

Web streaming shows dabble in bold, political themes to target youth

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A bunch of content creators have found the liberty to work on controversial subjects such as religion and militancy for video-streaming platforms, which traditional media such as film and television have shunned.

While Netflix originals such as *Leila* and *Ghoul* are set in dystopian worlds of the future where opposing religious views and inter-faith marriages are condemned and their proponents imprisoned, a ZEE5 show called *Kaafir*, featuring actor Dia Mirza, is set in militancy-affected Kashmir. Programming

industry experts said these are bold political themes to take up, and they have emerged precisely because of the free nature of the medium.

"The youth comprises about 50% of the population of India. That generation was possibly not watching television in the last three to four years, and there were very limited avenues for them to get their kind of content. That audience wants something real and relatable. Now, streaming services have opened up an entire Pandora's box and things are moving like wildfire," said Deepak Dhar, founder and chief executive officer of content studio Banijay Asia.

Sameer Nair, television



A still from ZEE5 show *Kaafir*. The Dia Mirza-starrer is set in militancy-affected Kashmir.

industry veteran and chief executive of content studio Applause Entertainment, said it may also be a case of how the TV medium per se has grown

over the past 20 years, and become a platform for mass audience entertainment. "Some of these themes, stories and subjects may not rate well

on TV and, hence, are not done on TV," Nair said, citing experimental TV shows such as political thriller *Prisoner of War*, and action drama *24*, which did not find much acceptance in India. Nair is now working on a show called *Avrodh* based on the 2016 Uri attacks, from a political and journalistic perspective.

"The economics of the OTT (over-the-top) medium allow you to tell different stories. Some of the stories tend to either play out as dystopian futures, or address what would be defined as more uncomfortable issues. It is based on more individualistic viewership, it's not a one-size-fits-all family television slot, and it's not rating-dependent," Nair added.

Kaafir writer Bhavani Iyer said the absence of censorship on the web allows a creator to tell the story in the most truthful manner possible. The Dia Mirza-starrer was originally written as a film 13 years ago, but the subject was considered too sensitive.

"It does make a lot of difference because you don't have to factor in these things at all. Plus, our show has reached out to all kinds of people, not just the urban multiplex kind of viewers. There is no patronizing of the audience. There is no 'they may not like this' thought. Everybody has access to what is available and it's up to the viewer to choose what they want to," Iyer said.