



Decolonising the Digital Screen: *Tri Loka* as a Relational Framework for Analysing *Paatal Lok*

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Abstract:

The *Amazon Prime Video* series *Paatal Lok* (2020) is often characterised as a contemporary crime thriller. This paper explores how Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer an interdisciplinary and indigenous framework that can be strategically mobilised to explore the socio-political universe of *Paatal Lok* to create a new possibility in terms of interpretation. This paper analyses the intersectionality of indigenous epistemologies and digital screen cultures, particularly OTT platforms, to examine how *Paatal Lok* reimagines the triadic cosmology of *Svarga* ("Heaven"), *Dharti* ("Earth") and *Patala* ("Netherworld") into a contemporary mapping of caste, gender and urban/rural divides. Key principles of IKS like holistic relationality, *samanvaya* ("harmonious integration"), indigenous theories of ethics and knowledge are the theoretical framework of the paper. Further, the paper uses a close reading of the text to argue that *Paatal Lok* simultaneously appropriates and reconstructs Indic idioms to critique hegemonic structures of oppression on Indian OTT platforms. The study argues that Hathiram Chaudhary, the protagonist of the show, is a modern *sutradhar* (narrator) of the series and Vedic stories like the story of Narasimha-Hiranyakashyap act as a connection between ancient wisdom and modern realities. The paper posits that it is important to bring IKS into dialogue with streaming media to counter Eurocentric media theory.

Keywords: OTT platforms, Decolonising, Indian Knowledge Systems, *Tri Loka*, Caste, Pedagogy.

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The series *Paatal Lok* uses the framework of the *Tri Loka* (“three worlds”) to represent social hierarchies as a cosmos that is fashioned around ideas of morality and class. This is a type of cosmological lens that explains the intersection of caste, class, gender and urban-rural divisions. This indigenous lens explains how these divisions function in the series as the building blocks of this world. The three realms of *Svarga* (“Heaven”), *Dharti* (“Earth”) and *Paatal* (“Netherworld”) actually belong to a larger cosmos consisting of fourteen *lokas* (“worlds”) that map spiritual, ethical and psychological states that are not limited to just geographical spaces (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.24.7–15; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.7). Classical texts often describe these *lokas* as gradations of consciousness in which *Svarga* embodies elevated awareness and harmony, *Dharti* a field of *karmic* struggle and *Patala* a condition of delusion, rage and bondage (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.7). *Patala* is more complicated than the idea of hell; it is an alluring, deceptive realm of beauty, wealth, power and elitism that conceals inner turbulence, suggesting an interplay between external prosperity and inner ethical decay. Such a reading enables a symbolic rather than literal interpretation of the *lokas*, aligning them with mental and social conditions that can coexist in the same historical time and physical territory. When an OTT text like *Paatal Lok* names itself after this netherworld and visually codes its narrative space into layers of heaven, earth and the underworld, it taps into this civilizational archive of spatialized morality to comment on contemporary social order.

Within this IKS-inflected optic, Delhi becomes a *Dharti* that is constantly traversed by forces of *Svarga*-like privilege and *Patala*-like violence, producing a sense that India itself is a condensed *Tri Loka* where different ontological realms overlap with the police station, the news studio, the dingy lanes, and the rural hinterlands working as sociological sites and ethical coordinates that inscribe characters into a graded cosmos of merit, sin and possibility. Indian Knowledge Systems, highlight indigenous epistemologies that foreground holistic relationality

and the embeddedness of knowledge in place and community (*National Education Policy 2020*). Colonial education and media regimes have flattened such epistemic richness into linear and Eurocentric categories by marginalising Indic frameworks like the *lokas* as mythology rather than categorising them as living theories of social life (Viswanathan 45; Balagangadhara 112). Bringing *Tri Loka* back as an analytic lens in reading *Paatal Lok* therefore works as both a metaphorical flourish and a strategic re-centering of vernacular cosmology.

Learners can interpret contemporary texts through indigenous categories in order to dismantle the alienating effect of colonial syllabi and to recuperate cultural selfhood. When *Tri Loka* structures the interpretation of caste, class, gender and spatiality in *Paatal Lok*, the series becomes a case study in how digital narratives can host decolonial hermeneutics instead of just reproducing Western crime-thriller conventions. Such an approach aligns with calls to incorporate IKS into media and language curricula as a way of decolonising the Indian mind while still engaging critically with questions of caste, power, representation and inequality (*National Education Policy 2020*). The *Tri Loka* motif in the series thus performs a double move by visualising the fragmentation of Indian society into highly unequal realms and simultaneously offering a conceptual vocabulary drawn from Sanskritic tradition through which that fragmentation can be ethically evaluated. This double work positions *Paatal Lok* as a rich text for decolonial media pedagogy where students can practice reading OTT content with tools that predate and exceed colonial modernity. *Paatal Lok* can also be interpreted through Radhika Koul's arguments for reading *Kathāsaritsāgara*. She states that the text produces a “phenomenological web of stories” in which narrative becomes constitutive of existence itself (Koul 33). Koul shows that the text's non-linear, recursive, interrupted structure and layering trains readers to hold multiple narratives at once without demanding a single synthesis and this is useful for understanding how

Paatal Lok similarly builds meaning through layered backstories and shifting perspectives rather than through a straightforward detective plot (Koul 151–53). This framework allows us to see how the series does not present crime as an event to be solved. Instead, it turns crime into a narrative form through which caste, masculinity, power and violence are made legible across interconnected social worlds.

Svarga in *Paatal Lok* can be read as the realm of elite urban power, inhabited by upper-caste characters whose lives unfold in sanitized, highly mediated environments such as television studios, gated neighborhoods, plush offices and political offices. The representation of national news media in the series reflects what scholarship identifies as the dominance of upper-caste elites in Indian media industries and the consequent filtering of public discourse through elite perspectives (Oxfam India and Newslaundry; Saha). *Svarga* here becomes a zone of aesthetic polish and narrative control, where carceral violence is refracted as ‘breaking news’ and moral responsibility is displaced onto nameless criminals from the netherworld. In IKS terms, *Svarga* is traditionally associated with enjoyment of the fruits of past *karma*, suggesting that those who inhabit this realm in the series are beneficiaries of accumulated social and symbolic capital (*Bhagavad Gītā* 9.21). However, such heavenly states can be precarious and morally ambiguous, continually threatened by inner corruption and external challenge. The *Svarga* of *Paatal Lok* is therefore not a stable utopia but a fragile fortress in which privileged subjects must constantly manage scandal and the ghosts of violence that their own institutions help generate.

The moral crisis of these *Svarga*-dwellers mirrors contemporary critiques of Indian newsrooms and OTT industries, which argue that while they market themselves as progressive and liberal, they often reproduce caste and gender hierarchies in more subtle, spectral ways (Oxfam India and Newslaundry). From a *Tri Loka* perspective, *Svarga* becomes a carceral realm in its own

right, imprisoning its inhabitants within a regime of image management, ratings pressure, politically correct aesthetics and ideological complicity that constrains genuine ethical action. *Svarga* in *Paatal Lok* attaches itself most clearly to the figure of high-profile journalist Sanjeev Mehra and the Delhi news studio, a gleaming space coded with heights from which reality is curated for national consumption. Mehra's persona embodies what IKS would refer to as a crisis of *dharma* ("duty"). He publicly performs liberal and secular virtues while privately colluding in sensationalism, political compromise, narrative manipulation and moral ambiguity that exacerbates the suffering of those in *Dharti* and *Patala*. Indian news channels often operate as spectacular spaces where elite anxieties about crime, nationalism, morality and violence are projected onto marginalized bodies which are often Dalit, Muslim or Queer (Oxfam India and NewsLaundry). *Svarga* is not simply the elite, upper-class but a moral atmosphere. The impurity of this space flows downward through the *tri loka* system. Classical cosmology positions *Svarga* as a realm of pleasure, merit, spirituality and provisional reward which is always at risk of decadence when separated from *tapas* ("self-discipline") and *dharma* (Kapoor 7–8). Mehra's journalistic *Svarga* dramatises precisely this fall and his pursuit of TRPs, personal security, political patronage and professional growth turns the heaven of free press into a compromised *loka* in which truth-telling is subordinate to spectacle and self-preservation and the assassination plot that propels the narrative is itself a karmic byproduct of this polluted *Svarga*, in which powerful actors engineer violence and then outsource its execution to those already marked as expendable in *Patala*.

Also, the illusory nature of *Svarga* is underlined by the way the series exposes the media's role in connecting elite nationalism to caste and gender hierarchies. The newsroom reproduces patriarchal masculinities while claiming to champion progressive causes, thus mirroring the larger contradictions of Indian liberalism which often overlays elite privilege with the rhetoric of

equality. Therefore, in IKS terms, this is a failure of *samanvaya*, the principle of harmonious integration (*Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* 1.1.4, p. 23). *Svarga*'s institutions refuse to integrate the ethical claims of those below and channel the fruits of collective labour and suffering upwards as ratings, prestige, political capital and career progression.

Similarly, *Dharti*, corresponds to the earthly realm and is populated in the series by figures such as low and middle-ranking police officers, petty bureaucrats and urban working classes, who stand between elite heaven and the criminalized netherworld. Sociologically, these characters embody what can be described as the middle strata. They are both enforcers and victims of structural hierarchies, tasked with managing the fallout of elite decisions while themselves subjected to precarity, humiliation and limited social mobility. *Dharti* thus appears as a liminal zone where aspirational desire and systemic constraint collide, producing forms of resentment and complicity that sustain the overall carceral order. Such middle positions are rarely neutral because they often belong to communities that exercise local dominance over Dalits and Adivasis while feeling subordinated to national or global elites. In *Paatal Lok*, *Dharti* characters frequently mediate between *Svarga* and *Patala* by translating the violence of the netherworld into paperwork, dossiers, and case files that make it legible to institutions of law and journalism. This mediating role resonates with descriptions of the earthly realm as a karmic crucible where ethical choices determine future movement upwards or downwards across *lokas* (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.3.2–5).

The police station in particular functions as a microcosm of *Dharti* where caste, class, and gender equations are enacted through everyday practices that decide who gets beaten, who is verbally humiliated, whose testimony is believed and whose labor is taken for granted. Intersectional analysis shows how Dalit and Adivasi women are especially vulnerable in carceral spaces, facing simultaneous marginalization on multiple axes (Kothari et al. 23). *Dharti* in *Paatal*

Lok therefore dramatises an active site of carceral reproduction, where the netherworld's violence is processed, normalized and re-circulated in the name of law and order.

The primary anchor of *Dharti* in *Paatal Lok* is Inspector Hathiram Chaudhary, whose police station and home in Delhi's crumbling infrastructure form the narrative's middle *loka*. As a mid-level state functionary, Hathiram represents what Connell would call "complicit masculinity," a character who is not fully hegemonic or marginal and thus caught between submission to upper-level power and proximity to street-level violence (Connell 78). His position is structurally liminal because he is tasked with upholding the law for *Svarga's* benefit while managing, containing, obfuscating and often violating those consigned to *Patala*. This liminality resonates with conceptions of *Bhūloka* ("earth-world") or *Mrityuloka* ("death-world") as the plane where ethical choices, bound by karma, are made under conditions of ignorance and structural pressure (Kapoor 6–7). *Bhūloka* represents the physical and material world and *Mrityuloka* is the realm of mortality inhabited by souls who must pay for their past actions while performing new ones (Kapoor 6–7). The series repeatedly stages *Dharti* as a site of conflicted *dharma* with Hathiram's initial willingness to accept petty corruption and casual violence reflects an inheritance of institutional *adharma* embedded within police culture. However, his growing attachment to the case and to the accused bodies in his custody produces a fragile ethical awakening that complicates simple binaries of predator and victim. Such a movement can be read as a partial alignment with *svadharma*, one's own ethical duty, which is not identical to blind obedience to institutional command. Hathiram's secretive investigation and his refusal to fully instrumentalize the accused for *Svarga's* narrative of terror, marks a tentative assertion of *svadharma* against systemic *adharma* (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.47).

Dharti's ambivalence is also spatial and sensory. The *mise-en-scène* of the series contrasts the fluorescent sterility of news studios and corporate offices with the crowded and noisy spaces of station rooms, and traffic-choked streets. These liminal spaces index what Dalit media scholars describe as the everyday grind of caste-class intersectionality, where power is experienced less as grand ideological discourse and more as routine humiliation, overwork, cruelty and risk exposure (Guru and Sarukkai 104; Yengde 115). Hathiram's own lower-middle-class, non-English-speaking world positions him as an intermediary figure whose complicity with *Svarga* is tempered by experiential knowledge of vulnerability and exclusion, even if he never fully joins *Patala's* subaltern solidarity. This positionality underscores the IKS insight that *dharma* is always context-embedded and relational, judged by the concrete effects of action on interconnected beings rather than abstract rules alone (*Mahābhārata*, Karna Parva 69.57–58).

In contrast, *Patala* in Hindu mythology is often portrayed as a subterranean realm where powerful beings dwell amid beauty and danger to symbolise depths of consciousness dominated by ego, anger and illusion (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.24.8–14). Contemporary interpretations emphasize that those who inhabit *Patala*-like states are trapped in cycles of negative emotion and self-centeredness that prevent moral growth, but these states are also produced by structural conditions of deprivation and exploitation (Vivekananda 212-15). In *Paatal Lok*, this realm corresponds to the underclass worlds of contract killers, marginalized castes, rural dispossessed and queer folk whose lives are marked by poverty and social stigma.

Paatal Lok foregrounds violence and embeds marginalized experiences within political and criminal narratives, but at the same time it frames subaltern figures as victims or villains. Such portrayals risk reaffirming the stigmatized spectacle of the subaltern, where suffering bodies circulate as proof of social crisis while the structural agents of that crisis remain relatively

unmarked. *Patala* in the series is thus doubly carceral because its inhabitants are materially confined by poverty and policing and discursively confined within media narratives that code them as dangerous or pitiable. Nevertheless, *Patala* is also a space of latent power and possible transformation rather than simply abjection (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.24-26; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.5). If consciousness can move between *lokas* in Indic thought, then the ethical question becomes how a society organized like *Paatal Lok*'s India systematically blocks or enables such movement for different groups (*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.7-37). Thus, the *tri-loka* motif exposes the social and political hierarchies that restrict upward mobility for certain bodies thereby converting *Patala* into a permanent prison for those marked as criminal or disposable.

Patala in *Paatal Lok* is populated by the four principal accused, namely Hathoda Tyagi, Tope Singh, Cheeni and Kabir M, whose lives trace different trajectories through violence, gendered marginalization, caste and communal othering. Critics have observed that the underworld in the series is not simply a criminal netherworld but a composition of rural hinterlands, urban slums, transit and liminal spaces where marginalized subjects bear the brunt of state and social violence (Banerjee). In classical cosmology, *Patala* is often described ambivalently; it is opulently resourced and inhabited by *Daityas* ("Titans") and *Nāgas* ("Serpent beings") who are powerful, yet they are subordinated within a larger cosmic hierarchy (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.5). *Paatal Lok* reactivates this ambivalence by portraying its *Patala* subjects as both victimized and extraordinarily capable, their violence a distorted form of agency forged under conditions of relentless abasement and abjection.

Hathoda Tyagi's arc exemplifies this karmic distortion. Emerging from a rural environment where assertion is brutally punished, his transformation into a contract killer is precipitated by honor-killing violence that he performs in the name of familial duty, only to find that this act

consolidates rather than dismantles oppressive structures thus Tyagi's story visualises a loop in which *adharmic* ("unethical") social orders incorrectly characterize revenge as *dharma*, thereby binding both perpetrators and victims into cycles of suffering that feed *Svarga's* demand for spectacular violence.

Tope Singh's history of humiliation in Punjab echoes broader accounts of youth leadership being targeted when it challenges entrenched power. His involvement with radical student politics and the repression that follows is part of known cycles of violence. His narrative resonates with Puranic depictions of *Daitya* or *Asura* assertion against the authority of the *Devas*, in which the so-called demonic often articulates a counter-claim to justice, only to be violently subdued in the name of cosmic order (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.10). Thus, Tope Singh's actions are not a moral absolute, but the degraded aftereffect of a thwarted quest for dignity, distorted by institutional refusal to recognize grievance as legitimate *artha* ("legitimate claim") and *dharma* (*Arthaśāstra* 1.3-7).

Cheeni's position as a transgender character of North-Eastern origin intensifies *Patala's* intersectional density. Feminist and sociological analyses of the series note how Cheeni's story foregrounds the compounded marginality of gender-nonconforming and racialized North-Eastern subjects in North Indian urban spaces, marked simultaneously as sexually deviant, racially foreign, economically disposable and possibly criminal in nature (McDuie-Ra 78–84; Mehta). While the series ultimately offers Cheeni limited narrative autonomy, their presence destabilises binary gender norms and challenges the heteropatriarchal structure that undergirds *Svarga* and *Dharti* alike. Cheeni may be read alongside liminal and androgynous figures in Indic traditions such as *Ardhanārīśvara* ("The half-female God") or the broader category of *tritīya prakṛti* ("Third

gender”) that occupy threshold zones and expose the contingency of seemingly natural hierarchies (Goldberg 42-47).

Kabir M is misread as a Muslim terrorist based on his name and visual markers, embodying another modality of *Patala* which is the conflation of Muslim identity with permanent suspicion. Critical responses to *Paatal Lok* have underlined how his storyline reveals the media’s complicity in amplifying communal stereotypes and feeding state narratives of anti-national threat, even when evidence is thin or absent (Banerjee). Within the *tri loka* schema, Kabir M’s fate shows how *Svarga’s* gaze creates *Patala*. Through naming, framing and repetitive visual coding, certain bodies become inherently lower, always available to be cast as the demonic Other. In karmic terms, this misrecognition is itself an *adharmic* act that accrues collective negative consequence to the institutions that perpetuate it, even if individual agents disavow responsibility (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.1-8).

Hathiram Chaudhary in *Paatal Lok* can be read as a modern *sūtradhāra*, a narrative mediator who threads together fractured worlds while negotiating a field where the ethical logics of *dharma* and *karma* are systematically distorted (*The Nāṭyaśāstra* 85-92). As a lower-middle-class Delhi policeman, Hathiram speaks from both within the story and brings an outsider’s perspective, offering commentary, memory, moral reckoning and interpretation in a manner reminiscent of classical Indian narrative frameworks, even though he is never formally framed as a stage narrator. His journey unfolds in a milieu where the cultural capital of ancient Indic ethics has been hollowed out by violence, media spectacle, social hierarchies and apathy yet vestiges of Vedic and Puranic storyworlds continue to structure the series’ imagination of justice and moral testing.

The figure of the *sūtradhāra* in classical Sanskrit and regional performance traditions is at once narrator, commentator, ethical mediator, actor and conductor responsible for introducing the play, connecting episodes, taking the story forward and at times directly addressing the audience's interpretive horizon (Lal 15-17). Hathiram fits into this expanded understanding and the investigation, flashbacks, action and journeys across *Svarga*, *Dharti*, and *Patala* are organized around his movement and gaze. As *sūtradhāra*, Hathiram is not an omniscient and morally pure narrator. He is a fallible, self-doubting subject whose own complicity in everyday police brutality and corruption is foregrounded. This marks a significant departure from the wise elder *sūtradhāra* of classical forms who is replaced with a modern, self-reflexive, everchanging and interrogative figure shaped by democratic and postcolonial anxieties (Deshpande 42-46). The ethical terrain that Hathiram traverses is markedly different from the idealized dharmic universes of many classical narratives. IKS scholarship highlights *dharma* and *karma* as relational ethical principles that tie individual action to cosmic and social balance, insisting on responsibility to community, ecology, universe and the divine (Kapoor 6-12). In *Paatal Lok*, these concepts appear as spectral residues and their language is occasionally invoked but their substance is hollowed out by institutionalized violence and inequality, thus we see Hathiram working in a police force where custodial torture is routine and extrajudicial killings are celebrated as encounters, a practice the series frames as *adharma* masquerading as swift justice.

The Narasimha-Hiranyakashipu narrative offers a potent intertext for reading Hathiram's function because in the Puranic story, the demon-king Hiranyakashipu acquires a boon that renders him seemingly invincible with no human or animal with the ability to kill him, at neither day nor night, neither indoors nor outdoors and with no conventional weapon (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.3-8). Vishnu's Narasimha avatar appears as a liminal figure, half-man and half-lion, who kills

Hiranyakashipu at twilight on a threshold with his claws, thereby operating in the interstices of the boon's conditions (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.8). Narasimha thus becomes a symbol of liminal justice, taking the form of an intervention that protects Prahlada and restores *dharma* by exploiting the ambiguities of law and language. In *Paatal Lok*, there is no literal Narasimha avatar, but the structure of justice often unfolds at similar thresholds of legality, morality, hierarchy and narrative. Hathiram occupies an in-between, liminal space, thus he is neither fully complicit like his superiors nor fully radical like the dispossessed figures whose stories he uncovers. Furthermore, his most decisive act of resistance is refusing to endorse the state's prefabricated terror plot and quietly working to prevent further injustice. This occurs through the deployment of tactical disobedience instead of spectacular violence within the cracks of the system, a contemporary echo of Narasimha's liminal strategy.

Similarly, Hathoda Tyagi's character intensifies this framework by functioning as a contemporary Hiranyakashipu-like figure whose ruthless violence coexists with a deeply entrenched capacity for affection towards dogs. He is introduced as a near-mythic contract killer, who is impossible to kill like Hiranyakashyapu, yet his backstory reveals a man shaped by humiliation and betrayal. In this sense, he parallels the *asuric* ("demonic") quest for security through domination rather than relational ethics. At the same time, his attachment to dogs complicates his demonization and opens an unexpected symbolic channel to epic conceptions of *dharma*.

The saving of Sanjeev Mehra's life through the presence of a dog crystallises these threads and ties the narrative to the *Mahābhārata*'s Yudhishtira episode (*Mahābhārata* 17.3.5–12). In the climactic revelation, Hathiram recounts that a dog effectively stood between Mehra and death. When Tyagi is about to execute the assassination, Dolly runs out to embrace Savitri the street dog

and Tyagi stops because of his attachment to dogs. Yudhishtira's refusal to abandon the dog at heaven's gate, and the later revelation that the dog is Dharma in disguise, provides a powerful context for this moment (*Mahābhārata* 17.3). The dog becomes a threshold figure connecting *Svarga*, *Dharti* and *Patala*, suggesting that even within a corrupted milieu, non-human beings can serve as conduits for residual ethical insight.

Reading Hathiram Chaudhary as a modern *sūtradhāra* foregrounds *Paatal Lok*'s deep, yet implicit, engagement with Indic narrative and ethical traditions. His role as the narrative thread-bearer situates the viewer within a corrupted *dharma-karma* milieu, where classical ideals are invoked but rarely honoured. Nevertheless, it provides a critical vocabulary for diagnosing contemporary violence. The Narasimha-Hiranyakashipu intertext supplies a template for thinking about threshold justice and the limits of legalistic protections for the powerful, while the series' recurring dog imagery taps into epic symbolisms of canine guardianship, liminality, moral testing, loyalty and violence (Kapoor 14-16; *Mahābhārata* 17.3).

What distinguishes an IKS reading of *Paatal Lok* from a purely sociological or Eurocentric media-theoretical approach is its emphasis on relational cosmology. *Tri-loka* is not a set of three static containers but a dynamic, interpenetrating system in which actions in any loka reverberate across the others (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.24-26; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.5). *Svarga*'s corruption moves beyond *Svarga* and precipitates *Dharti*'s ethical crises and *Patala*'s cycles of violence, just as *Patala*'s uprisings threaten *Svarga*'s illusion of stability. This refusal to offer a neat moral resolution echoes the cyclical nature of *Puranic* time, in which dharma must be continually renegotiated rather than permanently secured.

In conclusion, reading *Paatal Lok* through the lens of the *Tri Loka* cosmology reveals that the series mobilises an indigenous spatialized ethics to interrogate contemporary power. The framework of *Svarga*, *Dharti* and *Patala* demonstrates how these realms function as an interpenetrating and relational continuum where actions in one sphere continually reverberate across and destabilize the others and thus *Svarga*'s elite newsrooms which are built on narrative control and structural privilege, rely directly on the systemic containment and violence of *Patala*, while the middle level functionaries of *Dharti* bear the administrative and physical burden of translating raw subaltern suffering into state-legible dossiers. Social hierarchy is framed as a layered, interlinked cosmos which goes beyond the constrictions of an abstract Western sociological model, allowing the series to transform urban spatial segregation into a living critique of corrupted *dharma* and institutionalized inequality. Central to this decolonial reading is the re-imagining of classical narrative and mythic tropes within a compromised moral landscape. As a modern *sūtradhāra*, Inspector Hathiram Chaudhary does not navigate from the position of the flawed, complicit liminality of *Dharti*, threading together fractured backstories while staging a tentative assertion of *svadharma* against systemic institutional *adharma* (*The Nāṭyaśāstra* 85–92). The intertextual invocation of the Narasimha avatar and Yudhishtira's dog further demonstrates how ancient wisdom idioms provide a critical vocabulary for threshold justice, where ethics operates in the cracks of rigid legalism and non-human beings act as conduits for residual moral insight (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.8; *Mahābhārata* 17.3). Furthermore, through characters like Cheeni who occupy the threshold zones of *tritīya prakṛti* and racialized exclusion, the text utilises Indic categories to expose the contingency of cis-heteronormative and upper-caste hierarchies, proving that traditional concepts can be strategically turned against the very structures of oppression that are often naturalized in their name.

In addition to textual insights, applying an IKS-inflected framework to digital streaming narratives carries crucial pedagogical and epistemic stakes for contemporary media studies and by dismantling the Eurocentric dominance that historically flattened vernacular cosmologies into static mythology, this approach enacts the decolonial imperative articulated in contemporary educational policy frameworks, such as the National Education Policy 2020. Integrating IKS into the critical analysis of popular web series enables students and scholars to interrogate questions of caste, class, gender and carcerality using theoretical tools that predate and exceed colonial modernity so rather than treating OTT platforms merely as neutral conduits for globalized entertainment, this methodology establishes digital screen culture as a dynamic site where indigenous hermeneutics can actively counter alienating syllabi and foster cultural selfhood.

In the final analysis, *Paatal Lok* exemplifies how digital narratives in the Global South operate as a *kathājāla* i.e. a complex, phenomenological web of stories in which narrative structure itself becomes constitutive of social existence (Koul 151–53). By training viewers to focus on multiple, recursive backstories simultaneously without demanding a simplistic moral synthesis, the series demonstrates that crime is not an isolated event to be solved, but a structural form through which systemic violence across interconnected social worlds is rendered legible. Thus mobilising IKS as a living, critical vocabulary allows media scholarship to move past both nostalgic traditionalism and Eurocentric theoretical dependence, proving that ancient Indic cosmologies offer a robust, relational tool to decode the complex socio-political realities of twenty-first-century screen media.

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