Devika Rani, an early woman producer, director, and actor in Indian cinema, combined her social capital with international network and technological knowledge to navigate the male-dominated terrain of film production.<sup>44</sup>

Following the path of Rai, here I explore multiple cases focused on women who assumed key production roles in Bollywood with an intent to understand what were the enabling factors for them. Affective and effective dimensions of power work in tandem to construct switching power. According to McClary (2020), the affective realm of switching power is the emotional, symbolic, and intangible dynamics of power.<sup>45</sup> For example, despite having a chequered background, the on-screen representations of Nargis Dutt as a traditional, sophisticated Indian woman created an image of a respectable woman for her. This public perception belongs to her affective realm of power. On the other hand, the effective dimension of switching power refers to the tangible, and material aspects, which results in concrete real-life outcomes. For instance, when Guneet Monga's production house Sikhya Entertainment continues producing critically acclaimed films for years and gives women a platform to tell stories, her production venture charts a concrete change in the power dynamics of Bollywood. This falls under the umbrella of the effective dimension of power as material labour exerts a real-life change here.

Feminist studies are concerned with the undervaluation of women's labour, which is also a common trend in male-dominated Bollywood. To deep dive into cases of Bollywood, it is imperative to understand the types of labour. Immaterial labour, defined by Lazzarato (1996), refers to cognitive and affective work that produces informational and cultural outputs. Material labour, on the other hand, refers to physical work leading to tangible outcomes. Marx (1867) argues that the difference between immaterial and material labour is visibility and measurability. Immaterial labour is closely associated with affective labour, which, according

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<sup>43</sup> Arsenault, Amelia, and Manuel Castells. "Switching Power: Rupert Murdoch and the Global Business of Media Politics: A Sociological Analysis." *International Sociology* 23, no. 4 (July 1, 2008): 488–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580908090725>.

<sup>44</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>45</sup> McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

to Hardt (1999), are efforts that can invoke emotional feelings in people.<sup>46</sup> Affective labour is often perceived as care roles and service-providing roles, which are historically feminized fields of work. It becomes the case as society expects women to be caring and emotionally supportive in both personal and professional contexts. But this kind of work is often undervalued and underpaid despite its significant contribution to social and financial aspects because it is not considered 'real' work, which is a prime concern of feminist studies.<sup>47</sup> Hochschild (2012) points out that care jobs and service sectors suffer from gendered wage discrimination due to the invisible status of affective labour.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, feminist scholars like Connell (2009) mention that women's material labour is often overly scrutinized or perceived as immaterial/affective labour due to the gendered nature of society.<sup>49</sup> For example, with the case of Nargis Dutt, Rai (2020) argues that Dutt's material labour devolved into immaterial labour because – a) the predominant masculine structure of Bollywood did not allow to give her due credit for production efforts, b) even when her production efforts were discussed, the focus was solely on her affective labour as a female star/sister/love interest of the male partners and exclusive of her material labour. This is why the dynamism of immaterial and material labour is crucial to understand the production efforts of women in Bollywood. It provides intricate insights into the obstacles faced by women, and their strategies to contest conventional gendered practices.

Switching power can be better understood in the context of gendered Bollywood through the concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' by Bourdieu (1984) as it discusses how a critical node (in this case, women) operates within the constraints of a field and/or transcends its limits. A field is a social area where social agents struggle and compete over attaining certain forms of capital and/or specific sets of benefits. Capital refers to anything significant for social agents, and the nature of struggle within a field usually determines what forms of capital; i.e. cultural, social, symbolic, or physical, will be significant for its social agents. Here, Bollywood is the field and women are the social agents who are amassing different forms of capital including social, financial, cultural, and political ones to contest the hierarchical power dynamics. The activities in a field (in this case gendered production practices) originate from the interaction between

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<sup>46</sup> Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100.

<sup>47</sup> Gregg, Melissa. *Work's Intimacy*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100.; Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2012. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn9bk>.

<sup>49</sup> Connell, Raewyn. *Gender: In World Perspective*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.



capital (resources) and habitus (dispositions). Capital determines one's position in the hierarchical social system of the field, whereas habitus delineates their internal disposition about it.

Habitus is an individual's "internalization of the socio-cultural and historical context of a field" that operates regardless of their consciousness. In simple words, habitus is the internal disposition of someone that helps them make decisions and choose lifestyle practices.<sup>50</sup> For example, the production sites of Bollywood were supposedly masculine, where women were considered mere decorative props to display on the screen. In the initial period studied here, it was the courtesans who joined the gendered film industry while women from so-called respectable families refused to do so. Here, the sociocultural context of the industry was the same for both sets of women, but their internal disposition is completely different. The habitus of a courtesan is free from the conventional values of Indian society, whereas the habitus of a woman from a 'respectable' family is more likely to be bound by social expectations. Bourdieu (1977) argues that habitus is a crucial factor in determining the activities of an agent within a field.<sup>51</sup>

### **Chapter 3: Through the Lens of History: Bollywood & Women**

Like many film industries of the world, Bollywood is also male dominated, with the tendency to undervalue the contributions and capabilities of women. In a book chapter about the gendered history of Bollywood, Sen (2017) asserts that the film industry is a sexist and classist one with the reflection of the patriarchal and Brahmanical societal values of India.<sup>52</sup> The subsequent literature review will be divided into a number of sub-chapters, each dedicated to

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<sup>50</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, and Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. 11. print. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002. Costa, Cristina, and Mark Murphy. "Bourdieu and the Application of Habitus across the Social Sciences." In *Bourdieu, Habitus and Social Research: The Art of Application*, edited by Cristina Costa and Mark Murphy, 3–17. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137496928\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137496928_1); Turnbull, Steven Martin, Kirsten Locke, Frédérique Vanholsbeeck, and Dion R. J. O'Neale. "Bourdieu, Networks, and Movements: Using the Concepts of Habitus, Field and Capital to Understand a Network Analysis of Gender Differences in Undergraduate Physics." *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 9 (September 12, 2019): e0222357. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0222357>.

<sup>51</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

<sup>52</sup> Brahmanism as an ideology aims to promote India as a Hindu majoritarian culture on the basis of caste hierarchy. It propagates the supremacy of the higher caste (Brahmans) over the marginalized people including lower caste Dalits, religious minorities and gendered others as well; Sen, Sanghita. "Breaking the Boundaries of Bollywood: Women in a 'Man's Industry.'" In *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, edited by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, 121–37. Routledge, 2017.

investigate women's involvement in lead production roles in Bollywood across time. It aims to answer the following sub-questions –

1. What are the factors that bar women from taking on decision-making roles in the production process of Bollywood? How different are the present factors from the past ones?
2. What are the factors that constitute the “switching power” of women who assume leading production roles in Bollywood? How different are the present factors from the past ones?

### 3.1. From High Stigma to Entrepreneurial Ventures: Bollywood & Women in 1913-1940

India got introduced with ‘motion picture technology’ as Marius Sestier, an employee of Lumiere Brothers projected the first motion film in Bombay,<sup>53</sup> at the year of 1896.<sup>54</sup> Then in 1913, Dadasaheb Phalke directed and released the first Indian full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*. According to Chakrabarty (2022), Bombay became the hub of film production during the 1920s because it was already the commercial hub of British India,<sup>55</sup> and had trade and industrial activities that could finance the film industry. Cultural activities like the commercial theatre movement, especially the presence of Parsi theatre,<sup>56</sup> also shaped the landscape for a Bombay-based film industry, which can be considered an origin point for today's Bollywood.<sup>57</sup>

In the 1910s-1920s, the only role women were expected to fill in films were the roles of the on-screen actresses. Researchers mention that it was so hard to convince women to act on screen that young boys played female characters in some films of that time. Even sex-workers refused to appear on screen as that meant ‘performing for the masses’, which was a highly stigmatized issue in society.<sup>58</sup> Sinha (2020) asserts that the high stigma originated from the

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<sup>53</sup> In 1995, Shiv Sena, the then political leader changed the official name of Bombay to Mumbai. In this paper, Bombay will be used to refer to pre-1995 Mumbai.

<sup>54</sup> Chakrabarty, Darshana. “Deconstructing Femininity and Progression of Women in 20th-Century Bollywood Films.” In *Cinematic Representation of Women in Modern Celebrity Culture*, 120–41. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> By British India, the paper refers to India under British colonization

<sup>56</sup> Parsi theatre is an influential theatre tradition in India that flourished in the mid-19th century. It included theatre companies mostly owned by immigrant businessmen from Persia who came to Bombay with the intent to expand trading opportunities.

<sup>57</sup> Chakrabarty, Darshana. “Deconstructing Femininity and Progression of Women in 20th-Century Bollywood Films.” In *Cinematic Representation of Women in Modern Celebrity Culture*, 120–41. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. “The PhalkeEra: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology.” 1993, 1993, 47–82.

trend of highlighting women's sensuality in films and their promotions.<sup>59</sup> Chakrabarty (2022) points out that marginalised women, namely Anglo-Indians, and sex-workers were the first women to act in Indian cinema in the silent era (1910s-1930s) as they were not bound by the traditional Indian code of conduct.<sup>60</sup> Even after that, in fact throughout the whole 1910s-1940s, most of the women associated with the film industry came from such backgrounds. Kumar (2018) uses the word *tawaif* to clarify that these so-called sex-workers were much more than that. Apart from being free from the traditional expectation of society, their deep association with cultural arts including classical music, dance, and poetry, and their capabilities to delight the spectators also made them attractive and viable choices for the on-screen roles of Indian cinema at the early period.<sup>61</sup>

Later, many of these women with *tawaif* backgrounds, such as Fatma Begum, Zubeida, Jahanara Kajjan, transcended the supposedly masculine field of Indian cinema with their own production ventures. Having been raised in *kothas*,<sup>62</sup> — spaces characterized by feminine power, entrepreneurial practices,<sup>63</sup> and significant economic and creative autonomy — they possessed 'feminine agency' and 'skilled imagination', which, according to Kumar (2018) enabled them to take on entrepreneurial routes. Alongside them, actresses of multi-ethnic backgrounds such as Armenian, Jewish, Anglo-Indian, and Parsi, also took on entrepreneurial roles after somewhat establishing their careers as actresses. These women were part of the rising workforce of women, impacted by the shifting social and urban economy of India, especially after World War I. Majumdar (2009) mentions the case of Nadia to argue that many of these women were involved in public performances, and Kumar (2018) states that many of them including Ruby Mayers, Romola, and Esther Victoria Abraham already had public-facing

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<sup>59</sup> Sinha, Priyam. "'Cultured Women' Do Not Act in Films: Tracing Notions of Female Stardom in Bombay Cinema (1930s–1950s)." *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* 01, no. 02 (July 2020): 2050012. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2717541320500126>.

<sup>60</sup> Chakrabarty, Darshana. "Deconstructing Femininity and Progression of Women in 20th-Century Bollywood Films." In *Cinematic Representation of Women in Modern Celebrity Culture*, 120–41. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Based on the analysis of Mukul Kesavan, she defines the identity of the *tawaifs* as such: a) they were not mere sex-workers, even though they also served that purpose for the 'cultivated man-about-town', b) they were more like an 'accomplished courtesan' or 'geisha' who trained 'the sons of the gentry' about the finer aspects of life including music, art, and etiquette, c) they had so much sublime sophistication to their craft that even their *mujra* did not turn out to be an erotic dance performance, but rather a choreographed way of salutation, Kumar, Anusuya. "Unlikely 'Devis': Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen." In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape*. Sage Publications Ltd., 2018.

<sup>62</sup> *Kotha* refer to women-led *tawaif*-households where many of them were born, brought up, and trained in performance arts.

<sup>63</sup> employing orchestras, designing traveling shows across the country etc.

working experience in colonial urban cities including Mumbai, Pune, and Calcutta.<sup>64</sup> Majumder's (2009, 93) analysis of 'female stardom' during the 1930s-1950s reveals a dominant cinematic and extra-cinematic discourse of that time. On one hand, actresses were considered 'low-class' women because performing for the public was associated with sexual and immoral implications. But upper-class status was associated with actresses who had respectable family background, education, and female propriety.<sup>65</sup> Even though actresses are out of the scope of this paper, this normative femininity pointed out by Majumder delineates that social background, familial identity, and education were bargaining factors for women in Indian cinema at that time.

Saraswatibai Phalke, the wife of Dadasaheb Phalke, is often mentioned as the first female editor and the first woman to work in leading production roles in Indian cinema. But her agency is debated since some argue that she learned editing only to lessen her husband's workload and merely managed the film sets by cooking for the cast and crews.<sup>66</sup> This case reflects the concern of Feminist studies about the undervaluation of women's labour as their immaterial labour is disregarded and material labour (such as editing) is faced with an intense inspection. Moreover, the lack of information and acknowledgement regarding her work reflects a common flaw of the gendered historical lens.

### 3.1.1. Fatma Begum

The historical documents and academic literature considers Fatma Begum (A1) as the first ever female to take on leading roles in the production process of Indian Cinema. In 1926, she started working as a writer, director, actor, and producer in Bombay, which also indicates the multiple kinds of labour women had to enact in their independent film projects of that time. There is much ambiguity about the background of Begum. Sawhney (2021, 21) characterizes Begum as a Muslim, Urdu-speaking stage performer, who got married to Ibrahim Mohammed Yakut

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<sup>64</sup> Kumar, Anusuya. "Unlikely 'Devis': Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen." In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape*. Sage Publications Ltd., 2018.; Majumdar, Neepa. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*. University of Illinois Press, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Majumdar, Neepa. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*. University of Illinois Press, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Pande, Mrinal. "'Moving beyond Themselves': Women in Hindustani Parsi Theatre and Early Hindi Films." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 17 (2006): 1646–53.; Godbole, Tanika. "Saraswatibai Phalke: India's First Ever Film Editor And Technician | #IndianWomenInHistory." *Feminism in India*, March 7, 2019. <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/03/08/saraswatibai-phalke-film-technician-editor/>.

; Roy, Dr Piyush. *Bollywood FAQ: All That's Left to Know About the Greatest Film Story Never Told*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Khan III Bahadur, the Prince of Sachin<sup>67</sup> and later fled to Bombay in 1913 with her daughters to join films. Even though in the papers of Sachin, Begum was dead in 1913, Sawhney interprets it as a cover to hide the fact that a woman of the clan had left to work in films.<sup>68</sup> Kumar (2018) also confirms Begum's flight to Bombay, but she poses Begum as a *tawaif* of Sachin, who catered to Nawab Sidi Ibrahim Yakut Khan III.<sup>69</sup> The film historiography of India is silent about her life during 1912-1922 and she resurfaces in 1922 with her role as the lead actress in *Veer Abhimanyu*, directed by Ardeshir Irani, who later became an influential figure in the pro-nascent industry and also the owner of a prominent film studio. Even later, she worked in films by Irani and another important industry figure, Nanubhai Desai, which shows her affective dimension of power in the industry as an important actress. Along with Begum, her daughters also worked in films. How and when exactly Fatma Begum's production house, The Fatma Film Corporation aka Victoria-Fatma Films, was set up is not much known. According to Rai (2020), Fatma Begum took on the role of director solely because she got annoyed by the non-substantial roles she was being offered as the lead female,<sup>70</sup> which indicates her efforts to transcend beyond her habitus. *Bulbul-e-Paristan* (1926) was the first film directed, written, and produced by Begum.<sup>71</sup> Kumar (2018, 44) asserts that it portrayed women as erotic beings with exotic costumes like most other films of that time, but it stood out because of having almost an entire female cast and taking inspiration from Persian tales whereas films by her male contemporaries were based on Hindu mythological materials.<sup>72</sup>

Later, in the next four years, Fatma Films kept on producing many movies directed and written by Begum herself. In 1929, both Begum and her venture got into a number of legal cases that resulted in the end of the studio. Based on the media reports, Sawhney (2021, 25) concludes that the cases are symptomatic of a new director venturing into a precarious industry. During and after multiple legal battles, Fatma Begum appeared only in a few films as an actor, and her

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<sup>67</sup> (part of present-day Surat, Gujarat)

<sup>68</sup> Sawhney, Rashmi. "Fatma Begum, South Asia's First Female Director." In *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media.*, 21–34. London & New York: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Kumar, Anusuya. "Unlikely 'Devis': Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen." In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape.* Sage Publications Ltd., 2018

<sup>70</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>71</sup> Sawhney, Rashmi. "Fatma Begum, South Asia's First Female Director." In *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media.*, 21–34. London & New York: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Kumar, Anusuya. "Unlikely 'Devis': Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen." In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape.* Sage Publications Ltd., 2018

last on-screen appearance was in 1937. Due to the inadequate information about Begum, Sawhney (2021, 27) interrogates the pattern of exclusion noticed in the historiography of the National Film Archive India. She does not falter to ask if Fatma Begum, allegedly the first South Asian female director of India, has been excluded from Indian film historiography because a Muslim woman does not fit into the nationalistic narrative led by Hindu upper-caste men.<sup>73</sup> The insufficient record of Begum's life and work reflects a general neglect toward women's contribution in the film industry, whereas Sawhney's argument highlights the need for studying discrimination against women in Bollywood from an intersectional perspective that takes gender and religious identity into account. Even though Begum's production venture did not sustain long, yet her position in the industry, network with prominent industry figures delineate the affective dimension of power. On another end, with the first female-led production company and the uniqueness of her storytelling, her material labour ruptured the discourse of the film industry, which again exerts the effective dimension of power she possessed.

Later in this period, 1931 becomes a turning point in the history of both Indian cinema and Bollywood as this is the year when sound and talkies entered the industry. According to Desai and Dadrah (2008), the development of sound in Indian films had two consequences: a) it curtailed the ability of Indian films to transcend linguistic borders among different states of India,<sup>74</sup> b) it also created the opportunity to localize film for different regions, cultures, and vernacular audiences.<sup>75</sup> This is important for the origin of Bollywood because regionalisation of films based on language started to become essential from this time.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, with the arrival of sound technology, songs and musical performances entered Indian cinema, which later became a critical feature of Bollywood films.

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<sup>73</sup> Sawhney, Rashmi. "Fatma Begum, South Asia's First Female Director." In *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media.*, 21–34. London & New York: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> India is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country, comprising of 28 states and 8 union territories.

<sup>75</sup> Desai, Jigna, and Rajinder Dudrah. "The Essential Bollywood." *The Bollywood Reader*, 2008, 1–17.

<sup>76</sup> Bose (2006) mentions that even before Hindi became the national language of India and India became an independent country in 1947, Bombay-based film practitioners, such as Himanshu Rai and Ranjit Shah, started to make films in Hindi, which, in the opinion of Bose (2006), can be considered efforts of nation-building by the filmmakers. It also signals how Bombay-based film industry, Bollywood started to be powerful across the country; Bose, Mihir. *Bollywood: A History*. Tempus, 2006.



In the 1930s, actress-turned-entrepreneur became a common pattern in Indian cinema. For example, Begum's Daughter, Zubeida co-produced films in 1934, whereas Anglo-Indian actress, Ruby Mayers started producing films from her own production company in 1936. Furthermore, after the advent of sound technology, women with musical skills and *tawaif* backgrounds took on roles of independent music directors and producers under the banner of their own production companies. Kumar (2018) notes that these women started their entrepreneurial journey to expand their own opportunities as artists and performers, rather than to attain mere financial gains.<sup>77</sup> However, most of these production efforts got marginalised in Indian film history and none of these ventures could sustain for long.

### 3.1.2. Devika Rani

Devika Rani Chaudhari (A2), considered 'the first lady of Indian cinema', stood out from all the aforementioned women involved in the film industry during the early period of Bollywood for multiple reasons. First, she was the first woman to join the Indian film industry from an upper-class, high-caste, elite intellectual background.<sup>78</sup> Second, she was trained in European fine arts in London, where she spent her childhood and early youth. She studied acting and filmmaking at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) and Universum Film AG Studio in Berlin. Being interested in global filmmaking practices, she also attended film seminars with Eric Pommer and G. W. Pabst. All of these gave her an edge over other industry personnel, both men and women. Third, while the entrepreneurial ventures by her contemporary women could not sustain, she was the co-owner of a studio that shaped the further development of the Indian film industry. In London, after graduating from RADA, she joined forces with another highly educated, hyper-westernized, aspirant Indian filmmaker, Himanshu Rai. She debuted as an actress under the direction of Himanshu Rai, and a Bavarian filmmaker, Franz Osten. While the film gained transnational praise in London, Europe, and India, Rani also started to manage the set design and choreography of Himanshu Rai's films. In 1929, Rani got married to Rai, and in 1934, they established a film studio called Bombay Talkies. It is important to note that Rani, by this time, had already broken all traditional social expectations of Indian womanhood, both on-screen and off-screen. She appeared in films with traditional costumes but still embodied an allure and mystique with her crisp European etiquette and sexual candour in

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<sup>77</sup> Kumar, Anusuya. "Unlikely 'Devis': Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen." In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape*. Sage Publications Ltd., 2018

<sup>78</sup> Her father, Col Manmatha Nath Chaudhari, was the first Indian Surgeon General and her maternal side was related to the great poet, Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

intimate scenes. Her screen presence expressed a unique feminine individuality that held the power of transcending cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries. She was already an international star before moving to India with Rai.

Bombay Talkies was the first production venture in India with indoor studio facilities and close ties with international artists and crews including cinematographers, editors, writers, music composers, and directors. Initially, all female roles in the films produced by Bombay Talkies were written for Rani, and with her flair for acting, she soon became the first superstar in Indian cinema. After her husband's demise in 1940, she took complete control of the studio, and ran it successfully till her self-induced retirement in 1945. Even after leaving films, she continued to possess the ability to change discourses in the proto-industry network, which is reflected in the 1955 film seminar she arranged to create a dialogue between the film fraternity and the government.<sup>79</sup>

While analysing the “switching power” of Rani, Rai (2020) argues that her power to break barriers in a male-dominated industry is constituted by – a) the interplay among her high-class, upper-caste, aristocrat, foreign-educated identity, b) the socio-cultural clout containing powerful networks in both European film fraternity and Indian elite cultural society, c) the ability of “cultural technology transfer” that she gained from global training, and d) the affective appeal based on her mysterious, glamorous star persona.<sup>80</sup> Her glamorous star persona worked as affective labour that successfully invoked passion and emotion among the audiences while simultaneously increasing social and cultural capital for her. On the other hand, her strong influential ties in various networks, social position, and cosmopolitanism equipped her to change discourses in the film industry; such as: co-running the first even commercial production studio in India, contributing significantly to the legitimization of the Indian film industry.<sup>81</sup> Based on these arguments, it is evident that Rani had a switching power with both affective and effective dimensions.

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<sup>79</sup> Kumar, Anusuya. “Unlikely ‘Devis’: Gender and Imagination On and Off the Silver Screen.” In *India and Its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape*. Sage Publications Ltd., 2018; Sinha, Priyam. “‘Cultured Women’ Do Not Act in Films: Tracing Notions of Female Stardom in Bombay Cinema (1930s–1950s).” *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* 01, no. 02 (July 2020): 2050012. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2717541320500126>.

<sup>80</sup> Rai, Swapnil. “From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture.” *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>81</sup> The 1955 film seminar was organized by Devika Rani few years after the studio went bankrupt and her husband died. Despite those incidents, she held the ability to organize a seminar that created the first dialogue between the political leaders and film practitioners of India. It made the path for a state-supported global

### 3.1.3. Durga Khote

Durga Khote (A3) appears frequently in the articles of film historians. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not have any prior performing experience and came from a Brahmin, middle-class Indian family. Being a twenty-six years old widow with children, she joined the film industry for the sole purpose of financial sustenance. Considering the then socio-economic values of India, a Brahmin widow performing for the public raised many eyebrows and is certainly indicative of Khote's efforts to transcend her habitus. Rai (2020) argues that Khote can be considered a pioneer because she made film careers more accessible and acceptable to upper-class and middle-class females, but Khote mentions in her autobiography that she did not join the industry to break any boundaries, financial sustenance being her only motivation. She was one of the very few artists, allegedly the only female artist to have the freedom to work with multiple studios in the early period of Indian cinema. Rai (2020) points out that even though Khote worked in a number of films as lead heroines and her work got positive attention, it was also true that she could not build a star persona like Rani and her contemporary actresses.<sup>82</sup> Being a widow with children might have worked against building her star persona and with time she was relegated to 'character roles'/supporting female roles. However, Khote acknowledges in her biography that her social background helped her to make effective networks in the film fraternity which further expanded her opportunities. For example, despite not being a very famous actress, her respectable family background and social networks provided her with international exposure. She was a part of the Indo-Soviet film exchange, Democratic Women's Federation delegation to China, and also represented Indian cinema at UNESCO. In 1937, she started to produce films as well whereas at that time female stars were the only female entrepreneurs in the film fraternity.<sup>83</sup> But Rai (2020) ascertains that a huge amount of affective labour went into her entrepreneurial venture. She struggled constantly to meet the needs of her family and scrutinize her persona as a woman coming from an upper-caste family while also maintaining her social networks.<sup>84</sup> Unlike Rani, she could not break free of social expectations and rise beyond the constraints of her habitus. This, according to

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circulation for Indian films through film festivals and also eradicated the indifference of the Indian government to films.

<sup>82</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>83</sup> Khote, The Late Durga. I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography. OUP India, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

Bourdieu (1999, 511), is symptomatic of a ‘habitus divided against itself’ as she embodies a duality that makes her negotiate between two contradictory roles.<sup>85</sup>

However, both Khote’s acting career and production efforts sustained more years compared to those of her contemporary actresses, producers, and directors. In 1952, she expanded her business into documentary filmmaking, and by 1960, she had set up a production company under her own name, which in the 1990s, ventured into short films, advertising campaigns, and television shows. Yet based on her autobiography, it is safe to assume that her material labour devolved into mere affective labour, because – a) her entanglement with the family, specially her emotional and social skills invested in lessening family feuds within the production business, kept her constrained, b) her upper-caste, respectable background helped her to establish important social networks, but her failure to invoke affective appeal also limited her opportunities. In fine, to build switching power, effective and affective dimensions of power need to work simultaneously. But in Khote’s case, despite having partially effective networks and comparatively stronger agency than many contemporary women, she could not transcend the limits of her habitus.

From the above-mentioned case studies, it becomes clear that the patriarchal structure of the proto-nascent film industry and the intersection of various identity elements confluence different forms of barriers and opportunities for these women. The weaker position of women was an overarching barrier for all of them, but Rani was able to chart through the gender bias more smoothly by wielding power from her higher social position, affective appeal, strong network, and cosmopolitan education. In contrast, upper caste identity and respectable family background, coupled with widowhood, became an obstacle for Khote. Even though these affected her habitus and switching power, she took the leverage of her social position to garner international exposure and strong social capital, which eventually enabled her to break some of the barriers as well. In Begum’s case, religious and chequered social identity created a unique barrier, which she navigated by moving to Bombay and creating industry connections through performances. In essence, all three of these women demonstrate habitus characterised by agency and resilience within a supposedly masculine field.

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<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Contradictions of Inheritance.” In *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Accardo, and Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 507–13. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

### 3.2. From Stardom to Missed Acknowledgement: Bollywood & Women in 1941-1970

Historians refer to the period of the 1940s-1960s as the golden period of Indian cinema. Technological advancement, new storytelling techniques, large-scale productions, commercial success, and the rise of stardom are significant features that characterize the period. But at that time the nascent Hindi film industry was also deeply impacted by both local and global politics. During World War II, the influential film studios suffered from a major economic crisis and a black-market economy rose in the Indian subcontinent, while illegal money found its way to the film business. This resulted in the rise of independent producers and directors funded by gangsters, the advent of more large-scale productions, and the shutdown of the studio system.<sup>86</sup> In 1947, the Partition of India, based on religion and an arbitrary border drawn by a British Official, caused one of the biggest exodus of population, flocking to either of the newly independent countries: India and Pakistan. Many film practitioners and theatre artists ended up in Bombay from Karachi and Lahore as refugees, and they started to join the nascent Bombay-based Hindi-language film industry.<sup>87</sup> The new Indian Government and the politicians had a hostile view toward Indian cinema, partially because of the illegal funding associated with it. On one hand, politicians criticised Indian films for being focused on entertainment and producing low-class films.<sup>88</sup> On another hand, the new censor board of independent India showed intense Victorian prudery by banning films left and right. Until the second half of the 1950s, the only relationship the Indian Government had with films was based on strict censorship and heavy taxation.<sup>89</sup> This gave birth to two dynamics: a) it produced the bisection of Indian cinemas into parallel/art films and mainstream/popular cinema, b) lack of recognition as a national industry led to the sporadic growth of film industries in various regions of the country.<sup>90</sup>

Despite all these, the nascent industry was producing more influential and diverse films than ever with private funding in the quasi-socialist nation-state of India. The government started to recognise Indian cinema in a half-hearted manner in 1954, which gave Indian commercial

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<sup>86</sup> Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya. "Indian Cinema, Indian Democracy: An Unusual Cold War Saga, 1947-89." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas*. Taylor & Francis Limited, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Quraishi, Humra. "How Migration Triggered by the Partition Influenced Indian Cinema." *National Herald*, August 7, 2022. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/book-extract/how-migration-triggered-by-the-partition-influenced-indian-cinema>.

<sup>88</sup> Reflective of Nehru's developmental, socialist ideology, which considered entertainment as a luxury for the newly independent country

<sup>89</sup> Bose, Mihir. *Bollywood: A History*. Tempus, 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya. "Indian Cinema, Indian Democracy: An Unusual Cold War Saga, 1947-89." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas*. Taylor & Francis Limited, 2021.

cinema a path to international exposure. Indian art films garnered attention in the Global North, mostly in the international film festivals in Europe and North America, while Indian commercial films got huge exposure in parts of the USSR, Africa, and Asia. Simultaneously in the 1950s-the 1960s, the star system of Indian cinema started to take shape as Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Nargis Dutt, Raj Kapoor, and Madhubala became famous, both in India and abroad.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.2.1. Protima Dasgupta

Academic literature hardly mentions women who worked behind the camera in leading positions during the golden age of cinema. Most scholars like Bose (2006), Abhineta (2018), and Sundke (2021) focus on the star persona of the leading actresses working in Indian films at that time but do not discuss their production efforts. A few academics including Rai (2020), Mukherjee (2022), and Sawhney (2020) briefly focus on the contribution of women in the production process of Hindi cinema during the period of 1941-1970. Mukherjee (2022, 122-146) and Sawhney (2020) mention Protima Dasgupta (A3), who was a producer and director in the period of the 1940s-1950s.<sup>92</sup> She was born into a wealthy family in the princely state of Bhavnagar. It is important to note that even in the 1920s both her parents had jobs. From the age of five, she got educated in England and received her tertiary education at Vishwabharati University.<sup>93</sup> After her short stint in Bengali films, Dasgupta moved to Bombay to consolidate her acting career and worked there as an actress from 1941 to 1944. In Bombay, she met her husband's sister, Begum Para, and later took on the role of a producer to launch Para as an actress. She produced and directed four films with Para in the lead roles. On the release of her first film, *Chhamia* (1945), she was applauded for taking the unexceptional role of a female director and producer. But her last project *Jharna* (1948) and its erotically charged story did not receive much positive review and turned Para into a pin-up girl rather than a star actress.

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<sup>91</sup> Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya. "Indian Cinema, Indian Democracy: An Unusual Cold War Saga, 1947-89." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas*. Taylor & Francis Limited, 2021.; Bose, Mihir. *Bollywood: A History*. Tempus, 2006.; "How Bollywood and Soviet Cinema Joined Hands to Create Movie Magic | Research News, The Indian Express." Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/the-soviet-unions-long-tryst-with-indian-cinema-8575232/>.; Govil, Nitin. "In and Out of Alignment." In *A Companion to Indian Cinema*, 387-411. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119048206.ch17>.

<sup>92</sup> Sawhney, Rashmi. "Women at Work: The Cultural and Creative Industries." *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 11, no. Women at Work: The Cultural and Creative Industries (December 1, 2020): 167-72. [https://doi.org/10.1386/safm\\_00026\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1386/safm_00026_2); Mukherjee, Debashree. "Archival Conjugations." In *A Companion to Indian Cinema*, 122-46. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119048206.ch5>.

<sup>93</sup> Vishwabharati University is currently a public central university in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. The great poet of Bengal and Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore established it on the philosophy of establishing a communion of the world with India.



Mukherjee (2022) operationalises the method of archival conjugation on the film collaborations between these two women and also the published interviews and articles about them to build queer historiography. Based on old photos of Dasgupta, Mukherjee (2022) interrogates if her androgynous representation (A6) was suggestive cross-dressing or a mere reflection of the then-popular fashion lexicon that was influenced by androgyny. She also mentions how the magazines and public forums of 1946 to 1949 commented on the masculine propensity of Dasgupta and published multiple articles insinuating the homo-sexual relationship between Dasgupta-Para.<sup>94</sup>

It was neither Mukherjee's objective nor conclusion to unearth the "true" identity of Dasgupta and Para. Juxtaposing various sources, all she tries to do is interrogate the past by breaking the boundaries of heteronormative narrative. Her creative collaboration with Para got halted as in 1958, Para got married to an actor. It was also speculated that Dasgupta's production career got sabotaged by big studio owners as they refused to supply her with equipment. Mukherjee (2022, 141) questions if this was the case because that was generally a time of clash between studio owners and independent producers or if this was the case simply because she was a female producer who did not fulfil the gender expectation of society. After her husband's death, as Para moved with Dasgupta in 1974, their friendship and creative partnership sustained the rest of their lives. Dasgupta definitely possessed switching power, characterised by both affective and effective realms. All four of her films garnered extensive media attention, which reflects her affective power to influence industry narrative. Media coverage, both positive and negative, also stopped her work to turn into mere affective or immaterial labour. However, her inability to create a sustainable venture is indicative of the limits of her effective power. This might be the case as she could not take leverage of her higher social position like Rani and lacked a strong social network in relevant spheres. The public scrutiny over her gender expression and sexual orientation can also be marked as crucial factor to limit her opportunities. However, even without a continuous screen presence, Dasgupta's exceptionalism — constituted of agency, confidence, and intellectuality — maintained an affective appeal for more than three decades, which was unlikely even for prominent female actresses of that time.

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<sup>94</sup> Mukherjee, Debashree. "Archival Conjugations." In *A Companion to Indian Cinema*, 122–46. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119048206.ch5>.

### 3.2.2. Ismat Chughtai

Yadav (2021) mentions Ismat Chughtai (A7), who penned screenplays for a number of prominent Bollywood films in the given period.<sup>95</sup> Chughtai, born in a Muslim conservative household of Uttar Pradesh, used to write in private and did not publish anything till much later in life. Defying the resistance of her family, she completed her Bachelor's study at Aligarh Muslim University. The Progressive Writers' Association and a fellow woman writer inspired her to write "realistic, challenging female characters", and publish her write-ups as well. While her first published novella garnered positive remarks for delineating women's struggle with an oracular voice, she also faced backlash for writing a blasphemous story in the initial period. Such allegations followed her even later in life. Her novel *Lihaaf*, inspired by a relationship between a Begum and her masseuse in Aligarh, became the centre of criticism for portraying female homosexuality, which made her face a trial in the Lahore High Court too.<sup>96</sup> However, she continued writing novels and short stories highlighting experiences and challenges faced by marginalised women. In 1948, after her husband introduced Chughtai to Bollywood, she started writing screenplays based on her previously published and/or unpublished novellas. Her scripts and dialogues for *Ziddi* (1948), and *Arzoo* (1950) were big commercial successes and later she ventured into direction in 1953. In 1958, upon setting up a production company called Filmina with her husband, she took on the role of director, writer, and co-producer for *Sone Ki Chiria*.<sup>97</sup>

From the 1960s, writing both literary pieces and screenplays, she became an important writer of contemporary time. Among her works, many are noteworthy, but for the relevance of this paper, *Ajib Aadmi* is important to mention because it was the first fiction that addressed the position of a woman within a tangled relationship in Bollywood.<sup>98</sup> The barriers faced by Chughtai did not exactly limit her entrance to the film industry, but rather created obstacles for her to take any creative role. As suggested by Crenshaw and Collins, multiple interconnecting identity elements gender identity, religious identity, regional identity, and familial values confluence her experience of discrimination as they intersect to stop her education and bold

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<sup>95</sup> Yadav, Anubha. Scripting Bollywood: Candid Conversations with Women Who Write Hindi Cinema. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Batra, Kanika. "The Home, the Veil and the World: Reading Ismat Chughtai towards a 'Progressive' History of the Indian Women's Movement." *Feminist Review* 95, no. 1 (July 1, 2010): 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2009.57>.

<sup>97</sup> Sadique. *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*. A Katha Book, 2000.

<sup>98</sup> Sharma, Aradhika. "Story of a Genius." Accessed May 9, 2023. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20071209/spectrum/book1.htm>.

writing. However, her ability to disrupt the narrative in the male-dominated field of literature and cinema asserts a unique switching power and also highlights the constant struggle between her liberal habitus and conservative field. It is hard to understand how much of Chughtai's affective power originated from her screenplays and production ventures due to the constant conjugation of her literary works with film efforts, but it surely reflects her capability to navigate various creative spheres. The constant contestation of the majoritarian, masculine societal narrative through her work delineates her affective power, which is very much different from that of the aforementioned women as she neither had a higher social position nor a strong network. But in her case, while judicial cases and societal backlash created a distinct barrier, support from husband, inspiration from literary circles, and education were crucial enabling factors as well. Despite belonging to a minority community, Chughtai managed to create a significant amount of work that garnered both commercial success and critical acclamation. This proves her effective power to change the discourse in industry and society.

### 3.2.3. Nargis Dutt

Like Chughtai, Nargis Dutt (A8) also helmed from a Muslim background in the 1950s, but familial background worked as a facilitator for her. Dutt was born to Jaddan Bai, a *tawaif* and the first female music director of Indian cinema. Rai (2020) argues that her mother's connections in the film circle provided her with initial foothold in the industry.<sup>99</sup> She first starred in her mother's film at the age of five in 1939 and later started to play roles of lead actresses at the age of fourteen. It is important to note that at fourteen, she was cast as a romantic heroine against a 33-year-old actor in Mehboob Khan's *Taqdeer* (1943). An interview with Dutt revealed that the director, a close friend of her mother, emotionally manipulated her to take the role,<sup>100</sup> which, according to Rai (2020), was the first instance of affective labour in her career and later it followed her through.<sup>101</sup> Her onscreen performance started to garner both local and international attention at the end of the 1940s. 1947 marks the entrepreneurial effort of Dutt as she set up Nargis Art Concern, one of the earliest film companies led by a female star in the post-independence era. The first film produced by the company, *Romeo & Juliet* (1947), was directed by her brother and she also played the lead female role there. Based on

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<sup>99</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>100</sup> Desai, Kishwar. *Darlingji : The True Love Story Of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

the Shakespearean tragic drama and modelled after Hollywood productions, the film got positive responses from the media, and Rai (2020) interprets it as evidence of Dutt's global vision for films. However, this creative partnership with her brother did not sustain over time and got marginalised in the historiography of the Indian film archive, which is often the case regarding women's labour in the film industry.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, this also indicates the similarity between familial circumstances between Dutt and Khote, as both women embodied habitus that constantly negotiates between itself and its ambivalences.

At the second half of the 1950s, after a brief period of professional setback, a few films directed by and performed with Raj Kapoor revived Dutt's career. This creative partnership with Kapoor is highlighted by the media only to insinuate their alleged romantic relationship in real life. And in the process, her religious and family backgrounds were often under the spotlight since Kapoor was a Hindu, married man. On the other hand, scholars study her creative association with Kapoor to gauge her contribution to the production process of his venture, R K Films, which, at present, is a prominent family business of the Kapoors. Rai (2020) quotes an interview where P.K. Nair, a prominent industry personnel, states that Dutt was "virtually directing" in the set of *Jagte Raho* (1951), a successful film produced under the banner of the said studio. But her financial contributions, creative efforts, and partnership with R K Films got no acknowledgment.<sup>103</sup> Desai (2007) presents an interview with her brother and former creative partner, Hussain, who clearly mentions that: a) Kapoor convinced her to leave films of other production companies and work without any remuneration in R K Films by saying that she is a partner of the studio. But in reality, there was no official declaration of it, b) On Dutt's insistence, Hussain signed a contract with Kapoor that provided him (Hussain) with a monthly allowance to sustain her family.<sup>104</sup> This statement illustrates the marginalised position of Dutt in her creative partnerships and on the other hand, delineates how she was balancing her personal life, familial needs, star persona, and production efforts within the boundaries of a male-dominated film industry. To understand more about the affective dimension of her power, the later period of her career is more significant.

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<sup>102</sup> Jha, Priya. "Remembering Nargis, Retelling Mother India: Criticism, Melodrama, and National Mythmaking." *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 287–97.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2011.597967>. ; Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>

<sup>103</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

<sup>104</sup> Desai, Kishwar. *Darlingji : The True Love Story Of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2007.

*Mother India* (1957), an epic drama by Mehboob Khan, is considered the most significant performance of Dutt's career, both in film circles and the academic world. Scholars have studied Dutt from a broad range of interdisciplinary lenses, but her portrayal in this particular film turned her into a unique subject to study the development of the postcolonial national narrative.<sup>105</sup> Jha (2011) states that even though Dutt was already a star before *Mother India*, her performance in this particular film made her an icon as this role became a representation of the decolonized, post-independent Indian culture to both local and global audiences.<sup>106</sup> Dutt won the best actress award at the Czech Film Festival for her performance in this film and it also became the first Indian film to be nominated for the Academy Awards. But it is also said that her regular appearance on screen portraying women of superlative values and sophisticated persona, helped her immensely to exceed the stigmas associated with film actresses in India and also to rise beyond her own chequered background.<sup>107</sup> After the success of *Mother India*, she also became the flagbearer of India's screen-culture in the Global North and starred in the first Indo-Russian co-production. Even though Dutt did not have an elite family background and an initial connection with the international film fraternity like those of Rani, yet through her performance she transcended local borders and garnered a similar degree of affective appeal.

After her marriage in 1957, Dutt mostly focused on politics and various sociocultural initiatives.<sup>108</sup> Considering how Dutt's production efforts did not get due attention and acknowledgment despite having an international star appeal and effective film networks, it becomes clear that her affective power was limited due to the patriarchal structure of the industry. According to Rai (2020), it is an ideal case to understand how women's material labour gets continuously entangled with affective/emotional labour within a male-dominated industry.<sup>109</sup> The nature of Dutt's switching power is also unique as it was stronger in affective realm but was limited in the effective dynamics.

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<sup>105</sup> Jha, Priya. "Remembering Nargis, Retelling Mother India: Criticism, Melodrama, and National Mythmaking." *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 287–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2011.597967>.

<sup>106</sup> Jha, Priya. "Remembering Nargis, Retelling Mother India: Criticism, Melodrama, and National Mythmaking." *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 287–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2011.597967>.

<sup>107</sup> Majumdar, Neepa. "Doubling, Stardom, and Melodrama in Indian Cinema: The 'Impossible' Role of Nargis." *Post Script* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 89–103.

<sup>108</sup> Desai, Kishwar. *Darlingji : The True Love Story Of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Rai, Swapnil. "From Bombay Talkies to Khote Productions: Female Star Switching Power in Bollywood Production Culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711793>.

Like the previous period, the dominant masculinity in industry and patriarchy in society were still prevalent in this era. But the forms of discrimination changed its faces. For example, religious identity became an important aspect, especially in post-partition India. Since women started joining films from various religions, and classes, the contribution of social position in easing barriers became more evident. The public scrutinization of women in films also created obstacles for women in this period, whereas the devaluation and sabotage of women's work did not create much uproar. Familial support and feminist allies became crucial factors too. While Chughtai was ushered into the film fraternity by her husband, Dutt's production efforts were marginalised by her brother and male co-worker. To charter through these distinct barriers, women also wielded unique switching powers constituted by stardom, media appearance, and contestation of the dominant narrative.

### 3.3. From Writers' Rooms to Editing Panel: Bollywood & Women in 1971-2000

The politics of India in the 1970s was heavily marked by political instability, economic struggle, and unprecedented corruption among politicians and bureaucrats. During all these downfalls, the pro-active government kept supporting, even funding parallel cinema, while mainstream cinema continued to suffer from various arbitrary orders of the government. Analysing the relationship between state and Hindi cinema in 1980s, Ganti (2012) remarks that it was another year for India when the quality of cinema was still a matter of discussion among politicians and bureaucrats primarily because they perceived it as a pedagogical tool that can influence people. With anecdotes such as the High Court's verdict on the sheer need of censoring cinema and the prescriptive roles of multiple state institutions regarding commercial films, she argues that the state's antagonism toward commercial Hindi cinema sustained through this period.<sup>110</sup>

But in the 1990s, everything changed for India as the country started to open its economy to the outer world. Ganti (2012) discusses the various implication of economic liberalization on the Hindi film industry. First, it increased competition since international films were being exported and cable TV networks entered the entertainment scenario. It also opened opportunities for Hindi cinema since now modern film technologies became more accessible and films could be exported to the Global North where a big chunk of non-residential Indians lived. Second, the government also started to implement modern policies which included

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<sup>110</sup> Ganti, Tejaswini. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Duke University Press, 2012.

supporting commercial films for the first time in history. This consequentially improved the reputation of the Hindi film industry and also gave it a cultural legitimization, which later worked as a driving factor to attract middle-class Indians to work in various roles of production. Third, with the advent of neoliberal views in society, there was an increasing number of women joining the workforce, which also became the case for the film industry. Especially daughters of film families, including the Kapoors, started acting, which was unprecedented till the 1990s. This trend of kinship, which nowadays fuels the nepotism debate in Bollywood, and is often criticized for favouring children of film stars, started in the 1990s because only then the industry started to have more cultural legitimacy and somewhat stable economic opportunities. In film sets of that time, women mostly had the roles of acting, hair-dressing, and/or costume management. Ganti (2012) states that the number of women definitely increased at that time, but the film industry was still considered a morally hazardous place. Observing how women operated in a masculine space like film sets, she further states that most actresses, be they underage or adult, were accompanied by guardians or family members. During 1971-1990, usage of the term 'Bollywood' for Hindi-language, Mumbai-based film industry got more consolidated as well.<sup>111</sup>

Most historical analyses of Bollywood focused on the period of the 1970s-1980s discuss the rise of megastar Amitabh Bachchan, and the effect of political turmoil on Hindi Cinema, but there are only a few journal articles and book chapters discussing the female directors, producers and screenplay writer of the 1990s. Some of them highlight the new feminist discourse set in the work of female directors like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, and Gurinder Chadda, all of whom were making films outside India, in English, and highlighted the Indian

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<sup>111</sup> A number of film journalists and practitioners of the 1970s claim to coin the term , but Prasad (2008) states that there is much ambiguity and debate about the origin of the term since a number of people have used the term at different periods in history for different purposes. Ganti (2012), on the other hand, argued that even though the term was coined in the 1970s, it got popular in the 1990s. She highlights how the terminology, popular among both scholars of film studies and entertainment journalists, is often criticized for having a lack of clarity and being too imitative of the term Hollywood. It often fails to distinct if it is referring to the Hindi film industry or the whole Indian film industry. The problem rises because there is no national film industry in India. And overlooking the fact that the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country has several regional film industries, sometimes the international media and practitioners use the umbrella term "Bollywood" to indicate all films produced inside the border of India. The discussion got even more complicated as in the last few decades, a few non-residential Indian directors also started to make Indian films outside of the country, mostly in English. "Amit Khanna: The Man Who Saw 'Bollywood' - Sify.Com," April 9, 2005. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050409171523/https://sify.com/movies/bollywood/fullstory.php?id=13713296>; "The Hindu : On the Bollywood Beat," April 3, 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20040403234115/https://www.hindu.com/lr/2004/03/07/stories/2004030700390600.htm>; Prasad, M. Madhava. "Surviving Bollywood." In Global Bollywood. NYU Press, 2008.; Ganti, Tejaswini. Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry. Duke University Press, 2012.



immigrant experience, with a concentrated focus on the position of women in the conjuncture of migration, identity, and agency.<sup>112</sup> Even though these female directors, producers, and writers contributed immensely to create a global identity of Indian cinema, their production efforts are out of the scope of this paper. About women's participation in screenwriting of Bollywood in the 1970s-1980s, some traces are found in the book by Yadav (2021). He mentions Kamana Chandra and Shama Zaidi, both of whom have been screenplay writers and dialogue writers in a number of significant films.<sup>113</sup> Kamana Chandra has not been the center of any academic study. But from the few newspaper articles published about her, it can be said that she was an educated, married woman when she got involved in writing for films. She wrote screenplays for a few important films of this period including *Prem Rog* (1984), *Chandni* (1989), and *1942: A Love Story* (1994). She collaborated with prominent directors of that time, such as Raj Kapoor and Yash Chopra. Her family name is a known one at present time in film circles as her daughters and son-in-law are important figures in the industry.<sup>114</sup> To understand the nature of her power, the information is too limited.

### 3.3.1. Shama Zaidi

Based on a few newspaper articles and Yadav's interview with Shama Zaidi (A9), it is safe to say that she was brought up with a creative fervor that was imbibed in her Muslim, well-educated, left-wing family. While her mother was a prominent Urdu writer, and theatre practitioner her father was an active politician and academic. She got trained in stage design in London and also cultivated costume designing and writing. After returning to India, she joined theatre circles and might have got associated with the Film Society Movement while working in the Mumbai-based progressive theatre.<sup>115</sup> Through this involvement with a movement that was inclined to parallel Indian cinema, she built a network with influential art film directors of that time. In 1973, she wrote her first screenplay with Kaifi Azmi for the film *Garam Hawa*

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<sup>112</sup> Viswamohan, Aysha Iqbal. "Introduction: Wonder Women, Iron Ladies." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 1–7. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_1).

<sup>113</sup> Yadav, Anubha. *Scripting Bollywood: Candid Conversations with Women Who Write Hindi Cinema*. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2021.

<sup>114</sup> shaaditimes. "Kamna & Navin Chandra." Accessed May 11, 2023. <http://www.shaaditimes.com/celebrities/wedding-stories/kamna-navin-040412>. ; Mid-day. "Friends and Neighbours," November 4, 2014. <https://www.mid-day.com/news/india-news/article/friends-and-neighbours-15737153>.

<sup>115</sup> Film Society Movement during 1960s-1980s was a collaborative effort by directors like Satyajit Roy, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Adoor Gopal Krishnan, and Shyam Benegal, with an intent to establish cinema as an art form across India. It is inclined to the philosophy of Indian parallel/art films.



(1973) based on a literary work of Ismat Chughtai. This film directed by Zaidi's husband was one of the rare ones to shed light on the experience of marginalized Muslims who did not leave India during the Partition, but during the time of its release, it faced obstacles from the Central Board of India,<sup>116</sup> and a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party, which ultimately resulted in a limited pan-India release of the film.<sup>117</sup> When asked about the need for having a sense of social responsibility in films, she ascertains that films should not be bound by expectations and ideologies should not be imposed upon films.<sup>118</sup> This particular incident is important to understand the pulse of the Indian socio-political ecosystem that historically has a reactive relationship with art forms, especially cinema. It is also reflective of Sen's (2018) argument that the state works as a patriarchal figure against Indian cinema using the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), or political organizations as its apparatus.<sup>119</sup> Years later, reflecting on her experience of working in *Garam Hawa* (1973), she mentions that even though she was officially credited for the screenplay and dialogues of the film, she actually worked in every aspect of it including direction. "*Now, if I'd been a man, I would have made the film on my own instead of working with and through Sathyu (her husband). It didn't occur to me at the time to do anything else-I just considered myself as a part of him*" – saying so, Zaidi blames the prejudiced society of India that did not allow women to rise and considered film direction was too difficult for women. She highlights that securing finances for films involved socializing at parties to build a network, which was perceived indecent for women.<sup>120</sup>

However, Zaidi continued writing for films, mostly based on various literary works by important writers and playwrights of India. While writing for films, she collaborated with many prominent artists. Reflecting the social evils, voicing marginalized communities, and a sense of sensitivity are concurrent themes in her screenplays. Even though she worked mostly in parallel films, several of her works including *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Trikaal* (1985) were also commercial successes and indicates her ability to transcend the boundaries of her field. Zaidi has also been active in theatre circles at the same time. Her recent interviews constantly shed light on the importance of having a strong theatre landscape, for both the film industry and

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<sup>116</sup> Now the name is changed to Central Board of Film Certification

<sup>117</sup> Yadav, Anubha. Scripting Bollywood: Candid Conversations with Women Who Write Hindi Cinema. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2021.

<sup>118</sup> "Shama Zaidi-Burning Bright – Unboxed Writers." Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://unboxedwriters.com/shama-zaidi-burning-bright/>.

<sup>119</sup> Harrod, Mary, and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, eds. Women Do Genre in Film and Television. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 117. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Dhruvad. "Shama Zaidi: Reviving the Hindustani Theatre." Tumblr. Tumblr (blog). Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://dhrupad.tumblr.com/post/179946753576/shama-zaidi-reviving-the-hindustani-theatre>.

society at large. Based on her experience of working in both parallel and commercial films, she has also been vocal about the need for improvements in commercial films, especially in terms of realistic dialogue writing and storytelling.<sup>121</sup> But in the time of her work in the industry, as mentioned by Zaidi, she had to face patriarchal biases, which ultimately did not allow her to direct films and therefore reflects the limitation of her switching power. However, her creative upbringing, strong network in various creative domains, and international education may have been crucial enabling factors to provide a foothold in the industry. It seems that her effective power is built on the intersection of socio-cultural capital and a unique skill set. Zaidi's switching power seems limited in nature also due to the lack of an effective dimension. She did not have the literary fame or public recognition like Chughtai had, but it is true that Indian screenwriters are hardly recognized as public figures.

Like Zaidi, Renu Saluja also constantly transposed the border between art films and commercial films in Bollywood in the 1980s-1990s. The 1980s was the first decade when women were joining the more technical roles of editors and cinematographers. Saluja, a Punjabi woman, got her education in film editing from the Film and Television Institute of India. She first started working in parallel films produced and directed by her FTII friends. But later, she worked in films by a variety of directors including Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Sudhir Mishra, Mahesh Bhatt, and Vijay Singh. Her work got her four national awards and ranged from art films to mainstream Bollywood films to independent cinema.<sup>122</sup> But the limitation of information about her makes it impossible to understand the nature of her switching power that helped her breakthrough in a male-dominated realm. Aruna Raje, was, however, the first female technician to have graduated from FTII. She started out as a co-editor with her previous husband, but later also ventured into direction and screenplay writing. Much is not known about the background and life of Raje, who won six national awards and worked in iconic films like

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<sup>121</sup> "Shama Zaidi-Burning Bright – Unboxed Writers." Accessed June 4, 2023.

<https://unboxedwriters.com/shama-zaidi-burning-bright/>; Yadav, Anubha. Scripting Bollywood: Candid Conversations with Women Who Write Hindi Cinema. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2021.; Cinemaazi. "Shama Zaidi." Accessed May 11, 2023. <https://www.cinemaazi.com/people/shama-zaidi>; The Hindu. "Music in Her Lines." October 1, 2011, sec. Theatre. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/theatre/music-in-her-lines/article2503835.ece>; Yadav, Anubha. Scripting Bollywood: Candid Conversations with Women Who Write Hindi Cinema. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2021. Mid-day. "Friends and Neighbours," November 4, 2014. <https://www.mid-day.com/news/india-news/article/friends-and-neighbours-15737153>.

<sup>122</sup> Khubchandani, Lata. "The Industry Remembers Renu Saluja, Famed Movie Editor." Accessed May 11, 2023. <https://www.rediff.com/movies/2000/aug/17renu.htm>; "Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema." Accessed May 11, 2023. [https://books.google.nl/books?id=8y8vN9A14nkC&pg=PT644&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?id=8y8vN9A14nkC&pg=PT644&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false).

*Gehrayee(1980)* and *Massom(1984)*.<sup>123</sup> The lack of documentation regarding the first female editors again reflects the usual neglect toward women's labor in historical archives. However, their cases depict the importance of having a film institute in a growing industry, namely for technical production roles. Back then, established in 1960, FTII was the only place to study and learn about cinema.

### 3.3.2. Honey Irani

While discussing the women in leading production roles in the 1990s, Sen (2017) analyzes the case of Honey Irani (A10), a pioneering woman in Bollywood. Much is not known about Irani's family background, but she and her sister were very popular child actors in the 1960s.<sup>124</sup> This involvement with films at a young age made her miss formal education. Much later in life, she enrolled in film appreciation courses in FTII, which was the only formal education she received and also reflects her proactiveness and affinity toward films.<sup>125</sup> Most of the media articles written about her focus more on her in relation to her ex-husband and children, all of whom are prominent figures in the industry. On the other hand, in her interviews, she focuses more on her work and the struggle as a single mother.<sup>126</sup> This indicates how gendered entertainment journalism is in India. Besides all these, she was the first female assistant director in Bollywood and after her divorce, Irani came back into the industry in 1991 with a very unique screenplay of *Lamhe (1991)*, directed by Yash Chopra. Upon being asked what made her debut only after her divorce, she states that she was tensed about being perceived as a screenwriter who only writes because her husband is already an established screenwriter. This is surely in contrast to the cases of Rani and Chughtai as for both of them marital status eased

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<sup>123</sup> IMDb. "Aruna Raje." Accessed May 11, 2023. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0707382/>. ; Shift Focus. "About Arunaraje Patil - Shift Focus, A School for Cinema and Life." Accessed May 11, 2023. <https://www.theshiftfocus.com/about-arunaraje-patil/>.

<sup>124</sup> "Honey Irani | Honey Irani on Her Journey from Being a Child Star of the '60s to One of Bollywood's Foremost Screenwriters - Telegraph India." Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/entertainment/honey-irani-on-her-journey-from-being-a-child-star-of-the-60s-to-one-of-bollywoods-foremost-screenwriters/cid/1912262>.

<sup>125</sup> Chaudhuri, Mohini. "Honey Irani On Spending Over 60 Years In The Movies, Feeling Out Of Place With The New Generation, And Her Advice To Her Kids," March 25, 2019. <https://www.filmcompanion.in/interviews/honey-irani-on-spending-over-60-years-in-the-movies-feeling-out-of-place-with-the-new-generation-and-her-advice-to-her-kids>.

<sup>126</sup> "Honey Irani | Honey Irani on Her Journey from Being a Child Star of the '60s to One of Bollywood's Foremost Screenwriters - Telegraph India." Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/entertainment/honey-irani-on-her-journey-from-being-a-child-star-of-the-60s-to-one-of-bollywoods-foremost-screenwriters/cid/1912262>. ; "Shabana Azmi, Javed Akhtar, Honey Irani Come Together for the Perfect Family Pic | Bollywood - Hindustan Times." Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/javed-akhtar-joins-wife-shabana-azmi-ex-wife-honey-irani-for-the-perfect-family-pic-with-their-kids-see-here-101674128193008.html>.

the entry barrier to the industry and even enabled creative collaborations with their partners. While widowhood reduced the affective power of Khote, being married to an established screenwriter situated Irani in a scenario that often undervalues women's work or simply does not perceive them as individual beings.

Irani's first screenplay is often discussed for being too controversial and ahead of time. Sen (2017) asserts that even in a typical backdrop of a male-dominated feudal society, Irani voiced women's right to life choices very strongly in the film. Such was the nature of Irani's screenplays. They did not make any drastic statement against the androcentric trend of Bollywood films but rather made space for subtle subversive elements. Agency of women, contestation of masculinity, and interrogation of social taboos appeared often in Irani's films. Her ability to break the typical Bollywood formula by mixing up genres also made her films different from the popular stream of feudal-patriarchal family dramas.<sup>127</sup> It is important to mention that, according to her interviews, she was not given the writing credit for a big blockbuster Hindi film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1999), which does not seem to be an anomaly in an industry full of male gatekeepers.<sup>128</sup> In the 2000s, she joined forces with Roshan, a notable director of Bollywood, and wrote screenplays for the first sci-fi series of Bollywood. Even this sci-fi screenplay had a superhero in the center who is unabashedly sensitive, devoted, and non-hyper-masculine.<sup>129</sup> However, it is true that several screenplays of Irani can also be reflective of the patriarchal formula of Hindi films.<sup>130</sup> But it is also undeniable that she is one of the firsts in the decade to put subtle gynocentric perspectives and contestation of gendered social taboos in commercially successful Bollywood films. Irani's constant negotiation between the urge to tell progressive stories and the need to suit the patriarchal Bollywood formula make her a "habitus divided against itself". Definitely, her nature of negotiation is different from Khote and Dutt's, as the familial expectation is not a factor here, but all these

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<sup>127</sup> Sen, Sanghita. "Breaking the Boundaries of Bollywood: Women in a 'Man's Industry.'" In *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, edited by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, 121–37. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> "Honey Irani | Honey Irani on Her Journey from Being a Child Star of the '60s to One of Bollywood's Foremost Screenwriters - Telegraph India." Accessed June 4, 2023. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/entertainment/honey-irani-on-her-journey-from-being-a-child-star-of-the-60s-to-one-of-bollywoods-foremost-screenwriters/cid/1912262>.

<sup>129</sup> Biswas, Madhavi. "Revisioning Family Drama: The Global Spaces of Romance and Science Fiction in Honey Irani's Stories." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 55–77. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_4); Sen, Sanghita. "Breaking the Boundaries of Bollywood: Women in a 'Man's Industry.'" In *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, edited by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, 121–37. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>130</sup> For instance, in *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hain* (2000) and *Krrish 2* (2004), women are nothing but ornamental characters to valorize their male counterparts.

cases of conflict between contradictory traits are filling the demand of patriarchy, in one way or another. Like Zaidi, Irani also had limited switching power as she also lacked affective power due to similar reasons, but her limited effective power is subtly visible in her implicit efforts to challenge gender norms and social taboos through screenwriting.

### 3.3.3. Tanuja Chandra

Tanuja Chandra, another prominent screenwriter of the late-1990s, comes from a creative family, where her mother, Kamana Chandra is a screenplay writer and her siblings are associated with literature and film. Akin to Irani, Chandra also stepped into screenwriting through a creative partnership with Yash Chopra. Several of her screenplays became highest grossing films of that period including her first film *Dil to Pagal Hain* (1997). Her work including *Zakhm* (1998) and *Sangharsh* (1999) was similar to Irani's, in the sense of how they were also delineating gynocentric perspectives in the backdrop of a typical Bollywood setting. It is also notable how, very much like Irani, Chandra was creating on-screen male characters who display domesticity, emotional vulnerability, and devotion. In 1998, Chandra ventured into directing with *Dushman* (1998), in which both the avenger and victim were women and the male characters were feminist allies. In the 2000s, she continued to make films which frequently featured assertive women, criticized majoritarian politics, and misogynistic social evils while also interrogating the position of women within marriage. Sen (2017) argues that much like Irani, Chandra's work also delineates a dual dynamic where she is constantly negotiating between the constraints of the field and her disposition, in this case, the patriarchal formula of Bollywood films, and their feminist views. Based on their works in the 1990s, she asserts that women in leading production roles had to walk a tightrope back then as they had to ensure commercial success. This also explains why both Irani and Chandra had to maintain 'feel-good' Bollywood template containing happy families, spotless homes, and romantic songs, even when their films were dealing with the horrors faced by women. Her films in the early 2000s reflect global vision as they are English-language film with a focus on the South Asian immigrant experience in the setting of post-9/11 New York.<sup>131</sup> She came back to Bollywood in 2017 almost after a decade with *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (2017), which is a rom-com and new genre for her. Unlike her other work, this film is explicitly vocal about women's

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<sup>131</sup> Sen, Sanghita. "Breaking the Boundaries of Bollywood: Women in a 'Man's Industry.'" In *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, edited by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, 121–37. Routledge, 2017.

agency and does not negotiate to fit in any typical Bollywood formula.<sup>132</sup> Chandra states in an interview that this (around 2017) is the first time when female-centric films can be commercially successful in Bollywood.<sup>133</sup>

The three case studies delineate that this was a period in Bollywood when leading production roles for women mostly meant screenwriting. Thanks to the national film institutes, a few women with technical production knowledge also started to join the industry during that era. The supposedly masculine space of production and the weaker social position of women, however, still worked in tandem to create a glass ceiling. That's why, even if some women were able to break through the male-dominated industry, they had to scrutinize their work constantly to sustain themselves. Commercial expectations became a barrier for women storytellers, especially when they wanted to portray progressive values and non-stereotypical characters. It is also noticeable that family backgrounds, namely coming from film families, were not key capital for female screenwriters anymore. Like the previous periods, socio-cultural capital, education, and strong network continued to be crucial for women's switching power in this era.

### 3.4. From Battling Censor to Elements of Surprise: Bollywood & Women in 2001-2022

The 2000s witnessed a plethora of changes in Bollywood in terms of production styles, industry operations, financial sources, technological advancements, hiring practices, and content as well. Before this, cinema was considered a mere pedagogical tool in the eyes of the Nehruvian developmentalist government, but in the contemporary neoliberal ecosystem, cinema became a source of economic opportunities and a medium of representing cultural ingenuity. The Government of India recognized filmmaking as an industrial activity in 2000, which also meant some tax exemptions, lower import duties, and access to corporate/institutional financing for Bollywood.<sup>134</sup> But institutional finance did not mean opportunities for experimental projects and/or opportunities for newcomers and new ideas, rather it meant excessive money flying into the industry only to secure already established film stars, mostly male stars of that time.

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<sup>132</sup> Firstpost. "Qarib Qarib Single Does Not Have the Darkness of My Past Films, Says Director Tanuja Chandra-Entertainment News , Firstpost," November 9, 2017. <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/qarib-qarib-single-does-not-have-the-darkness-of-my-past-films-says-director-tanuja-chandra-4200825.html>. ;

<sup>133</sup> Yadav, Anubhab. "May the Number of Women Filmmakers Grow: Director Tanuja Chandra." TheQuint, November 10, 2017. <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/bollywood/qarib-qarib-single-tanuja-chandra-women-directors>.

<sup>134</sup> Agarwal, Aayush, Chaitanya Kansal, and Pranav Garg. "Corporatization of Bollywood." Harvard Business Review. Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://store.hbr.org/product/corporatization-of-bollywood/IMB675>.



Corporate finance, however, made the industry more professional in terms of hiring practices. In the mid-2000s, special effects and modern post-production technology became part of the industry as well, which, Ganti (2012) suggests, is proof of how updated Bollywood was in terms of film technologies. Her ethnographic research on the gendered nature of Bollywood film sets claims that after the 2000s the highly masculine atmosphere of film sets took a backseat as more women than ever were participating in multiple areas of film productions.<sup>135</sup> 2000s is also the decade when low-budget films with thought-provoking storylines were produced and there was a clear lack of women behind the camera in Bollywood. However, a number of women from this period are noteworthy for their contribution in changing practices of the industry.

### 3.4.1. Ekta Kapoor

Sen (2017) mentions Ekta Kapoor, a prominent film producer, who ventured into Bollywood following her unprecedented success in the television industry. Kapoor helms from an upper-class, upper-caste, cultural elite, film family. With finances from her father, she started the television production company at the age of 19 and within a decade her venture became a huge commercial success.<sup>136</sup> A number of scholars have studied her trajectory of shaping the television entertainment industry of India, while many highlighted how women's representation did not evolve much even under the jurisdiction of her female-led production company. The films produced by Kapoor's production house, however, are diversified in terms of content and genre. Especially in *Dirty Picture* (2011) and her recent productions for Netflix India,<sup>137</sup> female sexuality, body choice, and feminine agency, became concurrent themes. It is indeed true that her woman-centric films like *Veere Di Wedding* (2018) are often exclusive of the caste and class struggle faced by Indian women, but it is also undeniable that with Kapoor's productions, films led by female protagonists started to become commercial successes in Bollywood. *Dirty Picture* (2011), allegedly a biopic of a female star, and marked for unabashedly celebrating female sexuality, was one of the first female-centric films in

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<sup>135</sup> Ganti, Tejaswini. Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry. Duke University Press, 2012.

<sup>136</sup> The Times of India. "From Being Known as a Superstar's Daughter to Becoming TV's Czarina, Here's How Ekta Kapoor's Career Shaped Up." June 7, 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/from-being-known-as-a-superstars-daughter-to-becoming-tvs-czarina-heres-how-ekta-kapoors-career-shaped-up/articleshow/59034081.cms>.

<sup>137</sup> like *Dolly Kitty Aur Wo Chamakte Sitare*(2020) and *Paglaait*(2021)

Bollywood to enter the 100-crore club.<sup>138</sup> Such unapologetic portrayal of complicated social issues has also made her face a number of judiciary notices, legal cases, and confrontations with the censor board.<sup>139</sup> Another prevalent discussion about Kapoor often centers on her position of privilege. Especially during the recent nepotism debate in Bollywood, when the second and third-generation children of the film families started to face backlash, Kapoor was also a target of the allegations. She has been the center of media attention for her exceptional choice to be a single mother to a surrogate child too,<sup>140</sup> which again hints the gendered nature of entertainment journalism in India. In media, she is also vocal about women's sexual rights and female entrepreneurship in the entertainment industry.<sup>141</sup>

With a net worth of 10 million dollars, and a huge list of television series, films, and web series beside her name, she stands out as a woman who really broke the glass ceiling of the male-dominated entertainment industry of India. Her elite position in the socio-economic and cultural network of Bollywood has definitely given her an upper hand and it is very much reflected in her earlier projects with big names in the industry. But while many star kids could not sustain themselves in the film industry, her business model has been a proven success and become more relevant with its expansion into OTT content, which indicates her ability to combine privileged disposition with business acumen. From the discussion above, it is safe to say that Kapoor's switching power consists of both affective and effective dimensions. While her regular media presence as a strong, powerful woman, controversial productions, and exceptional life choices build the affective dimension of her power, the commercial successes and positive attention attained by her films constitute the effective realm. Unlike many of her

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<sup>138</sup> 100 Crore Club, an official tag, is often used by the Indian film trade and media to address the films that have earned 100 crore or 1 billion Indian rupees or more even after deduction of the entertainment tax.; Gurudas, Gopika. "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Vidya?: Female Stardom in the Times of Size Zero." In *Stardom in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Celebrity and Fame in Globalized Times*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan and Clare M. Wilkinson, 245–64. Singapore: Springer, 2020. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0191-3\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0191-3_16).

<sup>139</sup> Hindustan Times. "FIR Filed against Ekta Kapoor in Madhya Pradesh for Her Web Series XXX," June 6, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/tv/fir-filed-against-ekta-kapoor-in-madhya-pradesh-for-her-web-series-xxx-alleging-insult-to-national-emblem-army/story-WOtwVhdSJNGvKH9XRvQbM.html>. ; "The Dirty Picture' Controversy: Ekta Kapoor Challenges Censor Board - Bollywood News & Gossip, Movie Reviews, Trailers & Videos at Bollywoodlife.Com." Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://www.bollywoodlife.com/news-gossip/the-dirty-picture-controversy-ekta-kapoor-challenges-censor-board-104820/>.

<sup>140</sup> Hindustan Times. "Ekta Kapoor on Becoming a Mother: 'Stored My Eggs When I Was 36,'" March 7, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/tv/ekta-kapoor-on-becoming-a-mother-i-had-stored-my-eggs-when-i-was-36-had-a-calling-for-a-long-time/story-kpR8oQ6DKlyepOHGGhyZjM.html>.

<sup>141</sup> "On The Move with Ekta Kapoor | Mona Singh, Ronit Roy | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion - YouTube." Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/>. ; "Ekta Kapoor, Sakshi Tanwar Interview with Anupama Chopra | Mission Over Mars | Film Companion - YouTube." Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/>.



predecessors, she did not get constrained by the limits of her habitus, rather she broke multiple social taboos while building a successful production company in a male-dominated industry. Through her ability to jump platform boundaries and innovativeness to garner both commercial and critical success, she evidently displays strong switching power.

Before analyzing the women who assumed leading production roles of Bollywood during the 2010s-2020s, it is important to understand the contextual changes of this period. With the advent of global OTT companies like Netflix and Amazon, and the mushrooming of local OTT platforms like TVF, Zee5, and Bigflix, the content consumption practice started to change across India. But it was the pandemic that really made people turn to these new media and also created a demand among film practitioners to have an alternative platform for films. It encouraged collaboration between these OTT platforms and a number of mainstream Bollywood artists as well. While there is a huge round of applause about the diversity of content coming through OTT, industry practitioners consider it a lucrative opportunity because here creative freedom is not bound by box office expectations and censorship; rather it provides the opportunity for global visibility.<sup>142</sup> But in 2019, after protests from right-wing majoritarian politicians over a number of content, a number of OTTs including Netflix India and Disney+Hotstar signed for a self-regulating toolkit.<sup>143</sup> Despite this, there is a strong debate going on about the need for censorship in OTT platforms.<sup>144</sup> Promoting the ideologies of the ruling party through films has been a historic trend in Bollywood, and this decade also follows through with a plethora of films that promote Hindutva and vilifies other religions. The position of women professionals has also changed in the industry as female-centric films are now regularly attaining commercial success, and more women than ever are working in various roles of production. But it is also true that in comparison with men, the participation of women is still very low. “O Womaniya!”, a report on women’s representation in the Indian entertainment industry, delineates that the representation of women in decision-making

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<sup>142</sup> “The 2010s: Reflecting on a Decade of Change in Bollywood – The Diplomat.” Accessed May 13, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/the-2010s-reflecting-on-a-decade-of-change-in-bollywood/>.

<sup>143</sup> The tool, defined as “soft-touch self-regulatory architecture”, does not mean that these platforms need to have a certification from the censor board, but this voluntary ethics code includes ratings and grievance systems. Nyay Bhushan, “Netflix Pushes for Self-Regulation of Content in India,” The Hollywood Reporter, January 17, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-censor-content-india-1176765/>.

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.outlookindia.com/>. “Filthy OTT Content: The Court Steps In,” March 12, 2023. <https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/filthy-ott-content-the-court-steps-in-news-269474>.

production roles, both in technical and corporate aspects, is only 10%. And among the 10%, Bollywood is the highest contributor but the number is not out.<sup>145</sup>

### 3.4.2. Zoya Akhter

In the period of 2010-2022, a number of women took part in leading production roles and created new discourses in Bollywood. A book on the contemporary women directors of Bollywood discusses Akhter and Kagti, both of whom have worked individually as directors and screenwriters and also collaborated on a number of projects. Akhter was born into a family of the Bollywood elite, in which her parents are reputed screenwriters, Javed Akhter and Honey Irani (described in 3.3.2). Her lineage goes back to prominent literary figures and scholars. Being trained at New York University in filmmaking, she started assisting directors like Mira Nair and Dev Benegal, who are famous for making transnational Indian films. Later, in the early 2000s, she also worked in the productions of her brother, Farhan Akhter, and long-term friend, Reema Kagti. In 2009, she took on the role of director with *Luck by Chance*, a film focused on the internal politics of Bollywood. Akhter's debut film was not a commercial success but it got critical acclamation for delineating the inner world of Bollywood, an industry that she got to observe closely from her childhood. Her initial years as assistant directors of multiple leading directors and her debut film about her own habitus indicate how her social position in the film fraternity and artistic acumen worked in tandem. In the 2010s, both of her films, *Zindagi na Milega Dobara* (ZNMD, 2011) and *Dil Dhadkane Do* (DDD, 2015), did great in commercial aspects, but she was also criticised for telling stories that only focus on upper-class and upper-caste struggle. She was constantly compared to her father, who is prominent for writing iconic working-class characters. While this reflects the burden of kinship, it also indicates Akhter's inclination to be confined within her habitus by choosing to tell stories that are exclusive of the struggles experienced by the people outside her surroundings. However, both these films had autonomous women who chart their own paths through a hierarchical misogynistic society and sensitive men who are constantly trying to break free from the expectations of a patriarchal society. According to Gopinath and Mehta (2023), Akhter reinterrogates the formula of Bollywood's family drama with *DDD* (2015) as she highlights the rigid gender expectations and the patriarchal structure of a wealthy North-Indian family.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> "Owomaniya Report 2022." Owomaniya, 2022. <https://owomaniya.org/>.

<sup>146</sup> Gopinath, Praseeda, and Monika Mehta. "Zoya Akhtar: Global Genres and Gendered Signatures." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 33–53. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_3).

Like the iconic family drama of Bollywood in the 1990s and 2000s, *DDD* (2015) also establishes itself in the backdrop of a spotless home, long vacations, and designer dresses, but rather than celebrating the patriarchal, Brahmanical family values, it sheds light on the position of women within the boundary of marriage. *DDD* (2015) and *ZNMD* (2011) also displayed her global vision as she places her characters on transnational journeys and touches upon the tales of diasporic lives.

In the second half of the 2010s, defying the criticism of excluding caste struggle and class struggle from her stories, Akhter came back with *Lust Stories* (2018)<sup>147</sup> and *Gully Boy* (2019), both of which centre around characters who are usually marginalised in Hindi cinema. In *Lust Stories* (2018), she raises the question of sexual freedom for women who are situated in the conjuncture of patriarchy, poverty, and lower caste, whereas so far, the hesitant portrayal of female sexuality in Hindi cinema is confined within the walls of , elite women. On the other hand, *Gully Boy* (2019) explores the impact of social structure on the identity of people. Even though it is a film about the rise of a rapper from an underprivileged, Muslim household, according to Gopinath and Mehta (2023), Akhter's storytelling disrupts the usual gendered, classed, and religious tropes of Hindi cinema.<sup>148</sup> In 2015, she established her own production house in collaboration with Reema Kagti.<sup>149</sup> Recently, her work has also expanded to OTT platforms as she collaborated with a few Bollywood directors for two anthologies in Netflix India, and is also working on a live-action film for the same platform.

The contestation of hetero-patriarchy is a concurrent theme in Akhter's work in both mainstream Bollywood and OTT platforms, but with the creative freedom offered by OTTs, she breaks free from the heteronormative narrative of romance and gender expectations. This is reflective of how like Devi and many of her predecessors, Akhter successfully connected her elite position and socio-cultural capital to break the barriers of her habitus and charter a new discourse for the film industry. She has attained both local and global acclamations for her work, but her privileged position within the film fraternity is nowadays discussed extensively in media reports. Gopinath and Mehta (2023) also point out that even if she constantly contests

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<sup>147</sup> An anthology for Netflix in collaboration with three more directors

<sup>148</sup> Gopinath, Praseeda, and Monika Mehta. "Zoya Akhtar: Global Genres and Gendered Signatures." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 33–53. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_3).

<sup>149</sup> Viswamohan, Aysha Iqbal. "Introduction: Wonder Women, Iron Ladies." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 1–7. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_1).

the class hierarchy and privileged lifestyle through her films, it is undeniable that her own family name and social position provide her with certain privileges. Her initial access to prominent names in the industry, her recent prestige projects under the banner of Netflix India,<sup>150</sup> and her ability to cast top actors in the industry in almost all her projects also prove that point. In essence, the navigation of Akhter in a male-dominated industry becomes easier as she takes leverage of her industrial and cultural capital, two major catalysts in her switching power.

### 3.4.3. Reema Kagti

Kagti, a long associate and friend of Akhter, is also a prominent director, producer, and screenwriter of Bollywood. But her background is completely different from Akhter's, as she comes from Assam, a marginalized state for both Bollywood and India. In 2001, she started out by assisting directors like Farhan Akhter, Zoya Akhter, and Ashutosh Gowariker. Dwyer (2011) studies her directorial debut, *Honeymoon Travels* (2007), as a realistic story, catered to the urban, middle-class audience of India.<sup>151</sup> Anjaria also (2013) highlights it as one of the few films that were made in the 2010s with a modest budget, and limited scale, but more realistic storytelling.<sup>152</sup> Her first film was certainly an off-beat one but it also confessed Kagti's love for Bollywood in its romantic aspects. If *Honeymoon Travels* is juxtaposed with Akhter's debut film *Luck by Chance* (2009), the appearance of a new genre called meta-cinema becomes evident as both of them build on their nostalgic relationship with old Bollywood films. This new genre of meta-cinema got a stronghold in the 2000s with the work of another female director, Farah Khan and it also reflects Sen's (2017) opinion on the ability of female screenwriters and directors to push the rigid boundaries of Bollywood genres.

However, Kagti's journey with offbeat films continued through *ZNMD* (2011), *Talaash* (2012), *Bombay Talkies* (2013), *DDD* (2015), *Gold* (2018), and *Gully Boy* (2019). Anjaria (2023) reads

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<sup>150</sup> "Bollywood Directors Join Hands to Pay Homage to Indian Cinema - Times Of India." Accessed May 14, 2023. [https://web.archive.org/web/20120622040500/http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-05-07/news-interviews/31599052\\_1\\_cinema-karan-johar-indian-films.](https://web.archive.org/web/20120622040500/http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-05-07/news-interviews/31599052_1_cinema-karan-johar-indian-films.); "Netflix and Archie Comics Partner for the Live-Action Musical Film, The Archies, to Be Directed By Zoya Akhtar - About Netflix." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-and-archie-comics-partner-for-the-live-action-musical-film-the-archie>.

<sup>151</sup> Dwyer, Rachel. "'Zara Hatke ('Somewhat Different'): The New Middle Classes and the Changing Forms of Hindi Cinema'." In *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*. Florence, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=981996>.

<sup>152</sup> Anjaria, Ulka. "Reema Kagti and the Ethics of Surprise." In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 97–109. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_6).

her creative journey as a non-linear one as she keeps experimenting with new genres and storytelling. Kagti herself also admits that her work does not have any similar tone in terms of theme, aesthetic, genre, or style, but she interprets it as her ‘versatility’.<sup>153</sup> This variety of storytelling and genre jumping is indicative of the material realm of her labour, but her association with big names in the industry reflects her ability to accumulate strong social capital, which further enables her to transcend beyond her habitus and influence the field. Like her non-conformist media presence, her work is also unhesitant in nature, which is not common in Bollywood films and especially was not common in the work of her female predecessors like Irani and Chandra. She also breaks free from the scholarly assumption of being inclined to mid-budget, off-beat films by choosing to make *Gold*, which is a mainstream, high-budget Bollywood film. Kagti was criticised for *Gold* as many interpreted it as an attempt to join the league of filmmakers who are promoting Hindu-nationalistic films in recent years with an intent to be on the favourable side of the ruling party. But she seems to be clear about the difference between anti-imperialist nationalism and contemporary chauvinist nationalism.<sup>154</sup> Her successful creative collaboration with Akhter in multiple projects is speculated from various angles. Akhter and Kagti themselves credit the diversity of their experience behind the success of their collaboration.<sup>155</sup> Gopinath and Mehta (2023), on the other hand, state that it is indicative of the ‘female homosociality’ within the supposedly masculine production sites of Bollywood. Kagti also continues to work individually for both mainstream Bollywood and OTT platforms through her production company while constantly gliding through different genres, aesthetics, styles, and themes.<sup>156</sup>

Kagti and Akhter both hold certain degrees of affective power, but it is different in nature. For Kagti, affective power is defined by her off-beat, versatile work and sometimes her androgynous appearance. But for Akhter, no matter how much her work is talked about in media, her kinship and industry network seem to take a centrality in the discourse about her. On the other hand, these two women’s affective power remains very much different from that

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<sup>153</sup> Reuters. “Q&A: Reema Kagti on ‘Gold’ and Nationalism in Films.” August 30, 2018, sec. India Insight. <https://www.reuters.com/article/interview-reema-kagti-gold-idINKCN1LFOWZ>.

<sup>154</sup> *Gold* is a patriotic sports drama; Reuters. “Q&A: Reema Kagti on ‘Gold’ and Nationalism in Films.” August 30, 2018, sec. India Insight. <https://www.reuters.com/article/interview-reema-kagti-gold-idINKCN1LFOWZ>.

<sup>155</sup> Viswamohan, Aysha Iqbal. “Introduction: Wonder Women, Iron Ladies.” In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 1–7. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_1).

<sup>156</sup> Anjaria, Ulka. “Reema Kagti and the Ethics of Surprise.” In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 97–109. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_6).

of their predecessors like Rani, Dutt, and Dasgupta because: a) they do not have a glamorous, mystique star appeal, and b) they refuse to portray themselves as fashion conscious, glamourized women. Therefore, it is safe to say that even though both these women have affective dimension of power, it cannot be interpreted as affective appeal. The effective power of Akhter is manifested through her ability to contest Bollywood's feudal-patriarchal genres and tropes as it exerts influence to change industry trends. As she breaks free from her own habitus and tackles the burden of kinship, she also delineates her power to shape public perceptions about her. On another end, Kagti's effective power lies in her diverse and experimental work that pushes the boundaries of Bollywood. And she needed to combine her artistic capability with sociocultural capital to build power. In brief, even though their effective powers stem from different contexts, both of it is aimed to rupture the heteronormative, masculine narrative of Bollywood and its gendered discourse.

This period of Bollywood film history delineated the slow departure of Bollywood from being a men's club to an inclusive space. Many would argue that like Chandra and Irani, contemporary women in leading production roles did not need to downplay progressive perspectives in films. The creative freedom offered by OTT is often deemed as a crucial factor in this regard. Given that OTT is free from box office expectations and censorship jurisdiction, it is perceived as a medium that can afford more realistic and progressive stories, which consequentially also make space for stories about diverse women. In interviews, industry personnel mentioned that this very aspect enabled OTT platforms to be more inclusive and open toward women storytellers.<sup>157</sup> It is also speculated that the significant representation of female executives in streaming companies resulted in involving more women in key production roles of streaming content/films. Purohit (2023), an executive at Amazon Prime shares the same view and states that more women in commissioning roles at streaming companies enabled better on-screen representation and off-screen participation of women in OTT content/films. While this claim remains out of the scope of the paper, the claim about involving 'more' women in the originals of OTT (in this case, Netflix India) will be scrutinised through quantitative study in the following chapter. Akhter (2022), however, points out in a recent interview that

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<sup>157</sup> Women's Day Adda | Interview with Anupama Chopra | Netflix | Film Companion, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4pivYIM9es>. ; The Women of Netflix Ft. Prashasti, Supriya, Niveditha & Kaneez | Now Streeming | Netflix India, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsG33ln\\_MnE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsG33ln_MnE). ; The Producers Adda with Karan Johar, Aanand L Rai, Rhea Kapoor, Siddharth Roy Kapur & Priti Shahani, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9TnhffMac0>. ; O Womaniya! 2022 Adda | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, Ormax Media, Prime Video, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwD3bupm6fY>.



OTT is also moving toward self-censorship due to constant contestation by majoritarian politicians and reactive groups.<sup>158</sup>

Beside the OTT phenomena, recent interviews and podcasts also illustrate a present-day situation, where women still have to fight gender biases in production spaces. Dhillon, a female screenplay writer, and producer, talks about how women have to work twice as hard and act very masculine on film sets. From her experience, she points out that women are taken seriously enough in power positions only when they are successful and/or show a masculine attitude on sets. She says, *“It’s like I have to prove myself just because I am a woman, and I have to act like a man in the man’s world.”* Purohit, Head of Amazon Prime India Originals, thinks this is the case because the Indian social norm perceives women as ‘indoor beings’. While Purohit talks about strategies she is implementing in increasing inclusivity and representation in the media landscape, Dhillon adds how people are hiring fewer women in the post-me-too period as they think of women as a whole different sort of liabilities now.<sup>159</sup> Akhter and Kagti, two women with successful production efforts, also state how they are often judged on the basis of their gender and their lack of care about fashion.<sup>160</sup> On the other hand, Kapoor (2018), another female producer remarks in an interview, *“I had to be apologetic throughout my whole career just because I’m a “female” producer.”* Her experience also delineates how women in leading production roles have to negotiate a lot when they want to make female-centric stories.<sup>161</sup> Even though both media and scholarly attention is minuscule regarding women who work in more technical production roles, a few interviews with contemporary cinematographers (Directors of Photography) give a brief idea about their situation. Sen (2020), a female cinematographer, states that the industry still considers working with a woman DoP as an “experiment”.<sup>162</sup> Reflecting on her 20 years of experience, she says that initially there was hardly any woman in cinematography. But the current struggle is more about female cinematographers facing barriers to be the head of their departments.<sup>163</sup> As per Matiani (2018), women cinematographers

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<sup>158</sup> FC Producers Adda 2021 | Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Nikkhil Advani, Sameer Nair, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmswr822\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmswr822_4).

<sup>159</sup> Film Companion, “O Womaniya! 2022 Adda | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, Ormax Media, Prime Video,” [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwD3bupm6fY&t=2448s), September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwD3bupm6fY&t=2448s>

<sup>160</sup> Zoya Akhtar & Reema Kagti | FC Post Mortem | Dil Dhadakne Do | Film Companion, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4DGmAXNPt4>.

<sup>161</sup> The Producers Adda with Karan Johar, Aanand L Rai, Rhea Kapoor, Siddharth Roy Kapur & Priti Shahani, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9TnhffMacQ>.

<sup>162</sup> The Cinematographers Adda | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VQyHVPp0yQ>.

<sup>163</sup> O Womaniya! 2022 Adda | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, Ormax Media, Prime Video, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwD3bupm6fY>.

face more challenges in getting work during the early phase of their careers compared to their male counterparts. She also echoes the concern of Dhillon as she mentions the extra burden of proving herself just because she is a woman.<sup>164</sup> It will be remissive if the paper does not mention that several films of this period in Bollywood were symptomatic of internalized patriarchy despite having women in leading production roles. Scholars bring in the examples of films like *Cocktail* (2012) and *Queen* (2013), both of which are made by women, represent complex, nuanced, modern women and yet choose to reinforce the patriarchal definition of “good Indian women” by glorifying the traditional women characters over the modern ones.

Sen (2017) states that films made by women sometimes fail to qualify as remotely feminist content because of two prime reasons. One, feminist discourse raised in films made by women often ignores the caste struggle in India, and that exclusionary tale of upper-class, upper-caste women cannot be a proper feminist story. Two, the patriarchy of the ecosystem creates barriers for all to address women’s issues with candor. The state works as a patriarchal figure using the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), or political organizations as its apparatus. For example, CBFC is an institution that began monitoring and regulating film production in British-controlled India. Its postcolonial role is now aimed to protect the “so-called Indian Hindu Brahmanical patriarchal morality”.<sup>165</sup> Srivastava (2018) also reflects the same tone as she speaks about the struggle to gain a censor certificate for *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2018), a film on the sexual freedom of Indian women. She points out that Indian films do have sexual content and they tend to cater to the male gaze, but the thing that made CBFC uncomfortable about her film is that it caters to the needs of women.<sup>166</sup> This opinion of her becomes even more relevant as the debate about introducing censorship for OTT content is also on the rise. OTT has been praised for showcasing stories of diverse and marginalized women, which is often not possible in Bollywood’s theatrical films due to commercial expectations and the influential role of CBFI. In these circumstances, scholars state that even in contemporary times, women in key production roles have to constantly negotiate and fight gendered norms because Bollywood clings on to its historical tendency to be a risk-averse industry, looking for a way

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<sup>164</sup> Has Bollywood Made Space for Female Cinematographers?, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8n1HC7h7mU>.

<sup>165</sup> Harrod, Mary, and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, eds. *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 117. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.

<sup>166</sup> Team *Lipstick Under My Burkha* Interview with Anupama Chopra, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXjoQcsSUUs>.



to pass the censor board safely and make a decent profit by following the repetitive formula of male star-led films where women are relegated to the roles of facilitators only.<sup>167</sup>

1913-1940	1941-1970	1971-2000	2001-2022
High stigma against 'performing for public'	Religious identity	Commercial expectations & patriarchal film formula	Internalised misogyny
Weaker social position of women	Weaker social position of women	Weaker social position of women	Weaker social position of women
Social position & on-screen representation	Familial expectations & gender expectations	Gender expectations	Gender expectations
Gender expectations and patriarchal beliefs	Lack of acknowledgment of women's contribution	Lack of creative freedom	Burden of kinship
Precarity of the pro-nascent industry	Patriarchal sabotage and misogynistic belief	Patriarchal role of state & majoritarian politics	State-led patriarchal apparatus: Censor board & political parties

Figure 1: Barriers women had to face to assume key production roles in Bollywood across time; Source: Visualized from the discussion above

1913-1940	1941-1970	1971-2000	2001-2022
Respectable family background: upper-caste, upper class, educated elite	Respectable family background: upper-caste, upper class, educated elite	Formal education and social position	Position of privilege, connected to film families or film fraternity
Affective appeal	Affective appeal	Affective power, not affective appeal	Affective power, cultural & industry capital
Strong social network & international exposure	Media narrative, socio-cultural capital & adaptability	Social network & adaptability	Adaptability & innovation
Technological knowledge & global vision	International training & education	Maintaining the feudal-patriarchal formula of films & underplaying progressive perspectives	Creative liberty offered by OTT platforms

Figure 2: Enabling factors that constituted switching power of women in key production roles across time; Source: Visualized from the discussion above

<sup>167</sup> Somaaya, Bhawana, and Jigna Kothari. *Mother Maiden Mistress*. Harper Collins, 2012.; FC Producers Adda 2021 | Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Nikkhil Advani, Sameer Nair, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmswr822\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNmswr822_4).

The chapter depicts a historical trajectory of Bollywood, identifying different forms of barriers (Figure 1) and enabling factors (Figure 2) that women encountered in the strive for key production roles in Bollywood across different eras. From 1913 to the present day, the patriarchal norms of industry and society work as an overarching hurdle for all the women discussed here. Unique intersections of religious, social, caste, regional identity, and marital status confluence a diverse array of opportunities and barriers for each of them. Macro elements such as political and economic situations also had a crucial impact in shaping industry norms and individual lives associated with them. Regardless of the time frame, women had to combine different types of capital and habitus to chart a way through the male-dominated industry. The forms of their switching power evolved in nature as the barriers they faced kept changing as well. But the strive of women to assume leading production roles continues throughout the entirety of Bollywood's history.

## **Chapter 4: Decoding the Role of Netflix India**

Netflix India entered the Indian market in 2016 and has been steadily growing its presence there ever since. In the initial period, it was catering to a niche of the English-speaking urban elite with a limited selection of content and a focus on Hollywood titles. However, it quickly changed its content strategy to focus more on local stories and cater to a broader audience segment. In 2018, it started producing original Indian content with a web show, *Sacred Games*, and in the same year, it released its first original Hindi-language film, *Love Per Square Foot*. This was the first mainstream Bollywood film to directly premiere on any OTT platform and with the global distribution of Netflix, it was available to watch in 190 countries. In the period of 2018-2022, Netflix India produced a total of 51 Indian films, of which 46 can be considered Bollywood films as they are Hindi-language films produced in collaboration with various Mumbai-based production companies (Table 6). As Netflix India continues to produce more original films, the company officials, industry practitioners, and media reporters continue to applaud the platform for fostering the participation of women in key production roles in Bollywood.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate such discourse by decoding the role of Netflix India in advancing the participation of women in key production roles in Bollywood. The following discussion will be guided by these sub-questions:

1. Statistically, how many Netflix India Original films have women in key production roles?
2. How does this number compare with the count of women occupying key production roles in mainstream Bollywood during the period of 2018-2022?
3. What initiatives has Netflix India undertaken to foster the participation of women in leading production roles in Bollywood? Are they effective enough to eradicate the aforementioned barrier or create catalysts that drive women to assume such roles?
4. Who are the women that are assuming key production roles in Netflix India Original films? What were the specific barring factors for them to assume key production roles in Netflix India Original films? What did Netflix do to remove the barriers for them? What constitutes the “switching power” of these women? What did Netflix India do to enable them?

#### 4.1. In Numbers: Mainstream Bollywood vs Netflix India

Does Netflix India really have more women in lead production roles for its original films compared to Bollywood? The discourse in the industry and media suggest so. But since there is no quantitative comparison available yet, this sub-chapter investigate the real scenario through an empirical analysis.

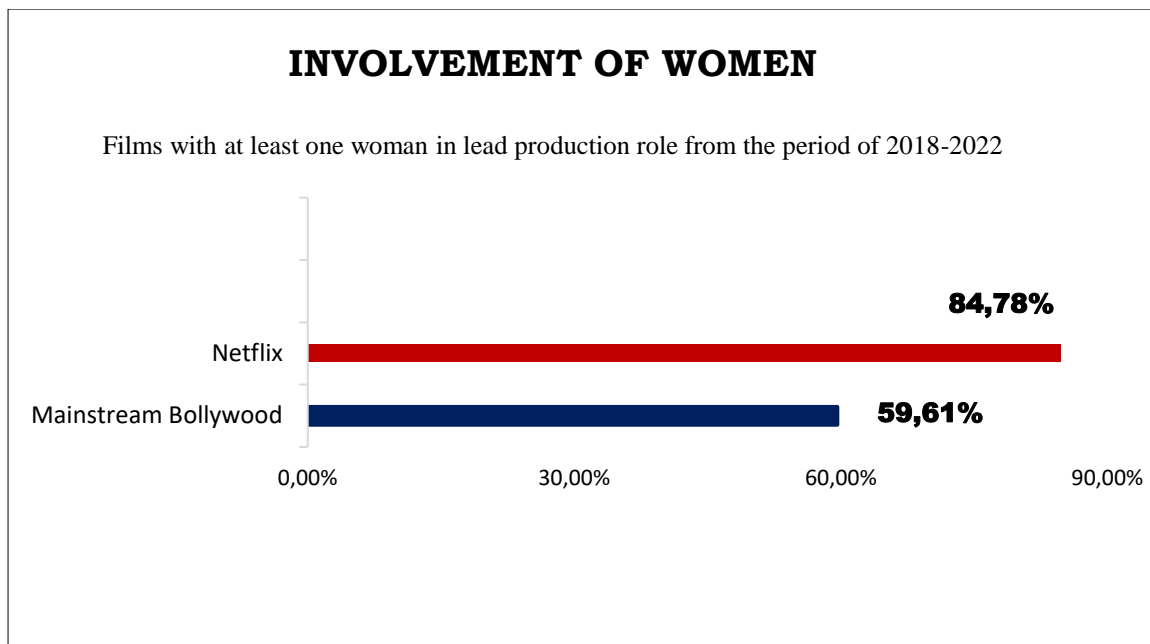


Figure 3: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman in lead production role (2018-2022)

Source: Calculated by myself (Details in A17)

During 2018-2022, Netflix India released 46 Hindi-language original films, whereas mainstream Bollywood had 540 theatrical releases. A numerical comparison shows that 84.78% Netflix India Original films had at least one women at a leading production role. In contrast, 59.61% mainstream Bollywood films had at least one women in similar position, which reflects a modicum of gender equality in the industry, but still fall short compared to women's representation in Netflix India. Further comparisons regarding each key production role can offer a more nuanced view.

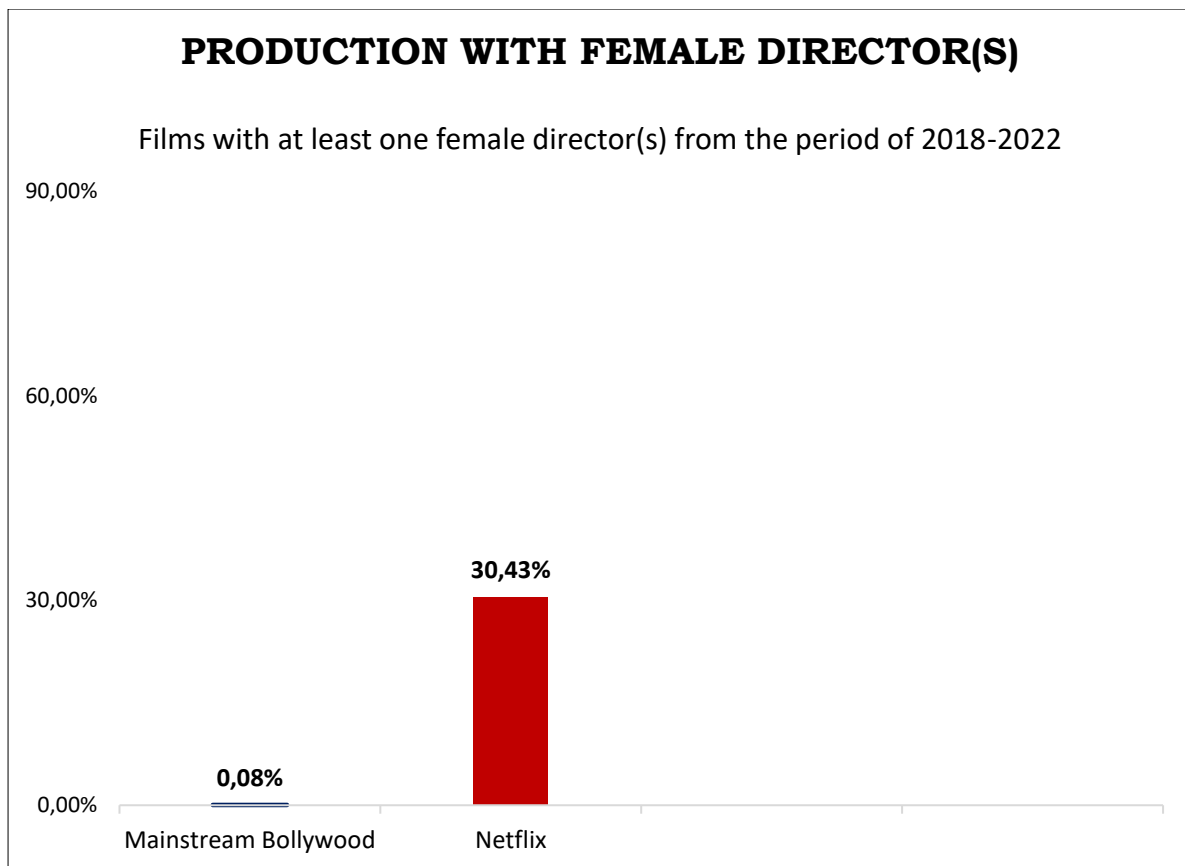


Figure 4: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman director (2018-2022)

Source: Calculated by myself (Details in A17)

In mainstream Bollywood, a scant 0.08% films had at least one woman director, whereas a notably higher percentage, 30.43% of Netflix Original films, were directed by women. None of these numbers paint an optimistic picture about the participation of women directors, but the situation in mainstream Bollywood is significantly grim.

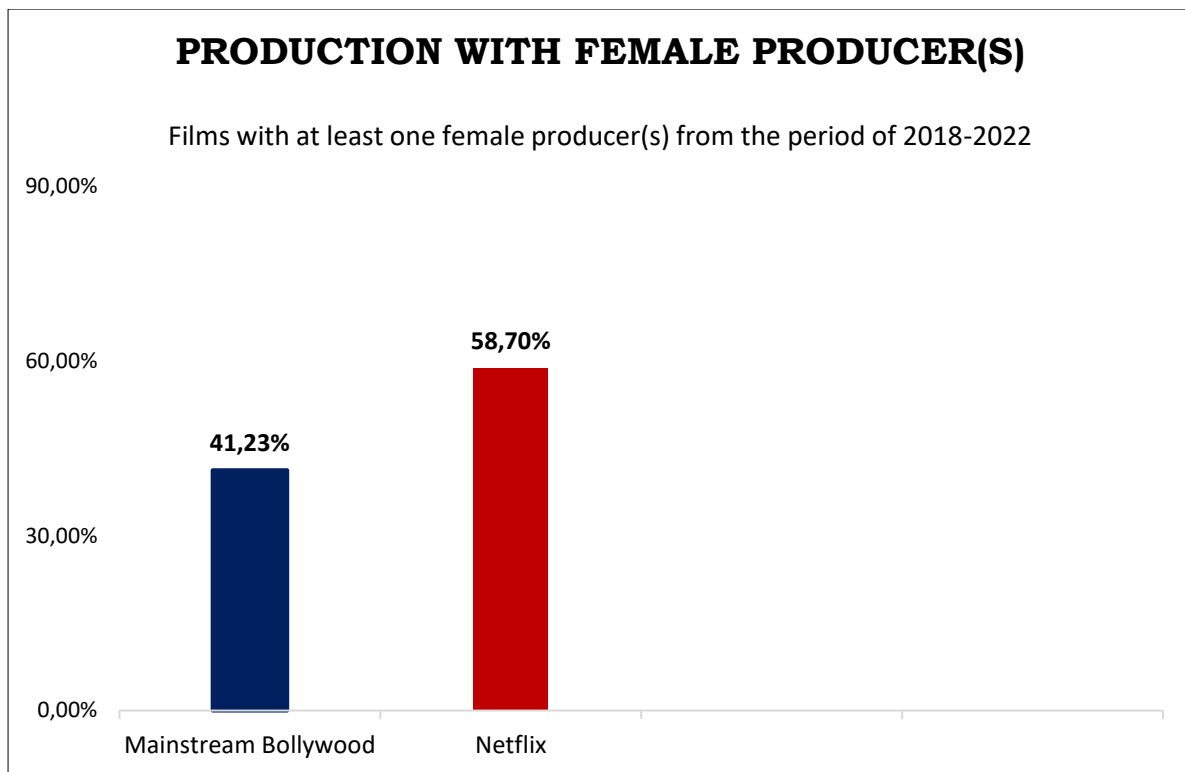


Figure 5: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman producer (2018-2022)

Source: Calculated by myself (Details in A17)

Compared to the representation of women directors, the representation of women producers seem strikingly high. While 41.23% mainstream Bollywood films had at least one woman producer, Netflix Original films stand at a higher position with 58.70% films having women producers. As standalone percentage, both of these indicate near equal participation of women as lead producers. But it is also necessary to study the women producers of mainstream Bollywood through intersectional lens as many of them are family members of influential male figures of the industry.

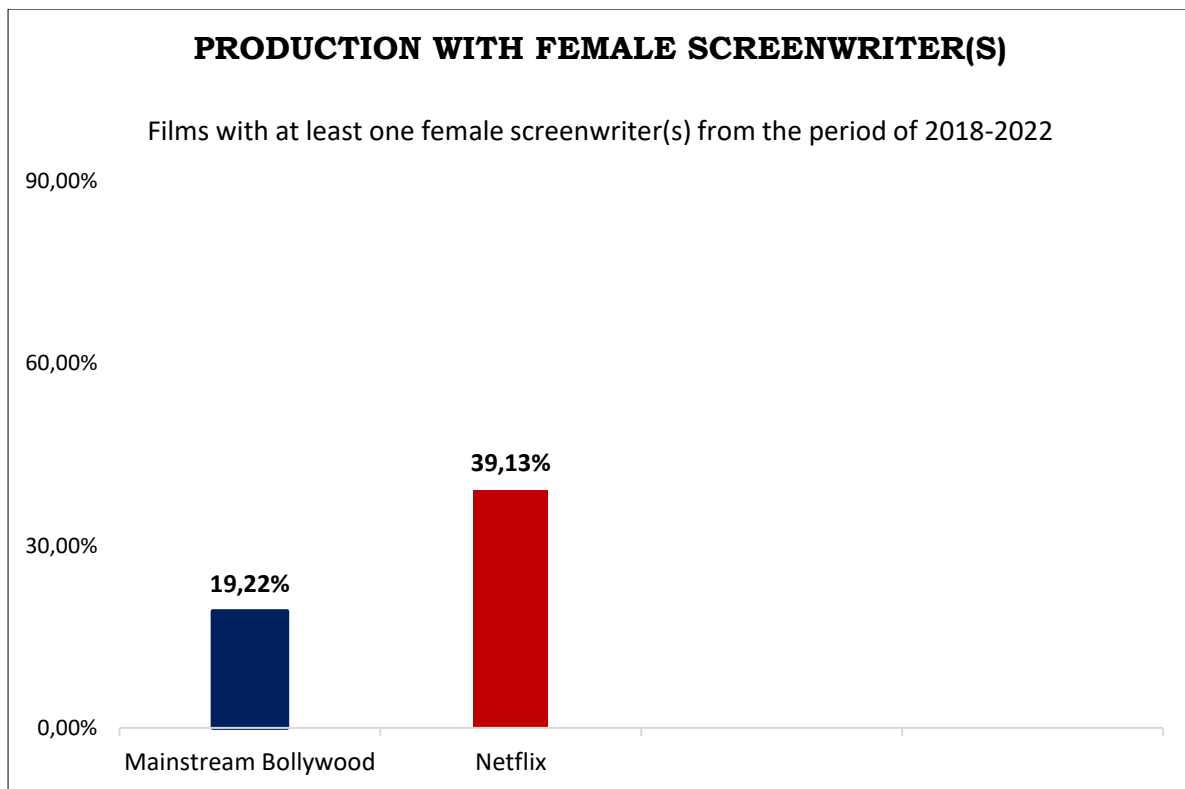


Figure 6: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman screenwriter (2018-2022)

Source: Calculated by myself (Details in A17)

While podcasts and interviews with contemporary female artists constantly emphasize the need for having inclusive writers' rooms, mainstream Bollywood portrays a bleak picture by having only 19.22% films written by women screenwriters. Among Netflix Original films, the percentage is not very optimistic too, but it is still almost double compared to that of mainstream Bollywood.



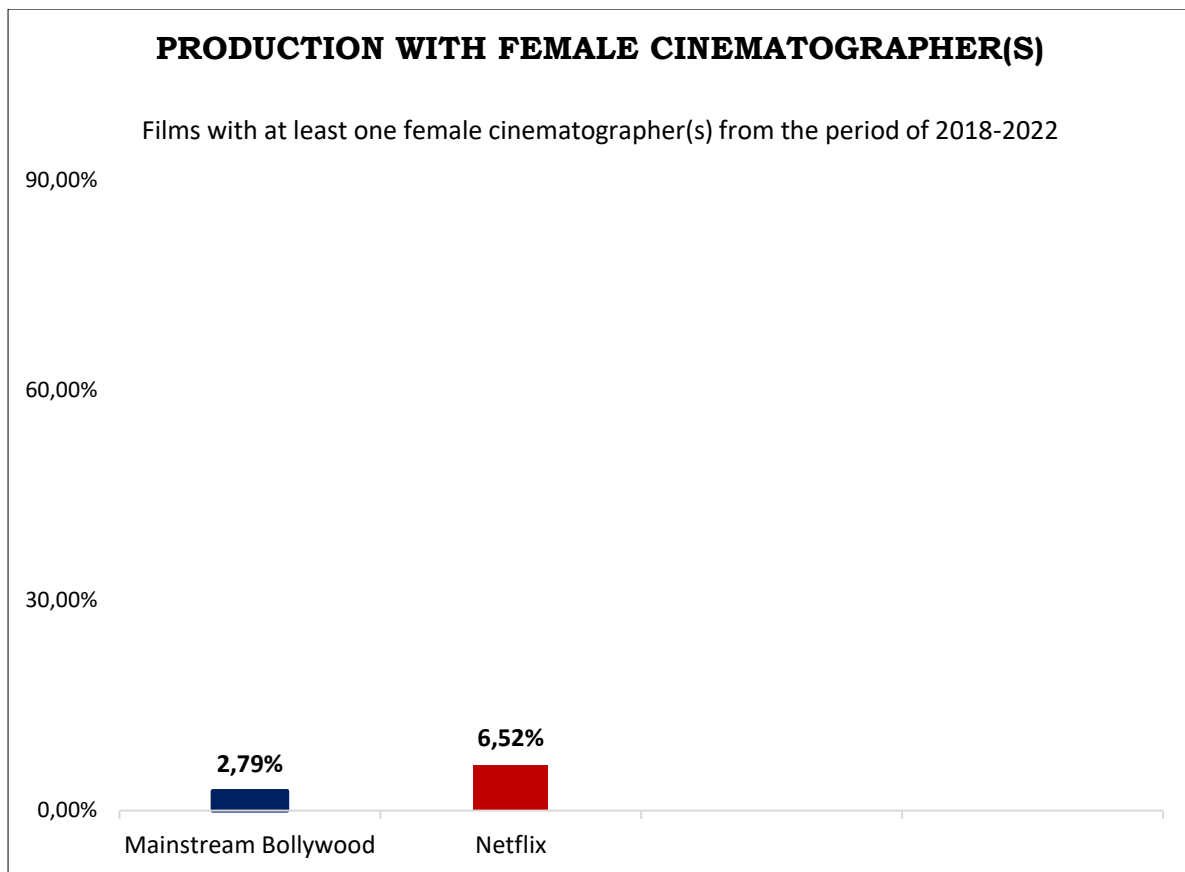


Figure 7: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman cinematographer (2018-2022)

Source: Calculated by myself (Details in A17)

The representation of women cinematographers in lead production roles is miniscule in both frontier here. While mainstream Bollywood has only 2.79% films with at least one woman cinematographer, Netflix India has 6.52%. This illustrates Sen (2020)'s remarks about the predominant apathy about commissioning women in leading roles of technical production activities.

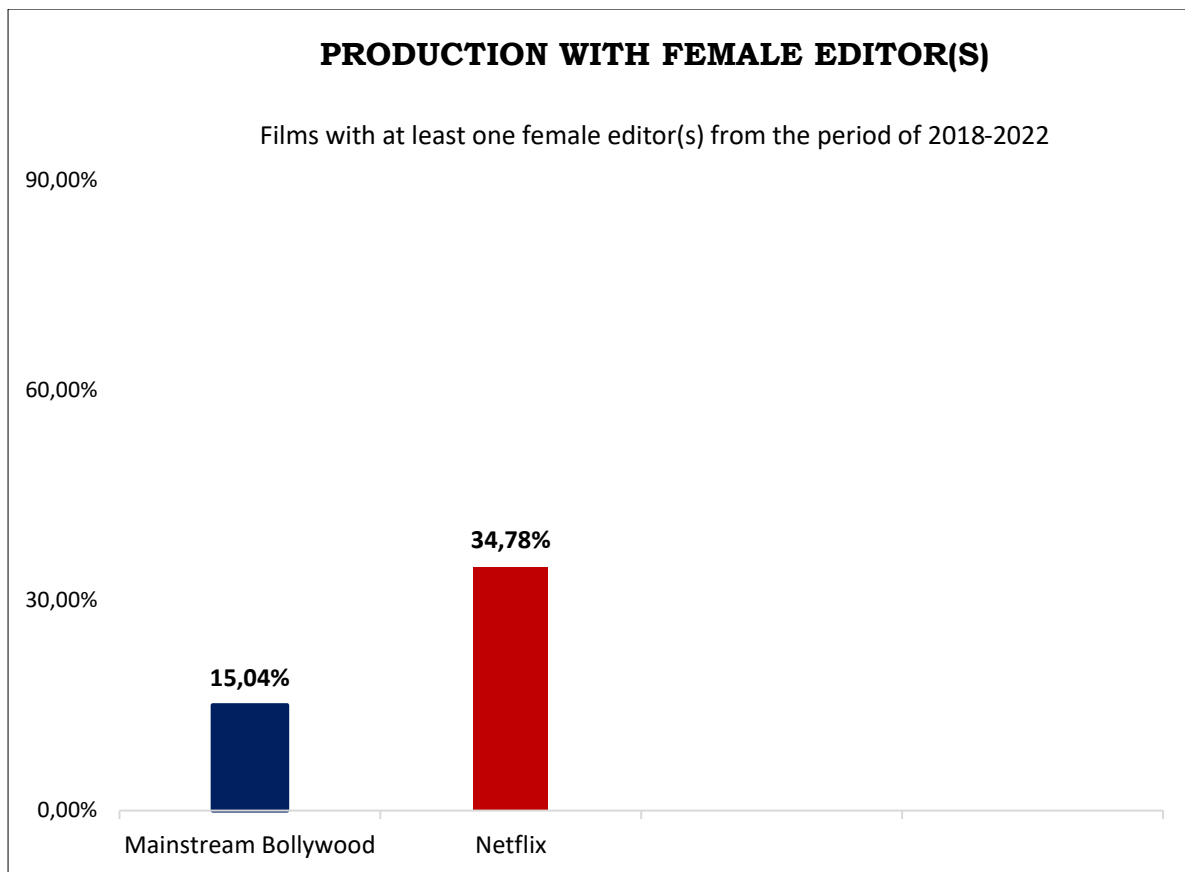


Figure 8: Comparison between Netflix India & Bollywood - percentage of films with at least one woman editor (2018-2022)

Representation of women editors is slightly better compared to that of women cinematographers. Yet, in both realms, the percentages are not anywhere near to achieve equal representation. Mainstream Bollywood has only 15.04% films with female editors. In contrast, Netflix India has almost double amount of films with female editors.

The discussion above evidently indicate that the representation of women in key production roles is far better in Netflix Original films compared to mainstream Bollywood. It clearly reflects more inclusive production practices of Netflix India. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the participation of women in lead production roles is far from ideal for both. Rather, while studied as standalone data, the discourse regarding Netflix India's commendable role as a champion of women representation seem to be over hyped. The paper claims so because apart from the role of producer, the percentage of women's participation in every other key production role of Netflix Original films is notably distant from achieving equal representation. Specially the situation in technical roles, such as cinematography and editing,

show a clear need for initiatives. Nonetheless, this quantitative comparison between women's representation between mainstream Bollywood and Netflix India provide an in-depth understanding of the situation, underscoring the room for improvements.

## 4.2. Policies & Campaigns: Is it working yet?

This sub-chapter evaluates the initiatives, both policies and campaigns, employed by Netflix to encourage women's participation in these roles of Bollywood. It employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Stakeholder Analysis on the campaigns to assess their efficacy and understand their public representation.

Shergill, Vice President of Content at Netflix India, remarked that more than 50% of Netflix films released in India (in 2020) have a female producer or director.<sup>168</sup> She does not mention any specific policy of Netflix India to make production scenarios more accessible for women, but she highlights the business perspective of involving women storytellers, *"It's (Giving space to women storytellers) not just a social responsibility but also great for the entertainment business because women consume a fair bit of content, and if we don't bring out their stories, it's like having only half a perspective."*<sup>169</sup> This discussion about "women's perspective" is also stated in Arya's clarification. Arya, Director for International Original Film at Netflix India clarifies that Netflix India does not mean to look for stories about women by engaging more women in key production roles, rather they want to include women's perspective, which has been historically ignored so far.<sup>170</sup> Meanwhile, Bami, Series Head of Netflix India claims that it's the company's conscious decision to have more women-centric and women-helmed stories.<sup>171</sup> While all of them keep discussing Netflix's diversity & inclusion values, citing the global inclusion report, it is also true that they did not provide any specific data about women's off-screen participation in Netflix India's Original films. This further necessitated the need for

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<sup>168</sup> Ragini Saxena and P R Sanjai, "Netflix, Amazon Rewrite Bollywood Rules with Focus on Women," Bloomberg.com, October 15, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-15/women-rewrite-rules-of-bollywood-thanks-to-netflix-amazon?leadSource=uverify%20wal>

<sup>169</sup> Singh, Johannah. "Five Top Content Executives Are Women at Netflix India." Newsblare (blog), March 8, 2022. <https://newsblare.com/business/media-and-entertainment/five-out-of-seven-top-content-executives-are-women-at-netflix-india/>.

<sup>170</sup> Huma Qureshi, Shefali Shah, Srishti Arya, Monika Shergill | Netflix | Anupama Chopra | Film Companion, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPWJ07ghQpY>.

<sup>171</sup> Tanya Bami on Bombay Begums, Tribhanga, Pagglait, Little Things | Netflix | Womens Day | HrishiKay, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgupdOYAail>.

a quantitative analysis that can truly present the number of women at the leading roles of Netflix original films.

While studied as standalone data, women representation in specific lead production roles of Netflix India's Original Hindi films do not indicate a situation of equity. Participation of female directors in Netflix Original Hindi films is comparatively limited since only 30.43% films (14 films) had at least one female director (Figure 4). The participation of female producers delineates an encouraging situation, with 58.7% (27 films) having at least one woman in the role of producer (Figure 5), but many of them have assumed the role of co-producers with their male family members, which raises question about the women's agency in the role. Even though many discussion about better representation of women pointed out that having an inclusive writer's room is the first key to ensure better on-screen representation of women, here only 39.13% films (18 films) have at least one screenwriter in their production team (Figure 6). But in technical roles of production, female participation is ignominiously low as only 6.52% films (3 films) have female cinematographers (Figure 7) and only 34.78% (16 films) have female editors. While this quantitative analysis indicates some optimistic scenarios regarding women's participation in leading production roles of Netflix originals compared to Bollywood, it also identifies room for improvements, namely in directorial and technical positions.

As understood from the discussion above, Netflix India's strategy about involving more women in key production roles have not yet been publicly disclosed. Therefore, my study explores multiple sources and campaigns to understand if any certain policy is being implemented. For a Women's Day campaign in 2021, Netflix India asked several women including actors, producers, directors, screenwriters, editors, and cinematographers, to share the change they have noticed in the production process of this particular OTT. And a number of them including Pandey, Shubhash, and Shaikh, remarked that it is the 'diverse representation' of women that has changed with Netflix India. Shubhash further claims that by giving the platform to represent stories of diverse women, Netflix India has opened the door to more women storytellers.<sup>172</sup> From these opinions, it seems that the content strategy of Netflix encouraged women to come up with their stories. Even though there is no comparative data available yet to back up these

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<sup>172</sup> "We Are Just A Story Away - About Netflix." Accessed May 14, 2023.  
<https://about.netflix.com/en/news/we-are-just-a-story-away>.

claims, it is true that with films like *Darlings* (2022), *Bulbbul* (2019), and *Lust Stories* (2018), there came a stream of women-helmed films that centre diverse and marginalised voices. Shahane, the writer and director of *Tribhanga* (2021),<sup>173</sup> gives a more in-depth insight as she states that Netflix India has picked up her female-centric story while no one else was ready to finance it because it does not have a hero or song.<sup>174</sup> Shahane's comment reflects that not just the patriarchal beliefs in the industry but also the feudal-patriarchal template of Bollywood films have created barrier for women storytellers. Therefore, it is understandable that the inclusive content strategy of Netflix India, to some extent, has worked as an effective policy to give women storytellers an equal foothold.

The website of Netflix India displays an array of projects that they have launched in India with the intent to increase female participation in production sites. Such an instance is its collaboration with National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) to support a screenplay writing course for 100 Indian women. The funding for this collaboration comes from the company's 5 million dollars global fund that is dedicated to fostering women storytellers across the world. Netflix also has a global fund called "Fund for Creative Equity" which is committed to creating opportunities for marginalized communities.<sup>175</sup> As part of that fund, multiple fellowships are offered that train storytellers from underrepresented groups. Terrie Samundra, whose directorial debut was Netflix original film *Kaali Khuhi* (2020), has recently been selected for one such fellowship called ReFrame Rise, which offers learning opportunities for mid-career female storytellers.<sup>176</sup> It is noteworthy that among 11 fellows of this global programme, Terrie is the only Indian. Specifically for the Indian community, Netflix India has collaborated with Film Companion to launch an ongoing programme called Take Ten, which is an ongoing program in India that aims to celebrate diverse voice in storytelling. It offers short-film workshops to a selected pool of storytellers, offers them grants to fund their short films, and finally selects a few to feature on Netflix India's YouTube channel.<sup>177</sup> The modality and effectiveness of this program can definitely be debated from multiple angles as this does

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<sup>173</sup> A film available on Netflix focusing on the inter-generational relationships of mothers and daughters

<sup>174</sup> Karishma Upadhyay, "The Women at Netflix," *The Hindu*, March 11, 2021, sec. Movies, <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/the-women-at-netflix/article61927886.ece>.

<sup>175</sup> "About Netflix - Building a Legacy of Inclusion." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://about.netflix.com/en/programs>.

<sup>176</sup> About Netflix. "Women in Film and Netflix Join Forces to Support Mid-Career and Early Career Women Directors and Cinematographers." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/women-in-film-and-netflix-join-forces-to-support-mid-career-and-early-career>.

<sup>177</sup> About Netflix. "Introducing Take Ten Films by India's Next Generation of Storytellers." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/introducing-take-ten-films-by-indias-next-generation-of-storytellers>.

not really offer any big launching opportunity to the awarded filmmakers. However, the first edition of the program did have 50% women among the winning projects. And it is true that offering grants to filmmakers has not been a common practice in the media landscape of India. Also, it is just the second year of the programme, which means it might be too premature to expect a substantial outcome from this. In fine, the initiatives that Netflix has taken to include more Indian women in the production process are very few in number and still at a very basic stage. But the associated communication repetitively speaks of the company's commitment to diversity & inclusion, and the language revolves around phrases like "elevate women", "empowering historically excluded and marginalized voices", "gender equity", "women empowerment", and "girl power". Such language strategy reflects an evident attempt of Netflix India to position itself as a benevolent steward of gender equity. The aforementioned public opinion of Netflix officials and press releases also indicate similar effort, and do not ever disclose the business aspect of such stands. For example, unique women visitors at Netflix India rose to 40% in 2020 from 26% in 2018<sup>178</sup>, which might have been a key factor in motivating Netflix India to include more stories with women's perspectives. But the continuous effort of the company to mask its corporate identity with the façade of benevolence demands further research in this regard.

Netflix's marketing & PR campaign in India is also very much centered on the theme of including women in mediascape. Since 2020, it branded itself as a "stree-ming" platform, where *stree* translates to women in Hindi. One of its major PR campaign in India was launched with a taglines "Her Kahaani Hain Zaruri" (Her story is important). These again reflect the same effort to establish itself as a benevolent company that cares about women's inclusion. The visuals related to this campaign and a few others including "We're Just a Story Away" predominantly highlight already established women in the industry. Given the platform's continuous effort to brand itself as an inclusive one and the nepotism debate in Bollywood about favouring established figures and film families only, an obvious question arises – "Who are the women storytellers in Netflix India's original films?" The question will be answered in the following sub chapter.

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<sup>178</sup> StartupTalky. "Why Streaming Platforms Are Focusing On Women-Centric Content," April 24, 2021. <https://startuptalky.com/streaming-platforms-women-centric-content/>.

### 4.3.Under the Umbrella of Netflix India: Who Are You?

To understand the nature of change that Netflix India has invoked in Bollywood regarding women-led production, this sub-chapter will take a case-based approach using intersectional lens. It will shed light on the backgrounds of the women occupying lead production positions in Netflix Original films with an intent to examine if the predominant biases of Bollywood — regarding class, caste, religion, family background, and other identity factors — has retained their influence in the world Netflix India.

In the period of 2018-2022, Netflix India has worked with 12 female directors, 30 female producers, 22 female screenwriters, 3 female cinematographers, and 13 female editors (Table 06). This quantitative analysis examines these women's professional position in the industry, characterised by the number of IMDb credits under their names.<sup>179</sup> Mainstream Bollywood is often criticised for its apparent favouritism and preference for people associated with film families. But as illustrated in Figure 9, Netflix India does not follow the industry pattern as it preferred to collaborate with mid-career women professionals. In most categories, except for cinematographers, there has been substantial representation of mid-career women, whereas the participation of new talent is also commendable in each position excluding editors. In fact, established industry figures have significantly low participation in some roles like directors and screenwriters, which is definitely indicative of Netflix India's inclination toward harbouring mid-career and new women artists. For a comprehensive analysis, the following sub-chapter discusses three select cases of women who are working in lead production roles of Netflix India.

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<sup>179</sup> Women with zero IMDb credit (apart from Netflix production) – New, Women with five or less than five IMDb credit (apart from Netflix production) – Mid- career, Women with more than five IMDb credit (apart from Netflix production) – Pro/Established



## Who are the women?

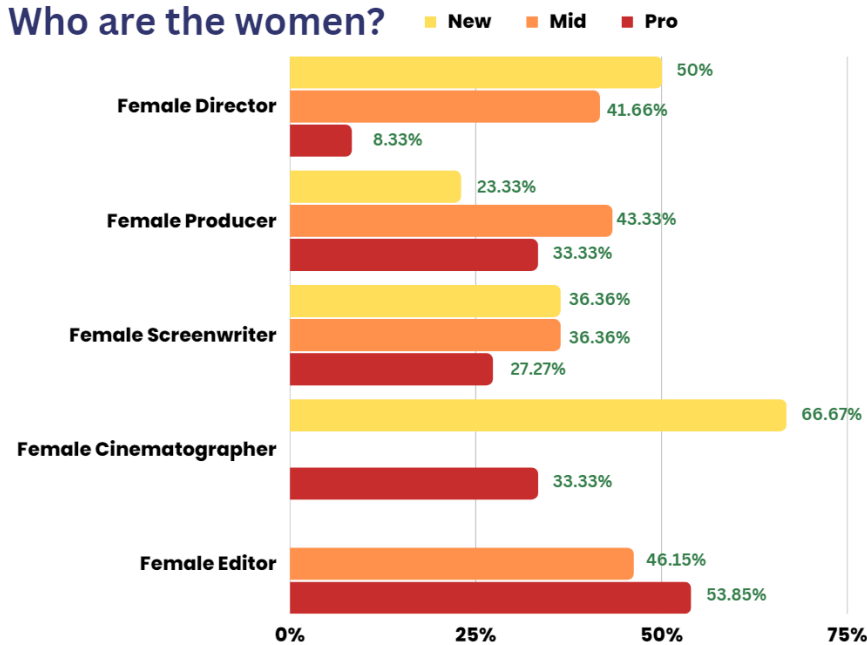


Figure 9: Percentage of New, Mid-career, and Prominent women in leading production roles of Netflix India

### 4.3.1. Anvita Dutt

Anvita Dutt, director and writer of two Netflix Original films, does not come from a film family, but she has been working in Bollywood for the last 18 years. She worked in advertising till a friend introduced her to Aditya Chopra, an influential industry figure and the owner of Yash Raj Films. Dutt's interviews delineates that she started writing lyrics in 2005 based on the encouragement of Chopra and ever since has written lyrics, dialogues, and screenplays for several films. Her collaboration with multiple leading directors and production companies in Bollywood speaks of her artistic ability and strong network in the industry, but Dutt (2020) clearly states that it was her work that always ensured her the next projects. Her screenplays for *Shaandar* (2015) and *Phillauri* (2017) had assertive women protagonists who chart their own path, but none of them were able to garner commercial success or critical acclamation.

In 2019, Dutt debuted as a director with a Netflix original film, *Bulbbul* (2019), a retelling of a classic fairy tale from a gynocentric perspective. When she was asked why she has chosen Netflix India for the film, she states that the platform gave her the freedom from box office

expectations.<sup>180</sup> She remarks that the script was ready a decade ago, but she'd not make this film for theatrical release.<sup>181</sup> In 2022, Dutt directed another Netflix original film, *Qala*, which is a period fiction about a female playback singer in the 1920s and her struggle to deal with internalized patriarchy. With this project of hers, Dutt again proves that an unprecedented/unique creative freedom is offered by Netflix India, which is effective in harbouring films with layered female characters and diverse stories.<sup>182</sup> Dutt follows the pathway of Chughtai, Zaidi, and Chandra, as she also turned to direction from screenwriting. Like her predecessors, Dutt also portrays feminine agency and interrogates the discriminatory practices of patriarchal society. But while the early screenwriters and directors often had to be restrictive about gynocentric views and/or could not sustain in the industry due to the expectation of commercial success, Dutt has been able to carve a niche. The affective dimension of her switching power is conjured by her strong network in the industry and her recent fame based on the films she directed. The creative freedom and platform offered by Netflix India, on the other hand, ensures that her production efforts get due attention and empowers her to transcend the limits of her field. Considering this, it becomes evident that one important component in Dutt's switching power is certainly supplied by Netflix India.

#### 4.3.2. Alankrita Srivastava

Alankrita Srivastava has been mentioned before in this research for her struggle with the censor board regarding *Lipstick Under My Burkha (LUMB)*, which faced the allegation of being "too female-oriented". Scholars, however, interpret the particular film as a rare one in Bollywood with candour portrayal of female sexual freedom. Before delving more into her work, it is important to understand her social position which constantly gets reflected in her films. Srivastava does not come from a film family and started out in Bollywood in the early 2000s as an assistant director. She mentions how her educational institution and family environment inspired her to contest discriminative practices. She also speaks of the importance of education

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<sup>180</sup> Box office expectation, a practice ingrained in the theatrical release of Bollywood films, refers to the pressure of earning a certain amount of money within the first week and/or first Friday of a film's release in theatre.

<sup>181</sup> "The Interview: Anvita Dutt." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://www.mansworldindia.com/people/the-interview-anvita-dutt/>.

<sup>182</sup> "Anvita Dutt | Tales Of The Fabulous: What Reading Does For You | Dial M For Films - YouTube." Accessed May 14, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lw3n6vpULk4>.

and the influence of strong women in her life, both of which inspire her to tell realistic stories about gender and society through films.<sup>183</sup> She debuted as a director with *Turning 30*, which revolves around ageism against women. Her first film was not a commercial success, but the theme of women's social position in the patriarchal society continued to accompany her next projects as well.

With *LUMB*, despite having a struggling journey with the censor board, she got both local and global acclamation. In 2020, her second film, *Dolly Kitty Aur Wo Chamakte Sitare (DKCS)*, was released in Netflix India focusing on the sexual desire of women that continuously gets suppressed by gender expectations and misogyny. Both *LUMB* and *DKCS*, according to Bhattacharjee (2023), contest “the politics behind the scopophilic representation of female sexual desire”. And while doing so, they also expose its close impact on motivating sexual violence.<sup>184</sup> This indicates how Srivastava's work, unlike many of her contemporaries and predecessors, is not limited to having strong female protagonists, but it also interrogates the problematic portrayal of women in media. Devasundaram (2018) situates her in the 'F-Rated'<sup>185</sup> space of Indian independent cinema, as she established herself as a significant female indie director, who uses the particular language of indie film to contest the conventional portrayal of women in mainstream films.<sup>186</sup> Moreover, she is one of the few female artists in Bollywood who took a concrete stand during the #MeToo movement in the industry. She is also vocal about the underrepresentation of women behind the camera in Indian entertainment industry. Her interviews, like her films, also reflect the clarity of her ideologies, which are certainly important elements in building her affective power. The effective dimension of her power is evident in her work in multiple ways, starting from the adaptability to transverse the field boundary of indie films and mainstream films to the resilience in making films that contest misogynistic norms.

Regarding the contribution of OTT regarding democratising Bollywood, she states that the change is not so drastic as the gatekeepers of the industry are still men. While many of her

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<sup>183</sup> Majumdar, Mayukh. “In Conversation With Alankrita Shrivastava.” *Man's World India* (blog), September 24, 2020. <https://www.mansworldindia.com/entertainment/cinema/in-conversation-with-alankrita-shrivastava/>.

<sup>184</sup> Majumdar, Mayukh. “In Conversation With Alankrita Shrivastava.” *Man's World India* (blog), September 24, 2020. <https://www.mansworldindia.com/entertainment/cinema/in-conversation-with-alankrita-shrivastava/>.

<sup>185</sup> 'F-Rated' (female rated)—an ornamental term to refer to films with female director, scriptwriter, and actors. Possibly coined by Bath Film Festival Director, Holly Tarquini.

<sup>186</sup> Bhattacharjee, Shuhita. ““Rosy Ki Khwaheeshein’: Scripted Romance and Acquaintance Rape in Alankrita Shrivastava's Oeuvre of Female Desire.” In *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking through Their Gaze*, edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan, 237–58. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10232-5_13).

contemporaries commend OTT for harbouring women's voice, she exclaims, "*I don't think there's a need to marginalise any kind of cinema by saying that its only good for the streaming space, or vice versa.*" Srivastava also acknowledges that the creative freedom offered by OTT platforms can afford a diverse range of content but she does not falter from stating that every medium should be open to diverse stories.<sup>187</sup> This indicates evidently that the switching power of Srivastava is not at all dependent on any specific platform or media. Her fervency for equality and inclusion go way beyond that and in the process, also enables her to transcend her field.

#### 4.3.3. Alia Bhatt

Alia Bhatt is a contemporary female star of Bollywood, standing at the peak of both critical and commercial success. She was born into an influential film family of the industry where her father is a prominent director and her mother is a notable actor. Her familial connections and close relationships with important industry personnel sit at the core of her strong socio-cultural capital. Sahdev (2015) argues that her privileged position in the film circle enabled an easy access for her in the initial period. Like Kapoor, Bhatt is also constantly faced with criticism for being an apparent beneficiary of nepotism. Initially, she played roles of typical commercial heroines in films like *Student of the Year* (2012) and *2 States* (2014), which, reflects a common barrier of typecast often faced by Bollywood actors. Soon enough, she changed her career trajectory by choosing to portray layered and unconventional roles. Her current portfolio includes stellar projects including roles of a prostitute in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a drug addict from Bihar, a medical student in *Dhairavi*, and an action-spy in an upcoming Hollywood film.<sup>188</sup> This capacity to influence her career path demonstrates strong switching power, while also reflecting her ability to break free from her habitus and field as she is consistently portraying roles that are completely different from her real-life personality and the traditional formula of a Bollywood heroine. These films reconstructed Bhatt's image as a skilled actor and simultaneously changed an industry norm, proving that female-led films can also be commercially successful. Such instances illustrate how affective and effective powers go hand

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<sup>187</sup> Majumdar, Mayukh. "In Conversation With Alankrita Shrivastava." *Man's World India* (blog), September 24, 2020. <https://www.mansworldindia.com/entertainment/cinema/in-conversation-with-alankrita-shrivastava/>

<sup>188</sup> "The Unstoppable Alia Bhatt | Marie Claire." Accessed June 6, 2023. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/alia-bhatt-interview/>.

in hand.

Like Dutt, Bhatt's career has not been hugely impacted by Netflix India. Her success is primarily built on theatrical releases, but later as Netflix licensed many of these films, she reached a pool of global audience through the platform. This definitely adds a new shade to her affective power, while also underscoring the ability of OTT platforms to garner global reach for local films. Her recent collaboration with Hollywood and various international brands delineate her increasing affective power and the adaptability of her effective power, which eventually ensures her concurrent navigation across multiple fields. In 2022, Bhatt joined the wagon of actress-turned-producer with *Darlings*, a Netflix Original film dealing with the often overlooked topic of domestic violence. This film is symptomatic of Bollywood's strive toward gender parity since it had women in almost all leading production roles and also explored the struggles of marginalised women as the key theme. It was also the highest-viewed non-English Indian original film of Netflix India.<sup>189</sup>

In the case of Bhatt, her privileged background and socio-cultural capital are undoubtedly crucial factors, but her capability to carve a niche and influence industry practice marks the very nature of her switching power. While Netflix India has certainly played a role in widening her global reach, it is not a primary source of her switching power. Overall, it is proven that Netflix India has certainly involved more women in pivotal production roles in Bollywood, but the instrumentality of this certain platform varies from individual to individual. It has established itself in Bollywood and Indian entertainment industry at large as an alternative platform which can afford to offer creative liberty and a global audience. This eventually facilitated mid-career and new women professionals to assume key production roles, which were historically occupied by men. However, Netflix India is still a small catalyst of change and does not yet have the power to entirely dismantle the gendered production practice of Bollywood.

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<sup>189</sup> Jha, Subhash K. "Really Thankful for the Success of Darlings, Says Alia Bhatt." National Herald, August 26, 2022. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/really-thankful-for-the-success-of-darlings-says-alia-bhatt>. ; Alia Bhatt, Shefali Shah, Vijay Varma, Jasmeet K Reen | Darlings | Film Companion Front Row, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n-gIHoxwwY>.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research is a pioneering effort offering a complex picture of women's representation in the key production roles of Bollywood across the whole of its history. The historical analysis reveals a nuanced understanding about how underrepresentation and marginalization of women in Bollywood productions historically intersects with identity elements like religion, class, and social status. Over time, these barriers have morphed in response to the changing socio-cultural climate, showing that gender inequality in the film industry cannot be separated from broader societal trends. Using a broad range of secondary literature including scholarly article, interviews, and podcasts, it exposes how gender bias in contemporary Bollywood is still heavily influenced by family background and social capital. Despite discussing the commendable strides made by women, my research delineates evidently that the industry is yet to evolve into a fully inclusive space. The current context reveals continued battles against gender biases and stereotypes, with women having to prove their worth twice as much because of their gender. The research was centered on elucidating the nature and degree of transformation brought forth by Netflix India with respect to women-led productions in Bollywood. As it takes the historical analysis into account, the study becomes more nuanced and can provide a background of powerplay where Netflix India had to situate itself .

With a quantitative analysis, my research becomes first of its kind providing empirical insights about the real scenario of women representation in leading roles of Netflix India's Original Hindi film productions. The findings indicate an encouraging, yet partial transformation. When compared to Bollywood, Netflix India has undeniably fostered significant progress, but women's participation in Netflix India's productions is also far from equal, particularly in directorial and technical roles. A key finding of this research has been the platform's proclivity towards mid-career professionals and emerging talent, signalling a significant departure from traditional Bollywood norms. My research also highlights that the influence of Netflix varies across individuals, as evident in the cases of Dutt, Srivastava, and Bhatt. Each of these women have navigated the industry and exercised their creative freedom in unique ways. While Netflix has been instrumental in certain cases, enabling filmmakers like Dutt to express nuanced female narratives without the pressure of box office expectations, for others like Srivastava and Bhatt, it forms part of a wider landscape of storytelling platforms.

In essence, while Netflix India is a promising catalyst for change and offers an alternative

platform for diverse and layered narratives, its impact should be contextualised. It is part of a broader ecosystem and its ability to overhaul gendered production practices in Bollywood is yet to be fully realised. The presence of Netflix in India provides an opportunity for the industry to further evolve and create space for a wider range of voices and stories. The intricate dynamics revealed in this research underscore the need for continued efforts towards achieving gender equity in film production. Both mainstream Bollywood and Netflix India present opportunities and challenges in this regard, which can inform strategies for promoting diversity and inclusivity in the future.

Though my research marks an important milestone in the study of gender bias within Bollywood, it is not without limitations. The evaluation of Netflix India's impact is confined to the relatively brief period from 2018 to 2022, necessitating a cautionary approach when interpreting these findings. The generalizability of the findings may also be constrained by the focus on specific key production roles in Netflix India's Original Hindi films. Future research could broaden the scope to include a larger variety of roles and production types. Moreover, further investigation into the strategies and undisclosed policies of Netflix India in promoting gender equity can yield deeper insights, and after a significant amount of time examining the efficacy of Netflix India's aforementioned campaigns can give more comprehensive insights. Combining all these key findings, it becomes evident that the nature and degree of women representation in Netflix India's Original film productions reflects a notable change in the historically gendered field of Bollywood, but a full-scale paradigm shift toward gender equality has not yet been achieved.

The fight for gender equity within Bollywood and similar industries is far from over, and the continuation of such research is vital in shaping strategies for promoting diversity and inclusivity. The challenges and quantitative data uncovered in this study only serve to underscore the importance of ongoing and robust research in this area, underscoring the significant strides yet to be made towards achieving gender parity within the industry.



## Appendix



A1: Fatma Begum



A2: Devika Rani



A3: Durga Khote



A4: Protima Dasgupta



Thirty years separate these two photographs, but easy riders Begum Para (on the left in both) and constant friend Protima Dasgupta even today get along like a house on fire.



A5: Protima Dasgupta and Begum Para recreate a thirty-year-old photograph for New Delhi Magazine, 1980



A6: Photos from set of *Jharna* (1948), Protima Dasgupta (second from right) representing androgynous propensity



A7: Ismat Chughtai



A8: Nargis Dutt



A9: Shama Zaidi



A10: Honey Irani



A11: Tanuja Chandra



A12: Ekta Kapoor



A13: Zoya Akhter



A14: Reema Kagti





A15: Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar



A16: An example of Netflix India's Campaign

A17: Calculation

Figure 3:

Percentage of films with no women in lead production role =  $\left( \frac{\text{Number of films with no women in lead production roles in 2018}}{\text{Total Number of films in 2018}} \times 100 \right) + \left( \frac{\text{Number of films with no women in lead production roles in 2019}}{\text{Total Number of films in 2019}} \times 100 \right) + \left( \frac{\text{Number of films with no women in lead production roles in 2020}}{\text{Total Number of films in 2020}} \times 100 \right) + \left( \frac{\text{Number of films with no women in lead production roles in 2021}}{\text{Total Number of films in 2021}} \times 100 \right)$



lead production roles in 2021/ Total Number of films in 2021)\*100) + ((Number of films with no women in lead production roles in 2022/ Total Number of films in 2022)\*100)

a) Percentage of films with no women in lead production role in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((40/95)*100) + ((48/111)*100) + ((9/27)*100) + ((20/49)*100) + ((28/77)*100) = ((145/359)*100) = 40.39\%$

b) Percentage of films with no women in lead production role in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((7/46)*100) = 15.22\%$

c) Percentage of films with at least one woman in lead production role in Mainstream Bollywood =  $(100-40.39) = 59.61\%$

d) Percentage of films with at least one woman in lead production role in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $(100-15.22) = 84.78\%$

Figure 4:

Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of director =  $((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of director in 2018/ Total Number of films in 2018}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of director in 2019/ Total Number of films in 2019}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of director in 2020/ Total Number of films in 2020}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of director in 2021/ Total Number of films in 2021}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of director in 2022/ Total Number of films in 2022}) * 100)$

a) Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of director in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((6/95)*100) + ((11/111)*100) + ((4/27)*100) + ((2/49)*100) + ((5/77)*100) = ((28/359)*100) = 0.08\%$

b) Percentage of women with at least one women in the role of director in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((14/46)*100) = 30.43\%$

Figure 5:

Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of producer =  $((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of producer in 2018} / \text{Total Number of films in 2018}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of producer in 2019} / \text{Total Number of films in 2019}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of producer in 2020} / \text{Total Number of films in 2020}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of producer in 2021} / \text{Total Number of films in 2021}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of producer in 2022} / \text{Total Number of films in 2022}) * 100)$

a) Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of producer in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((36/95)*100) + ((39/111)*100) + ((20/27)*100) + ((22/49)*100) + ((31/77)*100) = ((148/359)*100) = 41.23\%$

b) Percentage of women with at least one women in the role of producer in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((27/46)*100) = 58.70\%$

Figure 6:

Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of screenwriter =  $((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of screenwriter in 2018} / \text{Total Number of films in 2018}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of screenwriter in 2019} / \text{Total Number of films in 2019}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of screenwriter in 2020} / \text{Total Number of films in 2020}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of screenwriter in 2021} / \text{Total Number of films in 2021}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of screenwriter in 2022} / \text{Total Number of films in 2022}) * 100)$

a) Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of screenwriter in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((21/95)*100) + ((20/111)*100) + ((11/27)*100) + ((3/49)*100) + ((14/77)*100) = ((69/359)*100) = 19.22\%$

b) Percentage of women with at least one women in the role of screenwriter in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((18/46)*100) = 39.13\%$

Figure 7:

Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of cinematographer =  $((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of cinematographer in 2018} / \text{Total Number of films in 2018}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of cinematographer in 2019} / \text{Total Number of films in 2019}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of cinematographer in 2020} / \text{Total Number of films in 2020}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of cinematographer in 2021} / \text{Total Number of films in 2021}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of cinematographer in 2022} / \text{Total Number of films in 2022}) * 100)$

a) Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of cinematographer in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((4/95)*100) + ((3/111)*100) + ((1/27)*100) + ((1/49)*100) + ((1/77)*100) = ((10/359)*100) = 2.79\%$

b) Percentage of women with at least one women in the role of cinematographer in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((3/46)*100) = 6.52\%$

Figure 8:

Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of editor =  $((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of editor in 2018} / \text{Total Number of films in 2018}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of editor in 2019} / \text{Total Number of films in 2019}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of editor in 2020} / \text{Total Number of films in 2020}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of editor in 2021} / \text{Total Number of films in 2021}) * 100) + ((\text{Number of films with at least one woman in the role of editor in 2022} / \text{Total Number of films in 2022}) * 100)$

a) Percentage of films with at least one women in the role of editor in Mainstream Bollywood =  $((16/95)*100) + ((16/111)*100) + ((4/27)*100) + ((4/49)*100) + ((14/77)*100) = ((54/359)*100) = 15.04\%$

b) Percentage of women with at least one women in the role of editor in Netflix India Original Hindi films =  $((16/46)*100) = 34.78\%$

Table 1 - List of Mainstream Bollywood Films from 2018:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vkPHfAVgfvHi6RUfgEt0SBev43xOxt2M>

Table 2 - List of Mainstream Bollywood Films from 2019:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/13jlcUwgr4SUbjrLpVQxi8KUS4A0dbWro>

Table 3 - List of Mainstream Bollywood Films from 2020:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pquZnUDrpMKOyny9MAiLfnLdVJ83wFa7>

Table 4 - List of Mainstream Bollywood Films from 2021:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DBhXv\\_bTYqsOqCUtOkPeFoyYr5r66cx](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DBhXv_bTYqsOqCUtOkPeFoyYr5r66cx)

Table 5 - List of Mainstream Bollywood Films from 2022:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UX1mN11VGW7O7NV6vNTeavo0BElwK7Qz>

Table 6 - List of Netflix India Original Hindi Films (2018-2022):

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/18akIvdbhtZvf0z7c4i63Cy3mtd0-OKsP>

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