

The Image of *Bharatiya Nari* as Projected by Indian Television Soap-Operas

SHASWATI DAS

Abstract

Television soaps and serials in private television channels have swept the Indian market in the last few decades. These soap operas have been upholding the socio-cultural patterns of the country through their contents. In the construction of Indian cultural landscape Indian women and their roles in society are the most vulnerable sites. The linkage of national identity and tradition with Indian women's roles in society places them in a problematic position, given the patriarchal nature of Indian society. Soap operas on Indian television mostly depict women as homely and tradition-bound. Though there are portrayals of educated, professional women but they are also shown to find solace in the family. This paper tries to trace the image of the Indian Woman that has been endorsed by the Indian soap operas since its beginning and in doing so it tries to explore the implications of certain myths and ideologies that drive the story writers and the producers to de-recognize the changes in the contemporary society and to fall back on projecting stereotypical images; thus giving preference to social identity while ignoring individual identity of a woman.

Key words: Soap-Opera, Myth, Ideology, Identity and Stereotype.

Television was generally held in low regard and was seen as a populist medium, not worthy of serious study. But the phenomenal growth of television over the years has made it the most influential medium of mass communication in India. Television not only reflects the society or culture of which it is a part, it is also one of the main forces in the formation of the popular culture of that society (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, p.13-34). Among the various genres of television programming soap opera has emerged as a potent area of study. "No other form of television fiction has attracted more viewers in more countries more regularly over a longer period of time than has the serial. Given this fact, it is ironic that, until very recently, serials largely have been ignored in the "serious" literature on television and typically have been regarded with dismissive disdain in the popular press" (Allen, 1995, p.3). The study of television soap operas gained currency in western academia from the 1980s onwards (Jaggi, 2011). However, studies on the soap – opera in India

began later but they have "affected the development of television studies itself and continue[d] to shape the way we look at certain kinds of issues" (Munshi, 2010, p.3). One such issue that is very important in Indian context is gender role construction through television soap operas.

The Early Days of Indian Soap – Opera

Telecasting in India took a long time to develop compared "to other 'developing' nations like Brazil where television started and developed quite rapidly in the fifties, or Kenya where the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation was granted a contract for operating telecasting facilities in 1961"(Gupta, 1998, p.19). Though officially experimental telecast started in Delhi on 15th September 1959 but Doordarshan came into existence as a separate entity in 1976. National programme was introduced in 1982. The purpose of television broadcasting was regarded as that of public service where the thrust was on information

and education through the projection of socially important issues. "Television in India originally placed entertainment as a distant third in the triad of duties to be undertaken. The kind of entertainment to be provided was also very restricted, at least at the beginning. In the Reithian tradition, 'high culture' was to be broadcast in the effort to 'raise' the audiences' cultural tastes and values, in preference to popular or populist forms of culture" (Gupta, 1998, p.31). Though the emphasis was on classical music, dance and folk culture to sustain the Indian tradition, weekend feature films remained the most popular programmes till eighties. "Other popular programming remained film-related ones like Chitrahaar and interview based programmes like *Phool Khile Hain Gulshan Mein* too fed off the popularity of Hindi films" (Gupta, 1998, p.33).

Joshi Committee report observed in 1984 that Doordarshan was "dominated by feature films and film-based programmes that exploit the female form to titillate and/or, through their socially insensitive approach, simply trivialize and debase the image of womanhood" (Kumar, 2011, p.500). It, therefore, urged not only for reduction in the number of feature films and film-based programmes on television but also recommended for incorporation of "women's dimension in all programmes" and stressed on "the need for a separate focus on and for women" (Kumar, 2011, p.500-501). The Joshi Committee report further recommended that:

1. The improvement of women's condition, status and image should be defined as a major objective of Doordarshan.
2. Clear guidelines regarding the positive portrayal of women on television, and a system of monitoring the implementation of the guidelines should be formed.
3. The image of the male 'ideal' as one who is carrying and willing to share in household,

childcare and contraceptive responsibilities should be promoted.

4. Orientation courses for all Doordarshan policy makers, programming and production staffs are required so that they are sensitized to social issues with particular reference to women's issues and their implications in society.
5. The careful scrutiny (by a special committee) of all advertisements shown on television is needed to ensure that they do not portray women in derogatory and stereotype ways.
6. There is a requirement for a weekly programme on viewers' views, in which the audience, critics, commentators, women's organizations are called upon to analyze and evaluate the week's programmes.

Gradually sponsored serials were started on Doordarshan. India's first soap opera *Hum Log* started its journey in 1984. Within the twenty-minute time frame of the soap, issues like family harmony, gender equality, family planning, and cultural diversity were addressed (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p.97-99). Following the success of *Hum Log*, other soap operas began airing on Doordarshan, which were based on the Entertainment-Education strategy. After studying twelve representative serials on Doordarshan, Punwani (1988) indicated certain generalizations about the portrayal of women characters on television (p.226):

1. An overwhelming majority of them are home-based, whether married or unmarried.
2. Working women are always shown to be tamed by domesticity at the end.
3. Marriage is seen as a natural state for a woman, if single, the woman is working towards achieving that state; if widowed/divorced, she is rarely happy. She may be achieving success in her life, but underlying that is her sadness at her single and lonely state.

4. In their relationships with men, the ideal women are supportive and dependent; those who are aggressive or independent - minded are not considered desirable role models.
5. Women, who try to break out of their traditional place in society and family, do not meet with a happy end. At best, they have to compromise to some extent, but by far the commonest fate reserved for them is failure and humiliation.

The Mythological Turn in Indian Soap Opera

The portrayal of women character took a different shape altogether with the coming of religious soap operas: *Mahabharat and Ramayana*. Mankekar (1999) demonstrated how television in India has a profound effect in shaping women's place in the family, community, and the nation at large. She has mentioned in her book that "the creators of the televised Mahabharat saw Draupadi as an index of the position of "women" in Indian society, and, more fundamentally, as a maker of (Hindu) Indian "civilization"...however, Draupadi also embodied "woman's rage", in particular the rage of a woman wronged" (p.224). The presentation of Draupadi's character enabled many women to question their positions in their families. Derne (1995) pointed out that "Many women [saw] themselves as choosing between tolerating injustices and feeling angry at them" (p.109).

Mahabharat was followed by another religious soap called *Ramayana* where the central female character Sita presents an exact opposing construction of womanhood to that of Draupadi. "Sita, in the Ramayana, is the impeccably dutiful and subservient wife who prefers to be swallowed by the earth rather than have any doubts about her purity besmirch her husband's public standing" (Mazzarella, 1991, p.329). Mankekar (1999) has concluded in her work that Sita was considered as a role model for Hindu women (p.246). According to her "Ideal Indian Womanhood is constructed in terms of values deemed fundamentally womanly, essentially Indian: modesty, patience, and, above

all, a strong sense of duty toward the family, the community, and the nation" (cited in Mankekar, 1993). After the success of these religious epics, mythological serials become a staple of Doordarshan and serials like *Shri Krishna, Jai Bajrangbali, Chandrakanta, Alif Laila* and so on started attaining huge popularity. Women characters in these soaps were "archetypes" of Indian culture. According to Jung (1970), mythical stories show the way in which collective ideas are passed on through generations through archetypes. This archetypal image of Indian womanhood can be understood as a reaction to the western influences that were entering the country at that time. There was a rise of nationalism in India in the 1990s, and a call for a return to "traditional" values. The perceived invasion of the West through television imagery and the consumerist economy that became pervasive in the 1990s prompted the importance of maintaining traditional Indian culture. According to postcolonial critic Partha Chatterjee "retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture" was necessary (Chatterjee, 1993, p.120). Therefore, the construction of a monolithic and rather ethnocentric identity for a woman was quite natural.

The Restyling of Indian Soap – Opera with the 'K-Serials'

The shift in the Indian state's economic policy in favour of globalization accompanied a shift in public discourse as well as in the media (Chaudhury, 2001). Studies by Mankekar (1999), Fernandes (2000), Rajagopal (2001), McMillin (2002), Parameswaran (2004) and Fazal (2009) indicate that "representations of women in soap operas are inextricably linked with the economic repositioning of India within global market place" (Fazal, 2009, p.44). Soap operas started their journey on Indian private television channels in mid-90's and the genre proved to be massively successful with the turn of the new millennium. In

the year 2000, three soap-operas namely *Kyunkii...Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* and *Kasautii Zindagii Kay* by Balaji Telefilms came on air. These changed the then prevailing art of storytelling with the portrayal of the grandeur of sets, stylized looks of the characters, title and background songs, modern lifestyle punched with the Indian family values and tradition. These soaps in their presentation of opulent joint families were a departure from the earlier serials of Doordarshan which used to portray middle-class family settings. “The women in the serials derive their existence and social status almost entirely from their positing in the family hierarchy which following the rules of patriarchy, is determined by male power. Generally, these women are of two kinds. The first exude a subdued sexuality, are simultaneously docile, obedient, devoted to home-making, traditional in the sense of observing rituals like *karvachauth* etc., and carriers of *sanskara* and *parampara*. This is the ideal Hindu *nari*, the dream of modern India” (Deshpande, 2009, p.20).

Jaggi (2011) finds that the “marital, sacrificial and romantic elements” of these soaps have been largely borrowed from the Hindi films. For the majority of films leading actresses are often portrayed in the following major categories:

Mother: The role of a mother is one of the two significant roles that women play onscreen, the other being that of a wife. Success for a woman is not only accomplished by marriage and being a dutiful wife, but by her ability to reproduce. Women who cannot reproduce are often shown to set aside while their husbands may take on another wife. In Indian culture a woman’s significance is accrued from her husband and children. The role of a mother has many qualities and complexities associated with it. She is often portrayed as having two dueling entities. These two opposing forces are based on mythology. The benevolent side of

the mother is represented by many docile mythological women like *Gauri* or *Parvati*, who is fertile and provides nourishment, support, and care for her children. Her fierce form that is the image of *Kali* comes to the surface when she is wronged or her children are threatened. In the soap operas of Balaji Telefilms we have often seen such mother figures who build up future generations by teaching the morality and value system of Indian society and at the same time they themselves are dominating in nature and wield great power in the family.

Daughter: As a daughter a woman is often compared with goddess like *Saraswati* and *Lakshmi*. While *Saraswati* is worshipped for her knowledge and wisdom *Lakshmi* is revered in Hindu tradition for bringing wealth to the family.

Wife: The goddess, *Sita*, is regarded as the epitome of the perfect woman and wife in India. *Sita* is popular in mainstream discourse because of her sheer power of endurance against all types of calamities. *Sita* has been prototyped as an ideal wife with symbols like *mangalsutra* and *bindi/Sindur* in movies and as well as in the above mentioned soap operas.

Vamp: The other role played by women characters in movies and soap operas are the character of vamps. The vamp is the anti-heroine, the perfect foil for displaying the virtuous qualities of the heroine. She is often portrayed as a decadent woman who is mostly westernized and has no respect for traditional Indian values. Often she attempts to seduce the hero away from the heroine but ultimately loses to the heroine’s chastity, love and faith.

A study of prime time cable television soaps by the Centre for Advocacy and Research (2007) concluded that the gender roles promoted on television mainly depicted women as wives, mothers and daughters and the representation of

women within the traditional spaces of the household has remained unchanged. Their content analysis of fifteen primetime soaps broadcast in early 2002 on cable television found that “approximately 80% of the female character are confined to the kitchen, living room, dining room and bedrooms... they enter the professional space only when they have to save their spouses or family from clutches of others” (Centre for Advocacy and Research, 2007, p.188).

The myths and Ideologies behind the Construct

Soap Opera being a cultural institution reflects the values and norms of a society. They can be considered as ideological narratives that do not necessarily represent real life, but an "idealized" version of reality, projecting the ideology and myths of the society. Dominant ideology and cultural myths play an important role in the construction of the image of womanhood and femininity in general. As elaborated by John Fiske (1987) these ideologies are guided by the convention and they form ideological codes of a particular society. He has elaborated that an event to be televised is already encoded by “social codes” such as those of - appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behaviour, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc. These “social codes” are then encoded electronically by “Technical Codes” such as those of – camera, lighting, editing, music, sound. These two codes in combination transmit the “conventional representational codes” which shape the representations of, for example: narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, setting, casting, etc. These codes are finally organized into coherence and social acceptability by the “ideological codes” such as those of – individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, capitalism, etc. In his book “Reading Television”, Fiske said that “Anything that a man does or makes contains encoded signs of his culture, and the way in which he does or makes it is

determined to a considerable extent by his culture’s conventions” (p.60). In this sense dominant ideologies have their roots in our culture only. Whereas myth as defined by Roland Barthes presents an ethos, ideology or set of values within a given culture and historical period though the perspective is man-made and has a little semblance with reality.

The Indian soap-operas in general uphold the virtues like virginity, honour, modesty through their female characters. Ideology like "pativrata" (literally translated as a wife who is vowed to her husband) exerts a very powerful influence on Indian soap operas. This ideal of "pativrata" is always romanticized through various rituals. These rituals (like ‘karwachauth’) again place women in the familial context; thus limiting their self-identities. While the earlier soap operas on Doordarshan had created gender perceptions in the context of social problems, the new breed of soap operas started the trend of representing women in the context of the house and the hearth. Krishnan and Dighe (1990) found in their study that expansion of commercialism did not improve the representation of women. Fazal (2009) argued that while India’s repositioning was happening in the global marketplace, women in the soap operas are found unifying the family and preserving cultural heritage (p.41-42). Jaggi (2011) mentioned in her article that women in these soap operas were “outwardly smart and intelligent” but they were “traditional and ritualistic”. Some of the earlier soaps of Doordarshan had strong women protagonists who challenged the norms of the society like ‘Tara’ and ‘Shanti’. Mention must be made of *Rajini* that aired on Doordarshan in 1985. The protagonist of the serial, *Rajini*, was a middle class housewife who questioned oppressive practices of the society and redefined herself and the gender position within the structures of domination (Mitra, 1993, p.160-161). Another television soap opera *Udaan* which aired on Doordarshan from in 1988 showed a girl, Kalyani,

who grew up seeing her father being mistreated by law and society alike. She vowed to avenge the mistreatment by becoming a police officer herself. “Late 1990s saw a reversal of sorts to the 1980s. Women were back to their husbands and households. Every soap seemed to express a complete ritualisation of the family” (Juggi, 2011).

The New Breed of Pro-Social Soap Operas

Until 1990, Doordarshan had a monopoly over television broadcasting in India and it used to beam programmes for limited time. However, with the advent of satellite television the hours of entertainment increased, which resulted in more and more soap operas being produced. From the year 2000 onwards, the country saw the influx of soaps revolving around family dramas. These soaps mostly concentrate on the lives of Indian women who are struggling in relationships. Here, the emphasis is on mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships. But with the passing time these *saas-bahu* soaps have lost their essence and are now being replaced by pro-social soaps which deal with social issues. Soaps dealing with social issues more specifically women issues have made their presence; for example *Na Aana Iss Des Lado* (Do Not Come Into This Land Dear Daughter) primarily dealt with female feticide, *Balika Vadhu—Kacchi Umar Ke Pakke Rishte* (Child Bride—In Raw Age Making Ripe Relations) highlighted issues like child marriage and In *Mere Ghar Aayi Ek Nanhi Pari* (Into My House Came A Little Girl Fairy) portrayed the celebration of the birth of a girl child in a family after 40 years. But these soaps’ over emphasis on domestic politics rather than social evils make them ‘regressive’ in terms of the projection women characters. “Instead of challenging the social ill, women are being depicted as docile..”(Jaggi, 2011). She further noticed that these soap operas “include [lots of] ritualistic and religious elements to construct stereotypical, traditional narratives”.

CONCLUSION

In the first decade of the 21st century the K-serials were instrumental in “promoting religious customs and rituals leading women [to] fasting and valorizing self-denial and passivity as the desirable track to follow in order to ensure inter-and-intra-familial harmony and domestic peace and prosperity” (Dasgupta et al. 2012, p. 111). In these K-serials every action of the *bahu* was directed to safeguard the prestige or *izzat* of the family. *Sanskar* was the greatest attribute of all heroines of these serials. In the exact opposite of these *Sankarwali* heroines there were ‘too modern’ vamps who used to pose a threat to the unity of the family. These soaps presented the picture of an Indian woman who would find a way to reconcile her modernity with *sanskar*. The tradition continued in those soaps that addressed the issues like dowry, adultery, female infanticide and similar social injustices towards women. These pro-social soap operas that are gaining popularity with the Indian audiences again seem to nurture social rather than the personal identity of Indian women. Although soap producers sometimes focus attention on personal identity formation but often it gets submerged in tradition – bound social roles. Social messages are often conveyed in the midst of high, emotive family drama which is quite inconsistent with the thematic presentation of these serials.

The female characters in Indian soap operas usually present the stereotype of *Bharatiya Nari* (Indian woman) conforming to the rules of patriarchy and self-sacrificing for the cause of the family. On the other hand, the antagonists commonly known as vamps are shown as confident, self-assertive and individualistic. Narayan (1997) says that though in India mothers normally try to instill contradictory ideologies in their daughters, i.e., to be confident, impudent and self-assertive and at the same time teach conformity, decorum, and silence (p.8). But Indian soap - operas mostly portray these contradictions

as distinctly different characteristics in the heroine and in the villainess which in turn projects a singular image of the Ideal Indian womanhood. Instead of the diction of strong, successful and articulate woman, most of the soap operas narrate stories of victimized, passive and hapless women. In these soap-operas “educated women, professional women, and independent women [are] marginalized systematically and the religious, nonprofessional women [are] foregrounded as representative of Indian culture” (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2012, p.113). In such a scenario, it can be said that it will take some more time before such soaps can effectively be instrumental in portraying personal identity of woman, which allows self-growth without being concerned about how the society perceives her.

SHASWATI DAS, M.Phil., Research Scholar, Women’s Studies Centre, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India.

REFERENCES

- Allen, R. C. (1995).** *To Be Continued – Soap Operas Around the World*. New York: Routledge.
- Centre for Advocacy & Research (2007).** *Packaging the contemporary woman in television fiction: Deconstructing the role of ‘commerce’ and ‘tradition’*. In R. Ghadially (Eds.). *Urban women in contemporary India: A reader* (183 – 196). New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993).** *The nation and its fragments. Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Chaudhury, M. (2001).** Gender and Advertisements: the Rhetoric of Globalization. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 24(3) 373–385.
- Dasgupta, S., Sinha, D. & Chakravarti, S. (Eds.) (2012).** *Media Gender and Popular Culture in India - Tracking Change and Continuity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Derne, S. (1995).** *Culture in Action: Family Life, Emotion, and Male Dominance in Banaras, India*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Despande, A. (2009).** *Class, Power and Consciousness in Indian Cinema and Television*. Delhi: Primus Books.
- Fazal, S. (2009).** *Emancipation or Anchored Individualism? Women and TV soaps in India*. In W. Dissanayake & M. K. Gokulsingh (Eds.). *Populaculture in a globalized world* (p. 41–52). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fernandes, L. (2000).** Nationalizing ‘The Global’: Media images, Cultural Politics and the Middle Class in India. *Media, Culture and Society*, 22(5), 611–628.
- Fiske, J. (1987).** *Television Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gupta, N. (1998).** *Switching Channels - Ideologies of Television in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Jaggi, R. (2011).** The Great Indian Television Soap Opera: Issues of Identity and Socio-cultural Dynamics. *Media Asia*, 38(3), 140-145.
- Jung, C. G. (1970).** *Archetypes and the collective unconscious*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Paidos.
- Krishnan, P. & Dighe, A. (1990).** *Affirmation and Denial*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Kumar, J. K. (2011).** *Mass Communication in India*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House.
- Mankekar, P. (1993).** National Texts and Gendered Lives: An Ethnography of Television Viewers in a North Indian City. *American Ethnologist*, 20(3), 543-563.
- Mankekar, P. (1999).** *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mazzarella, W. (2003).** *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Duke University Press.
- McMillin, D.C. (2002).** Ideologies of Gender on Television in India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 9(1), 1-26.
- Mitra, A. (1993).** *Television and popular culture in India: A study of the Mahabharat*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

Morgan, M. & Signorielli, N. (1990). Cultivation analysis: conceptualization and methodology. In N. Signorielli, & M. Morgan (Eds.) (1990). *Cultivation analysis: New directions in media effects research* (p. 13-34). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

Munshi, S. (2010). *Prime time soap operas on Indian television*. New Delhi: Routledge.

Narayan, U. (1997). *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Tradition and Third-World Feminism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Parameswaran, R. E. (2004). Spectacles of Gender and Globalization: Mapping Miss World's Media Event Space in the News. *The Communication Review*, 7(4), 371- 406.

Punwani, J. (1988). Woman versus womanliness in India: An essay in social and political psychology. In R. Ghadially (Ed.) (1988). *Women in Indian society* (p.225-232). New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics after television: Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Singhal, A. & Rogers, E. M. (1999). *Entertainment-Education: A communication strategy for social change*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.