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Performing Pain and Gendered Suffering in Indian True-Crime Web Shows: Cultural Narratives and the Question of Ethical Sustainability

Deepthi C P

Ph.D Research Scholar
University College, Palayam
Email: deepthijerrin@gmail.com

Prof. (Dr). Chitra Thrivikraman Nair

Principal
KNM Govt. Arts & Science College,
Kanjiramkulam
Email: chitrathrivikraman8@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of suffering in contemporary Indian true-crime web series through the lens of pain studies. While pain is often understood as an individual biological experience, scholars in medical humanities and cultural studies emphasise that suffering is socially mediated, culturally framed and institutionally organised. Using qualitative textual and narrative analysis, the study analyses four influential Indian web series – Delhi Crime, Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega, Rangbaaz, and Mumbai Diaries 26/11 – to understand how pain is narrated, distributed and ethically framed within true-crime storytelling. The study explores how institutions such as policing, politics, healthcare and digital economies mediate suffering, and how gender shapes the visibility and interpretation of pain. Drawing on theorists such as Elaine Scarry, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Roger Silverstone, the research investigates whether these narratives responsibly represent real suffering or transform it into spectacle for audience engagement. The findings show that while these series bring attention to social violence and injustice, they frequently prioritise institutional responses, heroic narratives and dramatic storytelling over the lived experiences of victims. Gendered patterns also emerge, where women's pain is often symbolic and collective, while male suffering is framed as explanatory or productive. The study ultimately argues that Indian true-crime web narratives operate within a complex ethical terrain where suffering becomes both a site of social reflection and a narrative resource for entertainment.

Keywords: Indian True Crime, Pain Studies, Gendered suffering, Ethics

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1. Introduction

True Crime has become entrenched within the sphere of popular culture. As a genre that captures entertainment and information and held the public imagination, maintaining a place in our societies through successfully navigating shifts across format and focus. Consequently, all the contingent disparities generated are mitigated by the genre's capacity to regularly reinvent itself in response to social changes.

On November 2022, a new crime story got reported in India which then got infamously titled as the Mehrauli Murder Case. The newspaper walls and prime time screens of Indian news channels were seen celebrating the newly found hunt. Aftab Poonawalla, the prime suspect told Delhi Police that he took notes from the crime drama series Dexter, a show based on Brazilian serial killer Pedro Rodrigues Fiho who methodically carves up and disposes the corpses of victims. Poonawalla allegedly murdered his live in partner Shradhha Walker and chopped her body into 35 parts before scattering the parts across South Delhi. As reported (Vadepalli) a True Crime web show Dexter served to be the source of inspiration and influence for the alleged murderer. The Mehrauli murder case is not an isolated case it is just one among the many, henceforth appeals a deliberate discussion.

True Crime has existed as a genre since the 16th century, but in the last ten years or so has experienced something of a renaissance. Its renewed popularity came in an explosion of cross media hits - television, blogs, books, OTT shows, podcasts have all contributed to current cultural moment where True Crime feels inescapable. An acceptable definition for True Crime comes like this "stories about real things that happen to real people. (Murley). Although a good mystery or thriller always makes for riveting viewing, real life incidents capture viewers' attention the most.

...as it enables them to explore the darker aspects of human nature in a safe environment and also keeps them on edge of their seat. With stories that span decades, regions and social backgrounds, this genre has grown into a full-fledged phenomenon that gives an adrenaline rush. (Lal)

Manish Kalra, Chief Business Officer Zee5 India, agrees," The popularity of crime thrillers as a genre has been on an upward swing across languages. With authentic and impactful storytelling. This category has garnered a sizeable audience." (Vadepalli).

Post independent India represents a time and a place marred by the unrelenting vicissitudes of history and the repeated trauma of violence and crimes. Struggling to redefine its position in the world after the harrowing Civil Rights Movement for freedom, India entered the 20th century only to face some everlasting historical episodes of crime, shame and pain. Modern India's trajectory has been one of discontinuity, displacement, social unrest, historical trauma, along with its applausive phases of development. Thus, pain has become such a crucial component of our understanding of modern India.

In British Pain Society's Literature, an extraordinary definition is qualified with another more conventional classification for pain, "Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms

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of such damage “(Boddice 1). This definition roots for both pain in the body (sensation, tissue damage) and identifies it with an emotional process. Another definition goes like this, “Pain embraces all unpleasant feelings and largely unwanted emotions, such as annoyance, anxiety, despair, discomfort, disgust, distress, embarrassment, fear, guilt, helplessness, hurt, sadness, shame and remorse” (Chamberlain et al. 2).

In recent years, an increasingly large body of academic monographs has focused on moments of violence in 21st century India. Critical appraisals on how these moments of violence and criminal activity have been configured in the content of literature, film, and popular culture and OTT shows is a novel add on to this list. Through these web series, they are making an effort to reconstruct those forgotten moments of atrocity, filling in the blind spots from which the facts have been suppressed, watered down, or simply erased from official histories, popular memory and collective unconscious. These shows trace the lineage of imagining pain in modern India and try to flesh out the means by which writers and the makers have confronted the pain of a past seemingly beyond the boundaries of representation.

1.1 Introducing the Title

Pain studies, emerging at the intersection of medical humanities, anthropology and cultural studies, emphasises that pain is not merely a biological response but a socially mediated and politically organised experience. Pain becomes meaningful only when it is named, interpreted and legitimised within cultural frameworks. This paper compares four influential Indian web series – *Delhi Crime* (Seasons 1 and 2), *Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega*, *Rangbaaz* (Seasons 1–3) and *Mumbai Diaries 26/11* – to examine how pain is narrated, distributed and ethically framed. Rather than evaluating the accuracy of the crimes depicted, the study focuses on how these series imagine suffering and how narrative structures shape public empathy.

The title means that the study looks at how pain and suffering are shown in Indian true-crime web series that are based on real events or inspired by real crimes. These shows often present stories of violence, crime, investigation and survival, and they influence how viewers understand suffering in society. The phrase “cultural narratives” suggests that these stories are not neutral. The way suffering is shown is shaped by Indian social values, ideas about gender, justice, power and morality. For example, in some shows the suffering of victims becomes a symbol of social crisis, while in others the pain of criminals is shown as a reason for their actions. The phrase “ethical sustainability” raises an important question: Are these shows representing pain responsibly? Since many of these stories are based on real incidents, the study asks whether the series respect the long-term emotional and social consequences of violence, or whether suffering is mainly used to create drama, suspense and audience interest.

In simple terms, the title refers to a study that examines how Indian true-crime web series tell stories of suffering, how culture shapes these stories, and whether these portrayals are ethically responsible.

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2. Research Gap and Objectives

Although true-crime narratives have received growing scholarly attention in global media studies, relatively little research has examined Indian true-crime web series through the interdisciplinary lens of pain studies. Existing scholarship largely focuses on crime representation, narrative suspense, or audience reception, while the ethical and cultural dimensions of suffering in these narratives remain underexplored. Moreover, studies on Indian OTT content often analyse themes such as political violence, social realism or digital storytelling but rarely investigate how pain is distributed across victims, perpetrators and institutions. The gendered dynamics of suffering and the ethical implications of transforming real trauma into entertainment also receive limited critical attention. This study addresses these gaps by analysing selected Indian true-crime web series through pain studies, examining how suffering is narratively constructed, how institutions mediate pain, and whether these representations maintain ethical responsibility toward real experiences of violence and trauma.

In his seminal work *Toward a theory of the True Crime Narratives* Ian Case Punnett notes “.... tension between True Crime claims to represent reality and its charge to tell a good story artfully that makes it such a powerful vehicle for communicating moral messages and social truth of the specific cultural and historical context in which it has arisen” (93). The primary motive behind the study ensues from this assertion, therefore tries to look into select web shows through the lens of Pain Studies and hopes to engender the most valuable insight on how pain and suffering are represented in Indian true-crime web series.

This study aims to analyse how suffering is visually and narratively portrayed in Indian true-crime shows. Pain studies scholars argue that pain is not only a personal experience but also something that is communicated through cultural representation. As Elaine Scarry notes, “*Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.*” (2) This idea helps us examine how media attempts to represent experiences that are often difficult to express. Another objective is to understand how men’s and women’s pain are portrayed differently in crime narratives. Feminist scholars emphasise that suffering is deeply shaped by gender roles and power relations. As Judith Butler explains, “*Certain lives are recognised as grievable while others are not.*” (38) This concept helps analyse why some forms of suffering receive more attention in media than others. True-crime shows often turn real incidents into dramatic stories for viewers. Cultural theorist Susan Sontag observed that images of suffering can create both empathy and fascination, noting that “*the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen as the desire for ones that show bodies naked.*” (41) This objective investigates how media balances between raising awareness and creating spectacle. The final objective is to question whether these portrayals are ethically responsible. Scholars in media ethics suggest that repeated exposure to violence can risk trivialising suffering. As media scholar Roger Silverstone argues, “*Media have a moral responsibility in the way they represent the suffering of others.*” (7) This objective evaluates whether Indian true-crime web shows maintain this ethical responsibility.

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3. Framework of the study

This study is grounded in pain studies, and is informed by cultural studies on media and representation. Pain is understood not only as physical injury but also as emotional, psychological and social suffering. The framework examines how pain is narrated, who is allowed to express it, how institutions (police, hospitals, politics) mediate it, and how gender shapes the visibility and meaning of suffering in Indian true-crime web narratives. In this framework, selected web series – Delhi Crime, Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega, Rangbaaz and Mumbai Diaries 26/11 – are treated as cultural texts that perform and organise suffering for public consumption. The web series Delhi Crime, Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega, Rangbaaz and Mumbai Diaries 26/11 were selected using the following criteria: First, popularity and wide public reach formed the primary basis of selection. All four series attracted large viewership, strong media attention and sustained public discussion, making them culturally influential texts that shape popular understanding of crime, violence and suffering. Second, the shows were chosen because of their association with real or real-inspired criminal events and social realities, which aligns directly with the true-crime orientation of the study and allows an examination of how real suffering is transformed into narrative entertainment. Third, the selection ensures platform diversity (Netflix, ZEE5 and Amazon Prime Video), enabling the study to move beyond a single streaming ecosystem and observe how pain narratives circulate across India's major digital platforms. Fourth, the shows represent different narrative locations of pain – law and policing (*Delhi Crime*), rural and digital economies (*Jamtara*), gangster politics and power (*Rangbaaz*), and medical and emergency care (*Mumbai Diaries 26/11*). This diversity allows a comparative analysis of how pain is organised across multiple social institutions. Finally, the series were selected because they offer contrasting gendered positions of suffering – ranging from women's victimisation and symbolic pain, to male trauma linked with power, ambition and social mobility – making them especially relevant for examining gendered suffering and the ethical sustainability of Indian true-crime storytelling.

4. Methodology

The study follows a qualitative textual and narrative analysis.

Key scenes, character arcs and institutional spaces (police stations, hospitals, courts, political arenas and homes) are closely examined to identify:

- how pain and trauma are represented,
- how gendered bodies and emotions are framed, and
- how victims, perpetrators and professionals are positioned in relation to suffering.

The analysis also compares narrative emphasis across the selected series in order to understand broader patterns in contemporary Indian true-crime storytelling.

5. Suffering, Gender in True Crime Web Shows

5.1 The Delhi Crime Season 1 & 2

As Michel Foucault and Elaine Scarry demonstrate, pain is not merely a biological sensation but is structured through institutional frameworks such as medicine, war, and law,

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which regulate how suffering is recognized, interpreted, and exercised as a form of power. In *Delhi Crime*, pain is primarily mediated through institutional frameworks – law, policing and public administration.

The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it. (Foucault²⁵)

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it. (Scarry 4)

Season 1 transforms extreme sexual violence into a national moral crisis. The victim's bodily pain is present, but her subjective experience remains largely inaccessible. What dominates the narrative is how institutions receive, translate and act upon pain. Medical reports, forensic data and police procedures function as narrative gateways through which suffering becomes legitimate.

From a pain-studies perspective, this represents institutional ownership of pain. Personal suffering becomes socially meaningful only after it is converted into official documentation and investigative urgency. The emotional centre of the series is not the victim but the investigative apparatus. Season 2 further expands this logic. Pain is no longer concentrated in a single catastrophic event. Instead, suffering appears as dispersed fear within everyday life. The recurring home invasions and attacks produce collective anxiety rather than individually explored trauma. Pain becomes atmospheric. Here, suffering is managed through predictive policing, mapping of crime patterns and preventive surveillance. Emotional distress is stabilised by bureaucratic rationality. The lived aftermath of trauma remains largely unexamined. Across both seasons, the series privileges professional emotional strain – the exhaustion, pressure and ethical dilemmas of officers – over the long-term psychological and social consequences borne by victims. Pain is narratively resolved when institutional efficiency is restored.

Women's pain is largely framed as symbolic and collective rather than personal and lived. In *Delhi Crime*, the female victim's suffering becomes a public and national crisis. Her body stands in for the vulnerability of all women in public spaces. However, from a pain-studies perspective, her inner emotional and psychological world is rarely explored in depth. Gendered pain is therefore used mainly to generate moral urgency, social outrage and institutional action, rather than to understand the long-term experience of a woman living with trauma.

5.2 Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega

Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega departs from victim-centred narratives and focuses on the social world of young cyber-crime perpetrators. From a pain-studies perspective, the series foregrounds structural pain rather than spectacular violence. Structural pain refers to suffering created by unequal social systems, such as poverty, caste hierarchy, gender inequality or lack of education. Unlike sudden violence, this pain develops slowly through social conditions that limit people's opportunities and well-being. In his famous article

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Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, Galtung introduced the concept of structural violence, which is closely related to what we call structural pain. He explains:

Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. (168)

According to Galtung, suffering does not always come from direct physical violence. It can also come from social structures such as poverty, inequality, discrimination and lack of opportunities medical anthropologist Paul Farmer in his article An Anthropology of Structural Violence explains;

structural violence conflates full-fledged domination with mere social disparity and then collapses forms of violence that need to be differentiated, such as physical, economic, political, and symbolic variants or those wielded by state, market, and other social entities. (322)

He argues that poverty, political neglect and unequal access to healthcare create chronic suffering for marginalised communities. This suffering becomes part of everyday life, even though it is not caused by a single event. These ideas from Johan Galtung and Paul Farmer help explain how suffering in many narratives is not only personal but also produced by the structure of society itself.

The everyday suffering of rural youth—educational failure, unemployment, technological exclusion, caste-based marginalisation and fragile family structures—forms the emotional backdrop of the story. Pain here is slow, repetitive and socially normalised. It is not expressed through visible injury but through restricted life chances and constant humiliation. Importantly, the narrative relocates attention away from the victims of digital fraud and towards the emotional and social struggles of the perpetrators themselves. While the series exposes the conditions that produce criminal practices, it also risks ethically softening responsibility by framing cybercrime as an almost inevitable outcome of deprivation. From a pain-studies perspective, this narrative shift creates a hierarchy of suffering. The pain of distant, faceless victims—financial loss, emotional shock and social vulnerability—remains marginal. Pain is displaced by fascination with technological ingenuity and survival strategies. Structural deprivation becomes a partial moral explanation, while the emotional cost imposed on victims is narratively muted. Thus, *Jamtara* presents pain as socially produced but unevenly acknowledged.

In *Jamtara*, gender structures pain through unequal access to agency and opportunity. Young men's suffering is foregrounded as economic frustration, lack of education and social stagnation. This pain is shown as pushing them towards cybercrime. By contrast, women's suffering in the same social setting—restricted mobility, domestic pressure, emotional silencing and limited aspirations—remains largely in the background. Gendered pain here is normalised and absorbed into everyday rural life rather than narratively centred.

5.3 Rangbaaz (Seasons 1-3)

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Across its three seasons, *Rangbaaz* constructs pain through intensely personalised trajectories of violence, ambition and political power.

Season 1 centres on the rise of a gangster whose early life is marked by humiliation, fear and loss. Pain is repeatedly framed as a formative force. Violence becomes a language through which wounded masculinity, social exclusion and revenge are expressed. The narrative converts emotional injury into narrative justification for brutality. Season 2 extends this model but intensifies the link between pain and power. The protagonist's suffering is tied to betrayal, caste and regional rivalries. Pain is not merely an origin story; it becomes a political resource. Trauma is mobilised to legitimise domination. Season 3 further complicates this framework by embedding criminal suffering within formal politics. The central figure's journey from gangster to political authority transforms personal pain into public performance. Emotional wounds become tools for crafting populist legitimacy.

From a pain-studies perspective, *Rangbaaz* produces a heroization of suffering. The protagonists' pain receives narrative depth, psychological complexity and emotional visibility. By contrast, the pain of secondary characters – wives, children, villagers, informants and ordinary citizens – functions primarily to advance the protagonist's emotional arc. Their trauma reinforces his isolation, rage and moral ambiguity, but rarely stands as autonomous suffering. Thus, *Rangbaaz* personalises and politicises pain, transforming it into a narrative engine of power.

The male pain is treated as explanatory and productive. In *Rangbaaz*, the suffering of male protagonists – humiliation, social exclusion, betrayal and loss – is presented as a formative experience that justifies violence and political ambition. Their pain is narratively valuable: it explains their anger, motivates their criminal choices and legitimises their rise to power. Gender therefore shapes pain as a resource for masculine self-making, where suffering becomes a pathway to authority rather than vulnerability.

5.4 Mumbai Diaries 26/11

Unlike the crime-centred narratives above, *Mumbai Diaries 26/11* situates pain within clinical spaces. The series foregrounds bodily injury, psychological shock and ethical uncertainty inside a hospital responding to a mass-casualty terrorist attack. From a medical humanities perspective, pain is presented as radically embodied. Blood loss, burns, panic attacks and shock are shown alongside the emotional collapse of patients and families. Pain is not merely an event to be investigated; it is something that must be physically managed, emotionally contained and ethically prioritised. The series also foregrounds care-based suffering. Doctors, nurses and hospital staff experience moral distress, exhaustion and helplessness while making triage decisions. Pain circulates between patients and caregivers, producing what pain scholars describe as secondary or vicarious suffering.

Unlike *Delhi Crime*, where pain is stabilised through institutional authority, *Mumbai Diaries 26/11* exposes the limits of professional control. Medical knowledge cannot erase emotional devastation. Ethical uncertainty – who receives treatment first, who might die waiting – becomes central to the narrative. Pain here remains unresolved. Survival does not

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equal closure. Trauma persists beyond medical intervention, aligning the series closely with pain-studies concerns about the chronic afterlife of catastrophe. *Mumbai Diaries 26/11* introduces a different gendered dimension of pain through care and emotional labour. Women healthcare workers are frequently shown managing not only medical emergencies but also emotional breakdowns—of patients, families and colleagues. From a medical humanities perspective, this reflects how gendered expectations assign women a disproportionate role in absorbing, soothing and containing suffering. Their pain is quieter, relational and service-oriented, and is rarely recognised as trauma in its own right.

6. Ethical sustainability in True Crime Web Shows

The concept of ethical sustainability in cultural production refers to the responsibility of media narratives when representing real suffering. When stories are based on real crimes or social tragedies, the question arises whether the narrative respects the dignity of victims or turns suffering into spectacle and emotional consumption. The concept of mediapolis was developed by Roger Silverstone in his book *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Silverstone uses the term Mediapolis to describe the global public space created by modern media, where people encounter news, stories and images about events and suffering happening across the world. Silverstone explains that media today connects distant societies and allows people to witness the lives, struggles and pain of others whom they will never meet directly. Through television, films, news and digital platforms, audiences become spectators of distant suffering. In this mediated public space, viewers learn about wars, disasters, crimes and social injustice occurring in different parts of the world. Because these experiences are presented through media representation, the mediapolis becomes a space where moral understanding and ethical responsibility are formed. In other words, storytelling should not simply use pain as dramatic material; it should also maintain empathy, respect and social awareness.

Within this framework, Delhi Crime demonstrates both ethical engagement and narrative limitation. The series powerfully portrays the urgency of the investigation and the institutional response to gender violence. However, its narrative structure centres on the success of the police investigation, which risks narrowing the representation of pain to a procedural victory. Pain studies scholars such as Elaine Scarry argue that pain is difficult to fully express in language and narrative. When the story concludes with arrests and justice, the long-term psychological trauma, social stigma and recovery of victims remain outside the narrative frame, leaving the deeper dimensions of suffering largely unexplored.

A different ethical tension appears in *Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega*. The series draws attention to structural deprivation in rural India—lack of education, unemployment and limited opportunities—which push young men toward cybercrime. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman emphasises that suffering is embedded in social and cultural contexts, and the show successfully highlights this structural pain. However, by foregrounding the perpetrators' struggles, the narrative risks normalising criminal activity, while the emotional and financial

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suffering of fraud victims receives comparatively little attention. As a result, the audience may empathise with the perpetrators more than with those harmed by the crime.

Similarly, Rangbaaz raises ethical concerns through its portrayal of gangster figures. The series frequently presents the protagonists' traumatic pasts – humiliation, injustice or social marginalisation – as the emotional foundation for their violent rise to power. While this approach attempts to humanise the characters, it can also transform suffering into charismatic motivation for domination and violence. Cultural theorists argue that media narratives often convert trauma into heroic mythology, allowing audiences to admire figures who emerge from suffering. This process risks glamorising violence and legitimising power gained through brutality, even when the narrative claims to critique it.

In contrast, Mumbai Diaries 26/11 offers a comparatively more ethically cautious representation of suffering. Rather than focusing on heroic victories or sensational violence, the series emphasises the vulnerability, exhaustion and emotional labour of doctors and nurses responding to the crisis. From a medical humanities perspective, suffering is not presented as spectacle but as an experience that demands care, empathy and ethical responsibility. By avoiding a triumphant resolution and focusing on the fragile human effort to save lives, the series acknowledges the complexity of trauma and collective grief.

Through a pain studies perspective, these narratives reveal not only what is visible on screen but also what remains invisible. Scholars remind us that media often highlights dramatic and immediate pain, while ignoring quieter forms of suffering. In many true-crime narratives, chronic trauma, survivor isolation, financial instability after violence and the social silence surrounding everyday suffering receive little attention. These omissions show that media representation does not simply reflect reality; it selects, frames and sometimes simplifies pain for narrative clarity and audience engagement.

7. Findings

The analysis of the selected web series reveals several important patterns in the representation of suffering within Indian true-crime narratives. First, pain is frequently mediated through institutional frameworks rather than through the subjective experiences of victims. In Delhi Crime, suffering becomes narratively meaningful primarily through the actions of law enforcement institutions. The victim's experience remains largely inaccessible while investigative procedures, forensic documentation and administrative response dominate the narrative. Pain is therefore translated into institutional language and resolved through procedural success.

Second, the study finds that structural suffering plays a crucial role in shaping crime narratives. In Jamtara: Sabka Number Ayega, the series foregrounds the everyday struggles of rural youth – poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation and lack of opportunity. This depiction highlights what scholars describe as structural violence, where suffering emerges from unequal social systems rather than from isolated violent acts. However, the narrative emphasis on perpetrators' struggles risks overshadowing the suffering of victims affected by cybercrime.

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Third, the analysis identifies a strong connection between pain and masculinity in gangster narratives. In *Rangbaaz*, male suffering—such as humiliation, betrayal and social exclusion—is portrayed as a formative force that legitimises violence and political ambition. The protagonists' trauma receives narrative depth and psychological complexity, while the suffering of secondary characters functions mainly to support the protagonist's emotional development.

Fourth, the study finds that medical narratives offer a different representation of suffering. In *Mumbai Diaries 26/11*, pain is shown as an embodied and ongoing experience within the hospital environment. The series foregrounds bodily injury, emotional shock and ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare workers, highlighting both patient trauma and the vicarious suffering experienced by caregivers.

Finally, the analysis reveals significant gendered patterns in the portrayal of pain. Women's suffering is frequently represented as symbolic of broader social crises, particularly in narratives involving sexual violence or caregiving roles. In contrast, male suffering is often depicted as a catalyst for action, ambition or violence. This difference reflects how cultural narratives assign distinct meanings and narrative functions to gendered experiences of pain,

8. Conclusion

This study shows that contemporary Indian true-crime web series significantly shape public understanding of violence, suffering and justice. Through the perspective of pain studies, the analysis reveals that pain in these narratives is rarely portrayed as a purely personal experience; instead, it is mediated through institutions, social structures and cultural narratives that determine whose suffering becomes visible and legitimate.

The selected series represent different institutional locations of pain—law enforcement, digital economies, gangster politics and medical care—each organising suffering through its own narrative logic. While these narratives bring attention to social violence, they also raise ethical concerns, as victims' long-term trauma is often overshadowed by institutional success, narrative spectacle or the psychological journeys of perpetrators.

The study further highlights the gendered nature of suffering in true-crime storytelling. Women's pain is often represented as symbolic of collective vulnerability, whereas male suffering is framed as a formative force that leads to power or authority. Ultimately, the study argues that ethical responsibility must remain central to true-crime storytelling, ensuring that representations of real suffering balance narrative engagement with empathy, dignity and social awareness.

9. Significance

This study contributes to the growing field of pain studies by examining how suffering is represented in contemporary Indian true-crime web series. While much research on crime media focuses on narrative suspense or audience engagement, this study highlights the cultural, institutional and ethical dimensions of representing pain in digital storytelling. By analysing popular OTT narratives, the research demonstrates how media representations shape public understanding of violence, gender and justice. The study therefore offers a

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critical perspective on the ethical responsibilities of true-crime storytelling and contributes to broader discussions on media, suffering and cultural representation in contemporary India.

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