

Research Article

Representation of Dalits on OTT Platforms (Paatal Lok and Panchayat)

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the representation of Dalit identities in two prominent Indian OTT series Paatal Lok (Prime Video) and Panchayat (Prime Video), to understand how caste operates within contemporary digital storytelling. Drawing on Dalit theory and critical caste studies, the study examines narrative structures, character trajectories, speech patterns, spatial settings, and interactions between Dalit and upper-caste characters. The analysis reveals that Paatal Lok, while foregrounding caste violence and embedding Dalit experiences within the crime politics nexus, frequently positions Dalit characters as victims, villains, or symbolic markers of social othering rather than autonomous subjects with narrative agency. In contrast, Panchayat tends to diminish Dalit visibility, often relegating Dalit characters to the margins or depicting them through tropes of silence, passivity, or functional absence. Through comparative discourse and content analysis of selected seasons, dialogues, and critical commentary, the essay demonstrates that both series, despite claims to progressiveness, reproduce forms of Savarna hegemony in representation. The study argues for the urgent need for Dalit authorship, more self-reflexive narrative practices, and ethical representational frameworks that move beyond tokenism toward emancipatory cinematic portrayals. This study offers one of the first systematic, conceptually grounded examinations of Dalit representation on Indian OTT platforms. The work contributes to broader discussions of digital media, caste politics, and the politics of cultural production in contemporary India.

Keywords

Dalit Representation, OTT Platforms, Paatal Lok, Panchayat, Upper-caste Hegemony, Dalit Theory, Stereotyping, Subaltern Voices

1. Introduction

With the rise of OTT (Over-The-Top) streaming platforms, Indian series like Paatal Lok (2020-present) and Panchayat (2020-present) have achieved large audiences and been lauded for their rooted, “realistic” depictions of Indian sociopolitical life. However, along with this acclaim, there have been critical voices arguing that these narratives often perpetuate subtle, structural caste hierarchies, especially in the

depiction (or omission) of Dalit characters [1, 2]. From a Dalit theoretical perspective, which emphasizes caste as foundational to identity, power, oppression, and belonging, it becomes important to ask: how are Dalits represented in these popular series? Are they agents of their own stories, or reduced to caricature, symbolic suffering, or omitted altogether? Who represents Dalits on behalf of Dalits in web series on

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Received: 11 November 2025; **Accepted:** 26 November 2025; **Published:** 11 December 2025



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OTT Platforms? How are Dalits portrayed on OTT platforms?

The study identifies a significant research gap in existing literature, specifically the lack of scholarly work on the representation of Dalits on OTT platforms. Existing scholarship in Dalit studies, media studies, and critical caste theory (e.g., works by Anand Teltumbde, Gopal Guru, Kancha Ilaiah, and Suraj Yengde) has examined how caste operates invisibly in media: as absence, as stereotype, as the “background,” or as crisis whenever upper caste morality is challenged. Criticism of specific media texts like *Article 15* and *Newton* has foregrounded how Dalit stories are often mediated through upper-caste savior figures, or how Dalit subjectivity is constrained by upper caste narrative frames [3]. Reviews and opinion pieces about *Paatal Lok* have noted that Dalit characters (Tope Singh) are portrayed as violent, criminal, or tragic victims; that the main protagonist Hathiram could have been made Dalit yet was not, and that caste is largely rural or symbolic in the series. In *Panchayat*, critiques have focused on the near absence of Dalit characters, or their relegation to the margins (for example, problems accessing toilets, housing on the outskirts. This analysis matters for several reasons. First, media shapes public imagination: who is seen, who is heard, who is allowed to be central influences perceptions of belonging, power, and justice [4]. For Dalit youth, representation can affirm or deny possibilities of dignity and agency. Second, OTT platforms are increasingly international; how they handle caste might affect global understandings of India, of caste, and of Dalit marginality. Third, from a scholarly standpoint, comparing two shows of different genres and tones (*Paatal Lok* being a political crime thriller, and *Panchayat* being a rural comedy drama) helps us see varied modalities of Dalit representation, not just extremes. This study analyzes the representation of Dalits through qualitative content and discourse analysis, drawing on Dalit theoretical frameworks. The purpose of this essay is to map out those modalities, compare them, and suggest how Dalit theoretical insights might inform more emancipatory storytelling. The study has utilized the Dalit perspective as a theoretical framework. The Dalit perspective constitutes a critical framework shaped by centuries of caste-based oppression, structural discrimination, and social exclusion. It foregrounds

the imperative to dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies and brings attention to the agency, cultural expressions, and socio-political movements of Dalit communities. Central to this perspective are themes such as the pursuit of social justice as an inseparable counterpart to political independence, a sustained critique of the dominant social order, and the assertion of Dalit identity, agency, and rights as foundational elements of emancipatory discourse.

2. Materials and Methods

This study analyzes the representations of Dalits in “*Paatal Lok*” and “*Panchayat*” using qualitative content and discourse analysis, along with critical media studies informed by Dalit theoretical frameworks. It focuses on season one of “*Paatal Lok*” and “*Panchayat*,” highlighting Dalit characters like Tope Singh and the narrative surrounding the Dalit Samaj Party. The study employs a purposive sampling method to examine season one of “*Panchayat*” and “*Panchayat*,” particularly focusing on characters such as Vinod and Jagmohan, who are marginally represented [5]. It involves analyzing the content of both series by observing specific scenes and character interactions. These findings align with existing criticisms of mainstream Indian media: that caste is often silent (ignored), or when present, used as a moral problem or sensationalist plot point rather than a lived, structural identity. They also map to what Dalit scholars such as Suraj Yengde and others have argued: that simply showing atrocities is insufficient; what matters is self-assertion, dignity, subjectivity [6]. The representations in *Paatal Lok* and *Panchayat* marginally help by exposing injustice, but do not fully escape upper-caste frames. The research incorporates scholarly articles, reviews, opinion pieces, and interviews with creators discussing casting and character choices. It also references scholarly writings on caste in Indian media, Dalit theory, and critiques of representation. By employing Dalit theory, especially concepts related to caste oppression, Ambedkarite self-assertion, the Savarna gaze, and the subaltern voice, the study interprets the representations of Dalits in these series.

Table 1. Season 1- *Paatal Lok* (Episodes Coded for Dalit Representation).

Episode	Key Scenes Coded	Relevance
EP 1: Bridges	Cheeni’s introduction at the lock-up	Markers of caste, class, transgender identity, marginalisation
EP2: Lost and found	Flashbacks of Cheeni’s childhood in East Delhi	Caste-based violence, poverty, exclusion from home/community
EP3: A History of Violence	Tyagi’s backstory in rural UP	Caste-coded markers: rural hierarchy, origins in violence
EP4: Sleepless in Seelampur	Cheeni’s escape sequence; encounter with the mob	Structural precarity rooted in caste and gender

Episode	Key Scenes Coded	Relevance
EP5: Fathers and Sons	Tyagi's transformation into a hitman	Criminalisation of lower-caste masculinity
EP7: Badlands	Police interrogation of Cheeni	Caste slurs, humiliation, denial of dignity
EP9: Swarg ka Dwaar	Discovery of Cheeni's death	Narrative disposability of Dalit-trans characters

Table 2. *Season 1- Panchayat (Episodes Coded for Dalit Representation).*

Episode	Key Scenes Coded	Relevance
EP1: Gram Panchayat Phulera	Introduction of the village power structure	Visibility of only Savarna characters; caste erasure
EP2: Bhootha Ped	Night patrol scenes	The social geography of the village is shown as casteless
EP3: Chakke Wali Kursi	Office politics of Pradhan and Deputy	Upper-caste dominance is normalized as the default
EP4: Trunnu ki Mama	Family networks shown	Caste-coded kinship patterns unaddressed
EP5: Computer Nahi Monitor	Village problem-solving scenes	Caste is absent in public decision-making
EP6: Bahot Hua Samman	Fight sequence; honor discourse	Rural violence unlinked from caste structure
EP8: Jab Jaago Tabhi Savera	Ending sequence	Idealised rural harmony; no Dalit presence

3. Content Analysis

The comparative content analysis of *Paatal Lok* and *Panchayat* reveals crucial differences and similarities in how Dalit representation manifests across the two OTT series. Both series, while critically acclaimed, reproduce caste hierarchies in distinct ways. The *Paatal Lok* portrays Dalit experiences primarily through suffering and systemic oppression, and *Panchayat* largely omits or marginalizes Dalit identities altogether. Using the Dalit theory framework, which emphasizes voice, visibility, and agency for historically oppressed communities, we can interpret the table data as follows.

In *Paatal Lok*, Dalit characters are primarily represented as victims of social injustice and systemic violence. Their experiences are central to the show's dark exploration of caste, class, and corruption. However, this victimhood is often portrayed through a lens of suffering without empowerment [7]. Dalit lives are depicted as trapped in cycles of marginalization, and their struggles are narrated through upper-caste perspectives. The show's representation aligns with what Dalit critics describe as "structural victimization," where the Dalit figure serves as a mirror to society's brutality rather than a voice of resistance [8]. In contrast, *Panchayat* also features Dalit characters as victims, but in a subtler way. Here, their suffering arises from deprivation and exclusion rather than overt violence. Poverty, lack of sanitation, and bureaucratic neglect symbolize caste inequalities, but these issues are sanitized and detached from any direct discussion of caste [9]. The result is a soft, apolitical portrayal of rural life where structural op-

pression is normalized. When examining the leading protagonist category, neither series provides a Dalit character in a central role. In *Paatal Lok*, Hathiram Chaudhary, the police officer protagonist, has been read by some critics as potentially Dalit or lower caste, but the series avoids making his caste identity explicit. This ambiguity dilutes the radical potential of his character, converting a story of systemic oppression into one of individual moral struggles. The erasure of his caste identity underscores the discomfort mainstream media holds in directly addressing Dalit subjectivity [10]. In *Panchayat*, the absence is even starker: all central characters, the secretary, Pradhan, and their associates, belong to upper-caste backgrounds. The leadership positions in the village are monopolized by upper castes, and Dalits are almost absent from the narrative focus. This reinforces caste hierarchies by normalizing upper-caste dominance in rural power structures.

Dalit presence as passive or marginal characters further illustrates how both shows position them within the social hierarchy. In *Paatal Lok*, Dalit and lower-caste individuals appear in subordinate roles, laborers, suspects, or peripheral community members without significant agency to shape the narrative [11]. Their voices remain unheard even as their suffering forms the emotional core of the story. *Panchayat*, too, depicts Dalit figures as marginal; they appear on the periphery of village politics, often as beneficiaries of welfare schemes or as part of comic subplots. They rarely influence the decision-making processes, thereby maintaining a symbolic social distance between upper-caste characters and those at the margins. The absence of explicit Dalit identity in both series

reflects a larger pattern of caste invisibility in Indian media. In *Paatal Lok*, caste is addressed indirectly through visual cues, names, and dialogue, but Dalit identity is never verbalized, maintaining an aesthetic of ambiguity. In *Panchayat*, the erasure is more complete; the world of Phulera village appears almost casteless, or more accurately, upper caste by default. This erasure is not merely an oversight but a form of symbolic violence that aligns with what Dalit theorists describe as the “epistemic invisibility” of Dalit experience in mainstream narratives. In terms of helper or savior roles, both series reproduce upper-caste paternalism. In *Paatal Lok*, moments of justice or redemption often arise from within the system, usually represented by upper-caste or institutional characters, suggesting that salvation for the oppressed comes from those already in power [12]. The same pattern persists in *Panchayat*, where bureaucratic and administrative figures, mostly upper-caste, step in to resolve the issues faced by marginalized villagers. This dynamic reinforces the notion of Dalits as dependent rather than autonomous actors capable of self-determination, perpetuating a savior complex deeply embedded in the caste hierarchy.

Finally, the villain or criminal category reveals how caste operates subtly within moral framing. In *Paatal Lok*, criminality and caste oppression intersect, but not always in direct ways. Some Dalits or lower-caste characters are framed as part of violent or criminal networks, which can inadvertently reproduce stereotypes linking marginality with deviance. However, the show does attempt to contextualize these characters’ actions within systemic oppression, suggesting that crime emerges from exclusion rather than innate moral failure. In *Panchayat*, villains are not caste-defined; conflicts revolve around administrative inefficiencies and petty village politics. Yet, this “casteless” framing effectively erases the caste structures that underpin rural conflict, presenting an illusion of equality while leaving caste hierarchies intact. The comparative analysis highlights that *Paatal Lok* engages with caste more directly but still through the lens of victimization and ambiguity, whereas *Panchayat* maintains caste erasure under the guise of rural realism. Both series fail to center Dalit characters as empowered protagonists or autonomous agents. From a Dalit theoretical perspective, this reflects how OTT platforms, despite their promise of creative freedom, often replicate the same caste invisibilities and hierarchies as mainstream cinema [8]. The Dalit figure, when present, remains a site of suffering or silence rather than resistance and voice, revealing that the struggle for representational justice on digital platforms remains unfinished.

The presence or absence of Dalit characters in visual narratives reveals how deeply caste consciousness informs cultural production. On OTT platforms, where creators claim to have more freedom than mainstream television or cinema, the visibility of marginalized communities becomes a litmus test of social representation. In *Paatal Lok*, Dalit characters have a discernible, if painful, presence. The series introduces us to Cheeni, a Dalit and transgender character who has faced

abandonment, violence, and exclusion since childhood. Her existence embodies the intersectional oppression of caste, class, and gender [13]. Similarly, Tyagi, a hitman from a lower-caste rural background, experiences humiliation and deprivation that push him toward violence. Their stories, although secondary to the main plot, bring the audience face-to-face with the “other India,” the world of the marginalized, the unseen, and the oppressed. In contrast, *Panchayat* constructs a rural India seemingly devoid of caste. The village of Phulera appears harmonious, simple, and bureaucratically functional. While this may project an image of progress, it also reveals a deliberate erasure, a narrative choice that denies the existence of Dalit life altogether. In a village where caste structures inevitably shape every aspect of daily life, their absence becomes a striking act of invisibilization [14]. The story unfolds through the eyes of Abhishek Tripathi, an urban, educated Brahmin protagonist, reinforcing the gaze of privilege. The result is a sanitized, “casteless” village that mirrors an upper-caste fantasy rather than social reality.

In *Paatal Lok*, Dalit characters are given space, but their roles remain defined by victimhood. Cheeni, though shown with depth and humanity, rarely exercises agency [15]. Her life is narrated through memories and flashbacks that highlight trauma rather than transformation. She survives, but her survival lacks empowerment. Tyagi, similarly, is a man shaped by violence, a product of systemic deprivation rather than an independent moral agent. These characters exist in the narrative but do not drive it; they symbolize suffering rather than change. The character Tope Singh is both a victim and a criminal; the show gives him a backstory (rural oppression, relational traumas), but ultimately his representations slide into tropes: violent Dalit, morally compromised, used by political forces [11]. Hathiram, the protagonist, though not Dalit, is positioned as the agent through whose lens the viewer sees caste injustice; the possibility of having made Hathiram a Dalit character is often speculated in criticism but not realized. In *Panchayat*, there is no such representation to even evaluate. The agency belongs entirely to upper-caste characters Pradhan Ji, Manju Devi, and Abhishek Tripathi, who embody authority, wisdom, and humor. The absence of Dalit voices reinforces the hierarchy of who gets to speak and act in Indian storytelling. By centering upper-caste experiences, the series unconsciously suggests that leadership, governance, and morality belong to the Savarna domain, while Dalits remain invisible, voiceless, and unacknowledged [8, 12]. Dalit or marginalized characters (Vinod, Jagmohan) often struggle over basic entitlements (toilets, housing), but their struggles are portrayed as passive, dependent on the intervention of upper-caste characters, or shown in a way that reinforces their “inferior” social position. Thus, while *Paatal Lok* offers limited representation, *Panchayat* offers none; both, in their own ways, deny Dalit characters a full sense of agency.

4. Caste as Theme vs Caste as Symbolic Background

Paatal Lok wears caste on its surface. The show's title itself, derived from Hindu cosmology's "underworld," functions as a metaphor for India's caste hierarchy. The series presents multiple social worlds: Swarg Lok (heaven) for the elite, Dharti Lok (earth) for the middle class, and Paatal Lok for the socially marginalized. This symbolic structure embeds caste directly into the narrative design. Cheeni's story, the violent rural past of Tyagi, and the everyday indignities suffered by lower-caste characters turn caste into a thematic center of the series. The viewer is constantly reminded that India's "hell" is inhabited by those born into lower castes and minority communities. In contrast, Panchayat turns castes into an unspoken backdrop. It depicts rural life as simple, humorous, and free from tension. Bureaucratic challenges replace social hierarchies, and the absence of caste discourse functions as a form of ideological comfort. The show, while appearing in a political context, reinforces a post-caste illusion, a narrative that suggests that caste discrimination no longer exists. By erasing caste, Panchayat naturalizes Savarna dominance and presents the village as a harmonious space under the benevolent rule of upper-caste characters [16, 18]. Thus, caste in Panchayat becomes a silent, symbolic background that the viewer is not meant to notice.

5. Stereotypes, Tropes, and the 'Savarna Gaze'

Both series, though different in tone, reflect the persistent influence of the Savarna gaze, a way of seeing where the world of marginalization is mediated through upper-caste perspectives. In Paatal Lok, the depiction of Dalit life carries authenticity, but it also falls into certain representational traps. The narrative lingers on scenes of pain, violence, and degradation, creating a "spectacle of suffering." Cheeni's body becomes a site of pity, and Tyagi's masculinity is defined by brutality. The viewer is invited to empathize but not to understand; to witness, but not to see agency. The camera captures the subaltern, but the voice behind the camera remains Savarna [17]. While the show critiques casteism, it does so from a position of privilege, unable to give its Dalit characters full narrative control.

Panchayat exemplifies another form of the Savarna gaze: the gaze of omission. The series constructs a world that is charming, funny, and nostalgic, a rural India seen through the eyes of educated, upper-caste creators [4]. Its humor and warmth depend on the erasure of caste conflict. The villagers' struggles are bureaucratic, not social; moral, not structural. The result is a comforting vision of the village where caste oppression has been edited out. This subtle exclusion is itself a stereotype, the idea that Indian villages are naturally harmonious unless disturbed by modern politics. In both cases,

the Savarna gaze decides what can be seen, who can be visible, and how much discomfort is acceptable to the viewer.

6. Representation of Oppression, Dignity, and Resistance

In Paatal Lok, oppression is explicitly represented. The audience witnesses how caste and gender operate as structures of control and violence. Cheeni's backstory of humiliation and survival embodies the loss of dignity that marginalized bodies experience in urban and rural India alike. Yet, her quiet resilience also hints at resistance, a refusal to disappear completely. Tyagi's story, too, reveals the internalization of caste trauma, though it manifests as self-destructive violence rather than organized resistance [14]. The series allows viewers to see oppression, but it stops short of showing collective resistance or dignity restored through agency [10]. In Panchayat, the refusal to depict caste results in a refusal to acknowledge oppression. The dignity of rural life is portrayed as universal, disconnected from social location [16, 17]. Everyone in Phulera is poor, but no one is oppressed; everyone jokes about poverty, but no one suffers caste humiliation. This uniformity flattens the complexity of rural India, where dignity is often a struggle rather than a given. By not showing Dalit assertion or resistance, the series implicitly suggests that such struggles are irrelevant or resolved. While Paatal Lok confronts oppression through painful imagery, Panchayat avoids it through silence. In both cases, Dalit resistance remains absent, either overwhelmed by tragedy or denied existence.

7. Conclusion

In Paatal Lok and Panchayat, caste representation spans a spectrum from visible marginality to comfortable erasure. Paatal Lok foregrounds Dalit identity but confines it to suffering under a Savarna lens, while Panchayat erases caste, presenting a casteless utopia. Both offer incomplete portrayals: one shows visibility without empowerment, the other invisibility disguised as harmony, revealing that even in digital storytelling, Dalit representation remains mediated and unequal. Paatal Lok is more explicit in its references to caste, in positioning Dalit characters within political conflict and victimization; Panchayat tends toward marginalization through absence or stereotyped minor visibility. Both, however, operate largely under a Savarna gaze: upper-caste characters remain central, Dalit characters rarely lead, and caste oppression is often portrayed as an external menace rather than an internal, structural, lived condition. The significance of these findings lies in what they show about how even "progressive" or "realistic" media can replicate caste hierarchies. Emancipatory representation involves more than mere inclusion; it entails shifting narrative authority to let Dalits tell their own stories, emphasizing their perspectives, rejecting tokenism, and highlighting everyday caste dynamics in urban life, in-

stitutions, and relationships. These should be recognized not only as issues but also as sources of dignity, agency, and resistance.

Abbreviations

OTT	Over-the-Top
EP	Episode

Funding

This work is not supported by any external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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