

Rise of true events in OTT: An analysis through two series Trial by Fire and Jamtara

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ABSTRACT

OTT has given people the power to choose and see what they want and how they want and when they want. With the advent of Covid 19, OTT has seen an exponential rise in the country and with that a plethora of series, movies and shows have flooded the market pampering people for choice. But off late there has been a disproportionate rise in the recreation of true events into OTT series and shows. Real-life stories are exhilarating! From heart-racking dramas to adrenalin swelling action, series based on real-life events and stories are becoming hugely popular. While the numbers are stacking across all languages and platforms, it shows that there is intent in recreating history and giving people an understanding of what happened and how it happened and maybe an eventual closure. These gripping series offer a peek into the lives of the characters involved in these events. These are normal characters to inspirational leaders, from villains to unsung heroes and they bring alive parts of India that we may not be ready to face. This paper will look into the context of these true events, the reason why makers want to make them and its effects through the case study of two series based on true events Trial by Fire and *Jamtara*.

Keywords: *OTT, True Stories, Voyeurism*

Introduction

Realism in movies refers to what we call a slice of life. Cinematic realism traces its roots back to the realism arts movement and the area of philosophical realism. We usually decide whether a cinematic creation is realistic or not based on certain objective truths like if it has sensational happenings or a contained narrative that has had some effect on society. Realism is used in movies, not as a trope but to create intensely personal narratives that instantly connect the audience making them look at an event or a character in retrospect and at the same time introspect into their souls.

Simplistically speaking, realism is a reflection of the world we see and know, the walking talking colliding and imploding world around us. Some artists and philosophers don't believe that there is an objective "reality."

Realism began as an arts movement sometime in the 19th century. But it certainly does not negate the existence of realistic art before that. Statues in ancient Greece were regarded as real for their precise anatomy. But realism as we know it actually took off in mid- 19th century France. Realism in art was all about depicting life as it presented itself before us. Painters started bringing to life the common, the hitherto unimportant, the non-elitists in order to portray a slice of life. It's about taking into account what we consider reality from our perspective and transposing it onto an artistic medium, either through painting or sculpture, writing or photography, film or theatre, etc. Realism in movies depends both on narrative and visual realism. By narrative realism we mean bringing to life a chronology of events, keeping as close as possible to the way it occurred, its chronology and the characters involved in it. Whereas visual realism is recreating the setting as close as possible to that part of history and keeping it true to the setting. These movies have their foundations on reality with no escapist fantasy of a typical commercial blockbuster.

Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* and Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* are typical examples of movies based on realism. Structured almost in identical manner, these movies had realistic settings, relatable characters, and relevant narratives. Christopher Nolan called Ray's *Pather Panchali* an extraordinary piece of work and one of the best films ever made. Martin Scorsese, while speaking about Ray's influence on his own films, said that his movies opened his mind, inspired him as they did to a lot of film-makers. Scorsese felt that Ray's influence was incalculable. The fact that Ray's pictures are today as exciting, as revelatory and as moving as it was when they were made. That is the universal acceptance of movies dipped in realism.

That forms the basic premise of the realism in films. In this light let us analyse the two series in question to see if they fit the basic criteria of being realistic.

The Uphaar Fire

The Green Park area of New Delhi is a fashionable residential district of educated upper middle-class people and cantered on a busy market of the same name with men's and women's clothing wholesalers, boutiques, carpet makers, ice cream parlours, everyday repair shops and vegetarian restaurants thronging the area. The neighbourhood borders Deer Park, a vast wooded area popular for strolls and jogging, and home to peacocks, ducks, and deer. Crowded streets of the market and a melee of people always on the move make Green Park a busy business district. Smack in its centre was Uphaar, the entertainment oasis of the locality. With still internet taking

baby steps to people's homes and Mario and Contra were the most popular games on the net, Cinema was the focus on weekends.

On Friday the 13th of 1997 a fire broke out from a faulty transformer at the Uphaar Cinema Hall in this affluent Green Park area. It was screening the opening show of the patriotic Bollywood flick Border. The show was houseful. To make sure no one sneaked in without tickets the management decided to lock and bolt all the gates of the cinema hall including the exits to the first-floor balcony.

While about 750 people managed to escape the fire, those seated in the balcony seats were trapped because of a private box for the Ansal family, who owned the cinema, had been illegally added to the floor blocking access to exits. Fifty-nine people died due to asphyxiation and suffocation, and more than 100 were injured in the resultant stampede. Neelam and Shekhar Krishnamoorthy lost their two teenage children, Ujjwal, 13, and Unnati, 17, in that fire. For the unversed, it took 24 years of long, tiring, threatening, muck-racking, career breaking trials for the duo to finally get closure for their children's deaths. Uphaar cinema was owned by real estate agents Sushil and Gopal Ansal. After this two decade long legal wrangle, the Ansals were finally convicted to seven years in prison on 8 November 2021.

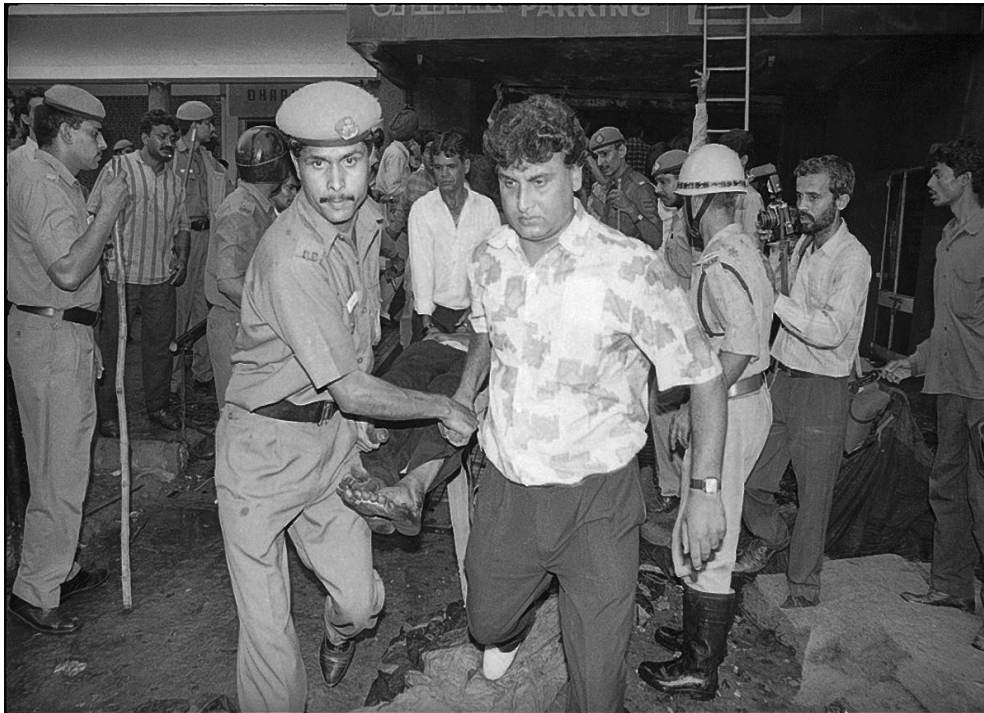


Picture 1: The charred seats of Uphaar (Source: HT)

The series, produced by Endemol Shine India and House of Talkies and directed by Prashant Nair, was inspired by the bestseller book, "Trial by Fire: The Tragic Tale of the Uphaar Fire Tragedy" by Neelam and Shekhar Krishnamoorthy. The director has beautifully captured the

heartbreaking yet resilient journey of the parents who lost their two children to the fire. The limited series depicted their endless trials, tribulations, frustration, hopelessness and a complete vacuum the lives of the victims' families that lasted over 24 years. It destroyed 59 lives inside the auditorium and hundreds outside who lived without a closure into the death of their kins.

While Abhay Deol essayed the role of Sekhar Krishnamoorthy, Rajashri Deshpande played the role of Neelam, Rajesh Tailang, Ashish Vidyarthi, Anupam Kher, Ratna Pathak, Shilpa Shukla, and Shardul Bharadwaj also featured in the movie.



Picture 2: People being rescued from the fire at Uphaar Cinema Hall (Source: HT)

The success of the movie was in staying true to the plot and the slow burning tragedy of a couple who refused to even consider themselves alive, consumed by the tragedy of their children dying in the fire. Such was their hopelessness that if a cake came for a birthday the husband hid it lest his wife thought he had moved on. On the other hand, the bulldogged mentality of pursuing the case on face of the seemingly insurmountable opposition, the prevalent horse trading so common in the society, corruption and nexus were brought out in graphic details, while the changing face of the capital city of India in the background showed how time changed even as the couple grew greys.

What made the series even more tragic was that commoners could identify with the plight of the couple, the warped legal system, the everyday struggles of the middle-class trying to adjust

and fit in into the situations without protest, because of priorities that began with mere survival all brought the series very close to the heart of any one trying to lead a normal life without any trouble.

The Uphaar tragedy was not a cinema hall on fire, it was the face of the general carelessness, lack of basic humanity and a casual cavalier mentality, that prevails in the upper echelons of the society who would go to any extent for squeezing out every penny of profit, while knowing they have enough money to do away with anything.

The sense of justice of them being booked under law, by no magic wand, but by a grind and struggle over two decades makes Trial by Fire such a fiery statement on Indian society. The timeline below is evidence of the impossibility of canning this story in the timespan of a movie. Little would be said, a lot left out and the verisimilitude of the case never understood properly.

Uphaar Cinema—Trial Timeline

Source: Times Now

1997-- 59 people die of asphyxia in a fire in South Delhi's Uphaar cinema during the screening of Hindi movie "Border". Over 100 people were injured in subsequent stampede.

Uphaar theatre owner Sushil Ansal and his son Pranav were arrested in Mumbai. Probe transferred from Delhi Police to Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). CBI files charge sheets against 16 accused including theatre owners Sushil and Gopal Ansal.

2001-- Court frames charges against accused under various sections, including sections 304 (culpable homicide), 304 A (causing death by negligent act) and 337 (hurt) of the IPC.

2003-- The Ansals plea seeking re-possession of the theatre rejected on the ground that place of incident is to be preserved to appreciate evidence. The Delhi High Court awards Rs 180 million compensation to be paid to relatives of victims.

2004-- Court starts recording statements of accused.

2005-- Recording of testimonies of defence witnesses begins. Additional Sessions Judge Mamta Sehgal inspects the theatre.

2007-- Accused start advancing final arguments. Association of Victims of Uphaar Tragedy (AVUT) approaches the Delhi High Court seeking conclusion of trial within a time frame.

Senior advocate Harish Salve appears for CBI and advances final arguments. Judgement reserved. Court fixes 5 September for pronouncement of verdict. Court fixes Nov 20 as date of verdict.

Court convicts all 12 accused, including Sushil and Gopal Ansal, in the case and sentences them to two years imprisonment.

2008-- Delhi High Court grants bail to Ansal brothers and two other accused. Ansals sent to Tihar Jail after Supreme Court cancels their bail. Delhi High Court upholds trial court order convicting Ansal brothers but reduces their sentence from two years to one year.

2009-- Supreme Court issues notice on petition filed by AVUT, a platform of victims' families, for enhancement of sentence and alteration of charges. CBI too files appeal seeking enhancement

2014-- Judges differ on sentence. One judge awards one year, another sentences Ansals to term already undergone. Matter referred to three-judge bench

2015 -- Supreme Court allows Ansals to walk free after paying a fine of Rs 30 crore each

2017-- Supreme Court asks Gopal to undergo the remaining one-year jail term while his elder brother Sushil was given relief from incarceration, in view of age-related complications keeping in mind the prison term already served by him.

2021-- A Delhi court awarded seven-year jail terms to real estate barons Sushil and Gopal Ansal for tampering with evidence. Court also imposes a fine of Rs 2.5 crore on each of the Ansals.

Jamtara—Sab Ka Baari Aayega

Jamtara is relatively new district created out of Dumka district in Jharkhand. It has Deoghar district to its North, Dumka and West Bengal to its East, Dhanbad and West Bengal bordering South and Giridih in the West. This small Naxalite belt hit the headlines for a completely different reason. Such was the slickness of the crime for which it topped news that people started saying that they have become a victim of *Jamtara (Humare sath bhi Jamtara hua)*. *Jamtara* had recently gained notoriety for being a hub of phishing scams, sextortion, blackmailing and bank frauds. These frauds involved a group of scammers who posed as representatives of banks or

insurance firms to trick gullible individuals into revealing their personal and financial information, such as bank account numbers, passwords, and credit card details.

The scammers then used this information to empty their bank accounts, claim insurance or make huge amounts of unauthorised purchases besides transferring money out of the victim's accounts or withdrawing cash from ATMs.

They often used social engineering, where they built rapport with the victims, to con them of their money. It became a major law and order concern for law enforcement agencies in India. In 2020 Delhi Police arrested six people from *Jamtara* for conning over 2,500 individuals of Rs One crore via customer care centres.

According to Trishant Srivastava who wrote the story of *Jamtara-Sab Ka Bari Aayega* when *Jamtara* happened not many were aware of cybercrimes. Post demonetisation, people across the country were using different forms of digital payment. One could suddenly see the spurt of activity in the digital format post demonetisation with e-wallets and digital payments becoming very popular. With that was a rise in cyber frauds.



Picture 3: Delhi Police Cyber Crime branch busted a fake call centre syndicate from *Jamtara* (Jharkhand) with the arrest of six persons which led to the recovery of 22,000 sim cards used in the crime. (Source: ANI photo)

The creators went to *Jamtara* and spoke to the locals, police, and anyone who could share any information about the crimes. During the research it was found out that this small town was also in the Naxalite belt and the boy who committed this crime were mostly in the 16-20 years age bracket and they made almost 100-200 calls in a day.



Picture 4: Screen grab of Jamtara- Saab Ka Baari Aayega from Netflix

The series Jamtara hit at the very base of the crime and worked on the essence of Jamtara which was to understand the essence of cybercrime. The reason why Jamtara became a fraud model was because these scam-stars capitalised on human greed, the whole national mindset of getting more by paying less, the culture of freebies and offers and discounts.

The languid small town mentality, the gullible nature of the people, easy preys to offers, understanding of the demography and the local lingo, made the series Jamtara real in every aspect.

The colour, culture and habits of the people, the urge for social stratification and freewill to get more out of lives, make the series connect instantly with the semi-urban and rural crowd as they see themselves and with the urban as they find a novelty in the depiction of their lives. The fact that these fraudsters are not the sharpest minds, connect with the young adults who do nothing with their lives and the fact that they still had figured out a way to dupe people of their money make Jamtara an intense watch.

Jamtara director Soumendra Padhi observed that the issue of phishing was so common that it went under the radar, and remained largely underrepresented in the media. But the stories of these scams are so simple and yet so real and unbelievable that once brought out in a detailed plot it caught the public eye. The series required extensive research and detailing to bring to life various characters and their motives.

The trailer of Jamtara begin with a couple of small-town boys mimicking a girl as they call an unsuspecting target sitting on the *mancha* of a field of corn. They hide their money outside

sugarcane fields in the ground in the most coarse rustic manner. It's difficult to see how they would con the so-called educated people with just a bunch of bogus freebies and convincing dialects and voices. But they do. And it is impossible to recreate the who substance of this process in the time bound limitation of movies.

The series has an ensemble cast of Amit Sial, Dibyendu Bhattacharya, Aksha Pardasany, Sparsh Srivastava, Monika Panwar and Anshumaan Pushkar, with no real hero or villain. It is this platitude with the viewers left to decide for themselves who is what is the biggest gift of OTT.

So why does it work!

Character Selects Medium-- One sheer advantage that OTT have over movies is its extended timeline. A movie has to be done and dusted in three hours max, but an OTT can run for eight episodes and even over seasons. Each episode is like an individual movie leading on to the other, giving the storyteller a much bigger canvas to go into the finer details of the act. It is of prime importance when one wants to recreate a real-life event.

But then stories have their own character, and they differ from each other in the most unique manner. Some stories though based on real life are meant to be movies only like Richard Attenborough's Gandhi. And some are just not meant for a movie. It all boils down to how each story is being narrated. If the plot is too big, too intriguing, has too many characters, and is spread on a much lengthier timeline, it certainly can't be made into a movie.

Being on OTT means there is scope for greater exploring of facts. OTT requires a special skill set for plotting of the story and creating the character arcs. OTT has its own advantages and challenges.

But when a story demands a larger canvas, a more complex intertwining of relation, better lay out of plot and stronger delineation of characters OTT is the fittest medium.

For both the series in question it is the very character of the story—one an unending heartless court battle following a heart-breaking tragedy and the other a story of a quicksilver crime of rustic in nature and cosmopolitan in effect--- demanded detailed storyline, approach and storytelling format making OTT the correct destination.

Being authentic—When there is this license to go into the depths of stories, comes the responsibility to be to get to that point, the makers must put together a strong and dedicated research team who would do the groundwork recheck the facts and get authentic proofs to back

the work. Research often is the key to the success of such projects. There is another way and that is to base the work on a non-fiction book written by an expert on the field or an eye-witness to an incident or maybe a journalist who has investigated an incident. But even in these cases what is need is double checking of facts.

Authenticity is perhaps the most important criteria while creating a work of art based on a real life incident. This is directly proportional to the responsibility the narrator has while chronicling somebody's life and the events surrounding that person's life. A whole lot of emotions are attached with it and any distorted portrayal could be heart-breaking or enraging.

While OTT has the scope the span to widen the canvas, the subject can't be taken lightly. Any effort to fictionalize and dramatize the story has to be done with responsibility and making it sure that the real story is not tampered with. OTT gives that scope.

This becomes all the more pertinent when the character of the story is directly involved with the production. *Trial by Fire* and *Jamtara* are two completely different kind of recreation of reality, but the people involved are real and alive. In the first case the couple who fought the case for so long and got a closure needed to be taken into confidence during the shoot. It needed sensitive handling and at the same time the makers needed to be careful not to run into libel. In the second case though the scamsters were perpetrators of crime, they had family, friends and next of kins who could be stigmatised by the crime committed by these youngsters. That had to be taken into consideration while remaining true to the story.

With good research and the license to tell both sides of the story, OTT becomes the ideal medium to tell their stories. While telling the life story of a person still alive needs to treat sensibly and with enough tact and consideration. The audience today consumes a lot of highquality content on OTT from across the globe and knows what good and bad content is. They also know what is real and genuine and what is pulp fiction. The OTT helps makers set the bar real high.

Protagonist who! — A movie usually has a hero and anti-hero, and the scripts revolve around them. Their characters are fleshed out and others merely form satellites around the two central figures.

OTT liberates the makers from this pre-determined limitation of characterization. With this extended runtime, the makers get the freedom to explore in greater depths the various characters and it helps when a reality show has an ensembled cast. A reality series that is working on a big canvas with several characters looks for this opportunity and OTT seem to be a perfect fit.

What the OTT does is allows the makers to move into the back stories and create the support characters who then go on to play equally important roles in the story. This does not only make the storytelling more concrete and real, but also places the story in context and gives it the deserved perspective. It links better with the viewers and the connect is immediately established.

In both the series several characters leave their mark, like the couple in *Trial by Fire* who lost their 'good son' and how the man from slowly being hopeless became one of the standout fighters, or the cleaner played by Asish Vidyarthi and how his family is also not left unscathed by the fire. Though he plays the agent of evil in the series, there is a humane element in his character that the episodic nature helped bring out. Likewise, in *Jamtara* the young woman Superintendent of Police and the family struggles she faces while trying to break the nexus in the profession and a girl from a higher caste marries a boy of a lower caste just for a better living. These characters rise in stature and claim their pound of flesh in the series.

Local people, local colour, local language and in OTT gives the makers the opportunity to make icons and memorable character sketches out of them. We take a cursory look at the OTT channels and multiple shows based on or inspired from real events, ranging from true crime and biopic to historical drama, fills the trending shows roster. The proof of the pie, therefore.

No commercial restrictions—Commercial success is a big thing for films. If the film bombs at the box office, it is relegated to a lot of flops and are easily forgotten. They may be good films, that have got critical acclaim. Henceforth, producers think twice before investing money in films, which for the lack of a better phrase, are not mainstream. For example, Director Soumendra Padhi made the movie *Budhia Singh*, based on the life of a long-distance runner in 2016.

The movie was critically acclaimed and even went on to win a National Award. But it was a commercial failure. It did not reach out to the masses and the ultimate aim of making such a movie, which was to inspire people failed.

There is no such pressure in OTT. Once on OTT it is not limited to the multiplexes, its available on every hand-held device with internet facility across the country. Padhi came back to create his new OTT series based on a phishing racket in *Jamtara* district of Jharkhand. The series became an instant hit, as it related to the local flavour of the heartland of India. The pressure is instantly off on OTT.

We have heard that films get stuck for years with no hope for release ever. And the term ‘movie is canned’ is a regular refrain for the people moving around the circuit. There are several reasons for a movie being canned.

Some producers go bust, sometimes it gets stuck for reasons beyond control, but when a movie gets stuck for creative reasons or because people feel that this movie could bring about a controversy. Like for the series *Trial by Fire* a case was filed by real-estate baron Sushil Ansal to stay the release of the movie on Netflix. But the court ruled against it. As a film it could easily have faced a problem. With no takers wanting to risk its release, but for OTT there was no such thing.

Besides, a brooding slow burning tragedy, a travesty of justice and a struggle to get a closure can't become the prime palette of a movie. In movies people go to entertain themselves. Movies call for a cathartic effect. *Trial by Fire* is thus a perfect fit for OTT where people can view the series at length trying to understand the truth with the director and the producer not worried about the commercial returns.

Besides once on OTT, the work is much more visible as it's on the handset and trailers are all over social media. Projects like this require an elaborate storytelling, OTT gives breathing space to independent filmmakers and also people who want to break the stereotypical storytelling and try out different stuff that challenges the societal norms, the prevalent mindset and general social construct. Once on OTT the audience who care for different stuff will eventually find their way to the work and then spread the word sharing and recommending.

This is one major pull for the OTT.

My phone, my choice of OTT— Still for the majority of the people in India, Cinema is an event when the family gets dressed up and leave to enjoy an evening. When a person goes to watch a movie, he or she wants to get his money's worth within the timebank of 120 minutes, but a brooding, sad, painful depiction of deaths and macabre could be an unwanted menu.

In contrast OTT is a personal space. A riveting script that reeks of justice, though served cold, could attract viewers who want to delve into the emotional turmoil and undertake the journey of two grieving parents. He or she watches the show alone, the realizations are personal and how they would react to it would be unique also. Therefore, stories like these make sense here because it won't work if you just walked into a theatre to get entertained. This is also

entertainment but of a different nature where you get to feel and almost live the characters and their pain. No wonder OTT platforms want more of these, on an intensely personal space.

Conclusion

To conclude, true stories have always been of a certain attraction. Real-life events have the substance and potential to mesmerize audiences as they are so much authentic and relatable. In this creative space where fictional storytelling can sometimes be predictable or even formulaic, creations out of true stories provide a fresh canvas to paint your views and often give a completely unpredictable perspective to an issue that had been around. Moreover, there has suddenly been availability of more true stories than before thanks to internet and the media boom. With such easy access to news, articles, documentaries, and personal accounts, creators have a wealth of material from the source and independent data to make the stories.

Furthermore, the heady concoction that the viewers get from experiencing real life events with the creative liberties needed for aesthetic storytelling make for glued viewing. This hybrid approach enhances the viewer experience. Finally, these true stories have a moral binding to it which includes several themes such as human resilience, human triumph, justice, or even dark aspects of society illuminated by a narrative. To sum up, true stories on OTT channels fulfilled the entire gamut of viewer satisfaction touching all the moot points from authenticity and intriguing narratives, combined with entertainment and aesthetic pleasure.

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