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“When we stop being scared . . .”

Youth culture, gender, and television in India

The diverse TV preferences of Indian teenagers can be ascribed to their gender perspective and their social status, as is shown by this qualitative study. Boys prefer comedians and strong heroes, girls choose TV films and soap operas, according to their social status preferably for entertainment or as standard for their social advancement.



Anujoth in her room in front of her PC desk

“I don’t like those typical very goody goody characters. I like mixed ones (who have) a tinge of negative and a tinge of positive, the sensible ones who know when to be good, when to be bad. I think that’s the way you need to be in today’s world. So Sujal is that kind (of character).¹ He knows what to do when. He’s got a little temper and all that, but he has always been misunderstood so you always have a . . . little bit of pity in your heart, little bit of care in your heart for that character.”

For 15-year-old Anujoth, an avid watcher of Hindi soaps and dramas on Zee TV and Sony ET (Entertainment Television) channels in Bangalore, India, the more complex the characters, the more she liked them. With little time to watch television because of her looming 10th grade CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) examinations, she was highly selective, enjoying certain prime time soaps with her mother. Sujal was one of her favourite TV characters, as was Jassy, a somewhat

plain-looking yet spunky woman on Sony ET’s *Jassi Jasey Koi Nahi* (“There’s Nobody Quite Like Jassy”) not for their looks or “good” roles, but for their human frailties. In fact, if she were to star in her own television serial, Anujoth wanted to be “a vamp who goes and butts her nose in every single thing and tries to create problems, because (. . .) I think playing a totally negative role, something totally different, is fun and . . . challenging – the essence of life.” Anujoth saw herself as a member of the “hottest gang of girls” in her school, as a carefree, well-loved teenager, and the world practically lay at her feet. Perhaps her responses are typical of teenagers across the world. Yet these have to be put in the context of her privileged upbringing where her gender, Sikh religion, and upper caste worked in her favour to allow her the freedom to choose from a variety of friends, careers, and television characters. What about other teens who are not so privileged, for

whom gender identity is integral to the choices available to them? How does gender texture exactly what Anujoth and other teens watch on television? Do television choices inform their gendered identities and vice versa?

These questions are important ones in the study of how teens interact with television. To explore further how teens’ gender identities are contextualised within their social and cultural environments and the role television plays in this contextualisation, six 14- to 15-year-olds were interviewed in Bangalore, India. These respondents represented diversity in terms of gender,² religion,³ socioeconomic level,⁴ and region.⁵ The teens were contacted in February 2004 and were introduced to a 7-month research design where their daily routines and television watching habits were tracked through self-maintained journals and scrapbooks containing newspaper and magazine clippings of their favourite television programmes and actors. A research assistant monitored the respondents’ journal and scrapbook activity two times a month for 4 months. In July 2004, each respondent was interviewed for around 2 to 3 hours at the end of which the author summarised the conversation to check for accuracy. Follow-up phone calls were made to verify details of the conversation. The multi-phased fieldwork resulted in a rich variety of materials: interview transcripts, journal entries, photographs

from researcher and respondent, and scrapbook entries. Interviews were transcribed and organised for analysis according to themes of identity (global, national, local, gender, class, ethnic, religious, teen), ambition, home environment (including parents' personality), TV characters, and TV identity. This article focusses on the interplay of viewers' gender identity and television.

Contextualising gender and television in India

For urban teens in India, television is part of a variety of activities such as surfing the internet, e-mailing friends, preparing for school exams, and participating in family rituals and religious festivals (cf. e.g. McMillin, 2005). For teen girls in particular, television provides a safe avenue for entertainment; they spend two-thirds of their leisure time indoors while teen boys spend half of this time outdoors. Girls in general are required to be home by 7:00 p.m. in most Indian households, whereas boys have the freedom to stay out late (Verma/Sharma, 2003). Such curfew is relaxed when high school and college graduates, whether male or female, are employed by the numerous lucrative multinational call centres that demand nocturnal labour. For these adolescents and young adults, television channels such as Channel [V] and MTV are part of the training programme to help develop American accents and personas to cater to a transnational clientele (McMillin, 2006).

For rural girls television performs an important gentrifying function in providing lessons on how to dress and behave

For low income, rural and semi-urban girls between 13 and 18 years of

age, a prime target for ancillary factories to multinational corporations on the outskirts of the city, television performs an important gentrifying function in providing (albeit sexist) lessons on how to dress and behave as wage-earning residents of the city (McMillin, 2003). What these statements highlight is that television for young people in India is a minor part of their daily activities that are absorbed primarily by education, work, and family obligations, yet serve an important function in connecting them to various spaces of expression and identity. Girls and boys are allowed very different degrees of freedom and girls are socialised at a very young age to perform a variety of service roles for their families and community, roles that are reified on television. Boys are given greater latitude to explore and nurture their own needs and wants. These basic features of Indian households translate into very different viewing choices and experiences for teen female and male viewers. Such differences have to be anchored to their structural contexts and critical theory that continuously interrogates the location of power is particularly relevant here.

To explain, critical studies of popular culture and media in India revive the political edge of reception studies (McMillin, 2007) that has been sub-

merged in North American audience studies (Harris, 1992). Such politicisation characterised British cultural studies in the 1960s and is evident in the cultural studies of Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, which grapple with the more politically inflected issues of post-colonialism, globalisation, and national identity. This critical component is strongly evident in Nordic and Germanic media research as well (Drotner, 2000b).

Drawing from a critical framework, this article posits that the gender identity of the respondents intimately informs what and how they watch television. At the same time, it asserts that other identity positions such as class, caste, religion, and language, texture the viewing experience as well and should be considered crucial components of the whole experience. The study of teens as an audience group must also regard them as "enmeshed in relationships of care" (Kaplan, 2000, p. 476), not just as threats to adult society, victims of adults, or emulators of adult culture, as has been the convention (Thorne, 1987).

To put it succinctly, context is crucial in the study of adolescents and media (Fisher-Keller, 2002) where such audiences are constructed as active, having agency in their interpretations and negotiations with the



Zohrab and his beloved TV set

text (McRobbie, 1991; Kellner, 1995). The analysis of the correspondence between gender identities and choice of TV characters among respondents in this study showed clear differences further textured by their class positions.

Gender differences in the selection of favourite TV characters

As stated in the previous section, in a context of male preference, girls and boys in most Indian households are socialised to perform service-oriented and ego-centric roles, respectively. Dating is generally taboo both among teenagers and young adults. Interestingly in this study, teens' choice of favourite television characters reflected this socialisation. For example, Ambika, a 14-year-old rural girl, stated that she wished she had not been born a girl because it was difficult to see the preferential treatment given to her brother, Praveen, by both her parents and grandparents. Her freedom was severely restricted whereas her brother could come home even at midnight without being questioned. Women lived in fear and she had to have "the courage of a lion" to endure the endless harassment she faced in her village for being a girl, she said. Yet Shubha, her 15-year-old friend, was vehement that she was proud to be born female because her harsh experiences had taught her to withstand anything. If miscreants in her village came to her house to harass her, she was brave enough to drive them out of her house and it is only, she said, "when we stop being scared that they (men) will stop scaring us ... (I)n my position, that sort of a woman will definitely come forward. Why should a woman always grow up behind (the man)?" For these girls, bride burning for lack of adequate dowries was a stark reality and they were reminded daily of their "unfortunate" plight in being female.



Ambika (left) and Shubha (third from left) pose for a photograph in the schoolyard together with their friends

Ambika's and Shubha's television watching was limited to a couple of hours every evening after they had finished cooking and cleaning the house, especially because their mothers worked long hours in nearby sweat shops. While Shubha was an avid news watcher, Ambika preferred to stay away from it because the frequent stories of disaster and crime made her sad and she sought television for entertainment and fun. Both disliked crime serials and enjoyed Kannada (their native language), women-oriented family dramas such as *Mangalya* ("Marriage") and *Mahabayi* ("Great Woman") because they dealt with women's exploitation and strategies for subversion. In particular, Shubha said that "if any picture comes about a mother, how to empower women, if there are serials like that, whatever my mother says, how much ever work I have, first as soon as I come home from school, I watch (sic)." She liked the actress Bhavyashree because though silent, she was strong and made a respectful career for herself in a very sexist industry. Through critical realism (see Fingerson, 1999), these respondents saw a direct correspondence between the portrayal of women on their favourite serials and their struggles in real life. Ambika also appreciated the straightforward male Kannada actor Ravichandra

who was a popular hero of both Kannada films and television serials.

Anujoth's ego-centric responses are more similar to those of the boys because although female, she enjoys the privileges of class freedom

The responses of these rural girls stand as a stark contrast to the upbeat comments of Anujoth described at the beginning of this article. The difference can be attributed to the vast distance in their socioeconomic backgrounds. As an upper income teen, Anujoth's primary concerns were whether the Indian cricket team won the latest match or whether she would be elected captain of the Science or Literary Associations. Her ego-centric responses are more similar to those of the boys in this study because although female, she enjoyed the privileges of class freedom. She had endless crushes on actors such as Sujal and cricket players such as Pakistan's Irfaan Pataa, who were TV heroes in the well-televised cricket matches. While Shubha and Ambika chose protagonists who effected social change, Anujoth appreciated her heroes for their individual strengths, be they for good or evil, rather than their social importance.

While the teen girls in this study named male and female TV characters as their favourites, the teen boys only chose male characters to admire and emulate. For all three boys, television was a minor part of their after-school routine since most of the evening was spent in tuition for the upcoming 10th grade exams. Even though Ashok, a 15-year-old, lower-income Kannada Christian boy was now in college having passed his 10th grade with distinction, he used most of the evening to study and watched television only after dinner with his fam-

being darker in skin colour than his sister. Comedy in particular awarded him intellectual superiority over his peers, where he could be one step ahead with a sarcastic wit.

Ashok, on the other hand, sought such heroic characters played by Bruce Willis and Vivek (a Tamil comedian) for their strength and quick wit. Both Zohrab and Ashok had had girlfriends and had lost interest in the relationship because they had just grown apart from the latter. Both now had girls as friends and were not interested in pursuing a specific



Ashok poses with his football medal in front of the TV set

ily. Like Zohrab, a 14-year-old, half Goan Christian, half Parsi boy, Ashok admired the wit of comedic actors. Zohrab specifically studied *Caroline in the City* to learn the art of comedic timing from Richard, Caroline's sharp-tongued work partner. As the younger child of a single-parent household and having moved to a different school each time his teacher-mother found a new job, Zohrab often felt lost. He had been a student in lower-income schools as well as posh, private ones, and even spent a few years in a school for children with handicaps because his tuition was free. Television for Zohrab was a way to connect to a somewhat grounded English-speaking community particularly because he didn't fit in with his Kannada-speaking classmates or middle-class Hindu neighbourhood. He was insecure about

romantic relationship. The third teen male in this study, Teja, a 14-year-old upper-income Hindu, similarly sought strong male TV characters as his favourites: Ash from *Pokémon* and Goldberg from *WWF*. Both showed determination and strength and people looked up to them. Painfully aware of his weight and dark skin colour, Teja said he was trying to slim down. For all these boys, their favourite TV characters offered some grounding in a world of insecure job prospects, confusion about girls and sexuality, and anxiety about keeping up with peers. Their vicarious enjoyment of the lives and loves of their favourite TV characters allowed them a sense of power in a somewhat powerless teen context.

Television and gender identity in India

While any number of studies have addressed the function of television in socialising children and teenagers about gender roles (cf. Barner, 1999; Larson, 2001, and Signorelli, 2001 for example), few examine the role of gender in programme selection (cf. Knobloch et al., 2005).

Zohrab and Ashok preferred male protagonists, wishing they had their wit or muscle

The teens in this study showed selective viewing based on gender, with girls choosing soaps and dramas and boys choosing comedies and action-oriented cartoons and reality shows. As did the German boys in Knobloch et al.'s (2005) study, the teen male respondents all preferred male protagonists as their favourite characters, wishing they had the wit or muscle of these televised heroes. The girls were more flexible, as demonstrated by Beal (1994) and Goldstein (1994), and discussed male and female characters as their favourites on television. The strong Indian cultural tradition of orienting males and females to gender-specific roles may have played a significant part in the selection of favourite TV characters (cf. Harkness and Super, 1995).

Shubha and Ambika sought ways to fight against the patriarchal society and used the serials to find ways to combat sexism and casteism

Further, for Shubha and Ambika, women-oriented serials resonated with their own traditional ideas of motherhood, as was the case for the Dutch female adolescents and young

adults in Ex et al.'s (2002) study. Yet these girls sought ways to fight against the female norm in a patriarchal society and used the serials to find ways to combat the sexism and casteism in their communities, as did the Mexican American girls (10 to 15 years old) in Mayer's (2002) ethnography. Class differences among the respondents provided very different perceptions of personal agency and played an important role in their programme selection where Anujoth of an upper-income family chose programmes primarily for entertainment while Shubha and Ambika chose programmes for lessons on upward mobility.

A wealth of scholarship in the social science tradition exists on youth and television, many of which are cited in the above analysis. Yet ethnographic studies on the same are scarce. Fieldwork conducted in Bangalore, India, in the homes and schools of the six respondents in this study resulted in a rich variety of materials pointing to the complex world of teens and the lifeline television can sometimes offer them to articulate their shifting and multiple identity positions. More ethnographic studies are sorely needed to address important contextual questions and draw out the nuances in audience reception. ■

NOTES

1 Sujal Garewal is the primary protagonist in Sony ET's prime time serial *Kahi To Hoga* ("Anything Can Happen").

2 Three are male and three are female.

3 Two are Christian, three are Hindu, and one is Sikh.

4 Two are from lower-income, two are from middle-income, and two are from upper-income groups.

5 Two are from rural, one is from urban North and three from urban South India.

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