



Review Article

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Hope, Inspiration, and Social Injustice of Transgender: Review of the film *Taali*

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ABSTRACT

Taali is a biographical web series about Indian transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant. Sawant is a well-known social worker and supporter of transgender rights who lives in Mumbai. As a petitioner, she was vital to the Supreme Court of India's ground-breaking decision 2014. This decision gave transgender people legal status, giving them a wide range of civil rights and protections. After filling the petition, she was in the limelight in Indian media, so many newspapers, websites, and channels interviewed her.

INTRODUCTION

Taali is a biographical web series about Indian transgender activist Shreegauri Sawant. Sawant is a well-known social worker and supporter of transgender rights who lives in Mumbai. As a petitioner, she was vital to the Supreme Court of India's ground-breaking decision 2014. This decision gave transgender people legal status, giving them a wide range of civil rights and protections. After filling the petition, she was in the limelight in Indian media, so many newspapers, websites, and channels interviewed her.

Sawant's unwavering dedication and advocacy efforts were instrumental in achieving official recognition of the third gender in various official papers inside the country. The decision to cast Sushmita Sen, a former Miss Universe known for her elegance and feminine aesthetics, as a transgender character can be considered a remarkably audacious choice. *Arddhanaari*, also known as Half-Woman, is a Telugu-language film of the vigilante action-drama

genre written and directed by Chowdary (2016). The narrative centers on a protagonist who assumes the identity of a Hijra (transgender), a marginalized gender minority in South Asia, and becomes a leader in the struggle against social injustice. The protagonist also adopts the role of a punisher, seeking retribution for wrongdoing.

In 2010, Sen expressed her sentiments about adopting her first daughter, Renee, stating that while Renee was not biologically related to her, she held a deep emotional connection. This convergence between Sen and transgender activist Sawant, whom she portrays remarkably in *Taali*, represents one of the numerous alignment points between them. Although limited information is available regarding Sawant's pursuit of adoptive rights, it is noteworthy that the duo displayed a carefree and confident demeanor as they navigated the legal system to obtain the right to adopt and subsequently assume the role of motherhood.

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In a particular moment within the film, *Taali*, a young female child, adorns Sawant's head with a paper crown, prompting her companion to inquire about her initial course of action in the hypothetical event of her being crowned Miss Universe. In this context, Sen or Sawant transports us to a significant occasion where the former was bestowed with a crown. This occasion was heralded by her memorable response characterized by a wide-open mouth and sparkling eyes.

Super Deluxe is a film of Indian origin that is primarily in the Tamil language. It was co-written, co-produced, and directed by *Kumararaja (2019)*. Its narrative centers on four distinct cohorts who encounter unforeseen circumstances, with each group on the brink of encountering their predetermined fate, all within a single momentous day. It starts wineries delving into Gauri's formative years as Ganesh, a schoolboy from Pune. Ganesh faces bullying from his peers due to his perceived femininity, as evidenced by his desire to become a mother, which is met with ridicule from his classmates.

Additionally, Ganesh's family fails to comprehend his true nature, thus exacerbating the challenges he faces. In the privacy of his residence, he assumes the attire traditionally associated with the female gender and engages in the practice of Lavani, a folk dance originating from the Maharashtra region, while standing before a reflective surface. This performance takes place within the context of a community event held in the vicinity. However, the protagonist's father responds vehemently to his son's display of feminine behavior. He persuades him to commit to refrain from engaging in feminine dancing movements in the future. However, chaos ensues shortly after that, following the demise of his mother.

Rao's portrayal of the character Ganesh has a high level of expressiveness as he navigates the challenges of establishing effective communication with his father, a police officer, and strives to maintain his mental well-being while being subjected to medical intervention for his perceived shortcomings. The individual embarks on a journey to Mumbai, a metropolitan city in India, and alights at a densely populated station. Subsequently, a pivotal moment occurs wherein Ganesh undergoes a surgical procedure to transition to Gauri, assuming a new gender identity. Gauri then undertakes the noble task of raising awareness regarding transgender rights, culminating in submitting a petition to the Supreme Court of India. At that moment, the advocate council and journalist took an interview and created conflict in her life. The objective of this legal action is to secure official recognition of the third gender as citizens and to grant them the legal entitlement to be included in all official documents in the country.

Sawant's life is characterized by several challenges and obstacles related to identity, survival, and equality. Her adventure will be remembered for generations. Simultaneously, it exhibits qualities of inspiration,

audacity, and pioneering. While the series does cover both the peaks and valleys of her experiences, it fails to adequately capture the compelling narrative of her continuous defiance of societal norms throughout her lifetime. Indeed, it is true that there exist some instances that have the potential to evoke strong emotions and cause profound sadness. However, the screenplay needs to be more consistent in its pacing. Occasionally, individuals may experience a sense of disconnection or disinterest in the tale. The composition needs to sustain reader engagement over its entirety. However, when it diminishes in brilliance, Sen and her captivating performance intervene and assist.

Bajaungi nahi, bajwaungi (I will not clap; I will make you clap for me), says Sen in the first episode of *Taali*. Moreover, from then on, know this will not be one of those Bollywood films/series where transgender people are comically shown as *hijras* (transgender), intimidating people on the streets. It is not a film but a revolution of the transgender journey in India.

Jadhav (2023), a renowned director who has received national recognition for his work, has garnered significant attention from audiences due to his unique selection of an actress to portray the character of Sawant in the film *Taali*. This director is well-known for his successful Marathi films like *Natarang*, *Balgandharva*, and *Balak-Palak*. Sen demonstrates a profound commitment and sincerity in her portrayal, investing her utmost effort and dedication. Nevertheless, the outcome is a conglomeration of impactful instances from Sawant's life and an extensive and arduous storyline that occasionally fails to captivate the audience. The rationale behind this observation lies in the script's tendency to avoid ultimately depicting the challenging aspects of transsexual existence. A significant portion of the depiction has undergone a process of sanitization and superficiality, occasionally failing to delve into the depths of our emotional core effectively. The sluggish tempo of the series exacerbates these concerns, prompting speculation as to whether the storyline could have been more successful as a condensed two-hour feature.

Daayra (The Square Circle) is a Bollywood film directed by *Palekar (1996)*. The screenplay was authored by *Timeri N. Murari*, a highly acclaimed Indian journalist and novelist. Its narrative delves into various subjects, including the dynamics of male-female relationships, preconceived ideas surrounding love, and societal perspectives. The storyline revolves around a romantic connection between a transsexual dancer and a lady who has experienced sexual assault, leading her to adopt masculine attire. The theatrical distribution of the film in India was withheld due to the presence of sensitive issues.

Sen looks the part to a T, especially when Sawant starts coming into her own as a social worker and activist, fighting for the rights of others like her, sari-and-big-bindi (Indian attire) in place, striding at the forefront of her flock. When she entered the court, a lot of Indian media

was ready to interview her, but during that time, one fake advocate came and blackened her face. The media kept watching it during that time, and no one protested it. However, she keeps wishing to feel the pain and turmoil someone like her has lived with all her waking moments. The sequences where she bursts out in anger are overlaid with dialogues like: 'jisne mera aisa makeup kara hai, ab main unka pack up karaongi,' (The person who did this makeup for me, now I will get the pack up for him) come off more filmi than anything else.

Several moments in the series will break the audience's heart. We see little kids abandoned on the streets and how Gauri adopts them. In another sequence, one of her trans friends dies by suicide, and the hospital throws her body on the ground next to the overflowing bin. It will choke to see how badly trans people were treated, especially in earlier days.

Sen has delivered the best performance of her career with *Taali*. She and Gauri become one person; sometimes, it is hard to distinguish between them. She is a total *bindaas* (calm) person who scares those who wrong her and her friends with a very manly voice. Sometimes, we must remember that Sen is a mere character performing a role. There is not even a moment when Sen will question the makers' casting choice. No one could have done what she did.

Sen's wide eyes, a strong pitch in her voice like a man, her angered expression, body language, mannerisms, and perfect makeup - everything is on point. She fit into the character well. *Taali* will end up as a successful show only because of her performance. It is more complicated to play a man. Even as Ganesh, Sen is convincing. She does not make a caricature of her character.

As Gauri, Sen shapes her performance, matching the loud tone of the series. There is a commanding aura in how she carries the character, which works in some dramatic sequences. The decision to make her play the younger version of Gauri was terrible, especially in that sequence where 47-year-old Sen plays the part of the younger sister to 34-year-old Hemangi Kavi. Krutika Deo, who played the youngest version of the central character, was good. Many other Marathi actors are also part of the cast. However, the writing is so cheesy and one-dimensional that none of those performances ever manages to register an impact.

Naanu Avanalla...Avalu is an Indian Kannada-language film made by *Lingadevaru* (2015). It portrays the life of Living Smile Vidya, a transgender woman, and explores her experiences as she navigates her gender identity. From a young age, Vidya embraces her feminine qualities and eventually transitions to living as a woman. The film sheds light on the challenges faced by the transgender community within Indian society. Sanchari Vijay portrays the character of (Vidya), while Sumithra, Kunal Punekar, and Sundar play supporting roles. It debuted at the 62nd National Film Festival in May 2015, where it received recognition by winning two honors at the 62nd National

Film Honours. These awards were bestowed to the film for the categories of Best Actor, awarded to Vijay, and Best Makeup Artist, awarded to Raju and Nagaraj. Prior to its theatrical debut in India on September 25, 2015, the film had its premiere at the Melbourne International Film Festival in August 2015.

Darmiyaan

In Between is a cinematic production from India, helmed by director *Lajmi* (1997). The film is situated against the backdrop of Bollywood during the 1940s and narrates the tale of an actress who becomes aware of her son's eunuch identity.

Laxmii is a Hindi horror comedy film written and directed by *Lawrence* (2020), a cinematic adaptation of the original Tamil film *Kanchana* (2011). The film's central focus is on individuals who become inhabited by the spirit of a transgender individual.

Njan Marykutty (I am Marykutty) is a Malayalam drama film written and directed by *Sankar* (2018). It aimed to provide educational content to its viewers regarding the challenges encountered by those who identify as transgender. Its narrative also elucidates the distinction between transgender individuals and those who have undergone gender-affirming surgery. By doing so, the film effectively portrayed the experiences of families enduring trauma and the emotional and physical hardships faced by individuals within this community resulting from societal and governmental actions.

Jadhav (2023), who has directed the series, must use the format's scope to make this real story impactful. He is just using the existing template of true stories where the audience can easily guess the key points. However, what the character did in that finale to get respect felt very problematic and made us wonder whether that incident happened that way or whether the makers took the cinematic liberty.

Taali has six episodes with an approximate duration of thirty minutes each. As a series, it is an absolute dud that only offers something praise-worthy in this crowded OTT space. The only good thing about the series is that since Jio cinema (OTT platform) is free, the possibility of Sawant's getting a wider reach and appreciation for what she has done for the community is high. The music in the series adds a lot to the story, especially the opening, which is very interesting. Much thought went into duplicating the clothes and atmosphere of old Mumbai. Sen's makeup and slow change are meant to shock, and she lets go of all her inhibitions to play the part. Despite the imperfect show, Sen and Sawant deserve a round of *Taali* for their unwavering commitment to doing something different. Even though it has flaws, it is a series made with much maturity. It makes people feel like they want to help others.

It moves at a slow pace and does not have any exciting moments. Even though it is not a thriller, the fact that each show does not end with a cliffhanger might make it

less likely that people will watch it all in one sitting. Even though it has a good heart, and there are many times when we want to stand up and cheer for Sawant, the story lacks depth. Many things that could have made us feel something make little impression. The subtleties and complexities of Sawant's life and the depth of her bonds need to be shown better. So, what could have been a moving and emotionally rich story about the path to acceptance becomes just another story about that path.

The biggest applause should go to Sen for how well she got under Sawant's skin. She is a master of her voice, body language, habits, and how she says things. Sen does a great job, even as Ganesh. It is not easy to act like a man. However, our Miss Universe shows that she can do everything. She walks a fine line and makes sure that the role of a transgender woman is not too stereotypical. She also brings a lot of grace, strength, dignity, and stillness to the table, and her act makes a heartbeat. She has both Aarya's toughness and Miss Chandni's gentleness. She takes this contrast in stride, and watching her light up each frame is a pure joy.

Sheetal Kale played a unique role as Nargis, and Ankur Bhatia plays Navin, a gay rights activist, but his character is not very well developed, so he does not add much to the plot. Krutika Deo is praised for playing young Ganesh with much vulnerability, like an experienced artist. She plays down Ganesh's girly traits, walk, and reflexes and gives a classy performance. Even though Sen is the superstar in the series, the rest of the cast, most of whom are from the Marathi film business, backs her up nicely.

Even though *Taali* is not quite as good as it could be, writers Arjun Singh Baran and Kartk D Nishandar and

director Ravi Jadhav deserve credit for bringing the exciting story of Sawant to life. Her story should be told far and wide. Maybe this was a missed chance because someone from the transgender group could have played the main character. However, give it a chance and see how Sen makes the story come alive and spark. Moreover, this should tell us why we need actors and artists like her to lead more and more of these stories that need to be told. It takes a lot of guts and courage to take on a job as complex and complicated as this one. After this film, everyone is interested in knowing more about Gauri and her journey. National and international media viewpoints are readily available on newspapers, channels, radio stations, online sources such as interviews, movie review websites, entertainment news outlets, and social media platforms where discussions and reviews about films are often shared.

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