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That 2010s Show: How a TV Series Brought Teenagers Home to Indian Audiences

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'Gumrah', a show that aired in the early 2010s, brought to television the worries and optimism about adolescents in the post-Liberalisation decades. Its concerns and unaddressed tensions continue to echo in contemporary debates about raising teenagers well.

The 2010s were great years for youth culture and representation in popular media. The satellite television revolution, then two decades old, allowed television channels to focus on specific demographics. Youth were deemed as a profitable market (Kumar 2014) and a host of channels were entirely dedicated to their aesthetic preferences.

Initially airing light-hearted romances and dramas set in school or college campuses, into the decade, television picked up darker themes: crime, adultery and suicide.

The trend was inaugurated by a show on Channel [V] called *Gumrah: End of Innocence*, which dramatised stories of teen crime. Produced by ALTBalaji, it aired between 2012 and 2016, hosted each year by a different film and TV celebrity (Karan Kundra, Karanvir Bohra, Karan Patel, and Abhay Deol variously played the lead), with guest appearances by other stars. *Gumrah* was one of the few shows that directly addressed adolescents and spoke unflinchingly about 'dark topics' usually reserved for adult viewing – jealousy, rejection, rape, and murder.

Gumrah approached teen life with a contemporary, piercing energy. In each episode, a cast of characters re-enacted a story, at the end of which a culprit was revealed or a shockingly tragic climax unfolded. Typically, towards the end the host spoke directly to the teen viewer, reminding them, "In just one moment, our life can completely change, in just one moment we can be led astray."

While *Gumrah* would be followed by other similar shows – *Pyaar Tune Kya Kiya, MTV Webbed, Confessions of an Indian Teenager, Big F*, and many more – many remember it as a distinct, compelling moment. It solidified teenage as a relatable category for Indian television audiences. There is a strong online nostalgia from people who worked their own adolescence through the show.

ndhr280 · 2y ago

This Gumrah show has kept me Single till date

⌄ 4 ⌄   Reply   ⬆ Share   ...

Scary_Giraffe_4996 · 2y ago

Lolll I can understand

⌃ 1 ⌄   Reply   ⬆ Share   ...

What does it mean for a television show to weigh in on teen lives and teen crime, and what made it memorable?

Situating *Gumrah*

The story of *Gumrah* begins with the economic liberalisation of the 1990s. As Doordarshan, the state monopoly broadcaster, gave way to satellite television, a range of channels in English and Hindi (Thussu 2007a) increasingly revolved around profiting from new audiences, leaving behind television's original goals of education and nation-building (Ibrahim 2012; Thussu 2007b). News media began to cover more of cricket, cinema and crime, 'Bollywoodising' news (Thussu 2007b). Film and television also relied more on the erotic (Mankekar 2004 quoted in Kumar 2014). As the boundaries between news and fiction storytelling began to blur, audiences expanded. Channels like MTV, Channel [V], and UTV Bindass targeted young people and purported to tell their stories.

Gumrah's story also has longer roots, in the history of how the concept of adolescence emerged in India, to the point that today it is widely acknowledged as a crucial period, where people begin to explore themselves, build their value systems, develop sexual desires, rebel, and understand their role in society (Tambe 2019). The first consequential steps were forged through the law in the late 19th and early 20th century. Debates over child marriage and age of consent aimed to establish the appropriate age of consent, boundaries between marital sex, non-marital sex and so-called prostitution, and state intervention in religious customs (Tambe 2019; Ghosh 2014).

Adolescence became a way to recognise that physiological maturity does not imply psychological and emotional maturity,and became a zone to help girls in some ways and control them in others (Tambe 2019; Ghosh 2014). That imagination of teenagers, first articulated in US psychology, moved into Indian lexicons in the 1920s and quickly gained strength. As historian Ashwini Tambe has recorded in *Defining Girlhood in India*, adults were now instructed to play a very specific role, because teenagers needed both protection and freedom (Tambe 2019; Kapadia 2017).

Despite worries over them, teenage also began to be associated with possibility: teens represented idealistic, vibrant leaders who would create a better future (UNICEF). They just had to be provided stimulating environments, where they could channel themselves, under parental supervision, in healthy ways (Tambe 2019). *Gumrah* reflected the worries and optimism with which the idea of adolescence was negotiated – more publicly than ever – as they came to a head in the new millennium.

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In December 2004, a video went viral over multi-media messaging service (MMS) – then a novel communication media – featuring a schoolgirl performing a sex act on her boyfriend. The "DPS MMS case", as it was called, caused great panic about the 'immoral' activities teenagers were up to, even as the clip itself was endlessly circulated.

Many scholars of media, technology and gender have pinned 2004 as a turning point for our relationship to new technologies (Shah 2015). The DPS MMS case reconfigured sexual consent and the act of watching. While individual lives were treated as collateral damage, 'MMS' ballooned into a media genre, encompassing everything from illicit homemade pornographic videos to Bollywood movies.

ALTBalaji and its boss Ekta Kapoor were key figures in this process of projecting these developments on the big screen. They financed Love Sex aur Dhokha, Ragini MMS and many more projects and sequels that drew on the theme —marking a stark shift from the production house's older oeuvre of saas-bahu productions. Liberalisation had created the conditions for an unusual fascination with revealing the dark realities of the current, online generation and incentivised storytelling around it.

In this milieu, launching *Gumrah* was a conscious business decision. "I think crime is going to be another very big space for television […] the audience is lapping up crime shows," Kapoor said the year it was launched.

Familiar fears

What *Gumrah*'s narrative was most worried about is all too familiar. The show was rife with sex, alcohol, drugs, and romance. They appear as character traits or inciting incidents. While the storylines typically signalled concern for adolescents' safety, well-being, moral behaviour and growth, these notions were coded through social hierarchies, including caste, class, gender roles, and a concern with reproducing the social order (Chakravarti 193, Tambe 2019). *Gumrah*'s characters were often seen pursuing desires for commodities, partners or careers: be it proposing to a richer girl, faking a relationship with a boy, pursuing acting and singing careers, plotting to take revenge or steal someone's place, or secretly leading gangs. The show frequently represented teenagers who reached outside their default social groups, challenged traditional lifestyles, and commited the most heinous acts – stoking the fear that adults already had, passing it on to teens.

Despite the large variety of stories *Gumrah* explored, some patterns can be traced that show us what mattered to its makers and the audiences they imagined.

Many crimes it portrayed were impulsive acts of revenge, violence, desire or anger. Here are some samples: Sarika's parents gift her a new phone despite their financial struggles, at her insistence. Soon she becomes competitive and jealous, creates fake social media profiles for likes and steals money for a better lifestyle. When her mother gets in the way of her online activity, Sarika withholds her asthma inhaler, killing her. In another episode, an infatuated Deepali stabs her uncle because he planned to marry someone else, after initiating a sexual relationship with her. In another, Preeti seduces and tries to kill Ashwin, her sister Jyoti's ex-boyfriend, as revenge for when he forced Jyoti to pose nude online for an adult site.

The host interprets the story for its teen audience, at key moments. At the end of Preeti's episode, he says, "One thing is common in such cases: the victim often goes voluntarily to meet an online friend, and if a smart girl like Jyoti can be trapped, anyone can. As for Preeti […] it's not our job to punish criminals. The police exists to do that, their cyber cells too." When Deepali gets arrested, he says, "Love is a beautiful emotion, but at this age, what we think of as love is often just physical attraction […] this kind of relationship can be very dangerous to you and your family [...] Stay away from such decisions and such relationships."

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Gumrah's sensationalism was striking. Its plot twists and dingy visual style have even been spoofed. Devanshi, a viewer from Mumbai, told me the stories did not feel representative, they were "meant to give you anxiety." It scared viewers into feeling "hopeless, as though that's what teenage life is" and failed to "model anything healthy in terms of coping." Manasa, another viewer explained. These memories are quite opposite to what the makers intended. Channel [V] executives and hosts have repeatedly said that "rather than sensationalizing the crime or the criminal himself", they wanted viewers to understand that, "Nobody is born a criminal, but instead, circumstances and certain unforeseen incidents take you down a bad path."
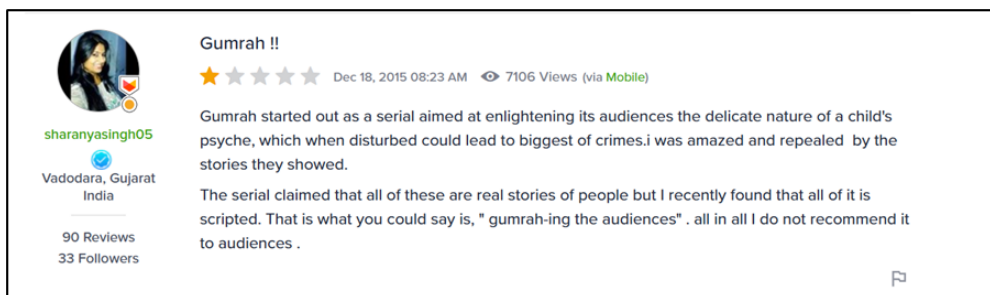
Familiar fears took new shape through the show. Many stories of *Gumrah* lament the teenager's lost bright future of middle-class ambitions when they are sent to jail, like a prestigious college seat, fame, or success in their career. *Gumrah*sought to address these fears, by shaping viewers into 'responsible' teenagers, as the hosts repeatedly urged them to be 'sensible', 'alert' or 'careful.' As part of a larger reframing of 'youth' through TV, *Gumrah* was preceded by a 2010 UTV Bindass campaign that used slogans like, "Just because I'm Bindass Doesn't Mean I Do Drugs" or "Just Because I am Bindass Doesn't Mean I Don't Believe in God" (Kumar 2014).

In *Adolescence in Urban India*, the scholar Shagufa Kapadia speaks of the worry "that the globalizing world may carry the adolescent on a path that may not only be ill-defined in terms of healthy development, but also steer the child away from valued cultural goals as well as from the family unit." She notes how in upper middle class families, parenting becomes a managerial project, where parents need to stray from traditional, authoritative parenting and forge friendlier relations with their teenage children to guide them (Kapadia 2017). *Gumrah* represented this moment in transition, exploring how anxiety-inducing crime storytelling needs to make way for a new parenting style, that does not shy away from discussing complex subjects but needs to 'manage' its audience's choices.

Abandoning the 'culprit'

The real riddle with *Gumrah*, though, was that it was confused about what choices it wanted teens to make, and about their agency to choose itself. The show implied that teenagers were too naive and immature to examine their jealousy or avoid stabbing someone, but simultaneously, they were powerful enough to reject sexual advances from adults or to file a police complaint timely.

In the end, *Gumrah* was doomed by the very thing that makes it special. Since the show talked directly to the teenager, the show struggled to place appropriate onus on larger social systems and processes, that were beyond the teenagers' control. There were attempts: well-meaning asides about parental pressure, sexism and moral policing were peppered into several episodes, but the show could not explore these relationships. It had to return to the teenager and share a neat little bit of advice that can keep them out of trouble. As a result, the show struggled to estimate their agency as they would.

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Occasionally, this advice appeared confused, victim-blaming, or insensitive, mainly because there was no consistent morality guiding the series (Gowing 1998) – other than 'don't do crime'. Rather, it appealed to a range of ethical frameworks flexibly, including family loyalty, gender equality, resilience in the face of peer pressure, and self-confidence.

The show occasionally disrupted this mould. For example, an ambitious Assamese student, Mou Pokhan, triumphed against her bullies, who get booked for violence and discrimination. "We need to change our thinking," the host opined at the end, "and create a better society for the new generation. Mou proved that she is Indian, but was there a need to prove it?" In another episode, Disha and Farooq's families, who disapproved of their inter-religious relationship, plan together to kill them. Before they can act, Zeba, Farooq's sister, poisons the parents' drinks, and is arrested. "Zeba was only fifteen, she had a perfect image of her parents. When she saw their truth, she was horrified. But what she did was not right […] no, it was wrong […] But what needs thought is that when a child like Zeba can understand, why couldn't Disha and Farooq's parents? Guys, if we keep fighting on the basis of religion, faith, and caste, this world will not be a peaceful place to stay," the host concluded.

The narrative does not punish them, and there is a moment of recognising that young people may be forging new, just moralities. Yet, did these moments disrupt longstanding anxieties or merely reveal something new about them?

> *Gumrah* perpetuated the anxiety caused by how much harder it is now to surveil teens. Teens could and do emerge as moral vanguards by leveraging these technologies, but that remained, largely, only a happy accident.

By focussing on investigations, arrests and reveals – particularly to the perpetrator's family – *Gumrah* perpetuated the anxiety caused by how much harder it is now to surveil teens. Teens could and do emerge as moral vanguards by leveraging these technologies, but that remained, largely, only a happy accident – when it comes in palatable forms, enhancing the family's status. It stood as hope at the other end of the cautionary tale, barely disrupting the essence of how teenagers were imagined. At the core, teens remained hormonal, addicted, easily out-of-control, confused figures who could fall out of the fold at any moment. The shock persisted, and the cautionary tale lived on.

There is something to the fact that *Gumrah*'s hosts sounded more level-headed than their contemporaries. Unpacking the story calmly and helpfully, they stood in sharp contrast from the sensationalism of crime news shows like *Sansani* (Ibrahim 2015). Some viewers remembered *Gumrah* was, at least partially, realistic and non-judgemental. For instance, Aditi, from Gorakhpur, shared that the monologues helped her friend confidently resist coercion around sex. Sometimes the show comments sharply on the lack of emotional tools through which teenagers can make sense of their experiences, and helps us empathise with the characters even as it criticises their choices – for example, one episode laments that we make bad choices when the prospect of losing someone is unbearable.

Still, the cautionary tale itself could be called into question. Usually, on *Gumrah*, the crime was followed by confession, after which the culprit was sent to jail. Incarceration was an inevitable, obvious consequence of wrongdoing. It created a fear inside the teen viewer – of losing everything familiar, losing access to recently gained autonomy. Cautionary tales served as emotional training: the protagonist pursue their desires, explore, feel joy, but the viewer is gripped by the knowledge, or feeling, that things would end badly. And that is what the show wanted the viewer to expect in life as well.

But what actually happened to the 'culprits' after they are caught? The show did not care. Very little was said about the characters' post-prison life. *Gumrah* took the authority of the state for granted and did not interrogate its role in adolescent life and reform. The problem with the cautionary tale was that the show eventually abandoned its subjects — the people it warned us through. The aunt who never married, the distant and rebellious brother who had to be brought back into the religious fold, the couple who was punished: all cautionary tales are half-told stories.

What if we stuck with them in reality, following the teenagers in India's justice system – in jails or observational homes?

The data we have tells a very different story on how these adolescents got there. The majority of juvenile crime comprises petty thefts and burglaries and are a result of systemic problems like social marginalisation and lack of basic necessities. Yet, because *Gumrah*'s focus was on the choices of urban, middle-class teenagers, the show elided the truth of the system.

The echoes of Gumrah

In the years after *Gumrah*, we have seen several moments of young people asserting and articulating their power, but there have also been tragic incidents that have emphasised their fragility.

With increased access and consumer status – across classes now – the power of teens to keep things secret has only expanded. New technologies and tools like smartphones, the internet, privacy locks and anonymity are, in some ways, the anchors of secrecy and shock. They are recurring motifs in stories about teens, in *Gumrah*, shows after it, and in the world outside television. Longstanding anxieties around teens have hardly been disrupted.

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Take, for instance, the range of advisories to parents and teachers in the wake of panics about teens carrying out dangerous tasks, ending with suicide: "Use parental controls on all [their] devices…" "Hormones take over their intelligence," "DGP – drugs, games and porn – addiction is rampant", "Teachers need to keep an eye on falling grades," and "this is an opportunity for parents to look at filling the gap in their relationship with children."

These instructions show the tussle between control-oriented and the new, friendlier parenting styles psychologists advocated for, they also expressed a desperate desire to understand what seemed impossible to explain: who teens are and what drives them. The fears resurfaced when some chats from an online group called Bois Locker Room went viral, revealing that boys from an elite school in Delhi posted pictures of underage girls without consent and even went so far as planning sexual assault. Once again, it sparked panic and conversation on why they did what they did, and the responsibility of parents and teachers to raise respectful boys.

In continuity with *Gumrah*, and events like the DPS MMS, the shock also comes from discovering that upper class and upper caste teens are capable of acts that threaten their social image of being proper and morally superior. Like *Gumrah's* stories, it comes from a mix of both being victimised and inflicting violence. In the traditional order, family reputation and caste pride come first, and such threats are dealt with by authority figures within the family, who brush information under the rug – say, by asking the victim to withdraw the complaint, as one parent of a Bois Locker Room member did. However, this is now harder to accomplish. Parents and other adults seem to be reckoning with an increasing loss of information about what their kids are up to. And if cases involving teens, such as the Pune Porsche hit-and-run involving a 17-year old are an indication, the authoritative 'no' to the adolescent is now seen as necessary – it may be in again.

What looking closely at *Gumrah*, and representations like it, reveal is the need to step away from the individual middle-class teenager, step away from the shock, fear, panic and outrage that have become so familiar to us, and find better questions to ask about adolescent life. Questions that are about social trust, equity, public services, harm, care, repair and accountability may be far more productive in enhancing safety, health and responsibility amongst young people. If only we could find our way back to them.

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