

# Search for Empathy: Poverty Porn Popular Culture in Indian Television

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## Introduction

Television in India offers a space that emulates the local public sphere where interactions with everyday sociocultural realities circulate between ordinary subjects. There exists a mode of media production that feeds on human suffering and its marketability through ‘poverty porn’. The genre of poverty porn explicitly narrates Third World tragedies in a romanticised fashion to sensationalise the content. Recurring images of weakness and suffering are often used as favourite tropes in Indian popular television to invoke empathy as a natural reaction. From melodramatic soap operas to emotionally appealing news reporting, the exchange of information and entertainment through such television media programming nourishes a unique environment for the discourse of empathy in popular culture.

The impact of media in everyday life has become increasingly problematic in terms of the way real-life events are being presented as a representation. The communicative discourse of representation involves the rhetoric of the image, which serves as a signifier that describes the meaning it intends to disseminate to a range of receivers. In a technologically advanced environment where it is hard to discern reality from fiction, the media’s role in the process of constructing stories about “what happens in the world” influences the public in their understanding of the world and its many problems. In closer analyses, narratives that paint a particular picture about incidents and regions, geopolitical contexts and cultures, and demographics and social structures reveal the bias ingrained in our views. The coverage of global conflicts and the reporting of protest movements reveal the way media narratives shape the reality of situations differently. For instance, Western media’s portrayal of issues in the Middle East has been criticised for their propagandist misrepresentations<sup>1</sup>. The reporting of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States, and the 2020–2021 Indian Farmers’ Protests are contemporary examples showing how media frames events within preconceived narratives by strategically highlighting or ignoring certain aspects of the story to create an agenda.

Popular media operates based on sensationalism; the ideology that emphasises strategies and methods of attention-seeking through which public interest on a certain topic is exploited. To gain immediate responses from a large audience, popular media cover those events, issues, and themes that can generate a high emotional appeal among the masses. Portraying these stories in a highly exaggerated and dramatic fashion can trigger strong emotions of pain, empathy, shame, guilt, fear, and aversion through which a collective sense of public response is achieved. The tactics of media sensationalism through the sharing of images that highlight human suffering and weakness refer to as “poverty porn”, a phenomenon familiarised by charity organisations that seek donations and help by “showing exploitative imagery of people living in destitute conditions” (Dortonne).

The media sensationalism that feeds on human suffering and its marketability through different modes is based on “viewer guilt” that compels one to “choose between sharing the hurtful images of

exploitation or ‘turn a blind eye’ to what they have seen” (Hamilton, Tokpa, McCain, and Donovan 2). In this context, regions like India, which are still defined by the vestiges of a colonial past, become subjects of the Western gaze that operates as an ideological tool for the dissemination of poverty porn discourses to the mainstream. Here, media representation of poverty porn specifically includes the overfocusing of tragedies and miseries of marginalised groups in a manner that highlights India as a representation of the “Third World”. The use of poverty porn images in media helps the privileged to distinguish the idea of progress by the strategic exclusion and exposition of certain problems. In India, the notion of poverty porn is part of the popular culture, and news agencies, social media, political parties, religious organizations, film, and television take part in a collective discourse of sensationalising “weakness” using advertisements and public relations where information is manipulated through emotional rhetoric.

### Poverty Porn and Western Media

Western media have always played a major role in controlling the power structure of the world through narratives that aim to establish a distinguishable dominant-submissive dichotomy. The bipolar political conditioning in the Cold War era was perfect for media discourses to find propagandist methods to frame stories in ways that help set special agendas. This was not only an opportunity for global media to take part in international affairs with vested interests but to create a homogenised narrative space in an increasingly globalised environment. In other words, media intervention in the form of agenda-setting rather than reporting events of reality is reflected in this new phase of multimedia-integrated journalistic practices where the spirit of globalisation appears as Westernisation.

The construction of narratives through a Western angle was prominent in the colonial era where conflicting images of the colonizer and the colonised subject were used to assert a power equation that normalises inequality as the natural order. These narratives favoured a colonial perception of the colonised countries as lands of low culture and barbaric practices. The coloniser’s curiosity for the indigenous and ritualistic cultural forms of these lands was a sign of exploitation rather than inclusion; the looting and importing of natural resources and artistic assets from colonised regions attest to the desire for things that had pure materialistic value. The disregard for the exotic and exquisite expressions of the native people showed the colonial resentment ingrained in this essential power relationship. For instance, the cultural differences in the culinary and cutlery practices between the Western coloniser and the Oriental colonial subject reflect the coloniser-colonised resentment that negatively brands certain spaces in terms of cleanliness, hygiene, and filth. The revulsion associated with the visual perception of these “outside spaces” is fundamental to the construction of power dominance as it signifies notions of social acceptance and rejection. As a result, the notion of “disgust” gets associated with the body of the colonised Other, and the representations of the “disgusted other” essentialises cultural identities.

Western media’s refusal to acknowledge India as an emerging power has exposed their priorities that only glorify the dominant power positions of the West. Both national and international media disseminate those narratives that define an explicable power difference between the ones who make the narratives and the ones who are subjects in them. It denotes how the production and reinforcement of narrative images and their interpretations are significant in establishing a particular point of view in society. The construction of “image-worlds” affects the existing structural aspects of society and they contain “the ability to reterritorialize and transcode the sordid conditions of a third-world metropolis” (Basu 95). Media influences the way a particular image gets associated with a region and becomes its most popular defining signifier. Once such images are transnationally disseminated, they establish a concrete reality and facilitate further identifications of the region through similar images that refer to such a collective reality.

### Empathy for the Other

Visual media narratives shape reality as a simulation through the repetition of images. Whether in the form of news reporting, television programming, filmmaking, or social media engagements, visual images paint the picture of a context more effectively than words because they easily capture the attention of those who perceive it. The main function of such images is the dissemination of primary information as they link a particular region with its culture and people for the rest of the world to see.

The hegemony of Western media is reflected in representations of foreign issues. The ideology of the western perspective is often characterised by an urge to stereotype and romanticise Eastern countries and spaces outside the West as the normalised “Other” (Said). The impact of cultural imperialism, global capitalism, and western modernity have contributed to the new world-making through certain archetypes that refuse to see things from the actual contexts in which an authentic view is possible. The many stereotypes that are sensationalised in news media reporting and broadcasting are reflected in other entertainment platforms as well, especially entertainment media forms such as popular films, reality television, comedy shows, and video games (Ross). Film productions have the capacity to construct a cultural imperative that asserts a view that forces one to imagine certain places as a signifier of misery and violence (Isea). Critically acclaimed films like *Gandhi* (1982), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) are examples of cinema using “Third World” struggles to create “an extensive repertoire of images about the South which has considerable bearing on how Northern audiences view the South and, arguably, on how Southern elites see their own subalterns” (Sengupta 601). The portrayal of India in films produced in the West celebrates the idea of an uncivilised, pre-modern, socially backward, savage, and traditional land (Ramasubramanian). Filmmakers and reporters have frequently subscribed to a Western gaze to create spectacles out of conditions like poverty (Shah; Shome).

Wendy Keys and Barbara Pini state that poverty porn is “a genre that focuses on entertainment, titillation, and sensationalism, and a de-contextualising of financial deprivation, alongside an associated emphasis on individual failure and personal irresponsibility” (3). The emergence of poverty porn television has legitimised socio-economic conditions through programming (Beresford; Jensen; Paton and Cooper). The genre of reality television, for instance, has developed the possibility of sensationalising suffering through new formats suitable to the changed socio-economic structure in a globalised scenario. Anna McCarthy argues that the ideology of reality television is based on neoliberal values that focus on the individual as an agent with responsibility—referring to it as “neoliberalism’s theatre of suffering”, reality television connects with audiences through responses that evoke a shared sense of suffering (McCarthy 34). Poverty porn identifies “suffering” as a universal phenomenon that uniformly affects human populations of all cultures and social systems. It uses this commonality to find an opportunity in the most diversified cultures such as India to create an emotional mass market for profit. In other words, poverty porn achieves its goals through the cultural homogenisation of suffering.

Poverty porn facilitates the structuring of the “Other” in popular culture. Viewing the Other from a distance is what defines the Western approach to identifying, defining, and appropriating the Other as a subject of low culture and development. The identification of the Other allows the Westernizers to project their gaze onto the unique cultural, geographical, and indigenous coordinates to find the exotic quality that contradicts the Western way of life. For example, the rural population is often imagined as pre-modern savage victims in the dominant popular imaginations of the West (Pini, Mayes, and Rodriguez Castro). The existence of the Oriental and Occidental differences in an unbalanced power equilibrium allows the Westerner to culturally appropriate and control the Orient. Such appropriations use media as a means to regulate the desires in popular culture to orchestrate the agenda of disseminating the ‘Western knowledge of the Eastern world’ as legitimate. This strategy of Westernising the Orient starts with the construction of the Eastern

stereotypical Other as an irrational, feminised, psychologically weak non-European while reiterating the European as a rational, authoritative, and masculine image (Said). Since Otherness is viewed as a form of marginalisation and exclusion (Warf), representing the Other in popular media facilitates the parochial ideology with which a dominant system of signifiers gives meaning to a category of people and their geographies, cultural differences, beliefs, and practices. The representation of the “Slumdog” within the Hollywood text attracts the universal gaze into the image of the Other and finds the possibility of a spectacle out of it. The ironic combination of the “Slumdog” and “the millionaire” reveals the rhetoric of Othering as a form of juxtaposing two contradicting categories of identities to achieve an emotive response among those who perceive it. Mary Grace Antony argues that the film and its marketing endorsed Western interventionist rhetoric by using Orientalist tropes to represent poverty. The way the “Slumdog” represents an India that is poor, non-progressive, and filthy and the “millionaire” represents a capitalist West that is rich, productive, and successful shows how a popular cultural medium like cinema sensationalises the poverty porn culture in favour of Western interests.

### Indian Television and the Marketisation of Empathy

After Doordarshan lost its monopoly over Indian television and its televised representations of Indian culture, a new “liberalization of culture” was brought by television, which according to Sinclair and Harrison “meant, on one hand, access to sources of news and entertainment not controlled by the government but, on the other, exposure to a televisual culture at odds with traditional norms and values” and new “cultural invasions” in the form of Westernized programs that tried to “indigenize the global forms of commercial television” (47). The arrival of satellite broadcasting in South Asia nourished the emergence of public life based on consumer culture (Page and Crawley). The media ecosystem of the early 1990s is defined by the penetration of satellite channels like STAR TV, Zee TV, and Sun TV (Raman). The mercurial success of STAR programs like *Santa Barbara* and the *Bold and the Beautiful* indicated that Indians primarily accepted television for entertainment over national social services and community messages (Melkote, Sanjay, and Ahmed 176). The programming of this period focused on the “reproduction of Western formats with a local twist” (Pathania 69).

The shift to the programming of private satellite channels was modelled on the “hybridization of language” where the popularisation of indigenised foreign programs led to the emergence of new hybrid formats like “Hinglish” (A combination of Hindi and English languages) (Sinclair and Harrison 46; Thussu). For example, Thussu notes that Zee TV’s *Hullo Friends* from U.S. *Friends*, and youth-oriented music programs like *Superhit Muqabala* were examples of the Indianisation of Western television (197-99). Superhit television reality shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (from *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*) and *Big Boss* (from *Big Brother*) were also adaptations of Western television. Another interesting aspect to notice here is the integration of television with Indian cinema. India’s popular film industry of Bollywood and its commercial characteristics such as film stardom, music, and dance are boosters for television entertainment programs; appearances of film stars in reality shows as hosts, judges, guests, and contestants are ubiquitous (Bajaj). Therefore, India’s most popular film stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Akshay Kumar, and Ritwik Roshan have become the face of popular reality television in India. Sinclair and Harrison summarise that there is fragmentation in the evolution of Indian television against which there is “triumph of the local over the global, of cultural heterogenisation over homogenisation, there is the global reformulation of Indian identity in diasporic terms, as new international satellite services connect millions of ethnic Indians around the world to the imagined community of their putative homeland” (48).

The concoction of behavioural, spontaneous, and dynamic patterns of human interactions and experiences constitutes the cultural media practice of television in India. There is preservation and change of cultural elements under the presence of visual media, and the socialisation of the public in this context is influenced by the degree to which mass media interacts with its consumers. The

impact of popular genres—family drama soaps and reality shows—have been overtly emotional across regions that are outside the border of India.

The genre of reality television maintains its proximity to the emotional quality of real-life experiences. In India, the popularisation of soap operas paved the way for reality shows to put more investments into the emotional vulnerability of the participants. They developed new hybrid programming to incorporate film stardom, local participation, and social commentary to marketise spectacles of emotion. Such hybridisation intermixes different aspects of visual culture from different mediums like cinema, documentary, drama, and news to generate a media pastiche in television programming, and they create “visually arresting and emotionally charged” spectacles of market-friendly television (Thussu 42). However, there is a shift from pure hedonistic entertainment to entertainment with social responsibility when shows like *Satyamev Jayate* (2012–14) were presented as experiments and discussions on various social issues. The first season of the show had 14 episodes discussing how topics such as female foeticide, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, the dowry system, casteism, and honour killings are serious problems in India. It marked the television debut of Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, who claimed that the show is about “meeting the common man of India, connecting with India and its people” (Rediff).

Television in India was affected by the idea of progress in a globalised economic and social structure. It was used as a medium to cater to the idea of nation-building in a post-liberalisation India where consumer capitalism and the modern democratic state converge to find new ways to gain popular validation. Development of strategies and production of values that appeal to the local masses became factors that decide the fate of both the market economy and democracy in India. The impact of *Satyamev Jayate* revolutionised the marketisation of the localised subject. To reach more audiences, the show was telecasted in different languages with English subtitles. As part of the promotion, STAR TV conducted special screenings of the show in remote Indian villages to include public participation of the common people, who otherwise would never have access to a television. “It is a relevant show for the whole country and we are making sure that it reaches out to all Indians, even in places with limited or no TV connectivity”, stated STAR India (Awaasthi). In addition to this, comments and opinions of the audience were collected through SMS and the money collected from the SMSes was used to help families related to the problems discussed in each episode. The cost of each SMS was reduced from Rs. 3 to Rs. 1, giving more relaxation to include more participation. The show was widely advertised through cinema halls, organised interactive sessions, popular soap operas, and newspaper columns. All these attempts were claimed as ground-breaking initiatives to create a new television public around televised social realities.

Contrary to the conventional approach where fixed studio sets often present an immovable host, Aamir Khan in *Satyamev Jayate* literally used the studio floor to walk around, occasionally meeting with the audience, and sitting with them—thus making the imaginary distance between the star and the common audience disappear. Such interactions were uncommon on Indian television and this new trend made a huge difference in defamiliarising the televised realities by introducing the impression that everyone is equal and important. More importantly, Aamir Khan never hesitated to be emotionally involved with particular situations in the narrative which include shedding tears and expressing shock, anxiety, and disgust at times to genuinely magnify the seriousness of the topic. Such dramatic acts and provocation enhance ‘intimacy’ and ‘authentic identities’ (Murray 129), similar to the spontaneous emotional venting of the layman. This reconfiguration of Khan’s star identity popularised the idea of “people’s show”, a concept that changed the outlook of reality television in India.

### The Politics of Sensationalism

The media’s narrative construction of poverty porn is an invitation to the unexplored realms of the underprivileged and the harsh realities that constitute their struggles for survival. These are

journeys into the private lives of the people who are now exposed to the public through the media lens. Such exposure strips them of their individuality and right to privacy at an unconstitutional level and these so-called “township tours” have the quality of being “social pornography” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 54). The pornographic aspects of exposure and voyeurism are inherent in the spectacles of poverty porn as their political principle has always been a form of attention-seeking through transgressive visuals. Film, television, and news media have a strong impact on the popularisation of Dharavi, especially in shaping a prior understanding of it (Dyson 266). The sensationalising effect created by the “Western curiosity and fascination with the slum” is evident in films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) which focuses on marketing the Third World context to a wider transnational audience (Dyson 255).

In creating a poverty porn rhetoric, victimisation is rendered as an effective strategy for framing the Other. Mirjam Vossen identified victim framing as one of the main strategies of Western media in creating narratives of poverty porn. To project the image of the dispossessed as a symbol of the social, cultural, political, and economic situation of the land, facts and reality are presented with emotion. The construction of emotional reality is essential to the ideology of poverty porn as emotions add value to suffering and make those who suffer as subjects who need sympathy. The tactic of “aestheticising poverty” makes us visualise the poor as a failed subject without having to pay much attention to the conditions that produce such inequality (Ibrahim 2–4). There has always been a popular viewership for shocking images of poverty porn in developing countries. Many disasters and crises are identified by the “uniqueness” of these notorious images. For example, the dead child’s picture from the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy (Tiwari) and Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph—“the vulture and the little girl”—show the severity of the context more powerful than any other descriptive format. Media reception of some of the worst disasters that happened in India such as the Bhopal gas tragedy, the 2004 Earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and the 2017 Uttarakhand Earthquake showed the extremity of these events through pictures and videos of victims in agony. Pictures of dead bodies, animals, the wounded in the hospital, and homeless people, were used by international media to narrate the horrifying realities that created victims.

The media’s framing of disaster events and tragedies depends on the type of audience they are addressing. The bias in framing is explicit when it comes to reporting home events. For example, Kellner criticises the corporate media in the United States for being the instruments of propaganda during and after the World Trade Center attacks. The live footage of the terrorist attack telecasted through television played a major role in elevating the nationalistic emotions of the American people to create a populist mandate for America’s war on terrorism.

The live television broadcasting brought a “you are there” drama to the September 11 spectacle. The images of the planes striking the World Trade Center, the buildings bursting into flames, individuals jumping out of the window in a desperate attempt to survive the inferno, the collapse of the towers, and subsequent chaos provided unforgettable images that viewers would not soon forget. The drama continued throughout the day with survivors being pulled from the rubble, and the poignant search for individuals still alive and attempts to deal with the attack produced resonant iconic images seared deeply into spectators’ memories. Many people who witnessed the event suffered from nightmares and psychological trauma. For those who viewed it intensely, the spectacle provided a robust set of images that would continue to resonate for years to come, much as the footage of the Kennedy assassination, iconic photographs of Vietnam, the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, or the death of Princess Diana in the 1990s provided unforgettable imagery. (Kellner)

The power of mediated images affects the perception of the audience in their meaning-making process. The purpose of these images is that they sensationalise an event or a context in favour of the narrator or those who benefit from the ramifications of the narrative. The reporting of the 9/11 attacks showed the horrifying nature of the event with visuals of survivors, fire brigades, and police officials, but it was broadcasted as a means to create a sense of national disaster rather than emphasising individual suffering. However, when national disasters are portrayed in the West, communities outside the mainstream are presented as subjects in a victimised position. Voorhees et al. find that when

Hurricane Katrina hit the US Gulf Coast in 2005, the affected minority groups were portrayed in the media “in a passive or ‘victim’ role and are rarely shown in positions of expertise”. Similarly, Valencio and Valencio analyse the BBC reports of the UK flood crisis during the 2015–2016 period:

The public vision of the field of the crisis was blurred. Adopting a complex narrative approach requires that the editorial team clarify the rationality of the actors involved, uncovering the deepest meanings of their voices and practices. Each case of disaster-related reporting analyzed could be compared with the presentation of a piece of an intricate puzzle to the public, yet the public still had to fit the pieces together to see the final picture. When these pieces were fitted together, a preliminary map of the social structure and the dynamics of the crisis emerged; however, no piece of news fully explored its potential to define the variety of articulations among the actors involved.

Poverty porn is obsessed with the production of disenfranchised subjects that have no significance without the tragedies they are involved in and the miseries they carry to the forefront of society. The “poor” in the poverty rhetoric lacks identity and are responsible for a collective Other through which a negative image of the community is created through homogenisation and stereotypical explanations (Paterson, Coffey–Glover, and Peplow). In addition to the way it devalues individual identity, one of the main disadvantages of subscribing to the media rhetoric of poverty porn is the negative way it affects the psychological realm of the masses. It encourages the viewer to have a biased point of view against certain people, and poverty porn pictures create a false sense of hope through the invocation of guilt as a natural human emotion. Dortonne observes that poverty porn makes people feel “uncomfortable, disconnected, and guilty”.

To keep events sensationalised, media have to keep using different images and repeat the act of publishing them at regular intervals. However, the continuous dissemination of the recurring images of poverty porn reduces their sensationalism. According to Downes, they ultimately lead to “compassion fatigue”, a “phenomenon whereby graphic or upsetting imagery ceases to have an impact because it has been seen so many times before” (Downes 22). In a technologically networked era of media production, the poverty porn “click bait” is effective only in creating short-term impacts because there are countless platforms that constantly produce narratives, counter-narratives, opinions and reports in every minute. The investigation of Feltwell et al. showed that online counter-discourses can challenge the dominant narratives of poverty porn. The competition of media platforms in an era where information outburst is the norm creates a numbing effect; a state defined by the lack of understanding of the intensity and importance of situations because of the simultaneous existence of multiple parallel narratives. The emergence of collective indifference as a social order can affect the format of media sensationalism. This demands more future research to understand poverty porn’s victimised Others through different perspectives.

## Conclusion

The rhetorical strategies involved in representing poverty porn as a regional phenomenon reveal the media’s affinity to visualise certain regions as backward while consciously avoiding others. The practice of highlighting the miseries of the marginalised in non-western geographical spaces masks the universality of these problems. Poverty porn studies must expose the ethical imbalance ingrained in media representations of the western/non-western to open up a context where discourses are not limited within the binaries created by images and rhetoric. The significance of such studies is how they de-westernise poverty to enhance rational approaches that acknowledge the omnipresence of human misery and the varying factors that contribute to it. This ultimately means, thinking outside the frames of media representation and understanding human suffering as a cyclic and universal phenomenon, not as an “Asian phenomenon”.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> The term “Western media” typically refers to media content produced and consumed by countries in the Western hemisphere, including North America and Western Europe. It encompasses various forms of media, such as television shows, movies, news broadcasting, music, literature, and online platforms. Western media forms reflect the cultural, social, and political values of Western societies and their narratives are often biased against non-Western countries. However, in the digital age of globalization, media production has expanded regions and cultures, thus blurring the traditional boundaries between Western and other media forms.

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