

# THE ACCESSIBILITY GAP ON STREAMING IN INDIA FOR VISUALLY AND HEARING IMPAIRED VIEWERS

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International platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+ fare better on content accessibility. Image for representation purpose only.

Despite the boom in Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming services in India — a report by Media Partners Asia released this month estimates that one leading platform is closing in on 20 million paying subscribers — there is a huge gap in the accessibility of content for visually and hearing-impaired viewers. However, regulations for streaming in India explicitly recommend that streaming services make an effort to have their content be accessible.

The IT Rules, 2021 cover a vast swath of the internet, from regulating social media intermediaries, setting out a framework to discourage platforms from letting users post what the Government considers misinformation, to requiring streaming services to submit to a three-tier grievance framework to address user complaints on web series and films. One aspect of the IT Rules that have not received much attention (or compliance) is their pitch for accessibility for persons with disabilities.

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The final provision of the Code of Ethics that OTT platforms like Netflix, Hotstar, and Amazon Prime Video have to adhere to, is a nudge to “take reasonable efforts to improve the accessibility of online curated content transmitted by it to persons with disabilities through the implementation of appropriate access services.” These are a likely reference to two key technologies: closed captioning and audio description.

## Closed captioning

Closed captioning, unlike regular subtitling, describes the sounds and background music score in a film or TV show, an important resource for deaf and hard of hearing people. Audio description tracks describe what’s happening on screen for blind and visually impaired audiences.

While the IT Rules Code of Ethics pushes for these technologies to be more widely adopted, streaming services — specifically those run by Indian firms — have largely not done so. The

most glaring example is the lack of closed captioning on the Indian Premier League on JioCinema, the highest-streamed sporting tournament in the world online. Disney Star, which owns the television rights, announced in March that they would release a subtitled feed of all the matches in the tournament, but JioCinema has not made a similar accommodation. (A Jio spokesperson did not respond to a query by *The Hindu*.)

International platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+ fare better on content accessibility. Following an agreement with the American Council of the Blind (ACB) in 2016, Netflix started adding an audio description track for all its original content globally, including in India. Whether it is a series in Marathi or a film in Tamil, as long as they're Netflix originals, these titles now have a separate Audio Description feed for visually impaired or blind viewers, as well as closed captioning in their original language.

### **Accessibility gap**

This is not the case for licensed content, even on platforms which otherwise have a good track record on accessibility. While Netflix has an Audio Description feed for many Hollywood films — US studios sometimes produce such a feed in-house, and then provide it to streaming platforms upon request — the vast majority of theatrically released films in India that are not produced or financed by a streaming platform don't have an audio description feed.

Even when such a feed is made, it doesn't always make its way to the small screen. For instance, the Rajinikanth-starrer *Kabali*, which had an audio description track produced for it by a radio station for a theatrical screening, isn't being streamed on Amazon Prime Video with that track as an option.

The situation is similar for closed captioning in the same language — outside of original films and series commissioned by international platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, there is no same-language audio description and closed captioning for the majority of licensed content on Indian streaming platforms. Indian-established streaming services listed by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting largely do not have either closed captioning in the same language or audio description for any content, let alone originals.

The gap may soon sting many would-be viewers as streaming grows rapidly in India — the World Health Organization estimates that there are 63 million deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) people in India, and nearly 40 million are estimated to have poor eyesight or blindness.

### **'Extra expense'**

Padmini Ray Murray, the founder and director of Design Beku, a Karnataka-based collective that focuses on working with communities on technology access issues, said that even closed captioning may not be the silver bullet. "It is true that visually impaired people can use closed captioning and subtitles," Dr. Murray said. "But the problem is that many of them would prefer sign language, because sign language is a language in and of itself with nuances that get lost when the subtitles are just a transcription of what is happening on screen."

Of course, streaming services don't currently provide either option. "In the digital product world, there's a reluctance to pay much attention to accessibility, as it needs an extra expense," Dr. Murray said, pointing to firms' reluctance to invest in accessibility. While there were accessibility standards for webpages, Dr. Murray pointed out, similar standards for applications lag behind in adoption.

The IT Rules' Code of Ethics says that OTT players should, "to the extent feasible," provide for

accessibility. “There is no way of enforcing [this provision], because there’s no legal implication,” Dr. Murray said. “It largely depends on the goodwill of the people creating these products.”

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