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Game of Thrones in India: Of Piracy, Queer Intimacies and Viral Memes

Rohit K. Dasgupta

→ *Game of Thrones* has been immensely popular in India since its launch in 2011. In India, however, the series was unavailable for some time owing to strict censorship laws. Based on ethnographic research carried out between 2011 and 2015, this chapter looks at the popularity of the show by tracking its distribution through pirated content, viral memes and young audience reception. In addition to its popularity within youth groups, another unexpected fan group that has emerged in the last few years has been queer individuals in India who find the queer characters such as Brienne, Renly and Loras particularly engaging. This chapter uses a variety of fan reactions in India to illustrate the important role the show plays in fans' daily world-making.

Game of Thrones has been a major success all over the world with a record-breaking 8 million viewers for the last episode of Season 5. Whilst the HBO show is telecast almost simultaneously in most of North America and Europe, it has faced a rockier path in the Asian countries. China began broadcasting the series (in a heavily censored format) only in 2014 on the China Central Television Network (CCTV), but it has an even later telecast history in India, where, after facing more hurdles with the censor board, it was finally picked up for distribution in a censored Indian format. This chapter looks at the Indian reception of the series in both bootlegged and officially released form, with special consideration for its prominence within queer communities. Considering the show's popularity, especially within the white straight male category, this provides a different lens through which to understand how the narrative is decoded (Hall) through creative/slash readings. I undertook intense ethnography between 2011 and 2012 in Kolkata, West Bengal, when Season 1 was first telecast and was being distributed in India through illegal torrent downloads and cheap pirated DVDs being sold on the footpaths of Gariahat. In addition, I also conducted informal interviews with some of these viewers from 2012 to 2016. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of Bengali, Hindi and English and have all been translated.

Digital bootlegging

I watched Game of Thrones for the first time on a DVD that I picked up from Gariahat. It was around eighty rupees (£1) I think. My friends had been downloading them on torrents and praising it highly [...] When I started watching it I was quite blown away. I was expecting some sci-fi/fantasy thing but it was much more than that. – (Ravi, Student, 20)

The piracy industry in India has a long history. As Ravi Gupta and Amir Ullah Khan acknowledge in their respective work on film and television distribution in India, piracy has flourished in India since the 1980s when as many as

100,000 video libraries were set up selling pirated films. The satellite boom of the 2000s with more than 30 million cable connections took piracy to even greater levels. Whilst most critics view digital media piracy as a phenomenon that undermines media business models and disrupts market equilibriums, Athique and Hill note that it has also led to new forms of informal economies, a wider consumer base and access for people like Ravi who cannot otherwise see the official programme. Piracy in India, as Liang and Sundaram argue, is shaped by a 'familiar set of global transformations in the production, circulation, and regulation of media and culture'.

It is a common sight in Gariahat, a prominent shopping district in Kolkata, to see several street vendors scattered across the pavements selling pirated books and DVDs. These are not sold in secret and one can see all the major foreign titles displayed prominently on the stands. Porn DVDs are also sold but these are kept separately and sold in black polythene bags to not embarrass the customer. Police raids are infrequent, and as one vendor I spoke to confided in me,

What will the police do? They get their weekly hafta (bribe) from all the hawkers and they stay silent. In addition, we also pay the ruling party goons and they too stay silent. I have been selling on this spot for the last eight years and have never been seized. I think it happens in the bigger cities (like Delhi and Mumbai) and some of the central spots of the city but I have been left in peace. </EXT> <SRC>(Ramesh, Pirate DVD Vendor, 58)

Ramesh is one of the many street vendors in Gariahat. According to Liang and Sundaram, as the CD/DVD piracy industry became commonplace from the 1990s, areas such as Central, New Market and Gariahat have emerged as iconic centres for pirated films and DVDs in Kolkata. When I browsed through Ramesh's DVD wares in 2012, he was already selling pirated copies of *Game of Thrones*. The HBO series was one of his fastest-selling products, as he said smiling, 'Hot scenes hain' ('There are hot scenes'). In fact, as Natalie Jarvey in the *Hollywood Reporter* notes, *Game of Thrones* is one of the most pirated television shows ever with illegal downloads up to 7 million in the first quarter of 2015. Vendors such as Ramesh know their customers very well and stock up on the most recent films and television shows. In addition, he explained that when a film first appears, it might be a poor print, also called 'hall copy' (illicit

copyfilmed through handheld devices in a theatre), but with television shows he can always get HD versions and thus charge a higher price. As Liang and Sundaram point out – and as Ramesh can attest – the margins in this business are slim and thus ‘volume sales are critical’.

By the time I visited Kolkata again in 2015, this model had shifted dramatically. Whilst pirated DVDs could still be found, most viewers of *Game of Thrones* had moved on to downloading torrents and watching the show through live streaming. According to Ninan Thomas, this was a result of the ‘digital India’ boom, which saw fast 3G and 4G technology and cheap Internet made available through several Internet service providers (ISP).

I am just downloading and watching Game of Thrones through torrents. They are fast and I can download the entire series overnight. I usually waited for the series to complete before downloading them but now all my friends have started posting statuses on Facebook and whatnot making it difficult to avoid spoilers so I just download the day after it has been telecast abroad. </EXT> <SRC>(Kishen, Professional, 23)

People like Kishen still prefer to watch *Game of Thrones* online rather than watch the ‘official’ broadcast, which was by now available on several satellite channels in India such as HBO Defined. This was because the version that was available to Indian viewers was heavily censored and, as Kishen explained, ‘there is no point watching that’. In April 2016, it was announced that Season 6 of the show would move from HBO Defined to Star World and would only be broadcast two days after the US broadcast, presumably to cut down on piracy. For some viewers, like Ravi and Kishen, this was still not good enough. As Ravi explained, ‘I am not going to wait for two days. There is no point. All my friends will have seen it already. I will just continue to download and watch the series’.

Queer intimacies

As explained in the introduction, my research was aimed at the queer audience of *Game of Thrones*. There were several reasons for this. Homosexuality had been outlawed in India under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, put in place in 1860, but in 2009, two years before I began my research, the Delhi High Court found the law to be in violation of the Indian Constitution. Following the ruling, there was a growth of queer consciousness, queer media and

more open dialogue about homosexuality. Films such as *Dostana* ('Friendship') (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008), *Memories in March* (Sanjoy Nag, 2010) and *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2012) have paved the way for greater queer representation in the Indian media landscape (Dasgupta, forthcoming). Even with this handful of films, however, queer representation on Indian television is still rare. Furthermore, homosexuality was again re-criminalized in December 2013 after the Supreme Court rejected the earlier ruling from 2009. Since then, human rights groups and advocates have been protesting the law, and as of early 2016, it is once again under review with the Indian Supreme Court. It is within this turbulent political setting that *Game of Thrones* has achieved such high success within the queer community.

Game of Thrones has several gay/queer characters but the two that were most popular amongst my research participants were Renly Baratheon (Gethin Anthony) and Loras Tyrell (Finn Jones). Baratheon and Tyrell were star-crossed lovers who had to keep their relationship secret for fear of social ostracization and violent reprisal from the public. As Govind, one of the *Game of Thrones* fans I spoke to, explained:

*Renly and Loras basically mirror what we go through in India. They are both very handsome, successful and so much in love yet they can never be together because it is not socially acceptable in Westeros. I was a bit surprised when I first started watching *Game of Thrones* because I had never read the books and did not even know there were gay characters, but it was a pleasant surprise and I can relate a lot to their love story. (Govind, Student, 22)*

Govind articulated the difficulties of being queer in India and the lack of queer characters in Indian television and media. Whilst scholars such as Shohini Ghosh argue that 'the silence around queerness is decisively broken', they also explain that this is mostly through ambivalent discourses that invoke queer desire through a process of 'misreading' (also called slash goggles in fandom parlance). People like Govind believe that true acceptance is still hard to find and that 'real queer characters' are still not easily found within Indian media discourse.

There is also wide-ranging agreement amongst queer female viewers that the series has a propensity for violence against its female characters. From main characters such as Cersei, who we see in a controversial scene from Sea-

son 4 being raped by her brother Jaime Lannister, to the gruesome death of the prostitute Ros by Joffrey's crossbow in Season 3, the sexualized violence almost seems to amplify the violence of the books. In fact, new characters have been created time and again only to become victims. As Rupa, another of the *Game of Thrones* fans I spoke to, explained:

As a queer woman watching this programme [...] the violence against women is just too much to take at times. Rampant misogyny. Whilst yes there are some queer characters, as a woman I don't think this takes away from the grotesque, almost self-satisfying sexualized violence that the show makers unleash time and again. (Rupa, Student, 240)

At the same time there are also strong female characters, such as Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth, whose strength comes from their assumption of masculine roles. Brienne, unlike Arya, has a strong physical appearance and is trained in combat. She is tall and muscular and almost androgynous. However, unlike the men of Westeros, she has a calm demeanour and only seems to pick up the sword to protect. Her physical appearance also defines her sexuality even though she admits to having had feelings for Lord Renly and is implied to be attracted to Jaime in later seasons. This makes her a much more complicated and layered character than most others and, as Rupa explained, also 'queer':

I love Brienne. When I first saw her make an appearance ['What Is Dead May Never Die', Season 2 Episode 3] I was struck by her masculine demeanour. I thought, here at last is going to be a female queer character. I was a bit taken aback by her romantic feelings for the male characters because I did not think that was the way it was heading, but despite that I think she challenges assumptions about gender and gender roles so she is definitely queer. Also she is hot and I like to read her as a lesbian character. (Rupa, Student, 24)

Queerness is more than just a sexual identity – it is about challenging normativity and the status quo, and subverting general assumptions about gender roles, performance and sexuality. In this regard, what Rupa says about Brienne is definitely true. Brienne is, after all, not just a tomboy (like Arya) but rather a much more defined character whose gender performance and 'queerness'

adds to her visibility and makes her occupy a different role in the show than most of the other female characters. At the same time, as fans such as Rupa have explained, through a process of 'misreading' Brienne assumes a queer sexuality for her many fans. In Season 6, Yara Greyjoy was revealed to be the series's first actual lesbian character, first being alluded to in the brothel scene in the seventh episode. Yara Greyjoy and Daenerys's flirtation and on-screen chemistry is welcomed by fans such as Rupa, who said it is 'a step in the right direction. Hope they don't shy away from a meaningful storyline there'. Whilst women such as Brienne are breaking the gender roles they are expected to fill, the queerest characters in the show still remain the men.

As Govind explained earlier, Renly and Loras are the two most visible characters and the pairing has spawned a great many works of fanfiction, memes and fanart on several forums, a testament to the popularity of these characters. To the credit of the showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, they have not shied away from non-heterosexual sex and a 'realistic' portrayal of male sexuality. Within certain limited contexts, the bodies of the male characters are also erotically displayed, if not as frequently as the female characters on the show.

However, in addition to Renly and Loras, another character who has merited discussion is Oberyn Martell (Pedro Pascal) who Ravi described as one of the 'hottest characters on the show'. Oberyn, who appears in Season 4, is depicted as bisexual and he expresses his sexuality more or less without much fear of shame or social ostracization. He is rumoured to have had sexual relations with his squires when his lover Ellaria (Indira Varma) is unavailable. It is also hinted on the show that the royalty of Dorne are quite open about being bisexual, and that the Dornish people have a more relaxed and accepting attitude towards sexuality in general. However, his untimely death in 'The Mountain and the Viper' (Season 4 Episode 8) kept his character from being fully developed. Getting to know more about Dorne and its comparatively liberal attitude towards sexuality is an area of frustration for fans such as Ravi: 'I think it was a cop out. Here you have a land where being gay/bi is okay and you have a major character who is openly queer unlike Renly, and then he is dropped – there is nothing more to it'.

Queer Indians still face much discrimination enshrined through the legal and social landscape of the country. Whilst it is true that queer culture in India over the last few years has made its mark on media, the focus is still on the political movement and gaining legal recognition for LGBT individuals.



Figure 1: Sakshi Tanwar meme (Source: Unknown, Personal Collection, 2015). Translation:

Small one, go to your room / I will not go / This is what I get after so many years of taking care of you.

Figure 2: Aditya Roy Kapoor as Robb Stark (Source: Scroll Droll, 2016).



There has been some growth of queer screen culture in India, but shows like *Game of Thrones* provide a way of disrupting the conventional queer narratives. As my respondents have pointed out, however, whilst *Game of Thrones* provides a viewing pleasure for its queer audiences, those same viewers are still critical of its misogyny.

Viral memes

It is evident that *Game of Thrones* has had a tremendous impact and influence in India and has even gone so far as to rival some of India's long-running soap operas. Indian soap opera culture has been described as a way through which Indian society's hopes, anxieties and aspirations can be measured. As Gokulsing writes, they have a profound effect on viewers through their storylines on social issues, family lives and, more recently, luxury lifestyles. *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* ('Because the Mother in Law Was a Daughter in Law Once') (2000–08) and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* ('Story of Every Home') (2000–08) have run for eight years each, and *Balika Vadhu* ('Child Bride') (2008–16) has just entered its eighth year.

Game of Thrones, which has been renewed for its seventh season and picked up by satellite channel providers in India, has also seen its fair share of mockery and 'indigenizing' to fit Indian values. For example, memes like the one below (Figure 11.1), which shows Sakshi Tanwar – popular actress from the television soap *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, who espouses Indian values and is depicted as the perfect mother – chastising Daenerys's dragons for not listening to her. Through a juxtaposition of shots, both from *Game of Thrones* and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, and the creation of descriptive intertitles, the fan recasts the dragon as an Indian child who is being chastised by their mother, and also shifts the role of motherhood to Sakshi from Daenerys.

In fact, mainstream newspapers such as the *Times of India* (7 May 2014) and the *Indian Express* (8 June 2016) also carried full-length features reimagining what *Game of Thrones* would look like if it was made in India with Bollywood stars. All of these are ways in which the show is personalized and given an In-

dian context for its various fans.

Perhaps a more interesting range of memes involved recasting each of the *Game of Thrones* characters against Indian politicians and drawing parallels between them. This was first published in the web portal ScoopWhoop on 5 April 2014, followed quickly by other media platforms picking up on it and creating their own versions. Whilst there are several such memes in existence, one of the more interesting and perhaps insidiously used examples during an election campaign was a comparison between Joffrey Lannister and Rahul Gandhi, as seen below. Gandhi, the great grandson of India's first prime minister and a politician who was and is tipped to be a possible prime minister, is depicted as someone who is cunning and conniving with no political qualifications and is only in his current position because of his family name. Interestingly, this entire range of memes not only targets the politicians in the opposition parties but also those in power. These became popular during the last general election between April and May 2014, making *Game of Thrones* an interesting case study – it is testament to the show's popularity that it was being used for election propaganda, not to mention the parallels that were being drawn between the contemporary political landscape of India and the brutal World of Westeros.

Although the preceding examples of fan memes are not exhaustive, they do represent the popularity of *Game of Thrones* in India. From the pirated versions of the uncensored DVDs to the unlikely queer fans, and finally the use of *Game of Thrones* fan material as political commentary, these manifestations can be understood as ways through which individuals in India understand, read and 'perform' the show. *Game of Thrones*, despite its cultural and historical differences, has found a steady viewership in India. The pavements are still selling DVDs of the show and new fans are constantly being introduced. Govind even mentioned doing a marathon of the show for queer fans. The fandom experience of *Game of Thrones* in India reveals the exciting ways through which fan practices can operate, and the show's popularity is visibly widespread, from the large metropolitan cities of Mumbai to the small towns of Nagpur. 1



Figure 3: Rahul Gandhi as Joffrey Lannister (Source: Unknown, Personal Collection, 2014).

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