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Theorising the Soap: A Study on the Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television

Abstract

The media, in its multifarious forms, functions as one of the principal strategies through which cultural communication is achieved in the society. Mass media serve as a powerful socializing agent in the contemporary society. It plays a crucial role in almost all aspects of day to day life. In this age of rapid modernisation, television still stands out as the most attractive and persuasive mass communication medium that provides tremendous reach and entertainment for all categories of people across the globe. Among the various genres of shows aired on television, soap operas have received immense popularity, especially among the family audience. Hence it is imperative to understand the reason behind the development of daily soaps on Indian television. This paper traces the origin, history and significance of prime time soap operas on Indian television.

Key words: Culture, Media, Soap opera, Television

Introduction

Broadcasting began with the introduction of the first television sets to the United States in the 1940s. The first digital television broadcasting began in 1998 by the Pioneer Corporation

as television sets became popular in the American household. The development of broadcasting profoundly improved patterns of media consumption by generating the possibility of a largely privatized and individualized media experience to the masses. The significance of television as a medium of mass communication has been universally recognized and is especially relevant to a country like India, having continental dimensions and innumerable diversities.

Television came to India in 1959 with an experimental black and white transmission from Delhi, with the aid of a small transmitter and makeshift studio. Till 1975 only seven cities including Mumbai, Calcutta, Srinagar, Amritsar, Chennai and Lucknow, were covered and Doordarshan, a public broadcast terrestrial television channel run by the Government of India, remained the only television channel in India. Television programs are broadly classified, on the basis of genre, as fiction and non-fiction. Fictional programs include soaps, serials, and sitcoms whereas news bulletins, heated debates and talk shows, games shows, reality shows are examples of non-fiction genres.

Over the years, television, the various private channels and the vivid genres of programmes associated with it, has become part and parcel of the Indian household. Despite the influx of novel modes of television entertainments such as reality shows, soap operas still reign as the most preferred genre on Indian television. The study of soap operas on television gained currency in western academia from the 1980s onwards, due in large measures to growing academic legitimacy of the study of media texts of popular culture and feminist research on the media that helped sensitise gender issues while viewing media texts as a site of struggle over meanings (Munshi 22). However economic liberalisation from 1991 and the subsequent transformation of the Indian mediascape paved the way for studies of television in the Indian context.

A soap opera or a soap, is an “episodic format conformed...to melodramatic requirements” (Gledhill 103) that follows an open-ended narrative structure, with stories

spanning several episodes where each episode ends with a promise that the storyline is to be continued in another episode. The never-ending nature of soaps and their “sense of an unwritten future” (Geraghty 12) is a crucial element that defines a soap opera. The storylines of a soap opera run concurrently, intersect and lead into further developments. Each episode switches between diverse parallel narrative threads that may at times interconnect and affect one another or may run entirely independent to each other. “Soap narratives, like those of film melodramas, are marked by what Steve Neale has described as ‘chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, deus ex machina endings’”(Geraghty 30).

Indian soaps are primarily catered to a female audience. Often labelled as a female oriented narrative, “soaps address women in particular” (Ahmed 1). Indian soap operas are mostly family based drama within a patriarchal set up, produced in a wide variety of languages including Hindi, Bengali, Marati, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and many more. Since the last few decades, the soaps produced in India are also broadcast overseas. They are often mass produced under large production banners running dubbed versions of the same serial on different television networks.

The History of Soap Operas

The history of soap operas can be traced back to the 1800s when novels such as Dickens appeared in newspapers in serialized formats (Kielwasser and Wolf 120). The term “soap opera” was used for the first time in 1930s by the American press to denote popular serialized radio drama which were sponsored by giant soap manufacturers such as Proctor, Gamble. BBC Radio's *The Archers* (1950), is recognised as the world's longest-running radio soap opera. In course of time soaps entered television as serialized daytime dramas which were broadcast daily under the sponsorships of soap manufacturers including Colgate-Palmolive and Lever Brothers. Originally directed at women, soap operas functioned as a vehicle for advertising.

The first televised soap opera was *Peyton Place* (1964-69), which eventually appeared on British TV. Gradually the craze for soap operas developed not only in America, Britain and UK, but all over the world. *Coronation Street*, first broadcast on ITV in 1960, is considered as the world's longest-running television soap opera. The daily transmission of programs in India started in 1965 with the opening of the state sponsored channel, Doordarshan. The introduction of colour into Doordarshan's monochromatic landscape in 1982, drew in urban middle class audiences and encouraged advertisers to compete for commercial sponsorship on Doordarshan. This resulted in the sudden onset of a variety of advertising supported entertainment programmes including sitcoms and serials based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. By the late 1980s, serial dramas were becoming part and parcel of the Indian television. Launched in the year 1984, *Hum Log (We People)* was the first ever serial to be telecast on Doordarshan. Sponsored by Nestle and Colgate and produced by a private company, *Hum*, a story of an urban middle-class family comprising three generations. The success of *Hum Log* was followed by *Buniyaad (Foundation)* in 1986. The popularity of these soaps has been justifiably seen as prototypes of how Doordarshan and subsequently private channels defined the genre of soap operas and serials.

By the mid-90's satellite broadcast via cable had Indian cities weaned away from the monopoly in television media enjoyed by Doordarshan. With the advent of the private channels in the early half of the nineties, such as Star Plus and Zee TV, there was a considerable modification in the content of entertainment programmes. Furthermore, in 1994 actor Jeetendra Kapoor established production house under the title Balaji Telefilms. With the entry of Ekta Kapoor, the producer of Balaji telefilms, there happened a paradigm shift in the history of Indian soap opera. With lesser-known actors, this production house launched long-running, prime time soaps that garnered very high TRPs (television rating points).

In the early 2000s with the entry of Ekta Kapoor's "K" series, "*saas-bahu sagas*" (mother-in law daughter-in-law) became the "*chhotey parde ki bari baat*" (the big thing on the small screen) and in due course of time Indian soap operas became the "*Saas- Bahu*" conflict platform. The very first serial of "K" series was *Kyunki Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (*Because the Mother-in Law Was Also Once a Daughter-in-Law*), aired on Star Plus, followed by yet another hit soap *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (*The Story of every Home*). Though the storylines or the portrayal were not so realistic serials by Ekta Kapoor gained very high TRP as they expounded "*parivaar aur parampara*" (family and tradition).

Private channels, like Star Plus, Zee TV, Sony and much later Colours also positioned soap operas as the preferred genre. There emerged different social issues as themes including child marriage, widow remarriage, illicit child, remarriage and many more. Shows like *Balika Vadhu* (2008, Colours TV), *Ye Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* (2009, Star Plus), and *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* (2010, Star Plus) had a successful long run on Indian Television. The Corporate Communications Head of Star TV, Yash Khanna, opines that "soaps are the flagship program for a channel, particularly those broadcast on prime time. The prime time band for television channels is 8pm to 11pm"(Munshi 38)..

The Development of Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television.

There were quite a lot of factors that contributed to the development of prime time soap operas on Indian television. When satellite television first came to India, audiences were able to watch prime time soaps such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *The Bold and Beautiful*. These had very high production values and were lavish treats visually, similar to Bollywood films of post liberalization India (Munshi 2008). They also contained "one of the vital ingredients for success in relation to audiences for soap operas-personal problems and emotional entanglements"(Hobson 2003). US prime time soaps became part of the experience of Indian

viewers and influenced Indian soap opera production, particularly in their lavish spectacle and presentation, narrative structure and content.

The prime time soaps in India represent a continuation of their culture's pre-cinema dramatic forms and stories, transformed by the capitalist economy of scale and the power of the mass media. Where they differ from their western counterparts is the dramatic traditions from which they emerged. Hence the influence of the two epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* frequently broadens characterization and interpretation of plots in prime time soap operas. Family melodramas of 1990s Bollywood also foregrounded the "Indian culture, Values and Traditions or the *"parivaar aur parampara"* (family and tradition) phenomenon, as Shoma Munshi christened it. The soap producers follow the ideal that 'without evil, there can be no good' and hence these soaps often become the platform where the incessant battle between the good and the evil takes place. The lavish display of opulence of soaps is "accepted without guilt, and with no indication ..that affluence might be corrupting or ill-gained..."(Uberoi 149).

Widely referred to as a 'woman's' medium, the feminisation of the television arises from the content or programs such as soap operas and serials are generally made with a female spectatorship in mind. Apart from this narrow division of genre, time slots i.e. the hour in which a program is aired can also alter the content of the program. For instance primetime soaps would differ vastly from day time soaps. In the West, especially in the United States, day time soap operas such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, usually catering to a more female audience, serials such as *Friends*, and *How I met your Mother* cater to both the male and female adult viewers. Genres are also culturally informed, for instance soap operas in India are vastly different in content from say the American soaps, and enjoy prime time slots in India.

Another important aspect that leads to the female centric nature of television is advertising. Commercial serials that sell viewers to advertisers showcase 22 minutes of content and sell viewers advertisements that often appear during the breaks. Each segment should be

entertaining in its own, almost a mini episode, otherwise the viewer might not bother to come back after the commercial break. For budgetary reasons the company prefers to find a successful formula for a program. Then repeat the formula-narrative repetition between episodes. The occasional appearance of film stars as guest characters to promote their films is an impeccable illustration of the commercial market of the prime time soap operas on Indian television.

Currently the three major networks that air primetime soap operas with national wide are Star India, Viacom 18 and Zee Entertainment Enterprises. The post 2010 era witnessed a greater inflow of very many and in the past two decades, the Indian television has experimented with a wide variety of genres that ranges from mythology to fantasy. Mythological drama such as *Devon Ke Dev.. Mahadev* (2011, Life OK) and *Mahabharat* (2013, Star Plus) were long running shows. The emerged shows based on biographies such as *Jhansi Ki Rani* (Zee TV, 2009) and *Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat* (2015, Colours TV). Crime thrillers such as *C.I.D.* (1998, Sony TV) and *Adaalat* (2010, Sony TV) received much attention. Romance was the most dominant of all genres and the most popular among them include soaps like *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?* (2011, Star Plus), *Kuch Rang Pyar Ke Aise Bhi* (2016, Sony TV) and *Beyhadh* (2016, Sony TV). Recently, fantasy and supernatural elements shown in soaps such as *Sasural Simar Ka* (2013), Colours TV) *Naagin* (2015, Colours TV) and *Nazar* (2017, Star Plus) have turned out to receive much fanfare among the audiences. Now-a-days, online platforms such as You Tube and apps such as Hotstar and Voot telecast television shows hours before being aired on Television.

Apart from its non-linear narrative, multiple plot sequences and ceaseless dramatic twists and turns in the plotline, a prime time soap opera has to its credit certain well defined characteristic features that add to its popularity among the masses. Such factors include the use of different tropes to attract viewership, the effective use of background score to enhance

emotions, the intense romantic scenes and the eye-catching song and dance sequences employed by most of the contemporary daily soaps. Though the proportions may vary according to the genre, theme and the cultural context of the programme, the basic constituents are indeed the same for most Indian soap operas. Almost all soaps aired in India have become “*saas bahu sagas*” with minor regional variations in the depiction of the bond shared between the two.

Conclusion

Soap operas have become an inevitable part of the Indian household ever since the era of broadcasting. With the arrival of Doordarshan and private channels there came a great influx of vivid genres of soaps. It is with the entry of Balaji Telefilms and their “K” soaps that there happened a paradigm shift in the history of the Indian soap opera. The development of soap opera in India is certainly influenced from the West where the storylines interlace intricate, convoluted, and often confusing tales of characters falling in love, committing adultery, etc. all of which keeps audiences hooked on the unfolding plot. Women and the culture of India (or a homogenised, diluted mainstream version of it) are successfully exploited by Indian capitalists to mint money. The mode of address of each television programme is tailored to fit the assumed audience. Widely referred to as a ‘woman’s medium’, the feminisation of television arises from the content. Over the years, daily soaps rule the Indian audience who adore the fictional characters on screen, taking exceptional interests in their way of life.

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