

New Beginnings: Netflix in India

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Abstract

Sacred Games is arguably the first Netflix Original produced from India. Netflix capitalised on this series to lead its campaign and subscription drive in India. Adapted from Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel *Sacred Games*, the series incorporates a range of stylistic elements, thematic concerns, and visual designs, marking its departure from the narratives of films made for theatrical release, which are subject to pre-censorship by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), and television series made for on-air broadcasting, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). The consequences of disruptive innovation not only inaugurate new possibilities for adaptation but also open out intermedial routes to sharing and distribution. To this end, the paper focuses on the intermedial nature of the campaign to publicise the web series across mainstream and established media forms like print, YouTube and Facebook as well as the emergent platforms of Twitter and Instagram. The series premiered when streaming on OTT platforms was already disrupting traditional media, reflecting Michael Strangelove's Post-TV concept from the cord-cutting culture. The arrival of Netflix and similar platforms revolutionized global media, introducing new consumption and production models. By examining the novel, series, and media discussions-including interviews, reviews, and viewer responses-this paper thus aims to understand this shift, focusing on Netflix's intermedia marketing and distribution strategies. It also considers how these practices prompt a re-evaluation of adaptation and intertextuality.

Keywords: Netflix, adaptation, intertextuality, streaming platforms, marketing, distribution.

Introduction

With the coming of the over-the-top (OTT) platforms, several television audiences began adopting the 'cord-cutting' ^[1] culture' thereby disrupting the existing business models of the Indian Entertainment Industry as well as transforming spectatorial practices. The Netflix Original web series *Sacred Games* (2018) adapted from the US based Indian writer Vikram Chandra's critically acclaimed novel of 2006 was launched for global streaming on July 6, 2018 in 190 countries with subtitles in 20 languages. *Sacred Games* is a dense and layered crime thriller that has been variously described as crime, neo-noir, conspiracy, thriller and mystery. Unencumbered by the compulsions of pre-censorship of the CBFC, Netflix chose to have the series directed by filmmakers Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwani whose films have been distinguished by innovative storytelling, high cinematic values and a definite audaciousness of approach. The writing team was led by Varun Grover who acquired a wide constituency of fans

through his stand-up comedy, poetry, lyrics, scripts and fearless expression of political views. The writing team included Smitha Singh and Vasant Nath. The primary protagonists were played by the stars Saif Ali Khan and Nawazuddin, actors who were also stars and known for their versatility as actors.

The making and marketing of *Sacred Games* marked the emergence of innovation in production, distribution and viewing practices. The successful run of the first season, sparked robust discussions much of which revolved around the explicitness of sex, graphic violence and the and its political world-view. *Sacred Games* was the only Indian show to make it to New York Time's list of 30 Best International TV Shows'; it won seven awards under the Regional Content Category at the 'Asian Academy Creative Awards' and was also nominated ^[2] as the 'Best Drama Series' at the 40th International Emmy.

This paper elaborates on this moment of emergence to understand its implication for new industry practices,

viewership patterns and the generation of ‘new content’. *Sacred Games* (2018) emerged during a time when streaming content on OTT platforms had already started disrupting production and viewing practices thus hinting towards Michael Strangelove’s idea of Post-TV [3] which is a consequence of the cord-cutting culture. The coming of Netflix and other OTT platforms transformed the expansive media industry, not just in India but all over the world. It introduced new consumption and production patterns, thus disrupting the existing media ecosystem. By engaging in a close reading of the novel and the series and looking into mainstream and social media discourses, such as interviews, reviews, discussions, news reports and viewer responses that have been shared and circulated about the web series, this paper attempts to understand this moment with a special emphasis on Netflix’s intermedia strategies for marketing, publicity and distribution. It also attempts to understand how the current production practices have also compelled the stakeholders to rethink the discursive nature of adaptation and intertextuality in the age of intermedia. In discussing this, it draws from Lobato’s deliberation on Netflix’s multifarious and strategic approach where he emphasises that Netflix India trespasses the censorship laws of countries by positioning itself not as a broadcaster or internet-based television station but as an ‘internet delivered service’. In doing so, it once more disrupts the existing business model by camouflaging itself and taking a form distinctly dissimilar from the film studios and traditional over-the-air broadcasters.

Sacred Games, initially proposed as a four-season series [4] with eight episodes each was later released as a two-season series with the seasons spread out and released with a gap of more than a year. The second season ends where the novel ends and so far, there has been no announcement about the possibility of a third season. In the aftermath of the two seasons on Netflix, Penguin India has re-released the 900-page book in two parts with the cover testifying it as “Now an Original Netflix Series.”. This paper devotes itself to studying Season 1 of *Sacred Games* and the discursive universe around its release.

The Acts of Adaptation: From Vikram Chandra’s Novel to the Netflix Web Series

Both the series and the film open with the dog falling from a building, but the circumstances of how it happens and to whom and how it relates to the lives of the characters are significantly different. Like in all works of adaptations, the series makes several critical departures from the book. The book unfolds against the backdrop of the 1980s to the 2000s while the series comes up to 2018; the time of the release of the series. While expectedly, myriad changes accompany the adaptation process; a few departures are noteworthy. Unlike the book, Sartaj Singh is not a confident cop in the series and does not resort to that occasional bribery to support his lifestyle needs. Neither is Parulkar a paternalistic mentor to Sartaj. Gaitonde too is not as sharp witted as he is in the book, he is vulnerable and as a posthumous character is now aware of his frailties. Devansh Sharma (First Post, 2018) writes that “the vulnerability and existential angst of both Gaitonde and the story’s parallel protagonist, Sartaj Singh (Saif Ali Khan), was one of the primary themes in the source material that attracted Varun Grover to Vikram Chandra’s novel.

A significant contemporary intervention is the elaboration of Kukoo’s character whose presence in the book is brief. Devansh Sharma (First Post, 2019) while referring to Varun Grover writes “While explaining something, he often moves

his right hand in a way to show that he’s emphasizing on a point. The same hand flaunts a glittering blue nail paint that goes well with his blue shirt. The decision to paint his nails is perhaps a demonstration of his gender fluidity. He has been an active endorser of gender parity in the industry, flagging the absence of adequate female representatives at every roundtable interview he’s invited to. Being a man in a misogynistic world, he makes sure his privilege is acknowledged every step of the way.”

Perhaps a more significant departure is the decision of the showrunner to make the implicit political undertones of the book into a more overt and significant theme. This in itself is a move that is anchored in the politics of the time during which the series was created. The novel references the violence that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in the early 1990s while the web series is more explicit about the political events that led to the escalation of communal tensions paving the way for the rise of the Hindu Right. The Congress under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is held directly responsible for pandering to Muslim orthodoxy in the Shah Bano case and to extremist Hindus by allowing the Temple-Mosque controversy in Ayodhya to be revived. Other political references that are made are the Emergency, Operation Blue Star that led to the storming of the Golden Temple. Mandal Commission and the Rath Yatra of L.K. Advani.

In a move that flags the ‘freedoms’ of OTT platforms from the pre-censorship imposed by the CBFC, the creators of *Sacred Games* use actual footage of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, an evidentiary document that is rarely made public. As far back as 1995, Mani Ratnam had been stopped by the CBFC from using the actual footage of the demolition in his film *Bombay* (Mani Ratnam, 1995) about an interfaith love story against the backdrop of the rising communal tensions leading to the violence of the demolition and its aftermath.

Reaching out to Potential Subscribers

Veihuti Duggal (2021) in her essay on Intermediality writes “Intermediality implies between media. This in-betweenness has functioned variously as metaphor, concept and method to evaluate media. In this way, the term ‘intermediality’ has acquired a variety of meanings while being part of the critical vocabulary of film and media studies” (p.1). In her essay Duggal identifies three key meanings of intermediality. These meanings can be an outcome of (i) an intricate relationship between distinct media which is suggestive of “crossings” either in the form of narratives as in the case of adaptations or “multiple sensory registers” that affect the “visual”, “olfactory” and “haptic” simultaneously; (ii) “convergences” that are “industrial, technological and aesthetic consolidations”; and (iii) the remediation of media that is characterised by the presence of “one kind of media in and through another” by means of “ekphrasis” or “web 2.0”. Web 2.0 tools are collaborative Internet applications that allow for facilitation of communications between individuals and organisations. Examples of Web 2.0 tools include blogs, wikis, Second Life, and social networking (Sendall *et al.*, 2008). Social Networking Sites like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc are all examples of web 2.0. To reach a wider audience, the filmmakers employ different marketing strategies and tactics. These tools help in creating a ‘buzz’ [5] around the new releases. A variety of media come together to make these promotions possible. More than often, these are media who also compete for audience attention. With the coming of social media, promotional campaigns have also

migrated heavily to social media platforms. Quevedo *et al.* (2019), reiterates the importance of social media as “useful tools for audiovisual promotion”, especially when it comes to promotion within a niche audience. Hence, TV networks increasingly use social media to promote content and foster engagement with their audiences” (Quevedo *et al.*, 2019). This section within this paper elaborates on the moment of emergence of Netflix Original content in India through the launch campaign of *Sacred Games* that relies heavily on the intermedial relationship between different media platforms. When Netflix arrived in India in January 2016^[6], other OTT platforms like Amazon Prime Video, Hotstar^[7], and Eros Now had already begun streaming in India, owing to the lack of connectivity and the stability of internet connections, these platforms had not been able to reach out to a wide constituency. In September 2016, Reliance Jio announced its low cost-high speed internet data plans which catalysed the disruption by streaming platforms in India. Netflix that had originally branded itself as premium priced service for a niche audience had to face a different kind of competition.^[8] At this moment Netflix lacked a subscriber base and an interactive interface like the social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn) where users can tag other users, post comments and share their feedback. Social media accounts are a field where users make intimate bonds, and share their daily habits, likes and thoughts. It was rather a service that was subscription based and in order to even surf through its titles, the users required a paid subscription. Thus,

to engage with the audience, Netflix required to engage with the existing internet users in India. To do this, it required a different media platform than Netflix's own website which was not designed with an intent to handle customer generated stories and content. As Strangelove (2015) had observed: “Viewers use social media such as Twitter to recreate the experience of communal viewing” (p. 138). The popularity of a show is directly proportional to the level of “social media activity”, and the shows that exhibit higher social media activity amass more viewers and fall under the ‘most watched’ or most popular category’ (ibid: 2015). Posting, liking and commenting on similar themes aids in their social inclusion within their social media circle and many among them go further to become Social Media Influencers. While some users use the platform very frequently while others resort to it occasionally.

At the time that Netflix entered the Indian market, the social media sites were being actively used for promotion and advertising by different brands. Netflix employed this to its advantage. The maximum interaction permissible (on the Netflix Website) to the users that were already subscribed was to like, love or dislike a film or web series or share the title details through a third-party app. So, Netflix made use of user-engagement strategies by posting on these websites, thus garnering reactions, comments, shares, likes and, tweets and retweets. In the initial days of its entry, the comments and likes were under three digits, barely significant for a worldwide platform such as Netflix. (Refer to Fig 1.01).



(Source: Facebook, @NetflixIN)

Fig 1.01: Shows the number of likes, comments and shares that are still visible on some of the early posts.

The first post on Facebook by Netflix India, prior to its launch in 2015 had only 191 likes and 8 comments (till mid of 2022). This was a common trope among all platforms, be it Facebook^[9], Instagram^[10], YouTube^[11] or Twitter^[12]. The Netflix India Facebook account-@NetflixIN was created on December 4, 2015 almost a month before its nationwide launch in January, 2016. Initially, Netflix had only offered 7% of its total U.S. library in India (Hosanagar, 2016). While Netflix was constantly acquiring old and new titles from India, it was not producing any original content as film or series. The content that was being posted by Netflix on the

social media websites was not just informing the users but was also engaging with them at various levels. The initial Netflix India productions were advertisements that were branding Netflix as a necessity for every Indian and a cherished possession. Some advertisements were created out of available and viral Netflix titles. One such advertisement that used shooter videos from *The Crown* prepared the audience for what Netflix is and how and where it could be accessed by the Indian audience. Such videos have a tendency of getting viral and being circulated by users. (refer to Fig 1.02).



(Source: Facebook, @NetflixIN)

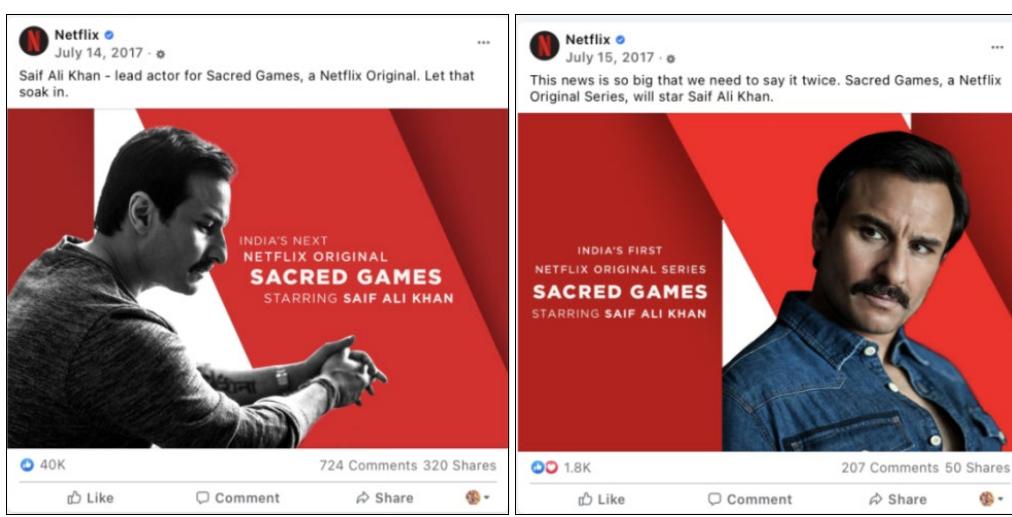
Fig 1.02: The frame grab above is from a video where Netflix, while promoting one of its most watched original series, *the Crown* gives important information about the platform. Such videos are called 'Explainer Videos'

In the year 2017, all the OTT platforms in India were in their initial phase targeting the audience between 18 to 35 years, as this was the age group which constituted nearly 75% of the internet users in India [13] (Vaidya, 2017). In the first year of this launch, Statista, a German Company that specialises in consumer market and data, in a report published in April 2016, projected that Netflix shall record 0.35 million subscribers by the end of 2016 only to rise to 1.18 million in 2018 and 2.32 million by 2020 [14] (Statista, 2016). Within the first year of its launch, Netflix restructured its offering to emerge from a content aggregator in India to a content producer. In the year 2017, Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, announced that several Netflix Originals in *Hindi* [15]. "We're expanding the content rapidly. We've commissioned many originals, like *Sacred Games*-that'll be coming out in 2018 and be our first big Netflix India original. And it's not just for India; it's an Indian story that we want to expand around the world...We're focused on a few great shows-shows that everyone wants to see. We'd like to have everything-maybe when our budget grows-but for now, we're focused on the series side. And in terms of Indian programming, we're

trying to really help this new category of premium TV, because as you know, serialised shows have been associated here with 'inexpensive' and we want to make some great ones-like an 8- or 10-hour movie."

Reed Hastings (Bhatia, 2017).

On the 14th and 15th of July, 2017, Netflix announced the arrival of *Sacred Games* on all its social media handles. The post was fashioned to attract the attention of Saif Ali Khan's fan base. The first post said "Saif Ali Khan, the lead actor for *Sacred Games*, a Netflix Original. Let that soak in" (refer to Fig 1.03) This was one of the first posts to have 724 comments and 40K Likes on Facebook and 526 Retweets, 269 Quote Tweets and 1,224 Likes on Twitter [16]. The second post reiterated the same, giving emphasis to the presence of a star in long form film making/ web-series. At this time, there was no specific *Sacred Games* page, and hence there was no embedding/ hyperlinking done for the same. Netflix was constantly engaging in one-to-one conversation with fans, replying through memes, comments and popular dialogues of original or acquired titles available on the streaming platform.



(Source: Facebook, @NetflixIN)

Fig 1.03: demonstrates the positive audience response on announcing an established actor in a episodic format

On 26 March, 2018 Netflix dropped the trailer of *Sacred Games* on social media platforms (refer to Fig 1.04). The International Netflix YouTube Channel has till July 2022

recorded 261,880 Views and 1.9K Likes. As was expected, it created the intended 'buzz' in the Indian Entertainment Industry.

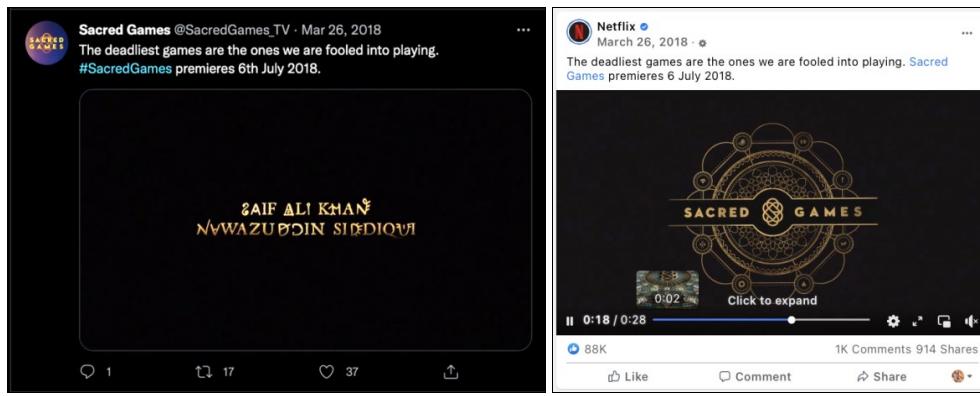


Fig 1.04: shows the reception of the same content over two different social media platforms- Facebook (left) and Twitter (right)

This campaign increased the frequency of postings as the date of the series' premiere drew closer. The fan activity was also increasing. A separate fan page was created for *Sacred Games* on Facebook, and Instagram; and a twitter handle-

@SacredGames_TV. Maximum activity was observed on the Facebook Page. All the activities were micro-managed by Netflix. It was generating user-specific comments to foster engagement.



Fig 1.05: shows the personalised replies Netflix was customising for each user.

When a user named Wasim Akram, as a comment to the First trailer (a sequence from the opening credit sequence) posted Facebook Fan Page, expressed his desire to torrent the show, Netflix took note of his name and posted a customised reply “Why get stumped by torrents when you can be bowled over

by Netflix, Wasim Akram?”. (Refer to Fig 1.05). Through these replies, not only was it inviting potential subscribers to its platform, thereby reducing chances of piracy, but was also encouraging binge watching, and advertising the other acquired titles it had in store. (Refer to 1.06).

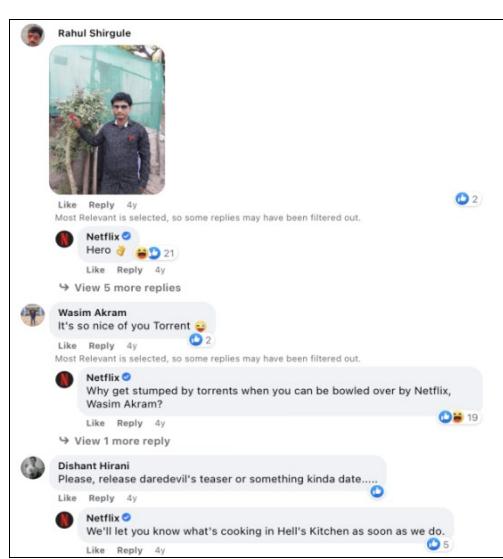


Fig 1.06: shows the how it was actively involved in trying to hinder users from pirating their content

The next big announcement with visuals from the series was made in May 2018. This trailer again saw maximum activity on Facebook. This announcement is followed by a poster of the Mumbai Shoreline. The poster was designed as a book cover, thus signalling its nature as an adaptation. From May onwards, regular posts were being made to engage the audience. Book cover-like posters of the four main protagonists- Sartaj Singh, Ganesh Gaitonde, Anjali Mathur

and Zoya Mirza were also posted. (Refer to Fig 1.07) The posts that were being made for this intermedial expansion were in turn intermedial in nature, ranging from photographs, posters, animations to videos. Thus, turning into a complex intermedial phenomenon that was marketing other two intermedial products- a web series i.e. *Sacred Games* and a web-based video streaming platform i.e. Netflix.



(Source: Twitter, @NetflixIndia)

Fig 1.07: Posters designed as cover page of a book, posted by Netflix on multiple social media platforms announcing that *Sacred Games* is an adaptation of a novel

The last 25 days from the release of the series saw increased activity that had now percolated from the virtual space to the 'real' space. It was being advertised in print and on billboards

and metro trains (Out of Home Advertising). (refer to Fig 1.08, 1.09 and 1.10).



(Source: The Hindu, published on July 16, 2018)

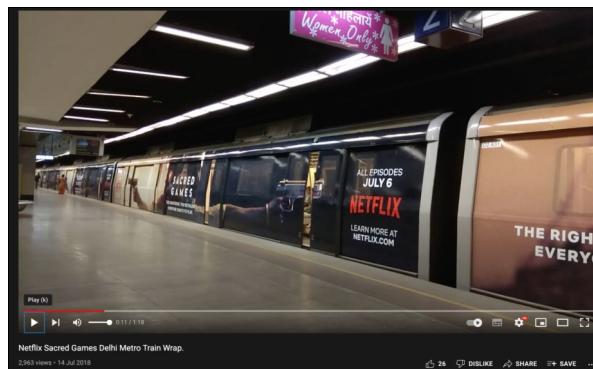
Fig 1.08: A large billboard in Bengaluru



Large billboards of Netflix's 'Sacred Games' on display in Mumbai. The show is Netflix's first original Indian series which released on July 6. (AFP)

(Source: Hindustan Times, published on 12 July, 2018)

Fig 1.09: Large billboards in Mumbai

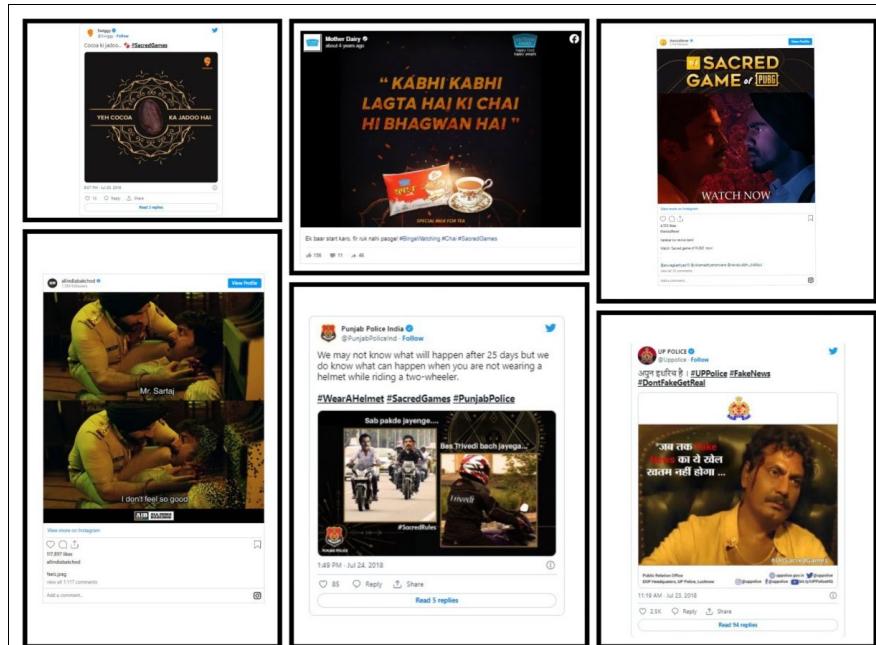


(Source: YouTube page of eg Communications Pvt. Ltd)

Fig 1.10: Advertising of *Sacred Games* on a Delhi Metro

While the attention of commuters was being drawn to life size posters of *Sacred Games* positioned along strategic sites, many internet service providers and other top brands were posting their plans along with memes from the series. Mother Dairy, Swiggy, TVF [17], AIB [18] (refer to Fig 1.10) were some of the top brands that made their creatives based on content from *Sacred Games* (Social Samosa, 2018). Even the Uttar Pradesh Police and Punjab Police's Twitter Handle

(refer to Fig 1.10) was posting *Sacred Games* memes (Social Samosa, 2018). The activity on web pages was increasing further. New videos were being posted on social media websites. A day prior to the premiere, a video was posted where different time zones were marked on a golden coloured Globe. Netflix continued to engage its audience with regular posts reminding them to binge-watch the series.



(Source: Social Samosa, 2018)

Fig 1.10: The images above show 'creatives' posted on social media by different brands, YouTube based Video on Demand Channels and two state police force that come under both the Union Government of India and their respective State Government.

Weather updates of Mumbai, behind the scenes and conversation with the creators of the series were posted throughout July. By now, fans had begun to post animated videos, memes, dialogues and a lot of user-generated material on the fan pages. The Netflix India pages were not the site for fan activity so much as the on other social media sites where fans were reacting to other posts and generating new content taking inspiration from the series. Even new titles, both national as well as international were being promoted to popularise *Sacred Games*. In August 2018, Parrot Analytics, published a report "Impact of *Sacred Games* in Asia" which reported that whereas most of the Indian audience opened up with a positive response to *Sacred Games*, only a fringe audience indulged in the *Sacred Games* controversy. It also reported it to be the "most-in-demand" title in India for the month of July. In the International Asian market it was

reported to perform well even in markets like Korea, Philippines and Singapore where Indian titles mostly underperform. In another report by Parrot Analytics published on, *Sacred Games* (along with *Mirzapur*, an Amazon Prime Video Original) was among the top two series that outperformed Western Originals in India with *Sacred Games* having over twice the average demand as *13 Reasons Why* (another Netflix Original) which was on the second place. Campaign India reported the *Sacred Games* intermedial campaign as a "master class in marketing" (Menon, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted how *Sacred Games* (2018) exemplifies the profound changes in industry practices, viewership patterns, and content creation ushered in by the rise of OTT platforms like Netflix. *Sacred Games* was

launched as an intermedial campaign. The popularisation of the web series was achieved by employing publicity tools across mainstream and established social media forms like print, YouTube and Facebook as well the emergent platforms of Twitter and Instagram and Out-of-home advertising in the form of billboards, metro ads etc. The disruption was observed not only by the introduction of new production values and practices but also in distribution and delivery systems. By dissecting the series and its surrounding media discourse, it becomes evident that the transformation in media consumption and production is both global and far-reaching. Netflix's innovative intermedia strategies and its ability to navigate and disrupt traditional business models and censorship laws underscore the need for a re-evaluation of adaptation and intertextuality in the modern media landscape. This analysis thus underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of media in the digital age, setting the stage for future explorations into the ongoing impact of streaming platforms on the industry.

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