

*Making Sense of TV Soap Operas: A Study of Audience
Response*

**A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
SOCIOLOGY**

**BY
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Dedicated to
My Family



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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled “*Making Sense of TV Soap Operas: A Study of Audience Response*” submitted to the University of Hyderabad in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology is an original research work done by me under the supervision and guidance of *Dr. Vinod K. Jairath*.

I declare to the best of my knowledge that this thesis has not been submitted to any other University or Institution for the award of any degree.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “*Making Sense of TV Soap Operas: A Study of Audience Response*” submitted by Sudhansubala Sahu in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology under my supervision.

I declare to the best of my knowledge that this thesis has not been submitted to any other University or Institution for the award of any degree.

**Prof. Vinod K. Jairath
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Abbreviation

CCCS: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

KSBKBT: Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi

KGK: Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki

KZK: Kasauti Zindegi Ki

U & G: Uses & gratifications

TRP: Television Rating Points

CHAPTER-I

Introduction

Chapter - 1

Introduction

India with its entry to the global market not only allowed its market to get flooded with imported goods but also its television industry to go through a complete transformation. It was under this global influence that the Indian television experienced a major shift, both in its content as well as its purpose. With the ‘explosion’ of satellite television the western ‘entertainment genres’ like soap operas and reality shows entered home. The educational and informative aspects, which were the initial purpose of television in India, got marginalized and entertainment took its place. This new entertainment oriented television introduced some new Indianized versions of western genres for the Indian audiences. One such genre was the local version of American soap operas, which appealed to Indian masses more than any other global product. At present soap operas not only dominate the national television but also the provincial channels as the most popular genre.

The present work examines how the audience constitutes multiple meanings in the consumption of Hindi Soap operas on various National channels of Indian television. This qualitative research was carried out in the urban middle-class setting in the city of Bangalore.

1.1 Introducing and Defining Soap Opera

Soap operas are one of those texts, which are seen to be specifically designed for women, such as Romance Novels and Women’s Magazines. The roaring success of soap operas has always attracted the attention of feminist and other scholars. According to Mumford, ‘as a genre designed for and watched primarily by women...

soaps have effectively been impossible for feminists to ignore' (Mumford 1998: 118). Though some of the feminist scholars have labelled them as rubbish, exploitative and patriarchal, others have attempted to understand the nature of pleasure that is derived by millions of women by consuming these texts. Several western scholars have made contributions to this field. Most importantly its audiences have been extensively discussed and debated among the academics in the western context. Though they are very few in number, significant studies on television serials and their audiences are found in India. However, a considerable amount of audience research remains unexplored in India which is due to the late entry of the medium itself.

Defining the genre of TV soap operas has always been a contested one where one can find the early US scholars defining them as 'an unending, daytime, fictional program shown five times a week' and scholars like Geraghty (2005: 311) who studied the soaps on British television, arguing that 'not purely by daytime scheduling or even by a clear appeal to a female audience, but they become the subject for public interest and interrogation'.

There are certain characteristics identified by Cantor and Pingree (1983) that a television programme is supposed to have in order to be identified as a soap opera.

- Soap operas are a form of serialized dramatic television broadcast, which are shown daily on different television networks. They are shown throughout the year and around four to five days a week.
- Soaps are stories about people and their daily life events which are generally set in present, rather than being historical, and most of the action occurs in domestic settings.
- The stories generally revolve around relationships of two or three families and their associates. They do not have heroes but have several characters and everyone is equally important.

- Characters presented in soap operas are easily identified as good or bad. Good characters are family oriented and hold in check their ambitions and selfish desires, whereas bad characters are openly seductive and aggressive in their careers.
- Soap operas proceed at a slow pace. The vital information is repeated from day to day. For those who miss episodes, some magazines and newspapers report the previous week's events.
- Actions in soap operas are usually told through conversation and not through portrayal of events. They are generally not action oriented.
- All soaps qualify as manifestations of women's culture. Occasionally, an adventure plot will be included in a soap opera, but most are women's stories revolving around love, duty and family.
- Soap operas are serious, not satires, comedies, or parodies.
- They are targeted at female audiences. Hence, the story focuses predominantly on female characters and 'feminine' or domestic concerns.

Soap operas in the Indian context possess all these characteristics but with its primetime broadcast timing the target audiences are no more confined to women only. This is the reason why the present study also includes the observations made by male viewers along with women. With time the Indian production houses have developed new styles to make their soaps more interesting, to go on for long and to attract more audiences. In a recent study Shoma Munshi (2010) brought out the following generic features of Indian prime time soaps.

- Open-ended narrative told in serial/episodic form which resists narrative closure
- Multiple characters, plots, and sub-plots
- Use of time at a dual level – one, which parallels actual time and implies that soap characters' lives go on whether we watch or not; and two, when the narrative takes a generation leap to introduce new characters and new story lines
- Emphasis on dialog and attempt at resolution
- Mixing of genres of melodrama, myth, realism and entertainment
- Hook, Recap and Precap
- Male characters whose actions move the narrative forward
- Women as the central protagonists
- The family home as the main setting for the show (p. 20)

Along with generation leaps, paying comparatively more importance to male characters and some other aspects like focusing on the institution of joint family; and significance of religious festivals (some of which are very region specific) are new additions to the existing features of soaps.

As Veena Das (1995) points out ‘not only are important variations in theme and character in soap operas produced in different countries in accordance with local cultures, but also the same soap opera may be very differently received in different parts of the world...at the level of both production and consumption of meaning’ (pp. 170-171). The Indianized version of soap operas have a large fan following as Munshi says ‘one-third of India’s billion inhabitants regularly watch Indian television soaps’ (2010:5). In this context it becomes important as well as interesting to study how Indian audiences from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds construct meaning in the process of consumption of their favourite soap operas on National Channels.

1.2 Studying Soap Operas: From Text to Audience

Initially, studies of TV soap operas focused on the structure and content of the genre, mostly tracing the history of its development from US Radio in the 1930s to the television. Till late seventies most works on soap operas relied on the theories, methods, and perspectives in the study of film and television, which included the structural analysis of narrative, semiotics and psychoanalysis, and the political economy of cultural institutions. Such studies were criticized as they did not take into account the aesthetic experience and interpretive skill of the audience while addressing complicated questions regarding their production, textual organization and relationship with the audience (especially women).

It was in the early 1980s that audience research was pursued by various scholars. It started with *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding* by David Morley (1999[1980]) in which he studied the decoding of a TV current affairs text (on BBC) by the audience. Later on, a similar approach towards the study of audience was adopted within the research domain of soap operas as well. Hobson's *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* (1982), Ang's *Watching Dallas: soap operas and the melodramatic imagination* (1985), Buckingham's *Public Secrets: 'Eastenders' and its audience* (1987) are some major works on soap opera audiences in the western context. These studies were highly influenced by the encoding/decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall (1973).

This shift of focus from text to audience brought out the complexities in the process of meaning construction by audience and 'audience' emerged as a much more complicated category than it was understood to be. These studies sketched a provisional map of different 'interpretive communities' based on the axes of age, sex, race and class.

While discussing the audience of *Crossroads*, Hobson says:

'Different people watch television programmes for different reasons, and make different 'readings' of those programmes, and much of what they say is determined by preconceived ideas and opinions which they bring to a programme. The message is not solely in the 'text' but can be changed or 'worked on' by the audience as they make their own interpretation of the programme' (Hobson 1996: 603).

Similarly Fiske argued that 'the television text, or programme, is no unified whole delivering the same message in the same way to all its 'audience'... The textuality of television, the intertextuality of the process of making sense and pleasure from it, can

only occur when people bring their different histories and subjectivities to the viewing process' (1996 [1989]: 537). It was also argued that 'the meanings negotiated between text and readers are not bound by any single episode, and hence, the soap opera may offer considerable opportunity for an interpretative role for the long-term reader/viewer', as they provide what is called 'ritual pleasure' to the audience as a result of which they develop 'para-social relation'¹ with the genre and its characters (Livingstone 1998: 51-59).

These studies located 'significant clusters' of meaning and joined them with the social and discursive positioning of the readers. They claimed that viewers with common histories and subjectivities come together to form different 'interpretive communities'. As discussed earlier most of the works within the reception studies tradition have dealt with these interpretive communities based on the assumption that they are formed along the axes of age, gender, class, caste, race and education.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Statement of Problem

Moving a step ahead of the works done within the reception studies tradition, the present study intends to examine how 'interpretive communities' can not be completely defined or explained on the axes of age, gender, class, caste, race and education. How audiences shift between different 'interpretive communities' as their life experiences shape their understanding of the texts? To put it differently, the main question posed in the present study is: Do all members of an 'interpretive community'

¹The concept of 'Para social relation' suggests that viewers can enter a drama through means other than identification. The viewers may experience the interactions between characters as if they themselves are participants, retaining their identity and playing against the characters, taking sides answering back and reacting emotionally (Livingstone 1998: 59). So, this para-social relationship can be recognized in its extreme form when a viewer puts himself so deeply into a character, that s/he can feel the same emotions and experience, the same events, as the character is supposed to feel.

read the *entire text* in the same manner and do they read the text in the same manner in *different contexts*? Are interpretive communities stable entities?

1.4 Objectives

- To study the relationship between the audience and soap opera texts and how audience construct meaning out of these texts within the context of family and everyday life.
- To explore how soap operas represent women, men and the power relationships through institutions like marriage, family and religion; and their interpretation by audience.
- To study how audiences which are situated within similar social, political and economic structures vary in their interpretation of these media texts.
- To examine how the structural factors as well as the lived experiences of particular individuals play an important role in the construction of meaning especially in fast changing societies like India.

The following methodology has been adopted to answer the question posed by this study and to achieve these objectives.

1.5 Methodology

Looking at the studies done on soap operas in western context and the literature on Television and films in India, I planed to go for a study of the audiences of Indian soap operas. It is a qualitative study of soap opera audience. I have gathered empirical data through in-depth interviewing with the regular viewers of the soap operas. I have also done textual analysis of the soap operas whenever it was required to have an understanding of the structure of the text (i.e. text of the soap operas discussed by my respondents) and the interaction between text, context and the audience.

Through the present research I dealt with the reception of soap operas by the urban middle-class and lower-middle-class audience as rightly pointed out by Patricia Uberoi ‘...a finger on the pulse of Indian middle and lower middle classes is a finger on the pulse of modern India’. Here urban also includes a good number of respondents who are migrants from other cities, from small towns and villages. Though I can not claim that the study reflects the sentiment of Indians as a whole but an attempt has been made to enrich the sample by including people from different parts of the country.

1.5.1 Methods of Data Collection

In order to carry out my study, I completely relied on qualitative approaches for data collection. First, I did a preliminary fieldwork with audiences who watch soap operas for more than an hour. For which 15 interviews were carried out with the help of an interview schedule (with 31 questions, both open and close ended) which had a set of structured and standardized questions, to have an idea about the audience taste and attitude towards their favourite programmes and characters. The schedule also included audience response towards various programmes (music, reality shows, and soap operas) on regional as well as national channel. Audience talked about their like/dislike towards these programmes, and explained how some of the presentations conformed whereas others did not to their commonsense understanding of the society (they have access to).

This preliminary study enabled me to form a better set of research questions for my field work. I chose Hindi soap operas on national channels because of their bigger and

wider fan following. The study being an urban middle-class study was carried out in the city of Bangalore where I used an interview guide to keep my discussion focused.

The interview guide mostly included open-ended questions which aimed at responses on their favourite soap operas, their favourite character(s) (based on their whole experience), why they liked them; whether they find any theme in the soap operas having a realistic dimension; do they talk about or discuss what is happening in the soaps with their family/friends; what are the other activities they are engaged in while watching soaps; how do they react towards any kind of interruption while watching, what is their perception regarding the effect of the soaps, how do they associate and dissociate with the stories, and how they derive pleasure out of watching their favourite soaps.

This whole range of questions addressed issues like: the significance of soap operas in the everyday life of the audience; how meaning is made; how pleasure is derived through watching and talking about it in the social circle; and how it has enriched their knowledge and influenced their life style.

I used purposive snowball sampling method for my fieldwork. Initially I had seven respondents with whom I started and then through them I got hold of my other respondents. This guided me towards a comparatively stratified set of respondents (especially based on gender, religion and region) with some homogeneity. As Gray has argued 'such homogeneity may be necessary both in terms of easing and sharing of knowledge between the researcher and the researched and providing a base from which comparisons can be made' (Gray in Geraghty 1998: 146) .

Finally, 60 respondents were selected and were divided on the basis of variables like gender, age, education, class, religion, regional background. But there were other things which were felt untouched by this set of variables thus for better understanding these categories were divided further. For example, my women respondents were divided by categories like working and non-working women. Among the housewives my sample had professionally qualified as well as school drop outs who were working due to financial problems (3 of them). Among the non-working women respondents there were those who were professionally qualified and were working at one point of time but at present they are not due to some unavoidable reasons.

The diversity among the respondents enhances the scope of analysing the influence of one's cultural background as well as the influence of social milieu and individual life experience on the reception process.

1.5.2 Profile of the Respondents

I interviewed 60 regular viewers of Hindi soap operas out of which 48 are women and 12 are men. Their regional background, age distribution, marital status and religious affiliation, class distributions are shown in Table 2.1, Table 2.2, Table 2.3, Table 2.4 and Table 2.5 respectively.

Table 2.1: (Regional Background)

State of Origin	Number of Respondents		
	Man	Woman	Total
Karnataka	4	18	22
Orissa	5	15	20
West Bengal	Nil	6	6
U.P	Nil	4	4
Bihar	2	1	3
Maharastra	Nil	3	3
Kashmir	Nil	1	1
Tamilnadu	1	Nil	1
Total	12	48	60

Table 2.2: (Age Distribution)

Age	<20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	>55	Total
Number of Respondents	2	10	24	6	8	2	4	2	2	60

Table 2.3: (Marital Status)

Marital Status	Woman	Man	Total
Married	43	7	50
Unmarried	5	5	10
Total	48	12	60

Table 2.4: (Religious Affiliation)

Religious Affiliation	Number of Respondents		
	Man	Woman	Total
Hindu	8	30	38
Muslim	4	18	22
Total	12	48	60

The study being based on the urban middle-class television audiences where many have migrated (it includes both first generation and second generation migrants) from smaller towns of various parts of the country and watch Hindi soap operas regularly, I planned to divide them into three broad categories based on their income and the property that they own, i.e. upper middle-class, middle middle-class and lower middle-class, which is shown in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 (Class Distribution)

Class	Number of Respondents		
	Man	Woman	Total
Upper- middle Class	1	20	21
Middle-middle Class	10	23	33
Lower-middle Class	1	5	6
	12	48	60

Upper middle-class includes respondents whose family income exceeds 5 lakh rupees per annum and/or they also have their own houses. Middle middle-class comprises of those whose family income is between 3-5 lakhs and they live in rented houses and

my lower middle-class respondents earn less than the above two categories and live in small houses. For example, in my sample four members live in one bedroom house as a result of which they fall into lower middle-class category.

Out of 48 women respondents 35 are house-wives, 10 are working and 3 are students. The house-wives were further divided into two categories, those who are graduates and non-graduates and do not have work experience whereas the second category of house-wives includes women who are highly qualified and were working at some point of time but were at home due to some personal reasons during my field work.

Among 12 of my male respondents, 3 are software engineers, one is a Manager in an MNC, 3 are skilled employees in public sectors, one is a businessman (he owns two internet browsing centers), one is unemployed and one is a student.

Educational status of my respondents is closely connected to their class status. For example, all those who are from lower middle-class did not complete their schooling except one (the only man in this category) who has completed his +2 (inter course).

For respondents in the middle-middle class and upper-middle class category the minimum qualification is graduation except one Marwadi woman who has not even completed her schooling. Majority of my respondents belong to middle-middle class and are mostly graduates.

1.5.3 Field of my Study

Bangalore is one of the fastest growing cities in India. It is a popular destination of many national and global industries that produce software technologies for the international market. Other than these private firms the city also has many leading public sector industries like BHEL (Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited), HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited), BEML (Bharat Earth Movers Limited), and BEL (Bharat Electronics Limited). It also houses major central government establishments like ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation), DRDO (Defence Research Development Organisation), and IAF (Indian Air Force). This is why Bangalore attracts large number of migrants from different parts of the country making it their new home. Some have settled down here for decades and there are some who have come here only a few years ago. Some of my respondents belong to the second category of residents of this city and have their culture untouched by the metropolitan atmosphere. I could see a clear difference in their attitude towards various aspects or one can say they are still not open to many ideas and the tension was quite clear in the way they interpret the texts of soap operas. For example, some of my Oriya male respondents were not comfortable with the modern life-style of women in the city (especially women who have come from their own state but lead a very modern lifestyle) and blame it on the influence of media.

In India many other cities are there which comprise of such heterogeneous population but compared to other cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad which have witnessed many communal disturbances in the past few decades, Bangalore still remains a tension free city where people from different religion and regional backgrounds live

harmoniously. Leaving aside minor incidents here and there, Bangalore has not witnessed any kind of communal violence in the past decades.

This even gets reflected in the attitude of the residents where people are more comfortable talking about religion. Thus I was quite comfortable talking to my Hindu and Muslim respondents regarding religious aspects reflected by soap operas. Unlike Makekar² (1999) and Raghvan³ (2008), I was never shown the door by anyone.

1.5.4 My experiences in the Field

Being an outsider and with certain limitations I faced some problems in the field. I do not speak Kannada or for that matter any of the four South Indian languages. But many of my respondents are also from other states as a result they had no issue with the local languages and I had no communication problem. All my respondents from Karnataka were also quite comfortable with Hindi and English as the medium of interaction. My interviews were in Hindi, English and Oriya (my mother-tongue). With large migrant population my status being a migrant became an added advantage not a lacuna. My middle-class status also helped me in getting access to my respondents. As my respondents belong to upper-middle class, middle-middle-class and lower middle-class status, my presence did not make anyone conscious about their own class or status. They treated me as someone from their neighbourhood. This is why it did not take long for me as a researcher to build the rapport with them and then channel the discussion into my area of interest. Most of my respondents were

² Mankekar mentions how she found it difficult to talk to some Sikh women as Sikhs in Delhi are the victims of Partition and they also became the soft targets of Hindu mobs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

³ [M]any Muslim respondents from the survey declined further participation, as well as others declining the survey. In one instance, I was shown out of the house, midway through the survey interview, when the elderly man of that household was unable to contain his suspicion of me. (Raghavan 2008: 45)

amused to know that I was doing research on soap operas. Some even wanted to know what would be the result of this kind of research. Some felt it was too trivial a subject to research on (especially men). Most of my women respondents were too happy to talk to me as I was the first person who wanted to interview them which made feel as someone special. They were happy that their habit of watching soap operas ultimately could help someone like me. Women respondents were happier as they felt that they could help another woman and were more excited as I recorded their interviews. No one ever objected recording of their interviews. Many of them said that ‘no one has ever wanted to know how I feel about what I watch. I am so happy that someone is taking, what I feel, seriously, recording it and will use it for an academic purpose.’ There were some women whom I approached but they simply avoided me saying that they did not have time to talk to me but no one was ever rude to me.

My religious affiliation never created any problem for me from accessing my Muslim respondents’ households and talking to them. They openly discussed and criticized the media’s role in misrepresenting and under-representing Muslims and suggested that I should write about it openly so that the state as well as the production houses will get to know about their frustrations and demands. Some of them also expressed their unhappiness towards the over-doing of Hindu festivals and rituals in the soap operas whereas their functions and rituals are never shown or even if they are shown it is just for names sake. My status as a research student made them more comfortable. Only one of my Muslim respondents (a middle aged woman who is basically from Bihar) enquired about me for long because after my first visit, her son told her not to talk to me if I come again. So when I went back to her she asked me many questions and once she was assured she answered all my questions with ease. This was the only

incidence where my respondent showed reluctance because of our religious difference.

1.6 Chapterization

The dissertation is divided into 7 chapters. The first chapter (i.e. the present chapter) introduces the topic of my research and the methodology of my field study. The second chapter reviews all the relevant literature in the area. The third chapter traces the historical developments in the domain of Indian television in the pre-liberalization and post-liberalization era. In the next three chapters i.e. 4th, 5th and 6th chapter I analyse my data and in the 7th chapter I conclude my work.

Having introduced the area of research, the aims and objectives of my study and the methodologies that I have adopted to answer the research questions in this chapter I will now move ahead and place the study within a broader framework of media and audience research in the second chapter, titled as '*Media Studies and Audience Research: A Review*'. Here I would discuss all the major traditions in area of media text and audience research and place the present work within the tradition of reception studies in general and still emerging third generation audience research (as explained by Alasuutari) in particular. The chapter focuses on the contribution of the present study to the already existing feminist media studies on soap opera audience. It also addresses the gap in the research done on the programmes on Doordarshan and Private Channels and on texts and audience in the Indian context.

The third chapter titled '*Indian Television: from Edutainment to Entertainment*' draws an overall sketch of the development of television in India in past fifty years. It

discusses the changing face of television programmes with a special focus on the portrayal of woman in Hindi serials and soap operas on various national channels both before and after the liberalization of Indian economy.

The fourth chapter titled as '*Family, Marriage, Property: Audience Response*' discusses how soap operas reflect the changing face of the Indian society with respect to the major institutions like joint family, marriage, divorce, remarriage and property matters. In this context it becomes interesting to see the interpretation of the text by the viewers based on their age, gender, marital status and individual life experiences. At the same time one gets an idea that class, education, religion, regional background hold little importance in the formation of the interpretive communities in this context.

After analysing the changing face of the institution; their reflection in the soaps and the viewers interpretation of these soaps where they compare the text and the reality, the fifth chapter titled as '*Reel vs. Real: Reception Analysis of Ideal Characters in the Soap Operas*' addresses the construction of ideal and binary opposite characters in the soap operas and the various kinds of readings of the ideal characters by the viewers. Here one can see that age, gender, marital status and individual life experiences play very significant role in the formation of interpretive communities.

Differing from the above analysis chapters where the focus was on the freedom of the active viewers in the process of meaning construction the sixth chapter titled '*Religion and Region: Two Axes of Discrimination*' focuses on the restrictions imposed by the text, on the active audiences. Unlike the interpretive communities discussed in the above chapters here they are formed along the axis of religion and region, though one

can also locate smaller interpretive communities within them based on variables like age, personal bias and individual life experiences.

The seventh and the last chapter of the thesis draws conclusion based on the discussions in the above chapters focusing on the formation of various interpretive communities. The chapter discusses how these interpretive communities lack any defined boundary as their membership is not fixed and as the audiences keep moving between various interpretive communities their borders overlap, giving rise to what I call here ‘intersecting interpretive communities’.

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CHAPTER-II

Media Studies and Audience Research: A Review

Chapter-2

Media Studies and Audience Research:

A Review

In this chapter I will discuss the various traditions in media studies with respect to the shift in focus from text to the audience (starting from effect studies to reception analysis). The present study falls into the domain of audience research though I analysed the texts of various soap operas when required. Then I proceed with a discussion on the emergence of feminist media studies and the studies on popular culture for women in general and soap operas in particular. This is followed by the academic debates on soap operas as an independent genre, the works done on the soap opera texts and their assumed audience and then the empirical audience studies done in this area. After discussing the major works done in the western context a similar discussion was carried out in the Indian context. This is where a gap was identified in the present set of research on Indian soap operas and then I explain how this study is positioned to address this gap.

2.1. Tracing the Trajectory of Media and Audience Studies

Studies on media consumption can be broadly divided into two major categories, i.e. message based and audience based. The first category of works in media studies focuses on ‘Textual’ power over the determination of meaning, and the second relies on ‘Ethnographic’ method of cultural investigation where agency of the audience plays a significant role in meaning construction. David Morley (1999 [1980]: 116) summarizes the trajectory of development of media studies in the following words;

The different styles and strategies of research may ...be characterized as a series of oscillation between different, sometimes opposed points in this ‘chain’ of communication and command. On the one hand, message-based studies, which moved from an analysis of content of messages to their

‘effects’ on audience; and, on the other, audience-based studies, which focused on the social characteristics, environment and, subsequently, ‘needs’ which audience derived from, or brought to, the message.

So far the message/effect based studies have been behaviourist in orientation whereas the audience-based studies are structural-functional in their orientation (Morley 1992 [1980]), which is discussed in greater details in the following sections.

Within the mainstream media studies paradigms Jensen and Rosengren (2005 [1990]) outline five main traditions of audience research. They are: the effects research, uses and gratifications research (U&G henceforth), literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception studies.

Trying to be more comprehensive, Abercrombie & Longhurst in their book *Audiences* (1998) categorized the various studies dealing with the interpretation of a text and the audience within their ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ paradigm.

The development of media and audience studies has emphasized on the role of media as a site of struggle between the power of the text vs. the power of audience. Audience studies were engaged in examining the variable interpretations and interpreting the politics of pleasure which began polarising into what Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) call the ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ paradigm, within which either audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in the media activity or they are resistant to that incorporation (1998: 15). This can have two extreme versions: 1. Dominant Text Position, 2. Dominant Audience Position.

For example, the effects research and literary criticism focused on the power of text, uses & gratification research focuses on the power of audience, whereas cultural studies and the newly emerging reception analysis focused on the influence of the text, the audience and the context of consumption in the process of meaning construction.

All these traditions of audience studies have developed on the diverse notions of understanding within them. For example, the effects research has developed from the idea of strong-effect to that of weak effect ‘from short-term, direct and specific effect to long-term, indirect and diffuse effects; from the notion of audience being passive recipients of powerful media messages to active and selective users of media content’ (Jensen and Rosengren 2005 [1990]). This we will discuss in detail as we move ahead in outlining the trajectory of developments in media studies.

2.1.1. The Effects Studies Tradition

Ever since the emergence of culture industries¹, academics have enquired about the effects of their products on the consumers. One of the major theoretical approaches in media studies is the “Mass Society Theory”. According to this theory media acts as the cause as well as the maintainer of the mass society. It emphasizes that the content of media ‘serves the interest of political and economic power holders and assists in the accommodation of dependent public to their fate’ (McQuail 1987: 62).

Marxist perspectives on the media dominated the development of mass media research in communication in the UK and Europe, in contrast to the empirically based

¹ ‘Culture Industry’ produces mass culture for mass consumption. It is described by the Frankfurt school as an industry imposing the dominant culture on the masses.

tradition (i.e. the Uses & Gratification research) of the United States. The mainstream research in media studies have developed in response to the “pessimistic mass society theses” of Frankfurt School which stressed on ‘the conservative and reconciliatory role of mass culture’ for the audience’ (Morley 1992 [1980]: 45). Frankfurt School’s ‘pessimistic mass society theses’ overemphasized on the direct and unmediated impact of the media on audiences and its role in cementing the link between Fascism and ‘mass society’.

So, the effects studies tradition which was highly influenced by the theoretical position of Marxism, worked with the idea that people’s minds might be manipulated by powerful advertising and propaganda through newspaper and later radio and television.

The Marxist influence in media studies was evident in three different, but inter-related approaches: political economic perspective, critical theory and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. The political-economic approach focused more on the economic aspect than the ideological content of media. It suggested that media creates audience and delivers them to the market (advertisers) and also shapes their behaviour in certain distinctive ways (McQuail 1987: 64-65). The second perspective, i.e. critical theory, took shape in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer (Frankfurt school). According to them, it is the ‘culture industry’ that decides the taste of the consumers and in this whole process it is the ideology² of the ruling class, which gets transmitted (Adorno

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coined the term “ideology” in the 1840s to describe the dominant ideas and representation in a given social order. The concept of *ideology* forces readers to perceive that all cultural texts have distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social group.

and Horkheimer 1993). The third approach, i.e. Gramsci's hegemonic³ theory of media focused on the forms of expression of dominant Ideology through media content and how it played a major role in shaping the consciousness of the audience.

The above approaches (except the hegemony theory) mobilized a hypodermic model of media influence where the media 'inject' its audience with a certain way of thinking and behaviour. It treated audience as passive consumers. This media influence theory worked on a simple stimulus-response or one-step assumption about mass media where individuals receive messages and act on them. For example, Ewen's (1976) immigrant viewer transformed herself to fit the imaged America of the media image, making herself 'American' in accordance with its recipes (cited in Nightingale 1996: 4). As Philo (1993: 255) argues the problem with many traditional attempts at 'effects' studies has been that they utilized a crude stimulus/response model and did not analyse either the specific content of the message or how it related to wider systems of values and beliefs. Empirical research in social psychology quickly showed that a direct effect notion of mass communication was misleading.

The effect-studies research over stressed on the power of the text/content, which was then challenged by the Functionalist approach. In contrast to an understanding of the audience as a 'mass' that was passively subject to ideological manipulation or moral decay, the American behavioural science placed more emphasis on empirically verifying the media's influence on individual audience members.

³ Hegemony theory for Gramsci involves both analysis of current forces of domination and the ways that particular political forces achieved hegemonic authority, *and* the delineation of counter hegemonic forces, groups, and ideas that could contest and overthrow the existing hegemony (Kellner and Durham 2001: 7).

In this context it was argued that mass media cannot influence its audience until and unless it has some “function” or “use” in the social and psychological context in which they live (Morley 1999: 119). Later, the U&G perspective addressed this issue. The effect research tradition emerged around 1920s in America to which the Uses and Gratification followed after two decades. But, as Stuart Hall points out these ‘effects studies’ confined themselves to immediately observable changes in human behaviour and left the formal structure of media output wholly unauthorized (cited from Moores 1993: 5).

2.1.2. The ‘Uses and Gratification’ Model

The ‘uses and gratification’ model first started in America in the early forties with a mass communication research programme done by Paul Lazarsfeld & Herta Herzog as they attempted to study what gratifications radio listeners derive from daytime serials, quiz shows etc. The model insisted on the audiences as the active users of media messages. The idea of the active audiences was also particularly attractive to symbolic interactionist researchers. The gratifications researchers were concerned with how individuals use media as resources ‘to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals’. In other words it aimed at one question as Halloran puts it, ‘what people do with media rather than what media do to them’ (cited in Morley 1989: 16). It focused on the active engagement of audience with the medium as well as message.

Balnaves et. al. (2009: 68-69) summarize this tradition in following words;

A fundamental assumption of uses and gratifications research is that mass media audiences are not composed of passive individuals... Rather, they exercise freedom in their use of the media... It is assumed we use the media to satisfy specific needs and that we select particular media and particular content to satisfy those needs. These needs are determined by our social

environment, which includes our age, sex, marital status, group affiliations and personality”.

This tradition was criticized for overplaying the ‘audience freedom’ and ignoring issues of ideology completely. It was criticized for over-emphasizing the openness of the content (text) as well as banking more on the individual interpretation of the content. In other words, it ultimately got reduced to individual psychology. It was also criticized as few researchers challenged that ‘reality cannot be grasped and explained through quantitative methods alone’ and to overcome this limitation a qualitative method (which was a move towards the ethnographic method) was proposed (Ang 1996: 486).

Criticizing both the traditions (‘effect studies’ and ‘uses and gratifications’ research) Giltin (1978) says that the audience research when divorced from an understanding of both the politics of mass communication and texts are necessarily ‘administrative’ as they were designed to manage audiences for media industries rather than to explain their developing, changing, dynamic and formative nature, or to explore the quality and meaning of the media experiences encountered by audience (cited in Nightingale 1996: 4).

The lack of interest in the text and cultural criticism among traditional audience researchers (both from the US or Europe) left a gap in the field of audience and media studies. In early 1980s, British cultural studies theorists and researchers started filling up this gap with hermeneutics- based rather than social science research skills. In British cultural studies, the effect debate was marginalised by more textually relevant issues such as the dominant ideology of the text or its ‘cultural meaning’ and by the

search for the locus of textual pleasure (Nightingale 1996:5). We will discuss this in detail but before that let us discuss the third tradition of media and audience research, i.e. literary criticism research.

2.1.3. The Literary Criticism Research

Most of the studies in this tradition have focused on the ‘structure’ of the literary messages, or works where meaning is taken to be immanent in the content structures. In other words, there was a structuralist reading of the text within this tradition and it was generally confined to ‘high culture’ products.

Traditionally, a great deal of importance was attached to the ‘exegesis of texts carrying cognitive and/or aesthetic experience’ but with the development of modern social order literature has got redefined as ‘a form of communication which addresses its readers as private individuals in a sphere of leisure’ (Jensen and Rosengren 2005 [1990]: 56). As a result the purpose of literary criticism got redefined and there ‘was an emphasis on attempts at demonstrating that, and explaining how ‘literature’ as mastered by specific historical authors, may give rise to aesthetic experiences supposed to transcend the historical time and place’ (ibid.) which required readers to be educated in order to respond to the literary traditions.

Within this tradition an alternative ‘critical’ paradigm (which first originated in the works of Adorno and Horkheimer) in media studies was formed towards the end of 1960s within European social theory. The theorists started drawing on semiotics and began to talk about the message as a ‘text’, as a complex and structured arrangement of signs rather than an empty vehicle for the transmission of information or opinion

(Moore 1993: 6). Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories claimed to 're-view' Freud⁴ through the lens of structural linguistics, and also promised to show how subjectivities were constituted in discourse. It was believed a Lacanian perspective could be used to unpack the process through which spectators were 'positioned' as viewing subjects (in films) (Ibid: 11).

Methodologically speaking, this psychoanalytic model mobilized another form of hypodermic theory of media effect (Morley 1989: 19). With the help of content analysis, it deduced audience responses and assumed certain effects on the audience from the structure of the text and in doing so, it neglected the cultural and historical specificities. Lacanian writings and their application to media consumption have proved highly problematic as they led to a form of textual determinism which left no room for negotiation or resistance on the part of the audience as a result of which readers were reduced to a set of textually inscribed 'subject positions'. Morley argues that psychoanalytic theory proves to be very useful when it leaves the universalistic approach and addresses issues pertaining to particular groups in specific conditions and historical moments (ibid.: 19-22).

Later the interest of culture theorists in television audiences led to include interpretive activities of audience for which social or psychological utility bore little relevance and psychoanalysis was discarded for its clumsiness as an 'effects' method. But it re-emerged in cultural studies as a theory of spectatorship (Mulvey 1981), and as a means of demonstrating the ideological nature of film texts as gender and political discourse (Nightingale 1996: 9).

⁴ Aspects of Freud's own writings, such as notes on voyeurism and scopophilia, were taken up in film criticism.

To some extent, Psychoanalysis certainly explains the procedures, by which individuals are constituted as speaking subjects 'in general', but it does not attend to the cultural specificity of discourses - nor does it address the relationship of those discourses to wider social structures. Screen theory claimed to have resolved this by bringing together psychoanalysis and historical materialism (Moore 1993: 15).

Contributors to the British journal *Screen*⁵ brought together semiotics with Althusserian Marxism and a distinctive brand of French psycho-analytical theory associated with Jacques Lacan (which is called 'Screen Theory'). They were interested in studying 'the formal structures of cinematic representation, asking how those representations construct certain ways of looking and knowing spectators' (Moore 1993: 12).

The screen theory still had the problem of textual determinism as here the subject appeared as always-already successfully interpellated, or positioned, by the text. In this tradition, the reader was treated as a critical analytical construct to be deduced from literary discourses. It was Stuart Hall (1980, 1986) who guided media and audience studies into Cultural Studies tradition by developing the two paradigms in cultural studies.

Unlike this tradition of literary criticism which focused only on high culture, it is within this cultural studies tradition that 'popular culture' got revaluated as a worthy discourse for serious research. It differed from the above traditions as it took into

⁵ *Screen*: A Film journal which was one of the first ports of call for French poststructuralist theory.

account not just the text and the audience but also the everyday practices as an integrated aspect.

2.1.4. The Cultural Studies Tradition

Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957), Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961); E. P. Thompson's *Making Of The English Working Class* (1968) constituted the *caesura*⁶ out of which 'Cultural Studies' emerged. In this context the 'theory of culture' got defined as 'the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life'. These works laid the foundation for the 'culturalist' strand (one of the paradigms of the cultural studies tradition) which was then interrupted by the arrival of 'structuralism'. One major gap between these two strands of cultural studies lay on the 'conceptual reference to the term 'ideology''. Hall in his well known work '*Cultural Studies: two paradigms*' says that,

It has been remarked that whereas the 'culturalist' paradigm can be defined without requiring a conceptual reference to the term 'ideology' (the *word*, of course, does appear: but it is not a key concept), the 'structuralist' interventions have been largely articulated around the concept of 'ideology': in keeping with it's more impeccably Marxist lineage, 'culture' does not figure so prominently. [...] Though neither structuralism not culturalism will do, as self-sufficient paradigms of study, they have a centrality to the field which all the other contenders lack because, between them they address what must be the *core problem* of Cultural Studies. (1986: 40-48)

Thus cultural studies moved ahead of the Marxist lineage and offered another premise to the 'human science of culture' by appropriating theories from Levi-Strauss's structuralism and the linguistic paradigm of Saussure, i.e. Semiotics. The cultural studies tradition proposed to study mass-communication processes as an integrated aspect of other everyday practices⁷. Summarizing this Jensen and Rosengren (2005

⁶ *Noun*, a pause near the middle of a line of poetry

⁷ Two rather different ways of conceptualizing 'culture' can be drawn out of the many suggestive formulations in Raymond Williams's *Long Revolution*. The first relates 'culture' to the sum of the

[1990]: 57) say, 'For cultural studies ... the centre of mass-communication research is located outside media, which are embedded, along with audiences, in broad social and cultural practices'.

Hebdige's analysis of 'reception aesthetics' where attempt was made 'to account for the variable significance of objects and images as they are circulated in different consumer markets' contributed immensely to the 'cultural' audience research (Hebdige 1979 cited in Nightingale 1996: 14-5). Similar to 'uses and gratifications' account, Hebdige claimed that media audiences adopt those objects and images which offer a coherent account of their lived experiences, are culturally significant to themselves and promote a sense of community or solidarity with significant groups within it. However, 'unlike 'uses and gratifications' accounts, Hebdige demonstrates that the symbolic value of the objects and commodity forms selected by the subculture are accessible through semiotics analysis' (ibid.).

By late 1970s and early 1980s small groups of media researchers throughout the world began to experiment with interpretive and qualitative methods of audience research based on cognitive psychology and symbolic interactionist theories.

2.1.4.1. CCCS and the Encoding/Decoding Model

Within the Cultural studies tradition a more appropriate model of texts and readers was developed by members of the Media Group at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS henceforth) which was partly a critique of 'screen theory'. The group strongly contested *Screen's* model of text-audience

available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences... the second... emphasizes that aspect of 'culture' which refers to social *practices*... 'culture is a whole way of life'... (Hall 1986: 35)

relations by ‘putting an emphasis on reader as active producers of meaning and on media consumption as a site of potentially differential interpretations’ and ‘pointed to readers as the possessors of cultural knowledges and competences that have been acquired in previous social experiences and which are drawn on in the act of interpretation – the ‘repertoire of discourses’ at the disposal of different audiences’ (Moore 1993: 16). Their studies concentrated far more on TV representations and their reception than on film spectatorship. Its encoding/decoding theory ‘opened up a gap between readings inscribed in the text and the actual social subjects who interact with it and this “dialogic” encounter between the two finally determines meaning’ (Ibid. 6).

The ‘encoding/decoding’ model developed by Stuart Hall in CCCS was a serious attempt to establish an appropriate linkage between the text with the social context in which it operates. To some extent it synthesized the ideas given by both effect-studies (role of media in setting agendas) and uses and gratification (ability of active audience to make meaning from the text). Hall in his work ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1973) divided the audience into three categories on the basis of the procedure of decoding of a cultural text: (i) an acceptance of the preferred reading where the viewer decodes the message according to the reference code, ‘operating inside the dominant code’, (ii) negotiation with it, which ‘contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements’, (iii) flat opposition to it, where the audiences ‘decode the message in a globally contrary way’ (Hall 1993).

Hall was criticized because of the ambiguity of the concept of ‘preferred reading’, where the doubt was whether the text carries it within or it has to be derived through

some method. In other words, one possibility in determining the exact status of ‘preferred reading’ was to assume it as a property of the text (something contained in the text) and accessible to researcher who conducts a close inspection using the correct method of semiotics or it could be reading that most members of the audience will produce (Moore 1993: 28).

Morley defended this model’s usefulness and used it in his study *‘The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding’* (1980) (the first Ethnographic study on television audience). This qualitative audience research was initially set out to explore the encounter between the text and the audience and sketch a provisional map of different ‘interpretive communities’. In this study he was concerned with the ‘determination of meaning produced by the effectivity of the traditional sociological/structural variables – age, sex, race and class – in terms of the way a person’s position in these structures may be seen to determine that person’s access to various discourses in play in the social formation’ (Morley 1992 [1981]: 119). He argued that in the interaction between text and subject, ‘other discourses are always in play besides those of the particular text in focus – discourses ...brought into play through “the subject’s” placing in other practices – cultural, educational, intuitional (Morley 1992 [1980]: 57). But, later on he argued that ‘there is no *a priori* reason to stop at age, sex, race and class- that there is an infinite range of factors (from religion to geography to biology) which could be taken into account as determinations on decoding practices’ (ibid: 125). He also argued that determination of the relation between social position and discursive formation ‘is not to be conceived as a closed and final process’ as ‘audiences are determined economically, politically and *ideologically*’ (Morley 1992 [1980]: 57).

Some of the important shortcomings of Morley's study has been its failure to deal with the social setting in which consumption normally takes place – the immediate physical and interpersonal contexts of daily media reception (i.e. the domestic context of viewing which he addressed in his later works starting with *Family Television*) and its failure to address the contradictory nature of decoding by the same person for different programmes (Morley 1992 [1988]: 133, Moores 1993: 7).

Morley, Hall and others at the CCCS were working towards a sociologically grounded semiotics of the text-reader dialogue. Later critics of the encoding/decoding model Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott (1987) argued that there is no 'text itself available for inspection outside of the 'reading formations' in which meaning is activated (Moores 1993: 28). It was also acknowledged that the preferred reading model was better suited for news and current affairs programmes than popular fictional dramas like soap operas. This acknowledgement of *genre variation* led Morley to plan for reformulated reception ethnography (ibid.). In this context Morley says that by translating our concerns from the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory, we may be able to develop a model of text-audience relations which is more flexible and of wider application (1992: 127).

2.1.5. Reception Studies Tradition

Alasuutari (1999) divides audience studies into three 'generations', where the first generation refers to birth of reception studies, dated from the momentous development of Hall's communication model; the second generation of studies refers to the range of empirical reception studies that developed from Hall's model, which shifted the focus to actual audiences, leading to the rise of audience ethnography

approach (which now forms a major part of the media response studies and includes works of Morley, Ang, Mankekar); and the third generation of reception studies (which is still emerging), seems to endorse an approach that seeks to study media and audience relationship within an integrative framework of discourses through which media and audiences are formed.

Thus the reception studies tradition developed on the combined premise of cultural studies and U&G traditions. On the one hand, it employs the method of 'interpretative content analysis' which is done by reader-response theories within cultural studies traditions and then compares it with the empirical data about the audience which is done through in-depth interviewing and participant observation.

The reception studies tradition developed on a variety of other theoretical frameworks like symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis. Within reception studies it is assumed that cultural practices as well as individual acts of interpretations are relatively independent of the various structures of the overall society, like the political and economic structures. In other words, reception analysis intends to study how specific audiences differ in the social production of meaning.

To sum this up I quote Jensen and Rosengren;

Like cultural studies, reception analysis speaks of media messages as culturally and generically coded discourses, while defining audiences as agents of meaning production. Like U&G research, reception analysis conceives of recipients as active individuals who can do a variety of things with media in terms of consumption, decoding and social uses. What characterizes reception analysis is, above all, an insistence that studies include *a comparative empirical analysis of media discourses with audience discourses*- content structures with the structure of audience response regarding content. (2005 [1990]: 60, italics mine)

It is within the cultural studies tradition that the media and audience studies has largely developed in the last few decades. But in this tradition most of the work (except few like that of Radway (1984), Morley (1980), Ang (1985)) did not examine the audience empirically. In fact, they were deduced as analytical constructs from the media discourse. The studies that fall under this tradition were extensively referring to the social and historical contexts within which the social system of diverse practices (like sub-cultures based on gender, class and ethnicity) took shape and helped in the formation of the “interpretive communities”.⁸ Hall recognized that media “language” is not a strait forward “tool” for transmitting ideas, or a transparent “window” on the social world and audience members bring their interpretative frameworks to bear on the message and ‘the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical’ (Hall 1973: 92-93).

It was with the reader-oriented approach to audience response that the emphasis shifted from meanings in the text to the process of reading a text with an understanding that the relationship between text and audiences is dialectical. But, defining the ‘interpretive community’ as a sub-culture based on factors like gender, class and ethnicity within a broader social system made a generalization which got contested within the feminist media studies. Works by Ang and Hermes (1996) and Zoonen (1994) pointed out how studies within this tradition treat women as a unified category without actually problematising the category of ‘women’ itself and how gender was assumed to precede cultural preference and behaviour. As a result, Zoonen argued how instead of treating these identities (gender) as something given or fixed, one should look at them as an ongoing process by which subjects are

⁸ Same social system helps to generate interpretive strategies supposedly shared by individuals belonging to specific audience groups or publics which are referred to as interpretive communities.

constituted often in paradoxical ways. This limitation within the cultural studies could be addressed by adopting reception studies tradition. For example, ‘theory of intersectionality’ addresses the limitation of the feminist studies.

The theory of intersectionality gained its popularity within the feminist studies in the 1980s (though it originated in the 1960s and 70s in a movement led by women of colour), as category of ‘woman’ was in the process of deconstruction. Intersectionality can be defined as a theory to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine. It was claimed that gender, class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality may enhance the complexity of intersectionality (Davis 2008). Hence theory of intersectionality studies the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations. Similarly the present study attempts to deconstruct the category of audience by addressing the complexity within the group and focuses on the relationship between the various sub-categories of audience based on their social and cultural variation.

In Morley’s work on *Family Television* one could find the gender dimension getting prioritized and isolated from factors like class and age. This ultimately reduced the strength of the arguments related to women as a heterogeneous social category (and not merely a biological category) based on age, caste, class, education, income, region and religion (Morley 1992). Similarly, researchers like Hobson (1981), Radway (1984) Ang (1985) started their work with ‘a pre-existent’ interpretive community of women. To them, the commonality of women’s experiences of opposition in capitalist society provided an unifying sense of ‘community’ around which the attachment to mass-produced media commodities could be explained.

Seiter et. al.'s project on soap opera viewers explains how women can not be treated as a homogeneous category. Their findings suggest how women belonging to different class (working/ non working) differ a lot in the meaning making process of soap opera narratives (Seiter et. al. 1996). But, this classification between working and non-working women is criticized by Ang and Hermes (1991). In their opinion 'rather than treating class position as an isolated 'independent variable' predetermining cultural responses, it could ... be seen as a factor ... whose impact as a structuring principle for experience can only be conceptualized within the concrete historical context in which it is articulated (Ang and Hermes 1991: 314). Going deeper into the debate they argue that, 'the theoretical question that should guide our research practice is how gender along with other major social axes such as class and ethnicity is articulated in the concrete practices of media consumption (ibid: 315). While examining of the politics of *EastEnders* in his work *Public Secrets: 'Eastenders' and its audience*, Buckingham collapsed together concepts of discourse, ideology and commonsense knowledge. He stressed on active audience and the importance of interpretative activity. He advocated mapping its diversity across gender, age, race, and other major socio-cultural distinctions (cited in Nightingale 1996: 89).

Thus not only gender and class but historical context and ethnicity are also major dimensions which need to be examined along with gender to understand the practice of media consumption. This study takes into account how gender along with age, class, caste, religion and regional background influence the consumption of the media texts.

2.1.5.1. The Ethnographic Audience Studies

The quantitative survey techniques (used in the Uses and gratification research) failed to answer subjective questions related to media-audience studies, thus qualitative method and to be more specific the ethnographic perspective (which is also known as ‘reception analysis’) have been used by scholars like Silverstone, Ang, Seiter, David Morley many others.

According to Christine Geraghty (1998: 142), ‘the use of the term “ethnography” is itself polemical’. In her essay “Audiences and ‘Ethnography’: Questions of Practice”, she analysed various ways in which it has been defined and used by scholars like Gillespie, Fiske, Ang, Gray, Morley and Seiter (Ibid: 142). For example, according to Gillespie (1995) ethnography is the empirical description and analysis of cultures based on intensive and extensive fieldwork in a selected local setting. For Fiske ‘the object of ethnographic study is the way people live their culture ... trace differences among viewers, modes of viewing, and the meanings and pleasures produced’ (Fiske quoted in Geraghty 1998: 142). Whereas according to Seiter, ‘doing ethnographic audience research necessitates making contact with informants repeatedly, for as much time as possible, and under as many different circumstances as possible’ (Seiter 1999: 05). There are many studies in the audience research tradition where the scholars claim them to be ethnographic studies but still that has remained a contested domain.

Morley’s pioneering work *Nationwide Audiences* (1999 [1980]) was the first ethnographic work in audience studies, since then it has been widely used. But, it was been criticized by scholars as ethnographic methods used in television/media studies

do not satisfy to the requirements of ethnography completely. 'It has been argued that a proper ethnographic study in audience ethnography entails at least several months' stay in field' (Alasuutari 1999, cited in Bird 2003: 6). But so far the 'television audience studies have not satisfied the requirements of ethnography proper... while ethnographies are based on long-term and in-depth field work, most television audience studies have involved only brief periods of contact, in some cases less than one hour, with the informants' (Seiter et. al. 1996: 141).

These limitations have not reduced the competence and use of ethnographic model and one still finds it being used by scholars in the field of television studies. In the Indian context, scholars like Anjali Monteiro⁹ (1998), Purnima Mankekar¹⁰ (1999) and Juluri¹¹ (2003a) have done some important ethnographic studies in the specific localities of Goa, Delhi and Hyderabad respectively. The present study also depends on ethnographic methods for fulfilling its objectives.

The soap operas which are screened during the prime-time target family as a whole, though women still form the target audience category. Family viewing is much talked about by both the producers of the content of the soap operas as well as the policy makers. When one talks about family then home becomes the obvious set of viewing.

This is the reason why I preferred to locate my fieldwork in the context of home

⁹ Monteiro for her work 'Official Television and unofficial fabrications of the self', which was an analysis of several genres on Doordarshan, did participant observation and in-depth interviews with 88 respondents, in a heterogeneous, working-class, shanty town in Goa.

¹⁰ Mankekar in her work 'Watching culture viewing politics' analyzed the texts of popular serials on Doordarshan and further enriched her arguments with responses of the viewers, who were women belonging to lower-middle class in the Vikas Nagar locality of Delhi.

¹¹ Vamsi Juluri (2003) did a study on MTV viewers in Hyderabad. He carried out group interviews for which he selected four viewing segments and the participants had to answer open-ended questions after watching those segments. His respondents cut across gender and class.

viewing instead of work-place (though one of my respondents reported doing so, occasionally)¹².

2.1.5.2 The Multiple Interpretive Communities

As discussed earlier, Abercrombie & Longhurst emphasized on the role of media as a site of struggle between power of the text and power of audience, which can have two extreme versions: 1. Dominant Text Position, 2. Dominant Audience Position.

Dominant Text Position treats audience as passive, the prisoner of the text, and therefore to be very heavily influenced by the preferred meaning (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 18). Studies by Glasgow Media Group, for example Greg Philo (1999) believes that audiences are heavily influenced by the ideology and the meaning that the text carries. In practice his method revealed the 'preferred' meanings of the news though the study has illustrated some of the processes by which messages were negotiated or rejected. But, at the same time Philo (1999: 268-9) says, 'we must not forget the social context within which these messages are constructed and their relation to competing political views... media accounts may influence how we understand the relationships which constitute our world- what is seen as legitimate, necessary or possible'. Thus, he concludes that media is 'a crucial site of struggle for such contested meanings and for the attempt to gain legitimacy and to win the consent of the various groups and classes which make up our society' (Philo 1999: 269-70).

Dominant Audience Position tends to see the text not as monolithic with a strong preferred meaning, but rather as polysemic, containing a number of possible meanings

¹² One of my male respondents said that he watches his soaps in the office itself in case he gets late there. He tells his boss that it is time for his soaps and he does not care about the criticism from his colleagues and friends regarding his addiction to the soaps.

and therefore allowing a range of audience interpretations (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 18). Most of the interpretive theorists locate themselves within the 'resistance' group but the range of interpretation among them varies.

The 'interpretive theory' in media and audience studies is based on two major assumptions:

- (a) The open and polysemic nature of the media content
- (b) The active audiences.

It emerged as an offshoot of reader-response criticism in the works of a prominent and respected literary theorist Stanley E. Fish. Fish's work in this field (especially his argument in 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' (1976)) examines how the interpretation of a text is dependent upon each reader's own subjective experience in one or more communities. In other words, people read a text in different ways because they belong to different interpretive communities. For him, different critical models of a text are equally valid because critics disagree as they read differently. He argues that meanings are constructed in the process of reading and emerge from the reader's expectations, judgements, projections, assumptions and conclusions.

This paradigm attributes power to audiences in conceptualizing the media audience relationship as Fish ends up with a kind of idealism in which the text disappears, leaving only readers to "constitute" texts ((Rendall 1982). The most persistent objections made against this paradigm is that if texts do not exist as independent objects constraining our ways of reading them, then they would seem to be no constrain at all on interpretation which can lead towards an interpretative anarchy. Defending his idea Fish points out that there are always constraints on interpretation as

the members of an interpretive community share the same set of norms and assumptions (cited in Rendall 1982: 51). Again if the writer and the reader of the texts belong to the same community then the interpretive principle in force will be the same. It is in this context Fish argues that 'there are stable formal patterns inherent in the text which compels us to assign it to one genre rather than another and put invariable limits in the way in which it can be read' (ibid.: 52). But at the same time the interpretive strategies of the author and his/her period may be regarded as determining the way in which a text should be read which can further curtail the power of the reader.

This kind of a debate between Fish and his critics leaves the door open for a balanced research where neither the author/text nor the audience are all powerful. As I have already mentioned if the interpretive strategies of the author coincide with that of the members of interpretive community then the interpretation of the text will be constrained because the interpretive principles in force will be same. So, even though audiences go for different kind of readings of a text, she/he can not think beyond the prescribed set of norms and assumptions of the community. As a result of which there can be multiple interpretive communities within a community of the audience where no scope is left for an interpretive anarchy.

John Fiske (1987) is one of its leading proponents within reception studies. He insists that in the context of text-audience engagement, 'pleasure for the subordinate is produced by the assertion of one's social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negotiation with, the structure of domination' (1987: 19). He argued that the text is polysemic and the audience is diverse. Fiske takes an extreme view to the point

when he declares 'There is no Text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing' (Fiske 1996). This is why Fiske's view is closer to the Dominant Audience Position than any other theorist (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 22-23).

Hobson in her research, *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* (1982) claimed that 'to try to say what *Crossroads* means to its audience is impossible for there is no single *Crossroads*, there are as many *Crossroads* as there are viewers' (Cited from Nightingale 1996: 72). According to her, 'Different people watch television programmes for different reasons, and make different 'readings' of those programmes, and much of what they say is determined by preconceived ideas and opinions which they bring to a programme. The message is not solely in the 'text' but can be changed or 'worked on' by the audience as they make their own interpretation of the programme' (Hobson 1996: 603). She could not avoid her own estimation of what the programme meant, and explained that pleasure is experienced because the programme reflects the life experiences in which the viewers are engaged, as a result of which she contradicted her own statement. Thus one can conclude that there is no interpretive anarchy as it is guided by the interpretive principles.

Janice Radway's (1984) ethnographic study on women's reading of popular romance novels claims that reading romance novels provides women readers with an 'escape' from their mundane domestic roles which suggests that these women use reading as a 'resistant' practice. Similarly, Mary Ellen Brown (1990a) through her ethnographic investigation into the conversational networks of soap viewers argued that women viewers engage in 'resistive pleasures' through such talk. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (2006) though their study of the popular American soap *Dallas*, examined

cultural variations in the readings of viewers watching this soap in Israel, Japan and the US. Unlike other studies, this study did not focus on 'resistance' but seeks to study variable interpretations.

Livingstone (1990: 23) in a study of television soap opera viewers sees the creation of meaning through the interaction of texts and readers as a struggle, 'a site of negotiation between *two* semi-powerful sources' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 21). Her argument shows the complexity of text-audience relationship. Not only there exists a diversity of response to the text, but most likely explanation of the difficulty of assigning dominant and oppositional labels to the responses. She thinks that the text is fragmented and contains more than one preferred reading, or, infact contains a preferred reading which is contradictory (ibid: 22).

Willis (1990) goes further towards the extreme Dominant Audience end of the spectrum. His starting point is in "readers" not "texts" and in the need to explore symbolic creativity in everyday life (cited in Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 24). Still so far no theorist of the audience has completely endorsed either the Dominant Text or the Dominant Audience model (ibid: 29).

Hall says 'Polysemy' must not... be confused with pluralism... this question of the 'structure of dominance' in a culture is an absolutely crucial point... there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings' (Hall 1993(1973): 13). Thus audience research should attempt locating 'significant clusters' of meaning and join these clusters with the social and discursive positioning of readers to outline boundaries of various interpretative communities.

Morley suggested that, ‘what is needed is the development of a “cultural map” of the audience so that we can begin to see which classes, sections of classes and subgroups share which cultural codes and meaning system... so that we can then see how these codes determine the decoding of the messages of the media [and] what degree of distance different sections of the audience have from the dominant meanings encoded in the message’ (Cited in Moores 1993: 18).

Attempts to theoretically reconcile the dichotomy of ‘Incorporation/Resistance’ can be found in Anthony Giddens (1984) theory of structuration, which extends the classical debate between structure and agency. Giddens argues that social actions are shaped by social structures, which in turn are reproduced or transformed by human agency. Hence structure and agency are mutually interdependent in the constitution of society, and should be treated as dualisms rather than dichotomies. Similarly Hall (2005 [1981]: 65-66) insists that study of popular culture does not need to subscribe either to the incorporation or resistance paradigms, rather popular culture constitutes itself as a ground on which cultural transformations are worked, with the double movement of containment (or incorporation) and resistance.

To move beyond the ‘Interpretive Paradigm’ as well as the ‘incorporation/resistance paradigm’, the focus has now shifted to the relationship of media and everyday life. Such studies are based on the argument that media use is inherently embedded in the everyday lives of people and therefore cannot be studied as an isolated object. Instead they insist that media must be seen as a process through which everyday lives are constituted (Raghavan 2008: 21). It is particularly this research approach and practice of focusing on the ‘embeddedness of media and audiences in culture’ that Alasuutari

(1999) places into the ‘third generation’ of studies (ibid.). Hence, it becomes important to have an understanding of the role of media in everyday life and politics that takes place within the domestic consumption of television.

2.1.5.3. Media in Everyday life and the Domestic Consumption

Charlotte Brunsdon (1981) explained that ‘the relation of the audience to text will not be determined solely by that text, but also by positionalities in relation to a whole range of other discourses... elaborated elsewhere, already in circulation and brought to the (text) by the viewer’ (cited in Moores 1993: 16). Hence, in exploring practices of media reception, attention needs to be paid to the environmental conditions in which meaning and pleasure are constructed. Similarly, to understand the lived experiences of media consumers, one has to see things ‘from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences’ and then it has to engage with the situational contexts in which the media are used and interpreted (Moores 1993: 32).

The pioneering studies that focused on the context of consumption are – James Lull’s (1982) research in the USA on the ‘social uses’ of TV in family life; of Hermann Bausinger and his colleagues from the institute for Empirical Cultural Studies (Germany); and in Britain, Dorothy Hobson’s investigation on how young mothers at home relate to media output and Morley’s *Family Television* (1986). All these studies share Radway’s concern with interpreting embedded acts of consumption or in other words, ‘the politics of the living room’.

The idea of the active media consumers was attractive to symbolic interactionist researchers, who championed the idea of activity, either because it allowed them to

talk about the rule-following activities of audiences (Lull 1990), familial and personal performances (following Goffman), or in general to focus on the ways families integrated mass media like television into their everyday activities (Lindlof & Meyer 1987 cited in Nightingale 1996: 8). Communication and information technologies have a functional significance, as they provide, actively, interactively or passively, links between individual members of the households, with the world beyond, in complex and often contradictory ways (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 15). 'Empirical research has demonstrated that one factor which influences the way families process television is the nature of interpersonal communication which takes place at home' (Lull 2006: 237). As Silverstone & Hirsch (1992: 27) have summarized 'Families and households work with these technologies as much as they work with every other aspect of their daily lives, with greater or lesser degrees of success, control, competence and composure, depending on the resources they have to sustain their own moral economy'. Similarly talking in the context of television consumption Ang says, 'the continuing dialectic between the technologized strategies of the industry and the fleeting and dispersed tactics by which consumers ... transform these offerings into 'opportunities' of their own – making 'watching television', embedded... in the context of everyday life, not only into a multiple heterogeneous cultural practice, but also, more fundamentally, into a mobile, indefinite and ultimately ambiguous one, which is beyond prediction and measurement' (1992: 142).

Though the consumption of the media in the context of everyday life is too complicated to capture still there are studies on the consumption of television at home which try to explain their interaction. For instance, James Lull's edited book *The Family and Television in World Cultures* (1988) addresses issues composing the

complicated notion of “family television viewing,” in which researchers from six countries (i.e. Great Britain, Venezuela, Germany, India, America, and China) have produced reports. ‘The chapters emphasize the qualitative character of the relationship- how television influences the family and how families interpret and use television within their particular cultural contexts’ (Lull 1988: 10).

Ultimately what emerges from the growing body of literature in this area is a report of conflict in the sitting room, with disputes over what, how and when to watch. My study also highlights at this politics of the living room.

After discussing all the major traditions in the media and audience studies I now arrive at the theoretical framework where my study can be placed within the reception studies tradition. Through my fieldwork I have attempted to look at how soap operas represent women, men and the power relationships within family. Again I analysed various institutions of Indian society like marriage, family and religion (which is content structure) as they are portrayed in the soap opera texts and compared them with the reaction of audience towards these kinds of representation. The discussion that follows discusses how audiences which are situated within similar political and economic structures vary in their interpretation of these content structures of the media texts. This conforms to the basic question ‘how specific audiences differ in the social production of meaning’, on which reception analysis moves ahead and builds on other traditions like cultural studies and U&G.

Within the three generations of audience studies as discussed by Alasuutari (1999) I can say that my study fits into the still emerging third generation reception studies. An

attempt was made to study the customary audience of soap operas, their understanding of the texts of soaps that they watch regularly and construction of meaning through the interaction between text, audience and the context of consumption. It treats individual audience as a unit of consumption. It focuses on the way each audience constructs meaning out of various institutional aspects (like joint family, marriage, divorce, remarriage) and issues (construction of gender identity and representation of religious and regional issues) in the soap opera text, within the context of her/his family and everyday life. It shows how the context in which the audience is positioned overlaps with the text the soap opera in the entire meaning construction process.

After placing the present study within the third generation reception studies, now we are going to have a glance at the development of media and audience studies within the feminist scholarship, with special focus on the feminine genre called soap opera.

2.2. Feminist Media Studies

The works by critical media theorists within the various schools of thought (like the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies, French structuralism and poststructuralism) shed some focus on how gender, race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of social life are socially constructed in media representations (Kellner 2005). While discussing about women and culture industry, Mattelart (1986: 63) questioned the way in which cultural industries approach the remodelling of feminine roles and values and how women were straightaway singled out, from a commercial point of view, to become the favourite target of mass-media messages, an essential factor in the organization of their programmes. So far feminine genres like soap operas were ridiculed by

commentators belonging to the dominant social strata. Readers' enjoyment and competences were accorded greater or lesser "worth" as a result hierarchy of programme preferences were generally skewed in favour of the dominant social group. There was a shift in the media and cultural studies during 1980s as "the popular" was increasingly taken more seriously.

The feminist media movement opposed media representation of women and criticized them to be sexist and inadequate. They were calling for more positive representation of women and the participation of more women in the culture industry. So, most of the interesting qualitative studies on the theme of genre and taste were carried out by feminist cultural critics who attempted to rescue the denigrated media forms meant for feminine audience or the 'women's genres' such as soap opera and romantic fiction.

In this initial phase the feminist critics adopted textual analysis and literary criticism as their preferred methods as they were mostly addressing media texts carrying cognitive and/or aesthetic experience. This mostly happened in the domain of popular texts or narratives like the women's magazines, romance novel and soap operas which ordinary women had access to and enjoyed in their everyday life. For example, Angela McRobbie (1983), in her work on female youth subculture, analyses the ideological aspect of teenage girls' magazine 'Jackie'. She views the 'function of the magazine as being to 'position' girls for their later roles as wives and mothers, by means of ideology of teenage or adolescent femininity it cultivates' (McRobbie: 1983). She was concerned that children were learning the idea that women should be dependent and have limited choices about their lives. On the other hand, Tania Modleski (1988) feels the popular culture consumed by women is considered to be

gendered because many critics persist in equating femininity, consumption and reading on the one hand, and masculinity, production and writing, on the other. For Modleski, gender is central to the understanding of popular culture because of the fear expressed by high culture critics about the role of mass culture in making its audience passive and vulnerable, and prone to consumerism, which is equally a fear about the audience becoming feminine. But, she argues further that mass produced fantasies for women such as Harlequin Romances, Gothic Novels and Soap Operas deal with the very real problems and tensions that exists in women's lives. Though she feels that the modern feminists cannot be satisfied with the ways in which tensions and problems are resolved in these narratives, still she declares 'it is time to begin a feminist reading of women's lives' (cited in Storey 1993: 126).

Radical feminism asserts that 'since mass media are in the hands of male owners and producers, they will operate to the benefit of patriarchal society... the power of media to affect men's behaviour towards women and women's perception of themselves is beyond discussion' (Strinati 1995: 201). Unlike radical and liberal feminism, socialist feminism does not focus exclusively on gender to account for women's position, but attempts to incorporate an analysis of class and economic condition of women as well. All 'the three categories of feminism, i.e. liberal, radical and socialist, end up in forming a single theory in which 'mass media simply act as a conveyor belt for patriarchal ideology, and the female audience becomes merely a mass of passive consumers imbued with false consciousness' (ibid.). Being a liberal feminist herself, Zoonen says 'liberal feminism sees legislation and increased equality of opportunity as ways of undermining the 'unrealistic' portrayal of women in popular culture' (ibid: 192). But, the feminist critics' understanding of feminine or femininity and their idea

of oppressive representation of women did not get along with the ordinary women's understanding.

To address this gap between the feminist critics and the ordinary women, work in the area of popular culture was taken up by various feminist scholars like Hobson (1980), Brunsdon (1981 [1996]), Radway (1984), Allen (1985), Ang (1985). For example, Radway's book *Reading the Romance* is 'less an account of the way romances as texts were interpreted than of the way romance reading as a form of behaviour operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects – women who saw themselves first as wives and mothers' (1984: 7). Similarly Hobson (unlike Morley who treated audiences as members of sub-groupings defined principally by class position in his *Nationwide* audience study) stressed on the gender-specific meanings of the media in household contexts. In particular she cleared the pathway for investigations of gender and genre- for future writing on feminine reading pleasures. She says 'radio and television... are never mentioned as spare time... activities but are located by the women as integral parts of their day' (1980: 105 cited in Moores 1993: 36). Similarly Ang also said 'the pleasure of *Dallas*... is not a compensation for the presumed drabness of daily life nor a flight from it, but a dimension of it' (Ang 1985: 45).

As evident above, both within the broader framework of media studies and the feminist media studies in particular there was a growing inclination to understand the lived experiences of media consumers, especially women. In the following sections we will revisit the feminist media studies while discussing the interpretation of soap opera texts, their audience, and the interaction between them.

2.2.1. Studies on Soap Opera and its Audience

The hierarchy of programme preferences is generally skewed in favour of the dominant social group. Readers' enjoyment and competences are accorded greater or lesser 'worth' in what Bourdieu (1984) calls the 'cultural economy'. Hence as one might expect, feminine genres like soap operas are ridiculed by commentators belonging to the dominant social strata.

Because of its popularity as a feminine genre, soap opera remained out of the critical masculine gaze which turns it into a much devalued genre. It is seen to be structured to meet the demands of its female, home-based viewers. As the tasks of women staying at home are very repetitive, interruptive and never completed, so the narrative of soap opera lacks a proper end. Soap operas provide a contrast to masculine action-oriented programmes where the story ends when the tension is resolved. Soap operas consist of an 'endless middle'. They never offer a clear and singular solution to the personal as well as moral problems of characters. So, the stories remain unfinished and full of potential for further development and transformation.

The first ethnographic study on the genre of soap opera in Britain was by Hobson titled: *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* (1982). In this study she attempted to investigate the 'production of popular television programmes and the understanding or appeal of those programmes for their audience' (cited in Nightingale 1996: 69). She describes her interviewees (the women who viewed and discussed the programme with her) as active and involved viewers who combined information from their own life experiences and knowledge of both the genre and the programme to interpret and evaluate the stories and characters in *Crossroads*. But her major focus was not on the

power struggle between the text and the audience but between the producers and the audience and over production decision-making. Here the lack of interest in ideology and/or discourse in Hobson's work draws attention to the difficulty experienced as academics by women researchers who worked at the CCCS in the mid 1970s to early 1980s as it is situated at the beginning of the separation of feminist theory from the dominant masculinist traditions (ibid: 74).

As the genre of soap opera 'textually implies a feminine viewer' (Brunsdon 1981: 37), an obvious political critique of these continuous serials is the allegation that its pleasures help bolster patriarchal relations of power by confirming that a woman's place is in the world of family life, romance and interpersonal intrigue (Moore 1993:40). They often explore these programmes with ambivalence, at once challenging their romantic glorification of women's isolation at home, but also embracing soaps for their strong female characters and other narrative conventions that may think of speaking to female concerns and pleasures in ways classical novels and films do not (Brunsdon et al. 1997: 5). Much of the research in this area has been produced by feminist scholars and can be seen as part of wider commitment within feminist research to re-evaluation of popular forms aimed at and enjoyed by women. It is this political commitment, which is a hallmark of feminist work on soap opera; and it also focuses on the relationship of the popular text to its audience and the question of where, in this relationship, lies the power to determine meaning (Marris & Thornham 1996: 571).

For example, Tania Modleski, in her work, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas' (1979) , focuses on the gendered address of soap opera and analyzes

soap opera's structural features in relation both to psychoanalytically informed theories of female subjectivity and to the rhythms of women's work at home. She feels as if the feminine powerlessness is reinforced at different levels in soaps. She insists that in their address to women's desires and 'collective fantasies', soap operas not only allay 'real anxieties', and satisfy 'real needs' but at the same time they also distort them. She argues that feminists must find new and more empowering ways of meeting utopian needs and desires, which should be more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones expressed through mass cultural forms like soap opera¹³, or else, the search for tomorrow threatens to go on, endlessly (Modleski 1996: 46-7).

But quite contrary to this Terry Lovell's (1981) challenging thesis claimed that soaps can actually subvert the values of a male-dominated society... departing from the simplistic assessment of soap opera as the opium of masses of women, she tries to show how there are potentially oppositional elements in this sort of TV entertainment (Moore 1993: 40). She insists that 'because popular culture does not belong to... feminism and revolution, it is not captured for reaction, patriarchy and domination either... it is situated ambivalently and in contradictory ways, in relation to both' (cited in Moore 1993: 40- 41). Brunsdon's essay did not go as far as Lovell's in claiming that the continuous serial can be 'progressive', but she nevertheless sought to foreground the skilled nature of viewers' decodings and the discriminating character of their tastes (Ibid: 41). Rather she tries to suggest that "the skills and discourses mobilized by despised popularity have partly been overlooked because of their legitimization as feminine" (Brunsdon 1996: 601).

¹³ Radway (1984) also argues in a similar fashion while discussing about the romance novels. She feels that feminists should behave like the moral guardians of ordinary women when it comes to the consumption of popular culture like romance novels, because the pleasure derived from them by the readers release the *tension*, which if channelized properly can add significantly to the feminist movements.

Hobson (1982) in her ethnographic study found that the viewers who spoke to her were either apologetic or defensive about watching the programme because of the low status or value that their pleasures has in the wider 'cultural economy'. At the same time she grounded her discussion of *Crossroads*, to justify the production of the programme as praiseworthy cultural work on the basis of the pleasure it gave its viewers and the creativity 'against the odds' of its production teams.

On the contrary, many of the respondents in Ang's (1985) ethnographic study (in Holland on the American soap *Dallas*) said that they found the programme to be realistic, and indicated that their enjoyment was derived in large measure from the serial's relevance to everyday experience. Though there were some who structured within the mass culture discourse and took up an oppositional decoding position. She attempted to take up Hall's formulation of audience as 'already structured in discourse' and did so in relation to a position about mass culture, which she contrasted with another discursive position, that is populism. Ang followed this populist course charted for feminist audience research by Hobson and focused on women's textual pleasures. The most important shift in Ang's research was from the focus on the 'meaning' of the programme as a popular culture to a focus on the 'pleasures' experienced in viewing the programme – particularly feminine pleasure (Nightingale 1996: 77). She concludes by saying that '...where cultural consumption is concerned, no fixed standard exists for gauging the 'progressiveness' of a fantasy. The personal may be political, but the personal and political do not always go hand in hand' (Ang 1985: 136). This means pleasure may not always have an ideological function. Hence, the pleasure that the viewer of *Dallas* gained by supporting or criticizing the text, can be kept separated from cultural politics. Nightingale (1996:

82) claimed that the object of feminine pleasure in popular culture (e.g. in Ang's work) valorises patriarchy by perpetuating subjugation of women. She summarizes Ang's work in the following words:

An unresolved tension between discourse and individual (emotional) consciousness created an ambiguity in the *Dallas* project. Where pleasure is personal, discourse is social. Ang's emphasis on pleasure displaced the analysis from the social to the personal, from what is publicly displayed (the text) to what is privately experienced (pleasure). She then read back from accounts of the pleasure experienced by her respondents to reconstitute the text as a system of pleasure only, and on the way undercut the point of discourse analysis.

The present study largely focuses on the power struggle between the text and the audience. Instead of claiming the soap operas either progressive or regressive the study explores the varying nature of decoding of the text by the viewers. It attempts to strike a balance between pleasure and politics, personal and the social by taking into account the text as a discourse and the text as it is experienced by the audience.

Here we discussed various traditions and models of audience research within feminist media studies and their usage in the studies of soap operas in a western context. Drawing on these studies I highlighted the scope of the present study to re-evaluate the genre of soap operas in a different context and intended to fill some of gaps in the already existing studies. As mentioned above the present study is carried out in a very different context than those that were discussed earlier. So, now we are going to move on to have an account of similar studies on soap operas in the Indian context.

2.2.2 The study of Soap Operas in India

In India, it was the state owned television (Doordarshan) which first attracted the attention of scholars. The works done during this period can be divided into two

categories: (1) textual or content analysis of a particular genre or programme, (2) textual analysis enriched with audience responses which are mostly done thorough ethnographic method. Works done by Jyoti Punwani (1998), Anand Mitra (1993), Prabha Krishnan (1990), Krishnan and Dighe (1997), Arvind Rajagopal (1997) fall into the various traditions in media studies (starting from effect studies to cultural studies) as they have critically analyzed the text of different serials on Doordarshan to reveal the Hindu-Hindi ideology embedded within them, and to address the gendered representation of women in the popular serials. Later on works done by Mankekar (1999) and Monteiro (1998) looked into the way women were shown in the television serials on Doordarshan and enriched their textual analysis of the media texts with empirical audience research.

Mankekar (1999), in her study, showed how age old issues of women's oppression/exploitation were re-enacted and an ideal womanhood was constructed through serials like *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Udaan* and *Tamas* on Doordarshan. Through out her study, she attempts to acknowledge the significance of mass media in identity formation and the construction of national and gendered subjects, through a dialogical interaction between texts and audience (Mankekar 1999: 2002).

On the other hand Monteiro (1998) explains how women derive pleasure from watching television and the way television provides a space for women, to escape from the claustrophobic domestic space. Through her study (which she carried out among the working-class community, in Kamgar Nagar, Goa), she tried to explain how viewers, situated in networks of power within family and neighbourhood, make sense of television.

In her study Mankekar (2002: 299) highlights that ‘meaning is unstable and is frequently contested by viewers, historical subjects, living in particular discursive formations, rather than positioned by any single text’, whereas Monteiro (1998: 167) says that ‘the strategies of viewers range from resistance to negotiated acceptance to complete incorporation of subject positions offered by televisual discourse’. But both these studies address the Indian television in the pre-liberalization era.

After liberalization the focus of serious academic discussion turned back to the ‘effect studies’ tradition where there was this whole debate about how the media texts in the post-liberalization era can threaten the socio-cultural scenario of the country with the weapon of westernization. For example, in the edited volume *TV Without Borders: Asia Speaks Out*, by Anura Goonasekera & Paul S. N. Lee (1998) from Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore, various scholars attempted to understand and analyze the entry of private channels into the Indian subcontinent; their content and presentation; their impact on the culture and values of Indian audiences. These studies concluded that the new programmes had the potential to enrich the knowledge of their audience and the audiences claimed to be well aware of harmful effects of foreign programmes.

Talking specifically about the study of soap operas on Indian television, one can say that initially there was a whole lot of confusion regarding the definition of this genre (just like the US and Europe debate) and often serialized programs like sitcoms, and mythological serials like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* were also labelled as soap operas. But soap operas as defined by the US scholars came into existence in the 90s. Initially they were imported from the western countries but later the Indian production houses

started producing them with a touch of Indianness in them. The ‘Balaji Telefilms’¹⁴, became the centre of discussion because the popular and long running soaps like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (*KSBKBT* henceforth) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (*KGGK* henceforth). Now we have many such industries producing soap operas for domestic consumption. A recent study by Shoma Munshi (2010) takes a closer look at these production houses (Balaji Telefilms, Sphere Origin and Director’s Kut). She looked at the text of the soap operas and the popular characters (especially women like Tulsi, Parvati, Saloni, Ragini) in them and argued how these empowered characters depicted in soaps can empower the audience as well.

Priya Raghban (2008) who studied the popularity of Tulsi (in *KSBKBT*) looks at it from point of view of the empirical audiences. According to her,

[T]he thesis defines its approach as a study of the discourses that frame viewers’ relationship to *Kyunki*. It argues that study of the reception of a particular text requires a reflexive approach, in linking the interpretations viewers make to the text and the larger discursive framework, which I explore in terms of family ethos (2008: 40).

So building on these set of works and arguing quite similar to Raghvan, my study explores the relationship between the audience and the popular soap opera texts and makes an attempt to understand the ‘interpretive community’ as a much more complex category than what it was understood to be. The work shows how the structural factors as well as the lived experiences of particular individuals play an important role in the construction of meaning especially in changing societies as

¹⁴ Balaji Telefilms, incorporated in 1994, is a television content provider. Mr. Jeetendra, Mrs. Shobha Kapoor and Ms. Ekta Kapoor promoted the company with the object of making television software including serials and other entertainment content. It remained No.1 for four uninterrupted years (2001-2004). Starting off in 1995 with a serial *Maano Ya Naa Maano* on Zee TV, Balaji Telefilms has become one of the few producers of quality television serials and soaps, in Hindi and some South Indian languages.

tensions and contradiction which are always a part of the overall social structure and get aggravated in the fast changing societies.

In the next chapter we are going look at the history of television in India and its emergence as a major source of entertainment over the years. Here we will focus on the portrayal of women in the popular serials and soap operas in the past few decades.

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CHAPTER-III

Indian Television: From Edutainment to Entertainment

Chapter - 3

Indian Television: From Edutainment to Entertainment

Indian television celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2009. These fifty years can be broadly divided into three phases. The first phase was upto 1983 when the medium focused on education and information to farmers and students. Its reach was confined to few pockets of the country. The second phase is the one in which Doordarshan was the only official channel in the country and had limited broadcasting hours. The programmes were still trying to spread education and information through various genres. Whereas the third phase which is the most important phase in the history of Indian television changed the face of the medium as it broke the traditions by bringing in genres that were purely meant for entertainment. This study comes into shape during a period when the third phase is about to complete almost two decades. It is within these two decades the industry of television has gone through drastic changes.

This chapter will briefly look at the first two phases and then have a detailed discussion about the third phase. Here I will discuss how soap opera as a genre got introduced into the Indian television and got Indianized and then got established as the most popular genre in the television industry because at present ‘more than one-third of India’s billion inhabitants regularly watch Indian television soaps’ (Munshi 2010: 5). Subsequently I will also examine the different trends within the genre of soap operas on Indian television while dealing with issues like family, gender relations, especially with respect to portrayal of women in them.

Along with soap operas, Indian television has also got flooded with reality shows. Like soap operas, reality shows are also American in origin. The Indianized reality

shows have become very popular, but we are not going to focus on them. The chapter will briefly discuss the genre while talking about the changes on Indian television in the post-liberalization era.

3.1 Introduction of Television in India: The Doordarshan Era

Experimentation with television began in India on 15th of September 1959. The scope of its programs (two days a week) was restricted to educational broadcasts for a limited area around New Delhi. Mostly it was looked upon as a tool for disseminating educational messages in Delhi schools and agricultural messages among farmers in the suburbs of Delhi. These two projects were funded by UNESCO¹, as well as the Dutch Electronics Company, Philips², and Ford Foundation. The broadcasting time and reach increased gradually and by August 1965 television had become a regular daily service.

Initially, the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, thought television to be too expensive a toy in a country, where more than half the population was living below poverty line, and hence, television's presence in the country was ignored by the state till the beginning of the 1970s. This passivity of the state towards the growth of the network 'was a subversive (non-)act in an attempt to resist not only the seduction of the image but also 'electronic colonialism' (Ohm 1999: 77-78). But irrespective of everything, the idea of television being 'an agent of social change' gained ground. The debate was resolved by the policy of affirming television as a tool for

¹ 50 television sets were distributed by UNESCO for tele-clubs, between December 1960 and May 1961, in the rural vicinity of Delhi to disseminate the message of rural development. (Ghosh 2010: 224)

² On September 1959, Philips India Ltd. donated the equipment of its closed circuit television (21 of them) which it had set up in its stall during an industrial Exhibition in Delhi to the Government of India. (ibid.)

development in line with the state's ideology of progress and national integration (ibid.). This was explicitly promoted by the then head of the Indian Space Research Programme Vikram Sarabhai (1969): 'Television is ideal in conveying information and news to the broad masses of the people, particularly to the illiterate section of the population on whom such an audio-visual medium would have a profound impact.... The process of education is basically related to the information-dissemination-transfer process' (cited in Ohm 1999: 79).

Hence the programmes broadcasted at this time were exclusively instructional and educational ones. The government had set up access at community centres around Delhi and at government schools for students. Thus the initial spread of television in India was essentially a community activity. Individual ownership of television therefore only emerged much later (Raghavan 2008: 64).

Till 1976 television remained a part of AIR (All India Radio) which was owned by the state. The maintenance of the studios and production of programmes was financially supported by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Television service reached other cities only from 1972, beginning with Mumbai. By 1975, seven major cities were covered as television stations and broadcast facilities were progressively set up in those cities. This slow expansion of television in the first two decades was due to the exclusive reliance on a terrestrial mode of transmission which needed huge investments in infrastructure for setting up television stations and transmitters and each could cover only a short specified radius. This meant that transmission centres were mostly located in urban areas leading also to the growth of television as a largely urban phenomenon (Mitra 1993). To overcome this limitation and to find wider rural

reach, the Congress (Indira Gandhi) government planned to experiment in satellite communications and broadcasting.

The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) programme, which enabled direct broadcast to six states, was first, introduced between August 1975 and July 1976 when there was a national emergency. It was conducted jointly in collaboration with US space agency NASA. Its main purpose was to disseminate development messages with respect to health, literacy and agriculture and its ultimate aim was generation of national integration. The experiment covering 2400 villages, spanning twenty districts over six states, tested satellite broadcast technology as well as the potential of television in social and educational empowerment (Poduval 1999: 110). This project was declared a massive success and the Indian government got prepared for an enormous investment during 1980s to expand the reach of the television.

The period between 1972 and 1982 saw a rapid expansion of television in India. The trend continued in the 1980s under the premiership of Rajiv Gandhi with the motto of ‘one day – one transmitter’ (Ohm 1999: 83). There was a need for large amount of capital for further expansion of Doordarshan which became the main reason for commercialization of programmes. With this came rapid developments in production and transmission technologies, and there was a proliferation of different genres of programmes.

It was during this period that there was a rapid growth of indigenous manufacture of receivers/television sets and these were primarily marketed to the urban audience. Hence even though ‘it was repeatedly asserted that TV in India was not to become a

status symbol or an object of elite consumption but to develop as an instrument of socialisation for a progressive and dynamic society, Dube (1976) concedes that it was 'catering more to the affluent populations', especially to those who could afford the television sets (cited in Butcher 2003: 57). As a result of this the target audience gradually shifted from rural audience to urban viewers. With the increase in the urban audience base, television got recognized as an excellent medium for advertising by the business houses of the country. This along with the government agency's need of money for its expansion led towards rapid commercialization of television programmes (Mitra 1993).

The educational fare of the sixties got increasingly supplemented by a large variety of other programmes such as sports, news, feature film based music programmes, television plays made for Doordarshan and foreign comedies (Mitra 1993: 15-18). But all these did not replace the existing educational programmes for school children and farmers, but supplemented them, and often produced them in more attractive ways. For example, the emergence of programmes such as talk shows, quizzes and dramatizations, that addressed the issues of education and family planning but did so in a way that was more specific to the narrative, representational style of television (ibid.). The programmes were in three languages, English, Hindi and the regional language of the respective states.

But at the same time television was treated as a tool to disseminate government propaganda and Doordarshan became firmly established as an institution of the government in power. Government of India indirectly determined the programmes on Doordarshan. Indira Gandhi was quoted making this standpoint very clearly: 'We are

proud that it is government organ... Primarily, its function is to give the views of the government of India (Cited in Zins 1989: 160, cited in Ohm 1999: 84). 'Television has thus been a key locus in *governmentality*, taking this Foucauldian term to mean complex tactics which target populations by deploying the axes of political economy and the apparatuses of social security' (Poduval 1999: 109).

This led to a serious debate on the issue of state control of one of the most popular media of communication. Two alternative trajectories were suggested to make the medium free of state-control; first, 'to turn television into a medium of entertainment rather than education and allow commercial sponsorship for various programmes on Doordarshan', and second, 'to privatize Doordarshan, in order to release it from state control' (Mitra 1993: 12). The shift towards the commercialization took place in 1976 with the introduction of advertisements. It started with spot-commercials in 1976 and by 1983 Doordarshan went on to accept "sponsored programmes" (Poduval 1999).

3.2 Shift from SITE to INSAT and the Growth of Commercial Television

The evaluation of Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) which ended in 'July 1976 resulted in admissions of "having gone wrong" and concluded that DD's objectives of reaching and teaching the vast masses of illiterate rural people had remained only a partially fulfilled dream' due to its limited reach (Kalathil 1999). To overcome the limitations of SITE, India soon began investing in communication satellites and also developing them domestically. The Indian National Satellite (INSAT) programme emerged from this initiative for incorporating satellite technology into television broadcasting, along with other communication uses. In the year 1982 when the Asian Games were held in Delhi, India's first communication

satellite INSAT-1A was launched allowing Doordarshan to commence the use of satellite transmission in its broadcast. Colour broadcasting was also introduced for the national coverage of Asian games in Delhi. This satellite facilitated the linking up all Doordarshan Kendras (regional centres), which had until then operated as different and independent regional services, servicing regions of their radius. As a result of which Doordarshan was able to relay National Programme from Delhi for simultaneous broadcast across the country. The national, regional and local transmissions were integrated on a single channel, with the national and regional centres sharing time on it.

Following this development in the transmission technology along with the quasi-commercialization that had already begun in the late eighties, the ‘educational’ purpose and programming on Television got increasingly supplemented by the growing presence of non-educational programmes. Television plays and different English and Hindi ‘serials’ were introduced on Doordarshan. Advertisements were allowed to sponsor these programmes which further opened the doors for commercialization of television.

With the introduction of entertainment serials, the state intensified its efforts to deploy Doordarshan in the task of creating a pan-Indian national culture (Mankekar 1999: 5-6). They also drew from social learning theory and aimed at influencing viewing subjects to “adopt” certain “pro-development” attitudes and behaviours with regard to birth control, literacy and so on (ibid.: 71). ‘In 1983, a team led by the Information and Broadcasting secretary went to Mexico to study the “pro-development” soap operas of Miguel Sabido and next year Doordarshan commissioned a private producer

to create a serial that combined an entertaining storyline with developmental messages on family planning, women's upliftment, and so on' (Poduval 1999: 111). The serial that was produced was *Hum Log* (which was highly inspired by a Mexican soap opera) and it was used in propagating the Government's message of family planning (Punwani 1988).

Most narratives produced during this period had explicit "social message", with themes relating to family planning, national integration, and the status of women woven into the narratives. But at the same time, 'being the only channel for a growing pan-Indian audience, the National Network reflected in many ways the Congress' high claim to be 'all things to all people', which meant it became increasingly a tool to spread Hindi as the national language and Hinduism as the national culture' (Ohm 1999: 83, See a detailed discussion on these issues in chapter 6). Gradually with time 'it became more and more difficult to hide the fact that DD had been torn between two desires ...between... the privileged and the deprived, the urban and the rural, the regional forces and the centre and finally, the global and the local' (ibid.).

3.2.1 Popular Serials/ Soap Operas in the Pre-liberalization Era

As I have stated earlier the concept of development-oriented programmes on Doordarshan was first introduced through the Indian style tele-serial *Hum Log* (We People) which was a story of a lower-middle-class traditional Hindu joint family based in Delhi, struggling to achieve upward mobility and become middle-class. It started in 1984 and was aired for 17 months and had 156 episodes. This serial became

a turning point in the very character of television programmes in India.³ Several other tele-series were produced after the success of *Hum Log*. For example, another successful serial *Buniyaad* followed it which was produced by Ramesh Sippy in 1986. As Ramesh Sippy was a Bombay-based Hindi film producer, Harish Khanna (the former Director General of Doordarshan) called it a marriage of convenience between Bombay and Delhi (Mankekar 1999: 73-74). By 1987 almost forty serials were produced with two serials on an average being aired each evening (Raghavan 2008). The other popular serials on Doordarshan during this time were *Khandan*, *Tamas*, *Rajni*, *Udaan*, *Yugantar* leaving apart the two epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* which were very popular.

In the initial days some of these popular serials were loosely labelled as soap operas (Mitra 1993: 84). Even though *Hum Log* was inspired by a Mexican soap opera and approximated the form of soap opera genre in several respects, it was notably different from the typical soap operas (Das 1995). Similarly when the Ramayana text was adapted for television, a leading national weekly (Sunday) quickly labelled it as the 'soap opera of the Gods'- establishing its inter-textuality with the genre of 'soap operas' as well as underscoring its religious connotation (Mitra 1993: 85). In fact all these were serials which were spread over many episodes but told a complete story. They differed from soaps because there was a closure to their narratives unlike soaps where stories are never finally resolved. As the definition suggests, the genre of soap operas began on Indian television only after the liberalization of Indian economy, i.e.

³ The production and telecast of this development-oriented serial was sponsored by Food Specialties Limited (FSL), which was a subsidiary of the multinational company Nestle. On the one hand, FSL met the production cost of *Hum Log*, and on the other hand, *Hum Log* became a vehicle to market the new product 'Maggi'. As *Hum Log* was a big success, it also made Maggi popular among its viewers, and its sale increased to 5000 tons in 1984 from non-in 1982. This example gives a clear picture of how consumerism was closely related to the success of television serials (Mankekar 1999: 81).

after 1991. They began and proliferated on Doordarshan and Private Channels like Zee, between 1992 and 1996. *Shanti* and *Swabhimaan* were the first two soap operas shown on Doordarshan. We will discuss these in detail in the following sections.

3.2.2 Presentation of Hindu Mythologies on Indian Television

Ramayan and *Mahabharat* were different from other development oriented entertainment programmes as they were not based on any social issues. They were based on the Hindu mythologies and were targeted at the middle-class Hindu families, which constituted a large section of the viewers of Doordarshan. Justifying the telecast of *Ramayan*, the Information and Broadcasting secretary S.S. Gill described it as cultural rather than religious containing universalistic values applicable to all (Rajgopal 1994). So the Hindu epics were identified with Indian culture in general. This was the time of growing tension between the Hindu and the Muslim communities, and it made a big contribution in preparing grounds for the *Janmabhoomi* issue (ibid.). Another indication of the political influence of a religious epic that was mass mediated to millions of people is the young woman who played the part of Sita in *Ramayana* was elected to parliament on the Bharatiya Janata Party ticket. This is the reason why the broadcast of such religious epics was highly criticized. Arguing in this context, Vilanilam (1996: 79-80) says 'Fundamentalism (ritual religion) is being revived on television. As long as people are illiterate, culture may be mistaken for fundamentalism...' He also says that 'Cultural invasion... need not always be from without; it can occur from within. In an attempt to introduce uniformity in culture, the majority community's effort to impose its cultural norms and peculiarities on the rest of the population is also cultural invasion' (ibid.: 83).

But none of these criticisms were able to make a difference in the making and broadcast of such serials. One can still see the reproduction of these Hindu mythologies on the private channels. In fact they have become the inspirations behind the making of many popular soap operas. For example, when asked how she had conceptualized *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (KGGK), Ekta Kapoor said that she wanted to make a modern *Ramayan* (Lalwani 2003b). Taking this argument further, Munshi (2010: 11) suggests that the epics function as the principal text of the K soaps, for a few episodes at least, in situations when the central protagonists are fighting the battle of good over evil. This reflects the influence of the Hindu mythologies on other popular genres like soap operas.

3.2.3 Mapping the Portrayal of Women in the Serials:

The 1985 report of the Working Group on the Software for Indian Television, with Dr. P.C. Joshi as chairperson, identified the failure of the developmental mission of DD as located in its inability to productively reach “the rural masses”, “women” and “children” (Kalathil 1999). So ‘the need to rethink DD’s investment in “women’s issues” arose out of the understanding that the nation could not progress and socio-economic development would remain distorted as long as women were left behind as the lesser half of the society’ (ibid.: 88). The negative stereotyping of women was blamed on the over-dependence of television programmes on commercial cinema. So the Joshi committee recommended a detailed guideline for DD regarding the positive portrayal of women on television. It said:

The Government must at the earliest formulate clear-cut guidelines regarding positive portrayal of women on television. This portrayal must take note of women in all facets of their lives: as workers, and significant contributors to family survival and the national economy. Women must not be portrayed in stereotyped images that emphasize passive, submissive qualities and encourage them to play a subordinate secondary role in the family and the society. Both

men and women should be portrayed in ways that encourage mutual respect and a spirit of give and take between the sexes.

In order to promote a positive ideology that is sensitive to women's needs and permeates the total programming and also to have a coordinated, consistent policy it would be necessary for all Doordarshan policy-makers, programming, and production staff to have regular orientation courses that sensitize them to women's issues (Cited in Punwani 1988: 231).

Similarly 'A Vision for Indian Television' which was the Report of NAMEDIA⁴ (Media Foundation of the Non-Aligned, 1986) outlined the objectives of Television with respect to portrayal of women as follows:

The role of women in television programmes needs to be reappraised, male chauvinism eradicated, and women as equals, with an assured, dignified, honoured role in society must be promoted.

Two aspects of television programmes for women were stressed.

1. To create among them awareness of their role and responsibility as social beings with a status equal to men.
2. The specific interest of a large majority of women and of their role in the existing social and family structure. (p.29)

Deepa Dhanraj pointed out that these recommendations were based on two premises 'that the integration into the development process will automatically achieve equality for women, and that DD as a government institution is obliged to execute this national objective' (Kalathil 1999: 88).

⁴ NAMEDIA chose the format of five "feedback" Seminars around the country – in Guwahati, Calcutta, Bangalore, Bombay and Ahmedabad to cover regions and available disciplines, cultural and scientific. These seminars would conclude with a national Colloquium in New Delhi... The Chief Ministers of every State in the country and the heads of every Union Territory were invited to send their views on television and, if they so wished, representatives to the National Colloquium. (p. 9)
It is necessary to emphasise that as a feedback exercise no attempt was made at the Seminar and the National Colloquium to organise or achieve a consensus, nor formally to make a conference statement or pass resolution. (p. 10)

Whatsoever affirmative actions were taken to implement the guidelines and programmes based on family health, food, nutrition and home management needs, were devised to guide Indian women to adopt modern behaviour and attitude towards life. There was also an increase in the number of women oriented programmes and serials like *Udaan*, *Adhikar*, *Rajni* and many more like them and a few telefilms like *Kya Yeh Gustakhi Hai*. 'Most of these women-oriented narratives articulated the notion of women's emancipation in terms of the New Indian woman whose energies were harnessed to the service to nation (as in case of Kalyani and Rajani), or in terms of the upliftment of women by the state' (Mankekar 1999: 154).

Some of my respondents still remember the central women characters of the popular serials of the time and take inspiration from strong, independent and confident women like Chutki and Kavita. For example, one of my respondents, a middle-aged housewife from U.P. (who has worked as a high school teacher for more than 15 years), still remembers the Chutki, a character in *Hum Log* (the first tele-serial on Doordarshan).

In *Hum Log* there was a character called Chutki. She was very ambitious but her father never wanted her to study. But she was very intelligent. And when we compare the reel character with her real life then also it was very similar. The girl who played that character was very good at her studies in real life also. I was also in that same age group at that time. So her character was very inspiring for me.

Tulsi's character was also good but I do not find her very impressive.

This is the reason why even now she loves to watch soap operas on Doordarshan compared to Private channels. At present her favourite character is Anaro (in *Anaro* on Doordarshan).

At present I am watching *Anaro* on DD-1. The story revolves around a poor woman who works as a maid servant. The story is about her struggle to feed her child and take care of the day-to-day expenses. She is a very strong and confident woman.

So the intelligent and ambitious girl has preferred to grow into a strong and confident woman who can struggle to earn her own bread and take care of her child rather than turning into a glamorous house-wife who is busy in family politics.

A highly qualified 30 year old Bengali house-wife (has done her masters in Political science and M.ed and was working in Kolkata before getting married) also remembers a character on Doordarshan, i.e. Kavita in *Udaan*.

I liked the character Kavita. I was very young at that time and my father was in police. So while watching, my father used to say “one day you will also grow up and I want to see you making something good out your life”. So I used to get some strange feelings in myself. That serial was really very inspiring.

She also liked to watch Jassi “because it was something different than these *saas-bahu* serials” but later she lost interest in it as they dragged the story unnecessarily (we will discuss this in detail in another section in this chapter).

The commonalities between these two women are that they are both educated and were working and will get back to work when things fall back to place and there is little change of taste when it comes to their favourite character. They always loved and still love to watch independent and achieving women and not merely the good housewives.

But the textual analyses of these serials suggest that the moral of these stories were like unmarried women had to be “protected” by their families and in contrast, ‘those who transgressed their assigned “place” in the patriarchal family were severely punished by exile, profound emotional anguish, or suicide’ which ultimately reinforced the patriarchal family’s authority to control the sexuality of women

(Mankekar 1999: 118). There are many studies which explored how women are represented on the medium and some of them demanded a change in the representation. For example, Punwani (1988) analysed *Hum Log*, *Khandan*, *Buniyad*, *Rajani*, *Poornima*, *Chehre*, *Kala Jal* and many others and concluded that ‘the picture of Indian women on television is of a housebound, tradition-bound, passive person. Pointing out the recommendation of the P. C. Joshi committee for a system of regular monitoring of the portrayal of women on television which stated that ‘There should be a weekly programme of viewer’s views in which the audience as also critics and commentators from newspapers, women’s organizations etc. are called to analyze and evaluate the week’s programme. The evaluation must have a specific focus in the way in which women are portrayed.’ Punwani (1988: 232) said that ‘Doordarshan needs to build up a commitment not only to women, but towards promoting a changing image of Indian society’.

Nandini Prasad (1994) did the textual analysis of *Aaye Begane Deshi: Sasural, Aurat ki Jeevan Yatra*⁵ (by Meera Deewan), *Chhattisgarh Ki Beti*, *Pachpan Khambhe Lal Deewaren*, *Bharat Ka Lal*, *Dayare*, *Titli*, *Kya Yeh Gustakhi Hai* (during her study 14 serials at prime time were telecast). She concluded that ‘there was hardly ever a portrayal of normal women. Negative, limited images of women, victims of circumstances were shown, and if the women were assertive, they went to the other extreme and were depicted as shrewish, vampish, uncaring and ‘bold’ – jean clad and cigarette smoking’ (Prasad 1994: 112). Very often, ‘women were represented as creators of social problems yet rarely as creators of solutions of those problems. They

⁵ A touching commentary on the traditional Indian social system, the film defines the identity of a woman as a total non-entity. (p. 106)

were projected as lively, yet submissive housewives, sacrificing their love in order to conform to the pressures of society' (McMillin 2004: 87).

Similarly Mankekar's analysis of mythological dramas ...and of 'woman-oriented' narratives...of late 1980s Doordarshan revealed that women in these programmes were either portrayed as revered and divine beings within the constraints of right-wing Hindu revivalism where their bodies became sites of sexual pleasure. And the progressive and powerful women were limited by their womanhood and hence ultimately could not equal or surpass the status of men (Mankekar 1999). She says, 'Women-oriented programs reflected the state's need to mobilize women not just toward the twin goals of development and modernization, but also as custodians of the unity of the nation; women thus had to be constituted as loyal and patriotic citizens who would protect the integrity of the nation' (ibid.: 107)

Jyoti Punwani (1988) makes the following generalizations about the portrayal of women in the soaps shown on Doordarshan.

1. An overwhelming majority of them are home-based, whether married or unmarried.
2. Working women are always shown to be so, through circumstances, not choice, that too, unhappy circumstances. Also rarely are they happy in their jobs.
3. Marriage is seen as natural state for woman, if single, the woman is working towards achieving that state; if widowed/divorced, she is rarely happy. She may be making a success of her life, but underlying that is her sadness at her single and lonely state.
4. In their relationship 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 happy end. At best, they have to compromise to some extent, but by far the commonest fate reserved for them is failure. (p. 225)

Moving ahead Dhanraj (1994) notes that first of all Doordarshan assumed women to be uniform in their needs and desires and defaulted their representation to the middle-class, upper caste, urban Hindu. Secondly, in most serials, domestic labour was framed as an extension of woman's natural mothering role. Third, the single, working woman was portrayed as English speaking and sexually active, which was clearly out of the accepted norm of the docile Hindu housewife. Fourth, even a woman in power was defined by the patriarchal norm that saw it necessary to downplay her sexuality (cited from McMillin 2004: 86).

So far we have discussed the various committees and their recommendations regarding the portrayal of women on Doordarshan in the pre-liberalization era and the analysis of various serials by different scholars and their reactions towards the construction of ideal Indian women on Doordarshan. The discussion above addresses the failure of state-controlled television to facilitate women's development in India and provides a feminist critique of the dominant paradigm of development communication that privileges the state and its ideological apparatuses. Now we will move on to the next phase of Indian television which began with the liberalization of the Indian economy and the subsequent entry of foreign players into the Indian media sphere.

3.3 Liberalization of Indian Economy and the “invasion” from Sky

India with its entry to the global market not only allowed its own market to get flooded with imported goods but also its television industry to go through a complete

transformation. It was under this global influence that Indian television experienced a major shift, both in its content as well as its purpose.

Till 1991 the Indian state had a monopolistic control over the medium of television through state controlled Doordarshan. But since then, with liberalization of economy and polity, the Indian media landscape has changed radically. 'The shift from the state-controlled media where the Doordarshan was the sole player in the field with a total monopoly to the opening of the media to private channels was accompanied by the shift to the market, and global capital spearhead and guided by the state' (Chakravarti 2000: 12). The deregulation of the Indian economy impacted the structure, production values, content and viewing context of the television industry. Development of media technology and the establishment of media infrastructure have contributed towards this change. With the increase of television channels and cable networks, this change has become more radical (Brosius and Butcher 1999; Butcher 2003). First of all, as Ninan says 'the revolution in Indian television has created a climate for greater freedom of information for the vast majority. It has created space on television for all political parties and not just the ruling party, as was the case when Doordarshan had a monopoly' (cited in Richstad: 1998: 301). But the educational and informative aspect, which was the initial purpose of television in India, got marginalized as entertainment took its place. Privatization of Indian television replaced the 'development communication function' and 'gave way to...entertainment in order to attract high audience ratings' and at the same time 'promoted consumerism, capitalism, and other western values' (Rogers 2000: 71).

CNN was the first news channel, which made an entry into India via satellite during the Gulf war, i.e. in early 1991. After that the Public television broadcasting system of India i.e. Doordarshan was challenged by 40 private channels in the 90's which included STAR-TV owned by Rupert Murdoch's news Corporation; SONY, owned by SONY Corporation of Japan and ZEE-TV owned by Subhash Chandra from India. Responding to the competition from STAR TV, Doordarshan supplemented its regional-language channels and the national network with five new satellite channels which provided programming similar to STAR TV. STAR had to use Hindi programming in its Zee Channel to capture the Indian audience.

This gave rise to an entirely new industry of cable television operators through out the country. The growth was so fast that by the end of 2000, India became World's largest cable and satellite market with 35 million homes and 150 million cable viewers (Singhal & Rogers 2000: 108). In 2001 it reached 41 million (12% increase from the previous year) out of which almost 16 million were in rural areas (Butcher 2003: 66).

3.3.1 Increasing Audiences and their Fragmentation

Till late 1995, it was only the upper-middle-class and the upper-class viewers who could afford to subscribe to a cable connection. Again this viewership was limited because the programmes on Star TV were in English language and much more westernized than the programmes on Doordarshan and Zee TV. Its audiences were mainly from upper class and upper-middle class and with English education. To overcome this problem, Star TV decided to move towards 'Indianization' of its programmes. It hired Ratikant Basu (the former Doordarshan Director General) as its

CEO in October 1996 who introduced Star Plus, which was very Indian in its programming pattern (Mankekar 1999:47). Initially it showed programmes which were earlier shown on Doordarshan and were big hits. Such serials include *Imtihaan*, *Chandrakanta* and *Alif Laila*. This new marketing strategy brought Star into direct competition with Zee TV. In order to attract the middle class and lower middle class audience, Star introduced Hindi news and a big bunch of soap operas in its prime-time schedule for its soap opera lovers. This was also the time when Sony entered the market and gained popularity within a short span of time. But with all these developments, the regional locale serials such as *Buniyaad*, *Humlog*, *Malgudi Days* completely disappeared on the ‘national’ private channels and got replaced by a unified set of protagonists in unified representation of a home which we will discuss in the following section. Now representation of the ‘local’ is no longer part of the national; instead it is now done by the regional channels of the Doordarshan and a series of private channels operating programmes in regional languages such as Asianet and Sun TV (Chakravarti 2000: 13).

This intense growth of transnational television gave rise to concerns regarding process of cultural change in India. Though it ‘opened the ‘magic window’ to the world, it has since been condemned as an ‘invader’ and as the harbinger of change that has been described as ‘alien’ by religious leaders, politicians and social commentators’ (Butcher 2003: 14). It was said that the transnational television brings in a large number of ‘strangers’ in the form of performers or characters in the television programmes. Viewers socially interact with these media performers. The world that gets created through mediated communication is a world of ‘intimate strangers’ (Goonasekera 1998).

With this development of private channels, the notion of audience as a national public got replaced by audience as market, or rather series of markets made up of isolated individuals. In a similar situation in Europe, Katz argued that such increasing segmentation of audience denies the nation-state a medium to promote social integration and a sense of common purpose (Katz discussed in Webster 2005: 369). Till 1991 every television viewer in India watched the same news and the entertainment programme irrespective of her/his financial status or the location – urban /rural. But with privatization, there was a fragmentation of Indian audience. Initially there was a clear divide between the audience in urban setting and rural setting. The urban elite viewers with their high disposable incomes were the main target audience of the private channels as they were ‘desired by the advertisers’ (Singhal & Rogers 2000: 121), and the audience in the villages and small towns were left with Doordarshan as their only option. But things have changed drastically in past few years and this sort of fragmentation is getting blurred.

The opening up of the electronic media to private channels have not only retained the same biases in terms of class, caste, gender and region with their focus on urban India and the celebrated 200 million buying public, but at the same time, have brought in new biases. Now, in villages which continue to be denied the basic necessities of life, it is possible to see satellite TV and Doordarshan. ‘The continuing poverty, illiteracy, inequality and vulnerability of most sections of rural men and women have been completely erased from the screen and from the consciousness of the globalised India’ (Chakravarti 2000: 17). Bharucha (1994: 108) says ‘the implications of this cultural invasion are enormous not merely because of the grotesque disparity between the consumerist representation of ‘development’ on television (what is *desirable*) as

opposed to the abject economic conditions of its viewers (which determine what is *available*)’.

There were serious questions regarding the impact of foreign programmes on the country’s value system. In order to answer some of these questions, Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) funded an exploratory study in 1993 (Joshi 1998). A viewers’ survey was conducted in two metropolitan cities, of India namely Bombay and Madras. The survey was conducted in February 1994. The main purpose of the survey was to find out the viewers’ opinions regarding Indian and foreign programmes in terms of presentation, content, values and impact (ibid). At the end it was believed that Indian culture and values are strong enough to withstand any ‘cultural invasion’ (ibid.). It was found that the audience were all ‘aware of harmful effects of foreign programmes, but at the same time majority of them considered that foreign programmes could enrich their knowledge. Most of them did not consider foreign programmes as having bad effects on their way of living. In other words, the audience were not unsuspecting consumer duped by capitalism’ (Lee 1998: 281).

Through a survey it was found that Indian culture-specific films and serials were more favoured than the external culture-specific productions. Hence later on the programmes on the foreign channels were modified or adapted to meet the expectations of the hoped-for audience. The strong role of the television audiences and their values and their preferences for local or transnational productions, had a large say. Parija (1996) also has a similar argument. She says ‘By presenting an alien culture, *Swabhimaan* helps its viewers to define their own culture, to introspect and understand their own social position better’ (p.108). Her finding contradicts the

assumption that the non-Indian culture is actually damaging Indian culture. Rather it shows that the popularity of the Indian culture grows stronger with new challenges.

3.3.2 Introduction of Satellite Channels and the emergence of Reality Shows in India

Reality shows in India date back to the Channel V's talent hunt for making of a musical band. A band of girls called 'Viva' emerged from this show. It enjoyed short-lived popularity but marked the beginning of reality shows in India. Superstar Amitabh Bachchan's *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, which was the Indian version of *Who wants to be a Millionaire*, was a major hit with the audience in India. What followed next was a flood of reality shows. Many of them are adaptations of the pre-existing western versions of reality shows like Celeb-Reality, Prank-Reality, Game Shows, Talent Hunts, Job-hunts, Makeovers, Dating-Shows, Social Experiments, Adventure/Fear based shows.

Reality shows in India were welcomed by many of the audience who were tired of the Ekta Kapoor's saas-bahu soap operas that were (and some of them still are) pre-dominant on Indian television. However at present these shows are enjoying tremendous popularity. The most popular reality shows on Indian television now are *MTV Bakra*, *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, *Indian Idol*, *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa*, *Big Boss*, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*, *Nach Baliye*, *Jhalak Dikhlaja* etc.

The best thing about a reality show is that they are interactive as the viewers decide the winner through voting. It is all about people's participation, journey to fame and a lot of passion and emotion. Audience see the dreams of millions of Indians come true

through these shows. They relate to the characters that appear on the shows, and this makes the shows more meaningful than other genres. Some reality shows provide artists a good platform to get noticed, some shows help people win money and fame but almost all of them keep the audience hooked to the channel.

Reality shows are criticized with allegations that these shows are trading on human emotions for money. There are controversies about these reality shows being 'planned and scripted' or the voting lines being a hoax. There are also controversial and confessional shows like *Sach Ka Samna*. But still reality shows are claimed to be the place where reality meets fiction.

3.3.3 Introduction of Satellite Channels, the Soap Operas and the Construction of Womanhood:

As we have discussed earlier the case of Doordarshan, there were serialized programmes which were loosely labelled as soap operas. The first set of Western-style soap operas to be telecast on Indian television were the dubbed versions of American soaps '*Santa Barbara*' and '*The Bold and the Beautiful*' (the popular soaps from US) on Star TV. Their viewership was limited as they were in English and the soaps failed to hold the attention of the upper class viewers for long. Soon after this Zee TV came with Hindi soaps like *Tara*, *Parampara*, *Amaanat*, *Ashirwaad* etc. which were also popular but their popularity was also limited due to the limited accessibility of the satellite channels. Its reach was confined to urban viewers only.

Shanti and *Swabhimaan* were the first set of Hindi soaps, which came on Doordarshan. These were 'daytime soaps' (unlike the primetime soaps on Zee) and were targeted at women who stayed at home during daytime (Cantor and Pingree

1983). Both the soaps were very successful. A study done by Sudesna Parija (1996) on *Swabhimaan* shows that it also attracted the attention of working women. They did not mind running to the nearest friend's house during office hour, just to check out what was happening with the characters Svetlana and Rishab Malhotra. Part of the success of these two soaps was also due to the larger reach of the state network compared to the private channels till late 90s⁶.

Following this there was a spurt in the number of soap operas on Indian television especially on the private channels and they dealt with various issues. For instance, serials like *Saans* and *Kora Kaagaz* depicted women coming into their own, breaking barriers of convention. There were others, which revolved around interpersonal relationships, against the backdrop of joint families e.g. *Yeh hai Mere Apne*, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu thi*, *Mehendi Tere Naam Ki*, *Babul ki Duiyan Le Jaa*, *Ghar Ek Mandir* among others *Tu Tu Main Main* was a satire on the much-debated mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law relationship. Serials like *Amanat* and some of the older ones like *Campus*, *Banegi Apni Baat*, *Challenge* and *Alp Viram* dealt with the sufferings and obstacles faced by youngsters in friendship, courtship, in marriage and out of it, with slight emphasis on physical relationships and passions.

Unlike the earlier generation of serials which had themes such as the depiction of anti-colonial struggles, the 'uplift' of women, the social reformist efforts of patriotic men and women, and the portrayal of military heroes, most of these new serials (e.g. *Tara*, *Andaaz*, *Parampara*, *Swabhimaan*) were about adultery, the trials of single women,

⁶ A 1993 report said the state network reached 83.6 per cent of the population, while STAR was listed at about 15 per cent, but mostly in the more advertiser friendly urban areas (Richstad 1998: 301).

corporate wars and so on (Mankekar 1999: 356). Earlier soaps on DD tended to comply with the code of popular Indian cinema where 'negative' women, clearly polarized against the 'heroines'. With the likes of 'Santa Barbara' and 'Dynasty' and their Indian counterparts, the line between the good and evil has become blurred. We see it in the next chapter that women admit to secretly admiring 'bad' women, who are seen as 'strong', as opposed to 'good women'.

The Star channel also quickly gave up with the dubbed American soaps and switched over to home made Hindi programmes on its Star Plus channel. Then came soap operas produced by Ekta Kapoor's Balaji Telefilms which are responsible for changing the face of Indian television. Ekta Kapoor who could detect the pulse of the Indian audience came up with some very successful soap operas like *KSBKBT*, *KGGK*, and *KZK*. These soaps ran for almost a decade. There were many others which ran for years like *Kkusum*, *Koshish...Ek Asha*, *Kahin To Hoga.*, *Kabhi Sautan* *Kabhi Saheli*. Invariably all her soaps revolve around the themes of family problems, love, marriage, divorce and re-marriage. They are all women centric. Her famous heroines like Tulsi, Parvati and Kusum are portrayed as representatives of ideal Indian *bahus*. They are always busy in kitchen and in solving problems created by some other family member, who again is almost always a woman (e.g. Pallavi, Kamolika and the list goes on). What Ekta Kapoor succeeded in doing was bringing the independent and outgoing women like Shanti and Svetlana back into the fold of joint family. They are the ideal daughters-in-law and devoted wives. Looking at the enthusiastic audience reception of serials presenting women as happily domesticated the political scientist Neera Chandoke noted that the prime-time soap operas had undone the efforts of the feminist movement (Chandoke 2001). So since then Ekta

Kapoor has been challenged time and again but still she holds a strong position in the production of soap operas for Indian television.

For example, to compete and challenge the dominance of the K-soaps, Sony channel came up a new wave of soaps like *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* (JJKN) in 2003 (which was based on a Colombian TV presentation, *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*) and *Astitwa* whereas most of the K-bannered soaps are based on the *saas- bahu* saga and revolve around the kitchen politics, here the characters like Jassi and Simran were shown as women with talent who climbed the ladder of success through hard work and honesty. They were very traditional in their values and deeply attached to their families but at the same time they wanted to have their independent identity especially as professionally competent women. So it appeared like the right time to liberate women from the patriarchal social structure and give them a chance to achieve the highest goals in their life.

Jassi became a favourite of those viewers who were sick of watching the ideal *bahus* everyday and were waiting for change. They wanted to see a successful professional Indian woman on the screen and watched *JJKN* for a change. Most of the middle-class Indian parents, wishing their daughters to become economically independent with a successful professional career, saw Jassi as a role model for their daughters. Many young women also saw Jassi as their role model. But it did not last long.

3.3.4 The Jassi Mania did not last long but Simran still a Favourite

Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi (JJKN) started at the time when the TRPs of the *saas-bahu* soaps were very high. Some liked it but some were critical about these soaps. *JJKN* claimed

to be different than the *saas-bahu* soaps and was a hot favourite of many in the first few months. In that soap Jassi had an ugly look and audience waited to see her turning into a beautiful woman but after that it lost its charm. Though Jassi proved her talent time and again, she fell short of confidence. She was well aware of the fact that it was her looks or appearance which was her only draw back but she did not do anything to make herself more “presentable”. It looked as if her mother and grandmother had a better dressing sense than her. Everybody may not prefer to look glamorous but a line can be drawn between being glamorous and being presentable. Let us see the response of some Jassi fans who turned away from it after the make-over.

A middle-aged house-wife (Kannadiga from Gulbarga) likes both Tulsi and Jassi for different reasons and makes a comparison between the *saas-bahu* soaps and Jassi.

I like Tulsi a lot because she keeps the whole family together. She also tries to solve problems in the family and helps everyone in the family in maintaining a bond. Such people also exist in our society though their percentage is very low.

I liked Jassi a lot because that character was very different and very realistic. That serial was much different from these *saas-bahu* serials’ day-to-day fights. In it the character Jassi is an ordinary girl who has the courage to stand on her own feet and make such huge achievements in her life. In it we saw how an ordinary girl becomes a star because of her hard work and self-confidence, which is also possible in reality in any ordinary middle class girl’s life. I could relate to the story as I do have a daughter and I would like to see my daughter being successful in her life.

So all I can say is though these *saas-bahu* serials show some reality they exaggerate things a lot, whereas a serial like Jassi is more close to reality and can be much more inspiring for the young audience.

One can not deny that *JJKN* gave some space to women in the so called “public realm” of man. For the first time in the history of Indian soap operas, a non-glamorous woman was shown as possessing enormous potential to handle any problem in her professional life. It showed that a woman can maintain a proper balance between her personal life and career. *But at the same time it did not challenge*

the patriarchal social structure of Indian society. This story projected the foolishness of a girl who was widely acclaimed as a genius. Her intellect failed in front of her emotions and feelings. She became the biggest obstacle for her own success. This was certainly not what the audience was eagerly waiting for as a challenge to Ekta Kapoor's portrayal of Indian woman.

But a 40 year old Bengali housewife did not find Jassi much interesting when she turned into a supermodel because she could not believe that an ordinary middle-class girl could go so far.

I liked Jassi a lot. She was common girl who came up on her own. But later it became boring because they also started showing things quite similar to other soap operas. When she became a super model I could not relate to that character. I have a doubt whether a common lower-middle class girl can really go so far.

On the contrary, a young married working woman (Muslim woman from Maharashtra who is an Engineer) enjoyed watching the ugly Jassi turning into a glamorous super-model.

Jassi who was from a middle-class background achieves everything in her life due to her talent, hard work and honesty. I also liked it when Jassi went for a make-over and became a glamorous super-model. I think we should learn from that character that one should be presentable. Everyone is not beautiful but if we can become more attractive with some make-up then we should go for it. Who loves an ugly face? Even I would not marry an ugly man.

Such viewers hold back to the ideology that beauty is an important attribute especially for women and they have to put some effort to make themselves beautiful and attractive. This not only reflects a shift that has occurred in portraying women but at the same time 'they are being targeted not merely as consumers of goods but as desirers and active buyers of goods' (Chakravarti 2000: 13). Earlier women were

almost invariably used instrumentally to sell goods whereas now women are being targeted by the market directly (Ibid.).

This not only suggests a kind of patriarchal ideology where a woman's body is treated as the carrier of the identity of her personhood and individuality but also a market strategy which treats women as spectators and consumers in one go. 'Here the female spectator is invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal of female beauty' (Doane 1989, cited in Mankekar 1999: 90). A similar kind of ideology is reflected in the words of the young married working Muslim woman from Maharashtra discussed above when she says:

Seeing these old mothers-in-law in beautiful clothes and jewellery I feel that we should also maintain ourselves and we should also try to groom ourselves more than what we do normally. I also like to see these house-wives who always look glamorous. When I see them I do feel that I should also maintain myself like them.

In the final analysis, one does not see much difference in the underlying messages of these soaps (either *JJKN* or the K-soaps) as it is the patriarchal society which gains legitimacy through them.

Some of my respondents like to watch the happily domesticated and ever suffering ideal daughters-in-law in the soap operas which are running successfully on various channels, but they still remember the female protagonist Simran of *Astitwa*. While talking about this character, they compare her to their present favourite character and tell us why Simran was better and still a favourite.

A young Oriya housewife (who was a practising lawyer) likes Simran but she rejects characters like Tulsi and Parvati as very unrealistic.

Astitwa was my favorite because I liked the character of Dr. Simran in it. She was a doctor and was very dedicated towards her profession. She had married a man who was younger to her. I loved to see how she handled the difficult situations in her life.

Quite similarly a young Marwadi house-wife (who is basically from U.P. and is brought up in Mumbai) also likes Simran. She says,

I loved *Astitwa* and ...the character played by Niki Aneja was fabulous. When that serial started I was in standard 9th or 10th and I grew up with the serial. I learned so much from it. It really helped me in growing into a matured lady. It had a great impact on my thought process. She went for love marriage and later her husband left her for another woman. You should have seen how she talked to her husband. Every thing depends on how you say what you want to say. The way is very important. Anything can happen in anyone's life. But then we are not supposed to loose our temper as well as patience. And that is what I saw in that character. She handled things so nicely. Of course she got disturbed but then that did not stop her from being what she was.

Having discussed the soaps in the first few years of this decade let us now move on to more recent times. After the failure of *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi* the search for something different got intensified. New channels like NDTV Imagine, Colors and 9X came up. So there were more prime time slots to be filled with soap operas. To compete with the existing channels and established soaps they had to come up with something new, different and refreshing. In the following section we will see how there was a spurt in the number of new soap operas on different channels (both on the new and the older ones as well) and each one was claimed to be different than the *saas-bahu* serials.

3.3.5 The So-called Paradigm Shift

As the multiple cosmetic surgeries, innumerable marriages and generation-leaps became the order of the day, the *saas-bahu* sagas lost their impact. After the *Bahu*

(daughter-in-law), focus shifted to the *Beti* (daughter). Various satellite channels broke away from the *saas-bahu* sob stories and started telecasting serials on social issues. The *saas-bahu* sagas got replaced by the dusky daughters (who of course with time turned into brides) (*Saat Phere* and *Bidai*), child brides (*Balika Badhu*) and many other social issues addressing the girl child like female foeticide, widow remarriage, girl education, dowry harassment (*Mere Ghar Aayi Ek Nanhi Pari*, *Na Aana Is Des Laado*, *Uttaran*, *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo*, *Sabki Ladli Bebo*, *Radha Ki Betiyaan Kuchh Kar Dikhayengi*, *Bandhan Saat Janamon Ka* and so on). Initially it was claimed that these shows send a message that daughters are no more a liability for the family. Concept and story writers like Purnendu Shekhar (he has worked on *Astitwa*, *Saat Phere* and *Balika Badhu*) claimed that such shows make an impact on the viewers (Bansal 2008). Shobhna Desai (creative head and producer, Star TV) was quoted as saying ‘Studies show that these soaps not only create awareness, they also initiate changes at very small but significant levels’ (ibid.). Another senior creative director of Star TV Anupama Mandloi was quoted as saying ‘these programmes combine social values with commercial appeal in the competitive market’ (ibid.).

Some more production houses like Sphere Origin and Director’s Kut which are making successful soaps like *Saat Phere* and *Bidai* have attracted academic attention. Shoma Munshi in her book ‘*Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television*’ has incorporated the detailed interviews of the creative heads and other key members of three production houses: Balaji Telefilms, Sphere Origin and Director’s Kut and has also done a comparative analysis of the successful soap operas produced by them. The latter two production houses claim that they make soaps based on social issues. Sujoy Waddhwa (The head of Sphere Origin) told Munshi (2010: 145) that Saloni (a

dark skinned girl) ‘started off as an underdog, but see how she has come up in life ... now she has a perfect marriage, a good husband, a loving family’.

Similarly according to Rajan Sahi (the creative head of Director’s Kut), ‘*Bidaai* explores the fair/dark issue’. Here the dark skinned sister Ragini is not represented as suffering from an inferiority complex next to Sadhana, her fair and beautiful cousin. Ragini is shown to be smart, confident and relaxed. The two sisters love each other unconditionally’ (ibid: 146-149). So a girl’s fight against the discrimination she faces because of her dark skin becomes a talking point in the age of fairness creams.

Similarly one can see the soap operas presently being aired on *COLORS* are also issue based. *Balika Badhu* addresses issues like child marriage, pregnancy at young age and its negative impact on the health of women, maternal mortality due to inadequate information and lack of faith in the health system, child widows and their problems, marriage of poor young girls to men of their father’s age etc. It is somewhat interesting to see the way it is trying to educate people about the evils of these institutions and sending a message to reform the society. The old grand mother is shown as the agent of the evils of the traditional society whereas her younger son and his wife are shown as the agents of modernity who are trying to bring in the changes into their own family without bothering about the society. Though they are not succeeding in all their attempts but still they do not give up. *Na Ana Is Desh Lado* tells a story about female infanticide and how an educated woman can bring some change in her own society. But it’s important for such stories to be told in the right manner to create an impact.

Ninan (2008) says it was just a strategy to attract *small town women* as most of these stories were set in the interiors of Haryana, Bihar or Rajasthan. But its viewers were not restricted to small towns. So one wonders how they clicked with the viewers in the metros. Virendra Shahaney (the screenplay writer for the shows like *Bidai*, *Uttaran*, *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo*) explains ‘there are three ways of identifying with a character or a serial – identification, aspiration and distinction. Viewers could identify with the characters of *Malgudi Days*, *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad*. Then came the saga of business families, which rekindled the aspirations of urban middle-class viewers. Today, when somebody watches *Balika Badhu* or *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo* they are able to distinguish their position from that of the protagonist, but are inquisitive about what happens in such remote areas (Anonymous 2009).

Shoma Munshi (2010) argues in her book that soap operas are not just entertaining but also empowering women. She bases her conclusion partly on the empirical research done by Rober Jensen and Emily Oster (2008). In their paper Jensen and Oster explore the effect of the introduction of cable television in rural areas of India on a particular set of values and behaviours, namely attitudes towards and discrimination against women. Their analysis relies on a three year panel dataset covering women in five Indian states between 2001 and 2003 years which were a time of rapid growth in rural cable access. From their study they conclude that ‘the introduction of cable television improves the status of women: women report lower acceptability of spousal abuse, lower son preference, more autonomy and lower fertility. In addition, cable is associated with increases in school enrolments, perhaps itself an indicator of increased women's status and decision-making authority within the household’ (Jensen and

Oster 2008: 22). While discussing these empirical works Sevanti Ninan (2010) asks 'Is a country that favours such entertainment seriously ready for women's empowerment?' In the current political climate where the debate on Women's Reservation Bill is occupying the mindscape, these soap operas are nothing but a collective antithesis to any notion of empowerment. Looking at the popularity of these soaps and contradicting Munshi (2010), she thinks that women's empowerment can be the last thing in the minds of the viewers enjoying these soaps. She says 'Women's empowerment as debated in the political arena is about women stepping out of the confines of home and hearth to discover their potential. Indian soap operas are about tussles for power over home and hearth and their near resolution before any twists and turns appear' (Ninan 2010).

For a few months, audiences were convinced that the new crop of shows was a whiff of fresh air. But over a period of time, the story lines of most soap operas have taken bizarre twists in the tale. Women are increasingly being treated as doormats in the name of social relevance (Salvadore 2010). So at a time when promises of a new order were in place, everything seems to be getting dangerously regressive. But the industry people still believe that audience wants to see the same kind of drama (ibid.). Regular viewers of these soaps are quoted as saying that 'these shows start off on a serious note and once you begin to get interested, you find they end up on the same *saas-bahu* platform' (Bansal 2009). Another viewer, who is a doctor by profession says, 'Many of these shows distort medical and legal facts. The issues to be concentrated on are sidelined' (ibid.). Viewers feel that shows dealing with such serious issues like child marriage, racism, abortion, miscarriage, rape, widowhood and

even extramarital affairs should not take a neutral stand, otherwise it would amount to glorifying them (ibid.).

Producer Rajani Shahi agrees that the relevance of 'social shows' have now become questionable. He says actually the shows that pretend to be socially relevant confuse the audience (Salvadore 2010). Moving ahead he suggests 'the family sagas will remain the same, so all we need to do is find a new texture to evolve from there' (ibid.). In fact this is what the producers of these shows have been doing since long, i.e. packaging the old wine in new bottles. But not everyone agrees that serious issues are being mishandled by these serial makers. For example, Purnendu Shekhar (the concept and story writer of *Balika Badhu*) says that 'We are not romanticizing issues. However, we can not get preachy or bring about social change. But recently in Rajasthan when a 12 year old girl was married off to a 35 year old man, people got together and annulled the marriage. This is the impact of *Balika Badhu*' he claims (Bansal 2009). For Ninan (2010) and others like her, TV script writers do not seem like the right kind of change agents but ultimately looking at the popularity and wide appeal of the soaps she submit to them saying that 'May be the writers and producers of these tortuous sagas understand their viewers better than journalists do...'.

Women and minorities of a Third-World country like India are the worst victims of all the changes that have taken place in the media and the corporate world. For instance, when the latest UNICEF report says that 40 percent of the world's child marriages take place in India, resulting in a vicious cycle of gender discrimination, illiteracy and high infant and maternal mortality rates, Indian television shows the child bride Anandi (In *Balika Badhu*) busy in impressing her in-laws. The ways in which these

sensitive stories are developed their moral values take a back seat. The social issues get pushed to the background as the stories ultimately move into kitchen politics like the usual *saas-bahu* soaps. The directors, producers, story and script writers try to justify these things in the name of the audience. But there is rarely any attempt to know what the audience really want and deserve. Academicians like Shoma Munshi have also relied on the TRPs to understand the audience. But audiences are not homogeneous entity and are too complicated to understand through studies based on surveys or quantitative research. The present study explores how audiences critically analyse what they watch and react towards them.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the changing face of Indian television since its commencement. The education fare has got completely replaced with pure entertainment. Women were initially targeted by the state as the catalysts of national development but have now been turned into the target audience of the commodity market. Though time and again claims are being made with respect to proper representation of women, none have stood by them so far. The various committees of the Indian government and their reports with respect to the portrayal of various issues in a proper manner, especially women and minorities could not yield much positive result. Their impact on the content of the television programmes was insignificant and short-lived. With the shift of power to the hands of the market, things have degraded further. Though various studies have tried to prove that the effect of the transnational television is not as dangerous as it was expected to be but no one can deny that with their arrival the content of the television programmes have been transformed

drastically. Now it is no more about disseminating developmental messages but profit has become the ultimate aim of all the programmes.

In spite of various criticisms labelled against the way women have been constructed in the popular serials and soap operas on Indian television by various scholars, here we see that audiences find some of them very strong and hence inspiring. Their reading differs from the academicians both when it comes to serials on Doordarshan and soap operas on private channels. This is the reason why the present study examines the popular soap operas through the perspectives of the audiences.

Having discussed the development of television in India and its changing features in this chapter the following chapters focus on the audience interpretation of their favourite soap operas and their characters.

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CHAPTER-IV

Family, Marriage, Property: Audience Response

Chapter - 4

Family, Marriage, Property: Audience Response

Marriage and family are complementary to each other and are considered to be the foundation of any society. There is a vast body of literature available in anthropology and sociology which discusses widely about these institutions and their types. One can notice difference in the way people live, their marriage preferences and practices in a specific geographical territory based on their religious, caste and class affiliations. In a pluralistic country like India these differences are easily noticed even in a small town. Thus, it is a challenge for any form of popular culture in India to present a holistic picture of how these institutions function, for which they need to address the audiences belonging to different regional, religious, caste and class backgrounds. As the soap operas heavily rely on these institutions for their content, it becomes interesting to see how they construct them and how the audiences respond to these constructions.

Through this chapter (which is the first of the fieldwork based chapters) we are going to see how soap opera quite like the other forms of popular culture in India, attempt to depict the institutions like family and marriage in a very conventional manner. But, unlike other forms of popular culture, especially films, it enables the audience with moments of ruptures and allows them to look for a change. In order to do this we will examine the literature on family and marriage specific to the Indian sub-continent, how they are constructed by the popular culture industries for audience who are presumed to be homogeneous and most importantly how they get decoded by the audiences which is too complicated to be standardized in reality.

4.1 Indian Family System: A Critical Overview

In order to talk about family as a unit of analysis in the Indian context one needs to focus discussion on joint family and nuclear family. Joint family which is often considered to be very distinctive about Indian family system in colonial perceptions ‘was first given systematic shape in the writings of Sir Henry Maine, who believed that he had discovered in India a living example of the patriarchal family of ancient times’ (Uberoi 1994: 31). While talking about industrialization, urbanization and modernization of Indian society it was presumed that the joint family system was going through drastic transformation and was getting replaced by nuclear family as a household unit. But this assumption was challenged by A. M. Shah (1973) in his pioneering work *The Household Dimensions of the Family in India*.

Shah (1973, 1996) makes it clear that the household pattern in India was never homogeneous or constant. He says, ‘The data [regarding the numerical composition of households from 1819 to 1950] do not support the general belief that all Indians lived in large households in pre-modern times... Both macro and micro data regarding the average size of household for last more than 100 years indicate that the average household in the pre-modern times was small therefore nuclear’ (Shah 1996: 537-39).

He makes clear through his analysis that ‘both nuclear and joint households prevailed in the past and the widespread belief that all Indians lived in joint households by custom of the country in the past is totally false’ (1996: 538). Hence he argues, ‘There is no reason to assume that all Indians lived in joint households in the past, or even that the idea of living in a joint household exercised a dominating influence in the entire Indian society’ (ibid: 540).

Quite contrary to the general belief that joint family was more of a rural phenomenon, Shah (1973) asserts that it had a strong hold in the town and to be more specific among the sanskritised upper castes and upper classes. To make his point clear he says, ‘...in traditional Indian society there has been a greater incidence of joint households in the wealthier classes than among the poor. Sometimes it is even argued that the greater emphasis on joint residence in higher castes is due to their being richer than the lower castes, and not due to their higher ritual status or higher degree of sanskritisation’ (1973: 170).

But, nothing is constant and, with external factors like industrialisation and globalisation, the trend of migration has changed over the period which has also affected the household units among the urban educated, upper caste, middle-class and to some extent the upper class as well. Shah summarizes this changing trend in the following words: ‘There is one section of urban society, particularly in metropolitan cities, composed mainly of upper castes and middle and professional classes, among whom the institution of joint household was strong in the past and is now becoming weak’ (1996: 540).

He also mentions that others who were not a part of this sanskritized group (whom he calls ‘masses’) prefer to go for joint households. Hence joint family continues to be an empirically significant household type which, contrary to popular perceptions, is not conspicuously in a state of disintegration, whereas nuclear families remain as the predominant family form in India (Uberoi 2006: 24).

The whole discussion makes one thing clear that the tension between nuclear family and joint family as the predominant form of household is quite an old one and even though nuclear families always outnumber joint families, joint families are still the preferred form of household especially in central and northern regions of India compared to the south (Uberoi 2006: 23).

The Hindi soap operas on National channels always show north Indian upper-caste, upper-class families, they show joint family which is quite expected. As discussed earlier we found that with globalization and liberalization of Indian economy, the bond of joint family is getting weaker among the upper castes and middle and professional classes of urban society, particularly in metropolitan cities. So the joint family is “exploding” (at least in a particular section of the society) and paralleling this explosion there has been a resurgence of interest in a kind of melodrama in television soap operas which revolves around the joint families (Stratton and Ang 1996 [1994]). One of my young middle-middle class male respondents from Bihar pointed out that:

Now-a-days we rarely get to see a joint family in our society. That tradition is fading. The only communities which prefer to live in joint families are Marwadis and Gujaratis. You can notice that all these soaps where they show big joint families are all Gujrati and Marwadi families. These communities are mainly business class families and these soap operas mainly focus on them and not the working class families like us.

Conforming to him a middle aged upper-middle class Muslim woman from U.P. said,

...these days who lives in a joint family? You see in this whole apartment building you will only find husband and wife living with one or two kids. You may find them in villages but there also you will find them living in one house but having separate kitchen.

One can find these respondents did not agree with what A. M. Shah mentioned about joint family. M. N. Srinivas makes an interesting observation while introducing the work of A. M. Shah. He says that, 'Educated Indians do not derive their idea of the joint family entirely from what they see and experience. On the contrary, and surprising as it may seem, what they see and experience is influenced by moral norms derived from epics, folk tales, and bits and pieces of Hindu law filtering through newspapers and litigious friends, neighbours, and relatives' (cited in Shah 1973: ix-x).

So, if one considers the epics and folk tales as different forms of popular culture which served the same purpose for the masses, i.e. the construction of 'collective fantasy', before the arrival of popular media, then one can say that now it is the popular media which influences an individual's understanding of the reality. So, the discourse of soap operas, the context of consumption along with the personal life experience of the audience constructs the whole idea of joint family. What popular culture always tries to construct is a 'realistic illusion'. But that gets done differently in different popular genres, for example between films and soap operas, and that is what we are going to see in the discussion that follows before getting into a detailed discussion about what all factors contribute in the audiences' understanding or in other words how audiences make sense of the soap opera text.

4.2 Construction of Joint Family in the Popular Media

Uberoi (2006) in her analysis of a popular Hindi film (*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* [HAHK]) points out how the major strains which carry the potential to break the joint family structure were systematically eradicated in *HAHK* either by showing ideal-typical characters or by the simple erasure of few characters/members in the family.

For example, by showing the mother-in-law as dead, the film could do away with tension that usually prevails between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Indian families. This helps in the construction of a perfectly happy family which Bharucha terms as “Barjatya’s utopia in Bollywood” where ‘all relatives are nice and brothers and sisters love each other... There is no illegitimate or dishonoured or discarded sibling from another generation hovering in the shadow’ (1995: 802). *HAHK* was followed by another successful venture by Barjatya, i.e. *Hum Saath Saath Hain* where he applied the same formula and managed to re-establish the strength of joint household in the minds of Indian audiences. This proved that the idea of joint family works well in the market and hence was picked by another popular genre, i.e. soap operas. One of my respondents calls it a successful formula adopted from the blockbuster Bollywood movies of Suraj Barjatya.

This trend of joint family started with Suraj Barjatya’s film *Hum Saath Saath Hain*. That film was a big hit and since then the trend is followed by these soap operas. The film showcased joint family, Indian culture, the ideal Indian bahu (daughter-in-law) and it appealed to the audience. So the serials started catering to the market’s demand. Now all the Indian channels are accessible globally. So I think they are trying to showcase Indian culture and lifestyle to the audience around the world.

She felt that soap operas have followed a popular trend set by the Hindi film industry. But, what makes the whole thing interesting is that joint families as shown in soap operas are very different from the Barjatya’s joint family. Though the soap operas also show ideal typical characters in the joint families who are always ready to sacrifice their personal interest for others but unlike the Hindi film they focus and often exaggerate the tensions between members of the family. These tensions get supplemented with external threats as well. So, even though one gets to see ideal characters, the families are chaotic. As Ang points out, ‘Family life is not actually

romanticized in soap operas; on the contrary, the imaginary ideal of the family as safe haven in a heartless world is constantly shattered' (1985: 69) .

Quite contrary to the utopian family that was constructed by Barjatya, the soap operas always deal of difficult family situations where the conflictual relations between family members give rise to tensions, crises and emotional outbursts time and again (Ang 1985: 68). What they focus more is on the constant tension among its family member like parents-children, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, between sisters-in-law, husband-wife, and between siblings, and the flimsiness of the very structure of the joint family keeps the interest on. This is where soap operas break away from others, especially popular films in their presentation of the joint family. Furthermore one can say that '... one of the central problematics of soap operas as a genre, as well as its popularity and success, may be found in the way in which it upholds, against all odds, the ideal of the family' (Stratton and Ang 1996 [1994]: 613). And hence it becomes 'important to recognize that soap operas serve to affirm the primacy of the family not by presenting an ideal family, but by portraying a family in constant turmoil and appealing to the spectator to be understanding and tolerant of the many evils which go on within that family' (Modleski 1996 [1984]: 585). In the following discussion we will see how the respondents have reflected on this change in the joint family in reality where the happy joint family has become past and chaos is the ruling principle. But, irrespective of everything the spirit of joint family still survives among my respondents.

4.2.1 Joint Families in Soap Operas

The Hindi soap operas (on various National Channels) show joint families where two-three (sometimes more) generations live together. They all eat together, help each other in need, and celebrate all the functions together. But things do not end with these good things. The soap operas always show some family tensions within member. Sometimes they show the daughters-in-law trying to break away from the families, but ultimately the tension gets resolved and peace is restored till another set of problems begins. These things forces one to think about the Indian joint family system.

During my conversation with the audience of soap operas when I threw the words ‘Joint Family in the soap operas’, the responses varied according to people’s personal experience, what they get to see in their surrounding, as well as from the experience that they have gained through television. Some of my respondents tried to explain me the logic behind showing these joint families in the soap operas. Some of them got into their past experience and said that they got nostalgic when they watched these things, whereas some others talked about their horrific experience in the joint family and said they liked to watch them on television but would never like to go for it again in their real life. Some others talked about the impact of these onscreen joint families on the real life of the audiences.

For example, one of my respondents, a middle aged Muslim woman from U.P. said that these days no one prefers to live in a joint family and the soap operas show them because they can show so many characters and by the help of these characters more

number of sub-plots could be created. Hence, it is nothing but a strategy to hold on the story for longer time.

They show joint families because then only then can stretch things for years. If they will show a nuclear family like mine then how many episodes they will be able to make? What can they show in a small family?

On the other hand, a young married Hindu man from Bihar feels Indians always glorify the joint family system though they rarely go for it.

It looks nice to see these joint families on screen and that is why people are watching them so anxiously but the fact is no one loves to live in a joint family like that. Though we have started living in nuclear families but we still like to glorify the concept of joint family. In Indian society no one will ever talk against joint families, no one will talk against living with old parents, respecting them and taking care of them.

From these entire responses one can say that Audience love to watch something on screen which they can not manage in their day-to-day life. This is also a reason why joint families in soap operas have become a popular theme. This is what Richard Dyer also argued while talking about entertainment and utopia. He says, 'Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized' (Dyer 1993: 273).

There were respondents who have lived in joint families in past. According to them, they find the soap operas very realistic and miss/hate their families when they watch these soap operas and there are those who are very critical about the way joint families are portrayed in soap operas irrespective of the kind of family (joint family/nuclear family) they are living in.

4.2.2 Very Realistic

Men who are born and brought up in joint families not only feel nostalgic when they see joint families in the soaps but claim them to be very realistic. They also claim that they can relate to them in their day-to-day life.

For example, a young unmarried middle-middle class Oriya man said that he loves to watch these joint families as he himself was born and brought up in one like that. He claimed that he got good lessons from these soap operas which would help him in future and guide him for managing his own family.

I was born and brought up in a joint family. Hence I can relate to these soap opera stories and characters. I love to see the soap opera characters living together irrespective of all the adverse conditions. The negative aspects that are shown in the soaps are a part of real life and what is important is how to deal with such people or situations. It happens in every family that some people always create tension in the lives of others. In my family my paternal aunties do that (he laughs). So when I see these soap operas I get lessons like how to respond to an elderly person when she is hurting me or my sister or mother.

A middle-aged middle-middle class Kannadiga Muslim man (who is also born and brought up in a joint family) came up with a very similar interpretation.

I was born and brought up in a joint family. At times I can relate the plots of the soaps to my childhood and my struggling days. When I see someone struggling it reminds me about my life some twenty years back. Here we live in a nuclear family but many of our close relatives live in the same building where we live. So, though we do not have a common kitchen, we are like a joint family. We celebrate all the functions and festivals together. Another advantage is... I feel safe that my family is not alone... This is the reason why I enjoy the soaps and can relate to them.

Unlike previous case here the spirit of joint family still exists though people do not live together. Both of these men enjoy their memories in the joint families in past as well as in the present and hence enjoy watching them in the soap operas as they can relate to them. But, there are women viewers, who have a different kind of reading of

the text or to be specific of the joint families in the soaps. They like the joint families on screen but prefer to live in their small nuclear family.

A young upper-middle class house-wife from Kanpur finds the joint families in soap operas very realistic but in a different way. She says that even though she was brought up in a joint family, she loves being in a nuclear family.

I have stayed in a joint family; in fact I have a huge joint family. Both my father's as well as my husband's families are joint families. Actually I was so much irritated of staying in joint families that I used pray to god that please get me married soon so that I will live on my own in a nuclear family. I am not very emotional so I do not miss my family even when I see such families on TV.

She feels that soap operas are showing a real picture of the joint family in the present society. At present, joint families have become very chaotic and hence difficult to maintain. This is the reason why they are breaking very fast.

What is the present status of the joint families that they are showing? You see they are so chaotic. What they are showing is true. Earlier everybody used to stay in joint family; there was mutual understanding, happiness, and peace among the family members. But these days there is no element of happiness left in it. They are fighting like anything. Hence the joint family is gradually breaking down. Sometimes the spirit of joint family breaks though the members still continue to live under one roof, and sometimes they disperse and the house gets divided among the members.

So, this woman justifies the chaotic and negative image of joint families in the soap operas as realistic and the happy joint families as a thing of past. Here one can see how the soap opera viewer's interpretation does not vary much from the viewers of film as Uberoi quotes one of her respondent emphasizing that 'the film shows domestic rituals and family relationships as they once *were* and as they *should be*, but not as they currently are in a degenerate world' (2006: 153).

Similarly a young upper-middle class Oriya house-wife also prefers nuclear family as her experience in the joint family has not turned out to be satisfactory.

I am happy with my nuclear family. My in-laws visit us every year and we also visit them. My in-laws have never given me any affection, so I too do not feel much attached to them. My in-laws have never ill-treated me but they just want daughter-in-laws who will work for them, serve them unconditionally and will never ask for anything in return. But that is not possible. Things can not be one sided. One can not keep demanding without giving anything in return.

She does not prefer joint family as she feels that it demands a lot from the daughter-in-law and those demands are one sided. So, for both of these women the chaotic and over-demanding joint-families can never be a better alternative than their present nuclear families. Hence their reading of the joint families in soap operas are just the opposite of the men we have discussed above.

Here middle-middle class men and upper-middle class women belong two different categories when it comes to their interpretation of the joint families in soap operas and in their personal life. For men joint families in the soaps are realistic in a positive sense, whereas for women, they are realistic in quite an opposite way. This set of interpretive communities is formed on the basis of gender and not religion or region. But, there is another set of viewers for whom the ideal joint family is no more a practical reality. It has turned into a beautiful past memory and it is their nostalgia which keeps them hooked to the soap operas.

4.2.3 Nostalgia and/or a Need

While talking about *HAHK* Uberoi says ‘the outcome is a highly satisfying and nostalgic fantasy of ideal family life, a mediation of desire and reality which almost, but not completely, succeeds in erasing the unpleasant truth of practical experience’

(2006: 159). One of the viewers she interviewed calls it ‘an ideal nostalgic world’ (ibid.). Soap operas also provide the similar pleasure to viewers who have lived in a joint family in the past and are still longing for one but are forced to opt for a nuclear family because of certain circumstances.

As the joint families in soap operas are full of tensions and contradictions (unlike the ideal families in some films) the interpretations also vary from audience to audience. Men feel nostalgic whereas women identify the use that the joint families have in day-to-day life. For women, the practical needs that can be fulfilled by living in a joint family become more important than just the emotional ones.

For example, a 35 year old upper-middle class Oriya man said he used to watch these Ekta Kapoor’s soap operas very regularly because he used to see himself and his family in the soaps and their characters.

I still miss my joint family in which I was born and brought up. That is why those soap operas had attracted me so much as they appealed to my heart. They were all family dramas and stories were based on joint families and here I was all alone far away from my own family. Today also I feel the same way...

Another middle-middle class Oriya man in his late twenties also gets nostalgic when he watches these soap operas.

When the serial is good then I think of my family. I grew up in a joint family because my grandparents were living with us. I am very close to my cousins and I always miss them. The whole family comes together whenever there is a need or there is a function. If I get a good opportunity then I will definitely go back to my native place. I do have a desire to go back and live with my own people and get associated with my family once again.

Both of them can see a reflection of their families in the soap operas and imagine themselves as a part of the soap opera families. They miss their families when they

watch them on screen and feel like going back to their places of origin. What's common about these two respondents is they both are men who are around thirty years old and who have migrated from their home states in search of better job opportunities and hence are staying away from their parents and other family members. For them soap operas are providing a utopian solution of 'Community' against the *Inadequacy* which has resulted from the 'Fragmentation' of joint family (Dyer 1993). Or it can also be said that the soap operas provide some kind of pleasure to their viewers through, what Modleski (1996 [1984]) calls 'collective fantasy', 'a fantasy of a fully self-sufficient family' which is the direct opposite of the isolated nuclear family of the spectator.

My women respondents said that they like joint families and enjoy watching them in soap operas. Whereas they remembered their joint families in the past, did so not just out of nostalgia but they always talked about the functional aspect of it for which they missed it. For them joint family is good because it fulfils certain needs which the nuclear families can not. For example, a young middle-middle class house-wife from U.P. says,

I was born and brought up in a joint family. Our family is together for last seven generations. I like joint families a lot. Because when I am alone and I fall ill then there is no one to get me glass of water also. In joint families there might be some wicked people but I can at least expect some small helps from them. When I see these joint families in the soap operas I miss my family a lot.

Quite similarly a middle-aged upper-middle class Muslim house-wife misses a joint family as she longs for some emotional support when she is depressed.

I love to see the joint families in the soap operas, because I have lost my parents as well as my in-laws. When we live together in a joint family then we can share our happiness and sorrows. We can divide the work and when someone goes out for work and someone else can take care of the children at home. See now I am living alone. I can not share my problems with anyone.

Even when I get upset due to some family problem, I can not tell anyone. Sometimes I feel very depressed. But we can easily share these emotions when we live with our own people.

So, for these two women who are from different age, religion, region and class backgrounds, joint families are better than nuclear families as they can share their responsibilities as well as emotions with other family members.

Quite interestingly my women respondents (both with and without any prior experience of joint family) who are highly qualified and are working or are willing to work in future, place joint family above nuclear family because for them joint family can provide them support to go out and work without disturbing their family. Here there is no nostalgia attached to the institution. It is just the functional aspect of it which becomes dominant.

For example, a 29 year old middle-middle class, married, working woman from Orissa lives with her husband but prefers joint family because:

I think people in our generation do not prefer to live in joint families. If I would have got a job somewhere near my hometown, I would have preferred to stay with my in-laws. In that case when I go to work, my mother-in law would have been there to take care of kids, or to cook or to help me. I could have also been there to take care of her. I think joint family is better option then living alone, but in the modern era it does not exist. Joint family is a better option provided all the family members are good, and there is nobody like Kaveri and Urvasi (she laughs).

A young, newly married upper-middle class Muslim woman (highly qualified but presently at home) from Karnataka, also gives a very similar explanation and also gives an example of from her personal life. She says,

These soap operas are trying to show us the advantages of living in a joint family. Men go out for work and women are left alone to take care of themselves and children. When we live in a joint family, we do not have to

worry for everything and elders will be there to guide us... Once we have children it becomes difficult to manage everything alone and we cannot leave them and go for work also. My sister ... has two children. She has got a job as a lecturer. So my parents have gone to her place and living with her and she is working. Otherwise she cannot go for it... So if one is willing to work then joint family is a very good option, otherwise also it has lots of advantage. Joint families also have problems but the soap operas exaggerate them a lot. (Safina)

It goes against the general notion that educated, independent women do not prefer to go for joint families. On the contrary, they feel joint family can provide support to them and their family. But, this kind of belief is not specific to educated independent women. Women, who are less educated and stay at home, also look up to this functional aspect of the joint families. For instance, Safina's sister-in-law (an undergraduate house-wife) who was also there during the discussion also added to it by giving illustration from her own life.

In today's society and in this city environment, it is good for us as well as our children to live in a joint family. Our responsibilities are less in joint family and children not only learn from parents but also from other elderly members. They learn how to share things with others and have friends to play with at home. You see, my daughter must be playing with her cousins when I am here with my mother.

If we just take a look at the profile of all these women respondents then we can say that their region, religion, class and educational/professional background hardly makes any difference in their understanding of joint family both in the soap operas as well as their personal life. These women differ from the women discussed in the previous section, because none of them had a bitter experience in a joint family in past. That is why they miss it and long for it.

So, women emerge as a complicated category when it comes to their interpretation of joint families in the soap operas. Their interpretation varies according to their past

experience as well as present needs. The repetitive portrayal of joint families in soap operas can not undo the horrific experience in real life. Whereas men still dream of a joint family and these soap operas have furthered their imagination and longing for it. Audience miss it but then not everyone wants to go for it. They love to watch what they do not have but it is not necessary that they want to follow what they watch. Sometimes the audiences get tempted watching the happy families in the soaps but the next moment when they see tensions and contradictions both in the soaps as well in their personal life they feel safe and satisfied in their nuclear family. One can say that soap operas, quite unlike the films, do not propagate a utopian joint family. In fact, some of the viewers claim that their nuclear families are much better than the joint families in the soap operas. In the following section we will see how the interpretation of this particular institution changes with time and with the changing situations in the life of the viewer.

4.2.4 The Shifting Interpretation

Here we will see how an individual understands of an institution and their perception is not static. It changes over time with the situations that one goes through and experience that one gains from those situations. Here we will analyze the response of a man and a woman respondent, the way they interpret the joint families in soap operas and in their real life and how it has changed over time due to various circumstances. In other words 'people constitute themselves quite differently as audience members at different times' (Fiske 1996 [1989]: 536).

A young (24 year old) middle-middle class house-wife from Bihar (Sonam) said that *when she was not married* she liked to see the joint families in the soap operas and always wanted to go for it.

I liked to see the joint families in the soap operas. They reminded us about our responsibility towards other family members, especially towards our parents and in-laws. They reminded a son about his responsibility towards his parents and a daughter-in-law about her responsibility towards her in-laws.

But, after her marriage she had a horrific experience with her in-laws and now she is satisfied in her nuclear family.

Before my marriage I had an idea that I can adjust in a joint family but now I realize that I cannot adjust in a joint family. Right now I will prefer to live with my husband and my baby, because in my family they always ill-treat women. I have to follow the instructions of my mother-in-law or husband. I have to do all the domestic work. I am not allowed to think of anything good for my own parents. But at the same time they take special care of their daughter. When both of us were in the same condition, we were treated differently.

For Sonam an ideal joint family should have a strong and impartial head (may be one like Tulsi or Parvati).

A joint family is a good idea only when all its members are good, and it needs a good, impartial and responsible head. I do not like families where judgments are favoured towards one member, for example whatever the son says is good and whatever the daughter-in-law says or does is wrong, or whatever the mother says is good and whatever the wife says is wrong.

Here it will be very interesting to take a look at Sonam's favourite character and why she is her favourite.

Tulsi was my favourite because she was a perfect lady. She was perfect in every role that she played in the family. She was not only a good daughter but also a good daughter-in-law, not only a good mother but also a good mother-in-law. She never supported her son blindly. She was very impartial while giving judgments.

So, somewhere in her mind she expected a mother-in-law like Tulsi who would be good and impartial. But, as she did not get that in her life she is no more interested in a joint family. It shows that the dreams and expectations of an unmarried woman were shattered because of the ugly reality that she faced after her marriage. So, her understanding of a joint family as an unmarried and a married woman are completely opposite and this has a great impact on her reading of the soap opera text as well.

In another case a 35 year old upper-middle class man from Orissa (Rajesh) said he used to watch these Ekta Kapoor's soap operas very regularly before marriage because he used to see himself and his family in the soaps and their characters.

I still miss my joint family in which I am born and brought up. That is why those soap operas had attracted me so much as they appealed to my heart. They were all family dramas and stories were based on joint families and here I was all alone far away from my own family. Today also I feel the same way... When I watched this stuff I compare them with my life and my family. Whenever ... they showed something emotional I put my family in that place and imagined those things happening in my family.

After marriage he started analyzing the text more critically. Here he specifically mentions the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and makes a comparison between the reel life and real life situations. He said,

They show the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter so beautifully. But I do not see any woman in reality who will love to live with her mother-in-law after having so many problems. In fact I have hardly seen a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law having such good understanding between them...

He gets into this kind of conclusion because things have not worked out well in his personal life.

I do expect that my mother and my wife should maintain a relationship like that. But that is not happening. It is not at all possible that mother-in-law and daughter-in-law will think alike and live harmoniously. They show these things to attract their audience and we watch them because we are all idiots.

(He laughs) Yes now I realize that I was a big idiot and I think now I have become better and that is why I do not love them anymore.

He moves ahead and attempts to find out the problem behind the reel life and real life as well as between past and present. Ultimately he puts the blame on the changing attitude of women.

When I was young, we were staying in a joint family. At that time women were different. They were homely, used to respect elders. Now they have changed so much. There is a drastic change in their attitude which I fail to understand.

So, for this particular viewer, the homely, docile housewives of the past who are still present in soap opera texts have changed in reality as a result of which the joint family is going through a drastic change. Like Sonam, Rajesh's interpretation of soap opera texts have changed because quite similar to hers, his expectations are also not fulfilled in reality. From this, one can conclude that there is no fixed reading of a text by a viewer as it changes with time and circumstances in the real life. This set of examples also shows that audience interpretation need not differ with respect to their gender.

4.2.5 The Ironical Viewers of the onscreen Joint Families

Some of my respondents who live in joint families or have seen them in their neighbourhood critically observe the way they are portrayed in soap operas. Ien Ang explains that 'an important element of this ironical viewing attitude is the supplying of commentary' (Ang 1985: 97). She continues, 'According to Michel Foucault commentary is a type of discourse that has the aim of dominating the object: by supplying commentary to something one affirms a superior relation to the object' (ibid: 97). In the present context viewers assert their knowledge about the society in

which they live, over the texts of soap operas and analyze the negative influence of the soaps on the society, especially with respect to the changing family structure.

An old Marwadi woman who lives in a joint family criticizes the way joint families are shown in the soap operas. She said,

I do not understand how they are showing married daughters living together with their parents. Such things do not happen in our families. Sisters come to live with their brothers only when they are in trouble. Otherwise they live with their in-laws... What they are showing in the serials is wrong.

A married daughter living with her parents or brothers is an unusual thing. But, soap operas often show it as if this is a common practice. This is deviation from the normal practice and does not go unnoticed by the audience as other viewers also point out the same thing. A young Bengali woman said,

I do not understand why these soap operas show married girls living with their parents. In *Betiyaan* all the four daughters are living with their parents. Three of them are married but they are in their father's house with their husbands. I find it absurd. Even if they do not want to live with their in-laws, they can go for a nuclear family. This is something very unnatural in the soaps.

These observations by the audiences makes it clear that though they love to watch these soap operas and the big families in them, they compare it with the real families and object to any kind of deviation. Deviations and changes can not be easily incorporated into this age old institution. What is more interesting to notice is, it is not just the older generation who object to this change. As we see, young women in their late twenties and early thirties raise questions over this new dimension of joint family. For example, a similar objection was raised by a young married Muslim woman who claimed that these soap operas were distorting the image of joint families and was already having a negative impact on our society. According to her:

...these soaps show that guests come to the family and start staying as family members. This is so unrealistic. In reality only close relatives come and stay for a few days, but in the soaps even strangers come and stay as family members. In the soaps they show that girls get married but they come back and start living in their parents' family. So, the girls who are watching these soaps are thinking that what these soaps are showing is normal. Such things have also started happening in our society. (Ziya)

So, married women living with their parents has been questioned by these women and Ziya (a young married Muslim woman) even confirmed that such things have started happening in our society with nothing but a negative impact of these soap operas.

I know some three-four girls who are my relatives, who got married but have come to stay with their parents as their husbands have gone to middle-east for work. Few years back these things were unthinkable. Even when the husbands used to go abroad, women had to stay with their in-laws. They used to visit their parents' house for some days. But they never used to come and stay with them till the husband returned. But now-a-days girls have started coming back to their parents' family when the husband is absent. Such things should not happen.

All these women respondents read the text quite differently from those we discussed earlier. These women who differ in age, religious and regional background, critically analyze the way soap operas construct joint families. Taking up Stuart Hall's formulation, these women can be labelled as oppositional readers of the text as they totally stay away from the dominant code of reading. For these women it is not the nostalgia or need which holds importance, rather it is the change that draws their attention. They object to the deviations because they feel that it can have a negative impact on the joint family system. If married daughters start living with their parents then one will have to rethink about the very definition of joint family in the first place and this will also make a difference to the way property issues are handled in our society. In addition to this it will challenge the way women are treated in our society, i.e. as 'the outsiders, taking on the family name but potentially threatening the family both when they enter it (through marriage) and when they leave (by divorce)'

(Munshi 2010: 168). We are going to deal with this aspect in more detail in the following sections.

But, before that I am going to discuss another important institution, i.e. marriage and the way issues like marriage, divorce, remarriage and especially widow remarriage are being dealt in soap operas and how audience perceive what they watch on screen. We are also going to have a look at the element of resistance as well as change with respect to the institution within the text and the understanding and reaction of audiences towards this.

4.3 Changes in Expectations from Marriage

When someone discusses about marriage in the texts of our popular culture like films and soap operas it apparently means the Hindu marriage. As Hindus are the dominant community we can clearly see their rituals dominate the popular culture. Be it a blockbuster Hindi film or the long running soap operas, whenever we see a marriage, mostly it is a Hindu marriage with all the rituals being followed very elaborately. In order to understand how this institution and its various dimensions get constructed in the popular culture (specifically soap operas) and how changes get incorporated into it slowly but surely and how audience interpret them, it becomes important to have a picture of how things are working out in reality.

Among Hindus, marriage is a sacrament; a sacred bond between the husband and wife which even death cannot break. According to traditional Hindu belief, marital bond is inseparable and irrevocable. Unlike the western marriage system which is more of a contract, marriage is a religious duty for Hindus. As Kapadia (1966) pointed out, the

main aims of Hindu marriage are: '*dharma*' (the fulfilment of one's religious duty), '*praja*' (progeny) and '*rati*' (pleasure) and out of these three, dharma is given the first place and pleasure comes at the end. But, with time it has undergone changes and it no more remains unbreakable as there are legislations which allow Hindu couples to go for divorce and also remarriage.

In India marriages are structured within families. According to Steve Derne (2005) 'most Indians want love to follow from duty rather than the specialness of the beloved and expect that love should be extended to many in the family, while remaining subordinate to the fear of elders' (cited in Munshi 2010: 167). It is different from the western system as the 'ideology of the patrilineal joint family privileges the *lineal* relation of parent(s) and son over the *conjugal* relation of husband and wife' (Uberoi 2006: 30). The lure of conjugal intimacy is both feared as a disruptive force, and intensely desired, especially by young women. 'This is the root of the tension between *dharma*- moral code- and *desire*' (ibid.). In other words unlike the western system, in Indian society marriage is projected as a union between families instead of individual self-fulfillment. Hence arranged marriage remains the rule and 'despite changing lifestyles, the ideas of romantic love and courtship continue to provoke a great deal of public anxiety' (ibid: 25). But, still as Sudhir Kakar (2009) says 'Today, slowly but surely, the middle-class woman is pursuing the Indian family towards a greater acknowledgement... of the importance of marital bond'. So, he considers middle-class Indian women as the driving force behind changes taking place in many areas of social life including marriage. Higher education of the girls/women and their increasing contribution in the family income has resulted into higher self-esteem and the potential for self assertion among women in the present society. As a result of this

‘women today feel more entitled and are more vocal in their demand for a universal promise of marriage: intimacy, a couple’s mutual enhancement of experience beyond procreative obligations and social duties...’ (ibid.).

4.3.1 Divorce and Remarriage: Society in a Phase of Transition

Few decades back breaking the bond of marriage was out of question, or at least so for women. But, things have started to change. With education and independence ‘women have started asserting their legitimate equal status in the family, refusing to be subordinated by their husbands for life as their grandmothers used to be’ (Mahapatra 2008). ‘While economic independence at the top end of the social strata is seen as motivator for women to opt out of bad marriage, at the lower end, it is the increased awareness of their rights, especially when confronted by abusive husbands’ (Das 2008). For example, a young highly qualified housewife in my study said,

I think whatever they are showing about the working couples is certainly reflecting a current trend of our society. When both partners are earning equally, an ego clash is very obvious and I think women are always right when they protest against the unduly extra burden at home. Why should they tolerate any kind domination at home when they are equally educated and independent? As these days more number of women are opting for a career, the possibility of ego clashes ending up in divorces is also more. To add to that, women these days do not prefer to live in joint families. When they are forced to live with other family members they oppose it and if they are working then things can only get worse. This factor is also adding a lot to the splitting of couples.

‘Prior to codification of the Hindu personal law, there were ways and means to terminate a marriage, but it was so heavily loaded in favour of men that women’s opinion or grievances were seldom taken into account’ ((Das 2008). So, now it is the enlightened and independent women who are also coming forward for a divorce and not just men. As a result of this the divorce rates are increasing very fast in India which is, according to Uberoi, ‘unexpectedly resilient, and remarkably adaptable to

changing circumstances’ (2006: 29). She also asserts that ‘...the “progressive” modern lifestyle of a segment of the new middle class- those who have eschewed arranged marriage, dowry, and gender-discriminatory inheritance practices, ...represent only a very small fraction of the Indian population and their innovation in the area of kinship and marriage practices is contradicted by strong trends in the opposite direction’ (ibid. 29).

But, data shows that new middle-class is no more confined to a small fraction of the Indian population. For example, a report in *Times of India* says, ‘for every five weddings registered in Mumbai and Thane since 2002, family courts have received two divorce applications’ (Viju 2008). Another piece of report in the same news paper reads that ‘the divorce rate in Bangalore has risen by an astonishing 30% in a short, three-year span’ (Das 2008). These reports also tell us that those who are going for divorce are neither from the upper-class nor from the lower-class. In fact they are from the middle-class. The report from Bangalore tells that half the divorce cases are from the employees in the IT/BPO industry. People from these industries (who are mostly in their late 20s or early 30s) are finding it difficult to strike a balance between work-life as a result of which their marriages are getting strained. A psychiatrist is quoted as saying ‘There is no shame or stigma attached to divorce now and even parents often back their daughters who want to separate if things do not fall in place’ (Viju 2008). The same article quotes another piece of information that 20% of divorce-seekers are 50 plus. So, it seems these ‘elderly people feel enough is enough and look out for other options even in the sunset of their lives’ (Dabe cited in Viju 2008). It also tells us that matrimonial disharmony is no longer restricted to big cities, but has slowly become a major problem in smaller towns and cities where women

have become economically independent and have realized they can walk out of a bad marriage instead of leading an unhappy life (ibid.). On this backdrop it becomes interesting to analyze the way soap operas try to reflect this social problem in Indian society and the way audience react to and relate to what they watch in their favourite soaps.

4.3.2 Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in Soap Operas

As all soap operas show joint families, and marriage ceremonies are shown very frequently. In fact most of the tensions and contradictions in the soaps have their roots in the way a marriage takes place. For example, the long running soap opera *KSBKBT* started with a marriage, i.e. the marriage between Tulsi and Mihir. Mihir's mother was against the marriage as Tulsi was the daughter of a Pujari and hence was not fit to marry her foreign returned son. Mihir in fact rejects his mother's choice (Payal) and marries Tulsi and for next few months the soap deals with the tensions which are nothing but the consequence of this marriage. One can find a very similar pattern being followed by other soaps and sometimes the same formula gets repeated within the same soap. But, the story does not end there.

What makes the soap operas go on and on for years are love triangles, extramarital affairs, divorces and remarriages. When we are talking about these aspects one can not ignore another popular soap opera, i.e. *Kasauti Zindegi Ki* where the characters Anurag Basu, Mr. Bajaj and Prerana created a record within the genre of Indian soap operas, as Prerana (the female protagonist) divorced and remarried these two men around five times. Whenever my respondents talked about the way the institution of marriage was dealt with in the soaps, they mentioned about their disappointment with

this particular soap, even though they had many other stories to tell. Some of my respondents told me how Indian women work hard to make their marriage work irrespective of adverse circumstances and how by showing women going for multiple divorces and remarriages, soap operas are making a mockery of this institution; some told me that divorces and remarriages were things that happened in the western society, among Muslims/ Christians, in the upper-class/lower class but never among the middle-class and never in their community (whichever they belonged to). Some of my respondents told me that whatever the soap operas were showing was actually happening in the society and soaps were just dealing with the tensions which were caused by the changes in the age old institutions of our society. And there were some who told me why these soap operas succeeded irrespective of showing multiple affairs, divorces and remarriages. In the following sections we will examine audience responses with respect to these issues.

4.3.3 Marriages are forever

These words, divorce and remarriage, were enough to raise the eyebrows of some of my respondents. Most of them who had stopped watching *KSBKBT*, *KGGK*, and *KZK* admitted that they did so because they hated to see the same persons, especially women, getting divorced and going for re-marriage so frequently. Many of my respondents found the divorce and remarriage unrealistic and irritating. Some even said that they changed the programme for a few months when they felt that some such thing was about to happen. They believed that marriage should happen once in life and if you do not find happiness in it then perhaps you will never find it anywhere else.

My women respondents feel that soap operas are making a mockery of this sacred institution. For example, a 30 year old upper-middle class married Muslim woman who has only completed her schooling (from Bangalore) said,

In every serial they show one women going for 3-4 husbands. They sometimes show that a man is in love with his brother's wife. They have made marriage a stupid joke. They show married women having children from other men. They have made a mockery of everything. They show as if men and women have no control on their desires and everything is possible even though you live in a close family. I hate to see such things when they show women falling in love with their brothers-in-law and things like that. Such things do have their impact on the minds of the audience and I can see people start behaving like these characters. (Ziya)

Moving ahead, a young unmarried upper-middle class Hindu working woman (whose mother is widow) finds the age and the reason behind these remarriages very objectionable. She said,

In real life people do not marry after a certain age. They remain single for the rest of their life after a particular age. But in the soaps people keep getting married even if they have become grand-parents. Recently in *KGGK* Parvati got married to take revenge. Can anyone get married to take revenge? I had a lot of respect for that character because she was taking care of the whole family but can a woman marry another man to take revenge against her husband. I do not think so. This is the reason why we have stopped watching *KGGK* and *KSBKBT*. There are other ways to take revenge but these soaps have made a mockery of the institution of marriage.

She can not accept women living in joint families doing all such things, even though she herself has never experienced joint family. So, it is not just the number but also the age of marriage in the soaps deviates from what the society prescribes. These deviations can also be seen as signs of change in the existing patterns to which the society initially resists. Few more examples will further strengthen this argument.

A 22 year old middle-middle class unmarried Muslim girl who is doing a course in Aviation (from Bangalore) said,

Once you are married to someone then you should stick to the relationship irrespective of whether you like him/her or not. If you do not like someone then you should not marry. But after marriage getting divorced and going for remarriage is not a good idea. But these soap operas always show such things. I do not like to see such things. This is the reason why we do not prefer to watch Ekta Kapoor's soap operas. When they start showing these things we stop watching them.

A 30 year old middle-middle class Oriya Hindu housewife who is a graduate similarly said,

Indian women hold a very conservative idea about marriage. I have rarely seen women who would like to get divorced and remarry. Women work hard to keep their marriages for the whole life.

Again, a 24 year old middle-middle class house-wife from Bihar who has gone through a rough patch in her married life said,

I do not believe in second marriage because from my point of view it should happen once in a life. One should get satisfied with what one gets in his/her life. (Sonam)

All these young women from different religion, regional and marital background hold very similar view towards marriage. For all these women respondents' marriage is forever. Women who are not happily married are also seen to be working hard to keep their marriage. But, soap operas show women getting divorced and going for second and sometimes third and fourth marriage as well. Now it's very interesting to see how Sonam (the house-wife from Bihar discussed above) interprets this particular aspect in the soaps.

In serials they are showing that if your first partner is not good enough then there is no compulsion that you stay with him/her for the rest of your life. You have every right to take another chance. But, another thing which they are showing and I think that is also a good point that whenever they have shown these second marriages, they are also not very successful. Sometimes they are worse than the first marriage. Spouses start suspecting each other's behaviour. When you leave one person and opt for someone else then after some time you will also come across some draw backs in that person because on this earth no one is perfect.

So, what she wants to point out is a woman should always try to adjust with the person she is married to and should work hard to make it work as no one is perfect and the soap operas reinforce the same ideology.

Another respondent of mine (a 55 year old Sindhi woman) also holds a very similar view towards the role of women in protecting their marriage by invoking 'fate'. She said,

There is a saying that if you do not get satisfaction from one marriage then you will not get it even if you marry ten other people. We are born with a fate which determines all our happiness and sorrow. If there is sorrow in our fate we can not change it by changing partners. We should always try to find out solutions within the problem and happiness within the sorrows then only we can lead a happy life. (Brajewari)

So, women should leave their lives and decisions to their fates and should not try to change them. In other words women are taught ideologically to make compromises. Uberoi makes a very similar interpretation of the romance fictions in the magazine *Woman's Era*. She says, 'Typically, though not invariably, it is the wife who is advised to 'adjust', so that compromise is for the most part asymmetrical, an affirmation of male dominance in the family, as in society at large' (2006: 239). Here we can see that this compromising ideology being reflected both among the young and old women. Now it is interesting to see the response of a young middle-middle class married man from Bihar. He said,

...in a middle-class or a lower-middle class family when a marriage breaks then the woman becomes helpless and things do not look great for the man also. In these levels people follow the religious myths like marriage is for life. In fact in Hinduism we strongly believe that marriage is for seven births. So, if a woman leaves her husband then the man gets emotionally helpless. Sometimes they also become the object of social ridicule. Men in such situations can also take extreme steps like suicide. The same thing is also true for women in these classes. If a woman is economically not independent and her husband leaves her then she becomes helpless, vulnerable and often an object of social ridicule. Remarriage for such women is also not an easy thing

considering our conservative Indian ideologies. So, both our socio-cultural milieus as well as the economic condition of our women in middle-class and lower-middle class families do not allow us to take divorce and remarriage as easily as they are shown in soap operas.

So, it is not just women who believe that marriage is forever. Here we can see that even men share a similar attitude towards the institution. But, as we have discussed earlier, things are changing as more marriages are ending up in divorces in spite of this kind of ideology. In this context an old Sindhi woman (Brajewari) says that things are changing because women of the younger generation are getting intolerant.

In *KZK* they showed us a character called Prerana who got married four times in that soap. This is very wrong. But they are showing it because such things are happening in our society. Now-a-days people have become very intolerant. Once they find some flaws in a marriage they immediately go for a divorce. Those who are making these serials are getting these stories from the real life events but the reverse is also true. There are people who are getting these ideas from television.

For this old woman divorce is an easy solution for youngsters because they are intolerant. These things are shown in soap operas because reality itself is changing, especially in the younger generation. But, the young married woman (Sonam) who we have heard earlier said,

I think when women have money and power; they get an authority to run the family in their own way... Had I been working or having some money for myself I would not have adjusted in this family after all these things. At least in that case I could have saved my child. I am still here because I have no other option.

The same woman who said earlier that marriage is for life tells us that she would opt out of her bad marriage if she had money or a job. So, within the traditional housewife there is a desire to break the marital bond and there is a secret desire for a better life. So, women can assert their independence and work for their happiness only when they feel secure. This secret longing for a change gets reflected in soap operas. But,

things are not as easy for them as it is assumed by the older woman. One can see the tension between the existing patterns and the desire for change. We are going to discuss in more detail how soap operas show the secret desires of viewers in another section.

So, even though there are statistics to prove that divorce rates increasing fast in the metros, both among the younger and the older generation, neither women nor men are ready to accept this. On the other hand some of my respondents who agreed that the soap operas are showing the reality, they always tried to explain how these things are happening among ‘others’.

4.3.4 Divorce and Remarriage Happens only among *Others*

Many of my respondents who hold a conservative view about marriage think that divorce and remarriage is not something that happens in their community or class. According to their perception it always happens in the *other* community/class. The middle-class thinks it happens in the backward communities or among the poor, or the upper-class, or in the life of film stars. Sometimes they label it as a western phenomenon which is attempting to pollute the pure Indian culture through the popular media. Hindus think it happens among the Muslims and Christians. Muslims think it happens among the Christians and in the western society. Women think it can be possible only for men. This denial shows resistance towards the changes that are taking place in the society and the hold of traditional values on my middle-class respondents.

For instance, a 34 year old Oriya Brahmin man (an IT professional) said,

I do not think an ordinary individual can marry so many times in life. It might be possible for Muslims... [or] ...in the lives of very rich and influential people. Of course in the soap operas they show only very rich people. Such things happen in the lives of the Hollywood stars. But when it comes to the life of an ordinary man such things are not possible. One can not expect that he will get divorced today and get another suitable girl to remarry tomorrow...I do not think that things are so easy for women in our society.

Another young married Hindu woman confirms him to some extent with her examples. She said,

Our film stars like Saif Ali Khan and Amir Khan are involved in so many affairs and divorces and remarriage also. I think the serial makers are trying to show a bit of their life style.

One of my respondents (a young married Hindu woman from U.P.) tells us about the increasing rate of divorce and remarriage in the metros which confirms the statistics that we have discussed earlier.

I think what they are showing is happening in places like Delhi and Mumbai (she emphasized more on Delhi). As a spinster I was really not interested to marry somebody from Delhi. The divorce rates are so high there and of course the crime rate also. But it need not be true that people are getting married for 3rd or 4th time the way they show it in soap operas.

Another middle-aged Hindu woman from U.P. analyses these things more in a class line. According to her such things happen both in the lower-class as well as the upper-class.

It is very common in the lower class families, where women have lot more freedom compared to the middle-class women. If their husbands leave them then they start having relation with somebody else. My maid servant says 'if my husband can visit four women why can not I have physical relation with somebody other than the husband'. If the husband does not return home then also they do not care much.

I have heard that in upper-class families they exchange their wives, which I can not imagine happening in the middle-class families. Such things happen where the influence of western culture is more.

She also explains why such things are uncommon in the middle-class.

It is only the middle-class which can not reach the upper-class and do not want to go back to the lower-class status and hence it protects itself and especially its women in the name of family honour and social status.

Very similar to this argument another married Brahmin woman said,

The way they show extra-marital affairs, I do not think such things happen in middle-class families. But I have seen it in the lower-class, or the servant castes. In one case I have seen a girl having an affair with her elder sister's husband and finally she married him... In lower class families they do not have many restrictions. Most of the time, the girls elope with someone. ...It might also be happening among the upper-class people as they also maintain an open life-style. But they can easily hide such things. Others can not have easy access to the rich people's life but when a similar thing happens in a poor person's life everyone gets to know about it.

But our middle-class families are very conservative and I have never seen any such thing happening in a middle-class family.

All these Hindu men and women respondents from different age group and regional background agree that the trend of divorce and remarriage can be found among the others. Now it is interesting to hear the voice of the Muslim respondents in my study and how they agree or disagree with the respondents we have discussed so far. For example a young unmarried Muslim girl said,

Such things might be happening in the lives of men but I do not think it is possible for a woman to get married so many times.

Similarly another middle-aged Muslim woman says,

I have heard of men getting married three four times. This is also accepted in our religion but I have never seen women getting married so many times. I have also heard of elderly man getting married but never an elderly woman.

Conforming to these two Muslim women a 50 year old Muslim man said,

This is a very new concept in our society. Especially women getting married for three four times is something I have never seen in my life... They show women living in joint families marrying two brothers. This does not happen in any family.

Moving a step ahead he again said,

Such things are very common among westerners but I do not know about our Indian society. Yes I can tell you that such things also happen in the Christian community but not among Hindus or Muslims.

So, multiple marriages of men in the Muslim community are accepted and everyone agrees to it but not women or at least not the way these soap operas are trying to show. When it comes to the multiple divorce and remarriage of women, these viewers feel that it is an impact of the western community or it might be happening among Christians.

As one of the young married Muslim woman said,

The soap operas show old women with grown up children going for remarriage which is very unnatural. Normally women do not prefer to go for another marriage after a certain age.

And there is another middle-aged woman who is a divorcee almost proves to what the other women have been trying to say. She said,

After my husband deserted me I never felt like getting married once again. I was so annoyed with my life that I could not think of taking another chance. My parents wanted me get married once more. There was a man who wanted to marry me. In fact he is still interested but I do not want to take another chance. You see this is real life. But in soaps women get married immediately after the husband's death or the divorce. That does not happen in reality. Though I like to see remarriage of women, it should not be shown too frequently. (Sakila)

But, she says that at least soap operas are showing a positive change in the society by allowing women to remarry.

Earlier we had a notion that only men can remarry but one good thing that these soap operas are showing is remarriage of women...

So, the viewers agree at least about one thing, i.e. divorce and remarriage of middle-class women is neither expected nor easily acceptable, irrespective of her age, religion or regional background. Even though it (divorce and remarriage) is not widely

followed by Hindu men, the responsibility of making the marriage successful lies on the shoulder of women and not men. Irrespective of the statistics and the repetitive portrayal of these aspects in the popular culture it is difficult for the middle-class to accept these changes in the society.

Here at one point the middle-class as a whole forms an 'interpretive community' where all other variables like age, gender and region become insignificant. As Carol Upadhyia points out the 'new' globalizing middle class still continuous with the 'old'/'traditional middle class values' when it comes to family and marriage (2008: 63-64). But, within this one can also locate smaller interpretive communities formed by the two religious communities, i.e. the Hindus and the Muslims. For Hindus, divorce and remarriage is difficult for both men and women, whereas for Muslims, it is easy for men but difficult for women. These two communities overlap when their members say that multiple marriages and divorces, as depicted in soap operas, are prevalent among others and not in their community or class.

4.3.5 Widow Remarriages are Welcome but Soaps show these insensitively

Another trend that is common in the soap operas is widow-remarriage. So, it is interesting to see how audiences interpret this particular aspect. Everyone agrees that it is not an easy task to find a good match for a widow whereas in the soaps there is always someone ready to marry them.

For example, a middle-aged Muslim woman says that the soap operas show widow remarriage in an upper-class society, but things are not so simple and easy in the middle-class society.

It is ok for widows to remarry. But these things are not as simple as they show in the soaps. It happens in the upper-class families but not so much. Such things are definitely happening but not in the middle-class.

Agreeing with this viewer a middle-aged Bengali Hindu woman said,

Few decades back widow remarriage was a taboo but now-a-days families are also encouraging their widowed daughters and daughter-in-laws to go for remarriage. But still it is a difficult task to get a suitable match for such women; whereas in the soap operas women remarry immediately after their husbands go missing or die.

Conforming to this kind of an attitude another middle-aged Oriya woman said,

The soaps show too much. When the first husband dies the woman gets married to someone else and then the first husband comes back. These things are very unreal. They show women get prepared for second marriage immediately after the death of their first husband, like what Tulsi did. Sometimes women with grown up children are shown going for remarriage. That does not look good.

One of my friends got widowed at a very young age, everyone in her parents as well as in-laws family wanted her to remarry. But she did not agree. But I personally feel that such women should remarry.

A middle-aged Muslim woman stopped watching a soap opera based on Muslims because in that they showed a pregnant widow going for remarriage, which is strictly forbidden in Islam.

I was watching one soap called *Kwhaish* on Sony which was based on a Muslim family. In that the husband of the female protagonist dies and immediately she gets married to her brother-in-law (*devar*). I did not like that. They also showed that her second marriage takes place when she is pregnant with the child from her first husband. This is strictly against our Muslim laws. That is the reason why I stopped watching it.

Unlike the last section where audiences are unable to accept the multiple marriages and divorces shown in soap operas, here all these women who belong to different religion and regional background welcome the idea of widow remarriage. What annoys them is not the remarriage of the widows but the way such issues are dealt in the soap opera. They feel such issues should be dealt more sensitively and practically.

4.3.6 Soaps are showing the Changing trends in Society: Caste and Class

Some of my respondents in fact think that the soap operas are already showing the changing trends in our society. For instance, a middle-aged Muslim man said,

We get to see these things in the news papers everyday. Divorce was there earlier also but it has gone up drastically in last few years. The younger generation holds a very different view towards marriage and divorce compared to the older generations.

Not only the issues of marriage and divorce but the very procedure of mate selection is going through a drastic transformation and the same things are getting reflected in the soap operas. He continued,

At present in *Ye Rista Kya Kehlata Hai* we get to see how the institution of marriage is getting transformed from generation to generation. Earlier the opinion of the bride and groom was not even required. Marriages were completely decided by elders of the family. Bride and groom used to meet only after marriage. But, now bride and groom actively participate in the mate selection process. They want to see each other, talk and know each other before getting married. In fact now-a-days boys and girls prefer to go for love marriage. These things were unthinkable few years back. We get to see this transformation in soap operas.

Another change that the soaps are showing is the importance of class as the criteria of mate selection. In Indian marriage as we know caste plays a major role. It is interesting to note that the role of caste is shown to be insignificant. Even in case of marriages in the soap operas, it is the class position rather than the caste, which becomes a matter of conflict. For example, Tulsi in *KSBKBT* and Perna in *KZK* were not accepted by their mothers-in-law because they were from middle class. Whereas in reality, marriages in Hindu families are fixed according to the caste and inter-caste marriages lead to a lot of tensions.

Even though people are getting liberal these days as the viewer mentions above, we often get to hear cases of honour killing where boy and girl break the tradition which

can be caste endogamy or village exogamy. But, it looks as if things are changing recently. A news report from Hubli (Karnataka) says that caste which is a common factor in most honour killing incidents in north India was absent in case of Rekha. The only crime she had committed was she loved a boy (who was from her caste but) from a lesser economic status (1st May 2008, Times of India). The soap operas have turned this to the new rule. Generally they show the girl who is from a middle-class background, falls in love with a rich boy/man and there the problem begins because the boy's family (especially the women in his family) resist the entry of woman from a lower class to their family. I got some interesting response towards this particular aspect in soap operas.

One of my respondents, a highly qualified upper-middle class Bengali housewife, feels that soap operas are overemphasizing on class just because they are trying to be politically correct. She said,

When it comes to a comparison between caste and class, I do not think caste has lost its significance or class is gaining importance. Our politics is still largely based on these caste lines. But when it comes to marriage, money plays bigger role. I think if these soaps start showing caste differences then people will not allow them to be shown. Then there will be a possibility that these production houses will get into these dirty politics. So I feel that to be on the safe side they simply do not show anything related to caste and class has certainly replaced caste in the world of soap operas.

But, a young upper-middle class Oriya housewife (who was practicing law before her marriage) says that soap operas are showing class as the major standard in mate selection because they are showing rich communities like Gujarati and Marwadi. She feels that at present caste remains as the main criteria for mate selection only among those who do not have money.

Here it is interesting to see the opinion of a middle-aged upper-middle class Kannadiga Brahmin housewife (a graduate) with a grown up daughter. She says,

These days, inter-caste marriages are common, so caste is no more a problem. These days the problem is status. If both the boy and girl are educated, then there is no problem if they are from different castes. Such difficulties arise only when one of them is from a high caste like Brahmin, otherwise all other castes accept it these days.

So, all these educated upper-middle class housewives agree that caste is still significant among Brahmins as well as when it comes to the politics of this country but class is replacing caste in the field of marriage. The change is apparent in the text of the soaps, in reality and in the belief of the viewers as well.

Another interesting thing is, all these soap operas focus more on love marriages. But still nobody is shown as happily married. Sometimes the other members (normally the mother or sister) in the boy's family will be unsatisfied with the bride's class or status and sometimes there will be some misunderstanding between the young couple and others will add to it and the couple will split. As it is shown in the soaps '...despite changing lifestyles, the ideas of romantic love and courtship continue to provoke a great deal of public anxiety' (Uberoi 2006: 25) among the middle-class Indians. A young married woman respondent also pointed out the same thing when she said,

They show people fall in love, get married and then after some time get divorced due to some misunderstanding. I think what they are trying to show is that one should fall in love but then love is not perennial or you can not build a relation just on the basis of love. A relationship requires adjustment; understanding, sacrifice and when these things are not there a relationship can not survive.

The changing pattern of mate selection and the importance of class over caste in this process are shown positively in the soap operas and are accepted by the audience with ease. What creates anxiety and tension within the text and in the minds of the

audience is the suggestion for love marriages over arranged marriages. Love marriage without the support of the family is neither acceptable to the upper-class families within the text of the soap operas nor to its middle-class viewers. So, soap operas not only focus on the changing trends within the society but also draw the line by showing the disadvantages of love marriage.

But, if the middle-class Indians are not comfortable with the idea of love marriage, divorce and remarriage then how are soap operas showing these things repetitively and running successfully for years? In the following section we will discuss how these soap operas provide an imaginary world to the viewer and how viewers derive pleasure by seeing things that they can not do in their lives.

4.3.7 Pleasure through Imagination/ Fantasy

Problem in the marital life is not an uncommon phenomenon. But staying in a conservative society like India, very few people can think of an alternative to adjusting in the situation by sacrificing their personal interest. People who are conscious about their social status rarely dare to get into all these troubles. But in the soaps, divorce and remarriage are presented almost as day to day activities. And people like to see them. The reason behind this could be that people fantasize the freedom of getting back to one's desirable partner which never happens in reality. They just love to see their favourite characters getting married to the person of their choice, after struggling for a long period. So, in a way the soaps satisfy the unfulfilled desires of their viewers through a world of fantasy. Talking in a similar pattern a young married Sindhi woman said,

In real life if a woman gets divorced for the first time, even then also society will make her life difficult but in the soaps they show that a woman can get

married to so many men without any hesitation and nobody is talking about that... In real life when a woman gets divorced it becomes very difficult to find another match. Even if someone goes for a second marriage then they go with a fear in their mind regarding the new man in their life and whether this marriage will work out or not. But in these soaps women go for their 5th and 6th wedding with a smiling face and lot of excitement. Audiences watch these things for fun because such things are never possible in reality.

Another viewer (a 30 year old married man from Bihar) had a very similar response.

I do not like to see these things but definitely audiences are accepting them. That is how these soaps are running successfully. I think audiences are enjoying these things. When audiences start liking a character, they choose the right partner for him/her in their imaginations and if that character is not married to the right person according to their expectations then they do not mind the character getting divorced and remarried. In other words audiences want to decide on who should be the partner of their favourite and if by chance that character gets married to someone else then they do not mind seeing divorce and remarriage. This is how the show goes on.

This secret desire or fantasy of an audience came out very openly in the response of a middle-aged Bengali woman, as she said,

Sometimes I feel why such things are not happening in our lives. (She starts laughing). We have to live with the same person with the same problems for the whole life... There will be cat fights, ego problem, then we will not talk to each other for some days, but I can not leave him. I have to live with him under any circumstance. He also can not leave me. So, these things never happen in our lives. Sometimes it is good if such things can happen. There will be a change (she laughs again). It will be an experience if one can live with so many men in her life, you can have different tastes in your life. In our case we have become old living with the same man, in the same house all through our life. Actually these things only can happen in the lives of those women who have too much money, power and independence, not in our lives. In fact we can not dare to do such things. Women like me can maximum go for a secret affair. Even the same is true for men. They also can not dare to do such things. Maximum they can also go for an affair because it is not so easy to divorce and remarry.

As Ang says, '...the pleasure of *Dallas* consists in the recognition of ideas that fit in with the viewers' imaginative world... Pleasure of *Dallas* is neither a compensation for the drabness of daily life, nor an escape/flight from it but a dimension of it' (1985: 82-83). Quite similarly the viewers derive pleasure by watching these multiple

marriages and divorces in the lives of the popular soap opera characters as that is something which fits into their 'imaginative world'. As Modleski (1996 [1984]) says, 'it is important to recognize that soap operas allays *real* anxieties, satisfies *real* needs and desires, even while it may distort them' (593).

But, very few respondents in my study openly talked about this dimension of pleasure. They took more interest in talking about happy family than a happy marriage. The reason (as we have seen in the discussions in the previous sections) is their socialization in a conservative society like India where they feel that marriage is for life and hence love affairs, divorces and remarriages are things which are difficult to get the sanction of the society. And also, as we have discussed earlier, that unlike the western system, in India the patriarchal ideology of the Indian society privileges lineal relations (like that of parents and children) over the conjugal one. Also within the institution of marriage pleasure and personal happiness take a back seat. So, people may try to avoid talking about the pleasure aspect in their discussions, but as few of my respondents pointed out, they might be secretly deriving pleasure by watching such things happening in the lives of their favourite characters.

Having discussed the institutions of family and marriage, now we will discuss audience perspective on another important aspect that soap operas deal with, i.e. property disputes in the joint families and the role of women in them.

4.4 Joint Families and Property Disputes: the Role of Women

Even though one can not say that joint households are simple creations of property or wealth, economic factors, to some extent, do affect joint households. Shah specifies two reasons for this trend in the traditional Indian society.

First, joint households helped generate savings and create assets, and once assets were created their preservation tended to preserve joint households longer. Second, poor people such as landless labourers, who had to move constantly in search of livelihood, could not form stable joint households for long. (1996: 539)

Soap operas exploit this particular aspect of the joint household to develop their stories. They show rich upper middle class people living in joint families and fighting for property. These families are normally industrialists/entrepreneurs (*KSBKBT*, *KGK*, *KZK*, *Kasamh Se*) and sometimes Royal families (*Saat Phere*, *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata He*) and land-lords (*Balika Badhu*). Transactions are shown in Millions and Billions. And the most important thing about these fights is that women play a very significant role.

In traditional patriarchal societies like India, ancestral property as well as the property earned by parents gets transferred from father to son/s.¹ Daughters are sent to their in-laws' house with some dowry which is considered to be their share in the family property. Though there are laws according to which daughters also have a right over their fathers' property, very few are actually aware of it or practice it. So, normally in India property matters fall in the male domain and women have little role to play in

¹ According to both *Mitakshara* and *Dayabhaga* (these two are joint family succession acts prior to 1956 Hindu Succession Act), Hindu women could inherit immovable property such as land but under highly restrictive circumstances...In contrast, men enjoyed a primary right to inherit and control immovable property; although under *Mitakshara* they too faced certain restrictions related to their rights as individuals (as vs. group rights), but not to their rights as a gender. Women were restricted by virtue of gender. (Agarwal: 1994, 91)

terms of inheritance. In many cases women are ignorant and sometimes they prefer to be indifferent to avoid any kind of dispute with their brothers.² But soap operas which show very traditional joint families, give us a very different picture in this matter.

In soap operas (like *KSBKBT*, *KGGK*, *Kasamh Se*, *Dulhan*) women take a lot of interest in property matters. Women are always shown as having a share in the family property and when they do not have their due share they fight for it. Sometimes women are shown as plotting against their brothers to take away family business. Not only daughters but also newly wedded daughters-in-law also take a lot of interest in family business as well as property related matters. There are cases in popular soap operas like *KSBKBT* and *KGGK* where the young daughters-in-law take away all the property by playing dirty tricks and then throw the in-laws and other family members out of the house as well as of the business enterprises. Sometimes they are shown as killing close kin for property. So, women who own property and those who aspire to have a share in the family property are shown as a threat to the institution of joint

² Since the concept of the *Mitakshara* joint family succession continues to be recognized (in the 1956 Hindu Succession Act) (except in a few states such as Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu), some of the basic gender inequalities inherent in relation to unpartitioned coparcenary property remain, such as below

-Since only males can be coparceners in the joint family property, sons have an indefeasible right in such property, but daughters don't. In addition, sons have a right to succeed to the deceased father's share of the coparcenary if the father dies intestate. Daughters only have the latter right that is the right to succeed to the father's share of the coparcenary.

- A coparcener can renounce his right in the coparcenary property. In such cases his sons would continue to maintain their independent rights to the coparcenary, but daughters and other Class I female heirs would lose the possibility of benefiting from such property.

-A man can convert his separate or self-acquired property to coparcenary property, in which case daughters, who would have enjoyed equal shares with sons in such separate and self-acquired property, lose out.

-Unlike sons, married daughters (even if facing marital harassment) have no residence rights in the ancestral home. And while daughters who are unmarried, separated, divorced, deserted, or widowed do have residence rights, they can not demand partition if the males do not choose to partition. (Agarwal 1994: 214-215)

family and the very structure of the patriarchal society. This goes along the established mindset of the region. For example, the Minister of Agriculture asked Bina Agarwal at an Indian Planning Commission seminar on land Reforms in June 1989, ‘Are you suggesting that women be given rights in land? What do women want? To break up the family?’ (Agarwal 1994: 53) It is very interesting to see how Agarwal analyses this question from the minister.

Whether or not so intended, the Minister’s reaction implies at least two assumptions about the family: that the stability of the family as an institution is linked to the maintenance of unequal resource positions between women and men; and that economic self-interest plays a significant role in intra-family gender relations, which would be revealed with particular starkness in gender conflict over a critical form of property such as land. (ibid: 53)

The soap operas also adhere to a very similar approach while dealing with issues like women and property. Women with property and women demanding/fighting for property are treated as challenge to traditional power relations which may be read as a threat to the joint household.

4.4.1 Women and the Property Matters in Soap Operas

Soap operas show women instigating their husbands or sons to do all wrong things to take away someone else’s property. Men are often shown as obedient followers of the ideas given by their women, be it their mother or wife. Again, the powerful rich women are very often shown as misusing their power and money. They treat men in their life as puppets who dance to their tunes. Sometimes men follow these women because they trust them and sometimes they have to agree to these women because they have no other way. For example, the two sons of the old lady in the soap *Balika Badhu* do everything according to their mother’s wish. The elder son does it because he is a blind follower of his mother whereas the younger son, though, has a different

opinion in many cases, does not have the courage to oppose his mother because of her power and influence as well as the conservative ideologies of the society (regarding the place and role of women in the family) in which they live.

This kind of representation raises certain questions regarding the property rights of women in the Indian society and their position and power with respect to property matters in a family.

Most of my respondents (48 out of 60) find this particular aspect in the soap operas to be very realistic though none of them belong to the class that is highlighted by these soaps. Only two of my respondents said that they could not relate to the property related themes. One of them, who enjoys the stories when they revolve around themes like love and marriage, says that the fun ends when property disputes start, whereas another viewer feels that though the property disputes are realistic they get over-emphasized as a result of which other tensions and problems in the families get neglected. He (a 34 year old married Oriya man) said,

For example, a woman married into a very rich family may not want to stay with her in-laws because she wants to live as a free bird. Here property does not play any role. It completely depends on the nature and attitude of the member of a family which can have an impact on their mutual understanding and that ultimately determines the family bond.

Such viewers feel that these things are shown deliberately to add some more twists and turns and to drag the story. Two of my respondents said that in real life the property disputes get decided in the courts. People fight for their share in the court and not at home by plotting and killing family members. But, there are many who feel that property issues are the part and parcel of every household and they go to the extent of saying that there can not be a bigger issue to break a family than the

property issue. Some of them relate it to fights between Ambani brothers or fight in some local royal family whereas some others can relate them to their neighbourhood and even their own families. What is more interesting is they can strongly relate to the role that women play in these disputes in the soap operas. But, views are widely divided on this particular issue. Hence like all other aspects viewers are divided in their interpretation of the way these property matters are dealt in soap operas and the role of women in such disputes.

4.4.2 Role of women in the Property Disputes: Audience Perspectives

A young middle-middle class married man from Bihar can not relate to the way women participate in the property matters in the soap operas. He said,

I feel that what the soap operas show is a naked truth. But they exaggerate it by showing women being so deeply involved in these property matters. Normally in our society it is a male territory and we rarely see women possessing so much of property. We hardly see sisters fighting with their brothers for their share in their father's property and sisters killing brothers for property are the rarest in our society. We do hear of brothers killing each other for money but sisters normally keep themselves away from these tensions.

A middle-aged upper-middle class Marathi housewife gives a similar view. But, at the same time she talks about the impact of the soap operas on women in this particular matter. According to her,

I have never seen women fighting for property. Even if they fight they do it in a legal way and not by killing family members. For example, in *Dulhan Sindura* kills her brother for property. This is something too extreme. In our society girls take enough amounts of money and property in dowry during their marriage. So there is no reason for them to come back and claim their share once again. Very often girls who are married into lower classes do not demand anything from their parents or brothers, to hold their husband and in-laws reputation high. Quite contrastingly these soap operas show girls who are highly educated and married into good families, fighting for more money. I have never seen such things in my surrounding. As India is a huge country such things might be happening somewhere. But, I think women must be learning these things from the soap operas.

She is certain that women take their share of property in dowry and hence should not come back to claim it once again. She compares the upper-class women in the soap operas with the lower class women of the Indian society, for whom property takes a back seat compared to maintaining social honor and good social relations. As Agarwal says, 'Typically women give up their claims in parental ancestral land in favour of their brothers, for a complex mix of reasons' (Agarwal 1994: 260). Here we see a man and a woman from two different class, age group and region share a similar view regarding the role of women in property issues in Indian society. On the other hand a middle-aged upper-middle class Kannadiga housewife initially questions the role of women in the property disputes but later on agrees that they are true to some extent.

They just show in the serial but in reality women do not own much property. It is the men in the family who handle those things.

But, immediately after saying this she adds,

Sometimes problems do occur because of differences in status. For example, when two sisters get married and if the status of their husbands' families is not same, then there is every possibility that jealousy comes into the relationship. So whatever they show may not be a complete reality but they are not wrong. They make big issues of small things but certainly such things are happening in our society from which they are getting ideas. They must be seeing such characters somewhere, which is why they are showing them.

She is not sure whether women in her society possess so much economic power as it is shown in soap operas but at the same time she assumes that it might be true just because the soaps are showing them so often.³ Here we can see that the two

³ Here we can say that audiences get confused and after some time start accepting the soap operas stories as real. They feel that their knowledge about the society may be limited and those who are making soaps know more than them as they are making the soaps for a society which is large and diverse in multiple ways. So when a particular aspect gets repeated again and again they start assuming those as real.

housewives discussed above are from the same class and age group but their interpretation differs.

Going a step ahead an upper-middle class, middle-aged Muslim man (an engineer) from Belgaon (north Karnataka) confirms the role of women in all kinds of disputes in family including property disputes. He said,

Soap operas show women deeply involved in the property disputes because they are the root cause of all these problems (he laughs saying this sentence)... There is a popular saying in Kannada that “ten men can live together without any hassle but four women can not live under one roof”. I think women make big issues out of small incidents. This is the reason why they do not prefer to live with others. And once they make up their minds, they start persuading their husbands to take their share of property and get separated from others. Such things are common even in traditional families.

Speaking in quite a similar tone an old Muslim man from Bijapur (in Karnataka) gives us an example from his own life.

There is no doubt that women play a very significant role in these property disputes. For instance take my case. My paternal uncle’s wife plotted in all possible ways to take away my share of property and finally she got down to ‘black magic’. As a result of that I became weak and lost interest in my share of ancestral property back in my home town. I do not think men take so much interest in all these things. Whatever good or bad things happen in the family it happens because of the women. Even when men take the lead roles, it is their women who actually instigate them to do so. In *Dulhan* Sindura kills her half brother for his property. Such things do happen in our society.

There are others like a middle-aged, lower-middle class divorced Muslim woman (who works as a medical attendant) who can relate these things to their own life and agree with the major role played by women in all these.

When it comes to property and money, relationships take a back seat. When men are doing such things their wives play a major role. Actually their wives teach them all these lessons and men act according to their instructions.

A young Hindu man (an engineer) from Bihar also agrees to the respondents discussed above and tries to find a rationale behind the role men play in such circumstances.

Even when brothers fight for property the main role is played by their wives... Women always take interest in materialistic gains of their husbands (he laughs). In such circumstances men get sandwiched between their family and their wives. As they have to live rest of their lives with their wives, their decision comes in favour of the wife.

A middle-aged housewife from Orissa also speaks in the same line and tells us how such disputes cut across class and rural urban dichotomy.

Women in the soaps instigate their husband's to get separated from the family business and start a new business of their own, so that they can make more money. They are showing these things happening in rich business families but from my own experience I can tell you that these things also happen in our middle-class families and just like the soap operas, women play a major role in such property disputes.

So even though soap operas show super-rich families in an urban set-up, audiences who come from very different backgrounds (like middle-class people from villages) can relate to them.

Speaking about this particular aspect, a young Muslim woman (engineer from Maharashtra married to a software engineer) tells quite frankly that,

It not only happens between siblings and relatives but also between husband and wife. Sometimes I and my husband also get into arguments regarding monetary matters. If a woman is not earning then she may not be very demanding but even in that case she will definitely influence the decisions of her husband in some or the other way. So it is very natural and whatever the soaps are showing is true.

So when a woman is not working she can instigate her husband or influence her husband's decisions with respect to monetary matters but when she is economically independent then she does not need to do all these as she can get things done on her own without the support of a man. This is also what another viewer tries to explain.

A young Muslim man (software engineer) from Bangalore feels that though Indian women are not so empowered to talk about the property matters, but with all the education and exposure that they are getting these days, such things (what soap operas are showing) will be common in future.

Now-a-days fights for property have become very normal things. These soap operas are showing women fighting for property, which is partly true but I think they are showing us the future. I think in future women will be very powerful and they will do all these things for money.

Another respondent tries to justify women fighting for their right and feels the laws of this country are inadequate to do justice to women in property matters. So, the viewers assume that with education and exposure women will be more aware about their property rights and will also have the courage to fight for it on their own in a proper way. But, till then these things will continue in the soap opera style.

So, what we see here is a range of opinions about women's participation in property disputes which can be divided into two broad categories. On one hand, women are seen as threat to the very structure of the joint family as their share in the joint household can break the economic foundation on which the household stands. On the other hand, women fighting for their share of property in the soap operas as well as in real life are justified as it is considered that such women can be the agents of change and empowerment of women in general.

Here we can see that men and women from different age groups, region, and religion and with different work status agree that women play a very significant role in property disputes. So, here the members of these two interpretive communities (those who 'can' and 'can not' relate to what they watch in soaps) can not be divided along

the line of gender, age, class, religion and region. The interpretive communities in this context are too complicated and highly influenced by the individual life experiences of the viewers.

But, if one looks at the texts of soap operas carefully, it is evident on one hand, that women like Kaveri (in *Saat Phere*, who is a rich man's daughter and hence very rich), Pallavi (in *KGGK* again a rich man's daughter) Jignasha (in *Kasamh Se* plotting to take away her brother's property), and Sindura (in *Banu Me Teri Dulhan*, again a rich man's daughter but trying to take away all the property by killing her brother) who are strong and independent and hence 'empowered', are always developed with a negative shade. These empowered women are never the heroines. Women who sacrifice their own peace and happiness to make others happy; who do not own any property from any other source but become rich by marrying rich men by chance; who understand the value of family over money; like Tulsi (*KSBKBT*), Parvati (*KGGK*), Saloni (*Saat Phere*), Vani (*Kasamh Se*), Vidya (*Banu Me Teri Dulhan*) are the heroines. So the picture is quite clear as women who become rich through marriage are 'good women' whereas women who become rich by inheritance or try to become rich by claiming their share are the 'bad women'. At least this is what the text says. Now it becomes very interesting to see how audiences interpret these good and bad characters. I am going to deal with this set of binary opposites in the next chapter.

4.5 Conclusion

The above discussion shows that the institutions of family and marriage and the various tensions and contradiction related to them which are very typical about our society are dealt by the Indian soap operas. They not only deal with the traditional

forms of these institutions but try to show the impact of modernization on them, the changes and strategies to deal with these changes. This is where the audiences of the soap operas differ in their reading of the texts. The ‘neither too conservative nor progressive’ attitude of the Indian middle-class gets reflected in the formation of the interpretive communities, which are not only complicated but also unstable and often in transition (Deshpande 2003: 130).

The burden of maintaining the sanctity of the traditional values falls on women and it is always considered as a responsibility of the women to make the sacrifices for the larger goal of the family in particular and society at large. Though there are deviations here and there very few who actually acknowledge these changes and adopt them. As Uberoi says, ‘The popular media in India, too, give considerable publicity to new lifestyles and family mores such as premarital sex, unwed motherhood, alternative sexuality, live-in arrangements, spinsterhood and bachelorhood, adultery and divorce, and especially to the lifestyles of the rich and internationally famous in the worlds of business, politics, sports, fashion, and cinema. This openness is itself a change, of course, but it must be said that these are the lifestyles of a minuscule minority’ (2006: 29). Especially when issues like woman’s rights, and her identity is in question, the tension gets further aggravated and it seems no easy solution is possible, at least not at this point of time. So, the only way to deal with it is to further complicate it, analyze it and provide solutions to it even though they are uncertain and sometimes contradict themselves as well as the existing patterns in the society.

As we saw above that it is not just the text, but even the audience are not quite sure about what is desirable and what is not. Things which they feel are good and desirable

at one point in time might change over time with exposure to new life-style and individual life experiences. It is not true that they negate their previous choice to go for another, but it is their circumstances which force them to do so. The contexts of consumption along with individual life experiences play very significant roles in the process of meaning construction. Changes in the age old institutions and tensions that grow out of them, which are part of everyday life get reflected in soap operas and audience read them according to their past experiences and present circumstances and hence there is no one way of reading the text.

In this section of analysis gender and age become the major axis for the formation of interpretive communities. Variables like religion and region look totally insignificant when viewers talk about their experience with joint family, marriage and property issues in real life and in the context of soap operas. But, then the discussion shows how even the category of women turns out to be too complicated to be treated like a homogeneous category. Women are divided in the lines of age and personal life experiences. Older women and younger women hold different attitudes towards these institutions, whereas men and women with similar life experiences share similar views. This shows that the interpretive communities lack any defined boundary as they are unstable and intersecting.

The next chapter examines the formation of interpretive communities in the context of audience interpretation of good and the bad women characters in their favourite soap operas.

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CHAPTER-V

Reel vs. Real: Reception Analysis of Ideal Characters In Soap Operas

Chapter - 5

Reel vs. Real: Reception Analysis of Ideal Characters

In Soap Operas

This chapter looks at the construction of women in soap operas and analyses the way viewers read these images. It deals with the changes/shifts in the presentation of ideal womanhood in the popular genres like films and soap operas and the different kinds of interpretation viewers do. The discussion shows that one has to go beyond structuralism to make sense of the blurred demarcation between the binary opposites not just at the level of textual analysis but at the level of reception as well. We will examine the features of the interpretive communities that take shape while analysing the favourite soap characters of the audiences as we did for the last chapter.

5.1 Women and/in Popular Culture: An Ideological Debate

The relationship between women and popular culture has gone through different phases of transformation in the past. Till the second half of the 19th century upper caste women were restricted to *pujas*, *utsavs*, religious festivals, and rituals in social functions like marriage. They were bared from the other public places and at the same time popular cultural forms were constructed as sexual threats which had the potential to lure these women into adultery (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 11). It is interesting to note that even in the 21st century popular cultural forms like soap operas continue to show upper-caste, upper-class women mostly confined within the ‘insulated private sphere’, i.e. home and restricted to religious festivals, and social functions like marriage. As we have discussed in last the chapter, in the prime time soaps of the current decade there is ‘an explicit emphasis on embracing the so-called “traditional Indian values,” that valorises family and tradition and this is where ‘traditional gender roles and

familial relations become a space that is perceived to require protection from the so-called corrupting influences of a globalizing, modern India' (Munshi 2010: 210-11).

So the way women in the 21st century are being represented in a popular genre like soap operas holds a close relation with the actual status of women in the 19th century. Like Marshment, the point that I want to raise here is, if women are predominantly defined as naturally belonging to the domestic sphere, this could function effectively to prevent them from seriously pursuing careers because 'ideology can be a powerful source of inequality as well as a rationalisation of it', and at the same time women may themselves be seduced into accepting such images, because of the general hegemony of patriarchal ideology (1997: 126-27). For instance, in the present day advertising and television programmes 'the new women are carefully crafted as someone who deals with the most oppressive situation and that too with a never fading smile' (Charkravarty 2000: ws-15). To do this they portray ideal women characters like Tulsi (in *KSBKBT*), Parvati (in *KGGK*) and their clones who dominate the shows in soap operas and to enhance the strength of these good women characters they construct bad women characters like Mandira (in *KSBKBT*) and Pallavi (in *KGGK*) and their replicas. Unlike the emerging new middle-class Indian women these ideal characters are neither confident nor assertive but still they are very popular. In this context the present study attempts to analyse the representation of ideal Indian women and the construction of binary opposites in soap operas and the interpretation of these characters by the audiences.

In following discussion, we will see how the ideal women characters in the soap operas have become the role models and agents of socialization for some women

audience, whereas those who hate them feel that these ideal women characters are responsible for the rising demands from husbands and in-laws in their everyday life.

5.2 Women in Popular Culture: Cutting Across the Binary Opposites

In soap operas, 'women' play important characters and are always in dominant roles. They are the heroines, they are the villainesses and they are the main supporting characters. These good and bad women characters in soap opera joint families are confined within the four walls of their house and exert tremendous power. They not only influence the family members but also participate in decision making process relating to family affairs, business and property deals. A middle aged Muslim woman respondent summarizes this inclusive nature of soap operas with respect to portrayal of women:

Actually the family revolves around women. So these soaps focus more on women and they try to show different faces of women. Woman can be a mother, wife, daughter or sister and she can be good or bad. This is what these soap operas are showing.

This kind of portrayal of Indian women stands in sharp contrast with the way women are presented in other popular genres of media. For example, most of the Hindi films are male centric and women are presented as beautiful and sensuous objects with a secondary status in the story. They have little or no important roles to play as far as the stories are concerned. They are shown as the weakness of male protagonists and unknowingly become obstacle for the protagonists' achievements by falling prey to the villain. Munshi says 'Unlike Bollywood films, whose heroes are idolized and heroines fantasized about, exactly the reverse is true in soaps. Here, it is the women who are idealized and men who are fantasized about' (2010: 211).

Referring to Hindi films Ashish Nandy says that ‘the bolder the Bollywood heroin becomes in dance and dress, the more submissive they are obliged to be as wife and daughter-in-law after marriage’ (Cited in Manchanda 1996: 86). These bold heroines just serve to attract the male gaze through their dance and dress before turning into a submissive wife. As Mulvey argues ‘the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the men within a narrative on the screen, and the gaze of male spectators in cinema halls all create the woman as a spectacle of male desire’ (Cited in Derne and Jadwin 2000: 243). One can find worse happening in music videos which show women as a sensuous object to attract the gaze of audience by exposing women’s body that looks out of context. But interestingly ‘driven by an anxious uncertainty about their Indianness, men do not make *all* women the object of the gaze’ (ibid: 245). In fact they ‘distinguish between those whom they see as legitimate objects of gaze, and those whom they feel should be protected from it’ (ibid: 246). This is where the ‘good woman’ gets differentiated from the ‘bad woman’.

A ‘good woman’ is one who is bearer of the tradition and culture of Indian society and who is always embedded within the institutions of family and marriage whereas the ‘bad woman’ is too ‘modern’ and ‘westernized’. Such women are considered threatening because they are ‘outside rigid formations’, or in other words they are ‘not so clearly contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 12).

Things are changing with time and this dichotomy between the heroin and vamp is getting blurred with more number of successful actresses playing the lead negative roles in Indian Hindi movies, e.g. Bipasa Basu in *Jism* and *Race*, Aiswarya Rai in

Khaki and the vamp is missing in most of the block-busters Hindi movies in the past few years. In fact the show is now dominated by westernized, outgoing heroines, like the roles played by Priyanka Chopra in *Fashion* and *Dostana*. What is worth noticing is that Priyanka Chopra received the best actress award for *Fashion* in which she played the role of an ambitious middle-class girl who turns into a super-model and becomes very arrogant which leads to her fall. But, this did not stop her from coming back to the industry and getting back her lost status. So the film developed both the positive and the negative face of the same woman. It showed that the vamp is within the heroine and the heroine wins when she manages to control the vamp within her. Here one can notice a shift in the tradition of portraying women in binary opposite categories of 'good' and 'bad'.

One can see this shift even in popular soap operas on television. Here 'good' and 'bad' women do not fit into the conventional definitions of heroine and vamp. In soap operas good women look to their legitimacy (to their aspirations and assertiveness) from the traditional icons and within the Hindu tradition it is not only Sita, but also Durga-Chandi (Manchanda 1996: 93). Monteiro and Jayasankar mentioned that 'Popular Indian cinema with its mandate for preserving the patriarchal family has always had its "negative" women, clearly polarized against its "heroines", untainted by any signs of "evil"' (2000: 312). On the contrary, story about the popular genres on television is different. They go on to argue that 'DD's earlier soaps have tended to comply with this code. With the likes of "Santa Barbara" and "Dynasty" and their Indian counter parts, the line between good and evil has become blurred. Women admit to secretly admiring "bad" women, who are seen as "strong", as opposed to "good" women, who are regarded as "wishy-washy"' (ibid. 312). Thus, in the soaps

the hierarchy of conceptual oppositions like good and bad is now dismantled as a result of which the 'stable' binaries upon which structuralism relies get deconstructed. It shows that meaning is unstable, being always deferred and in process. We will discuss it in detail in another section.

One of my respondents who is a young highly educated Oriya Hindu house-wife said,

Actually these serials are trying to show the real power of a woman. If she wants she can be so good and if she wants she can go to any extent to destroy what she has got.

Through these specific expressive genres (*genres* that are mostly created or consumed by women, like the women's magazine and the daytime TV 'soap') 'Indian women appear not as passive and voiceless, subordinate and sexually repressed, but as active agents in challenging the conventional dichotomization of dangerous *versus* procreative female sexuality, of natal loyalty *versus* conjugal ties, and of female power *versus* female virtue' (Uberoi 2006: 18). Arguing similarly one of my respondents, a young Sindhi house-wife (a graduate) said,

One good thing about these soap operas is that they are showing women as independent and decision maker in so many cases. They are not just the show pieces in the houses, the way Hindi films portray them.

A young Bengali Hindu house-wife (a graduate) summarised what the others have said.

I think soap operas are more realistic compared to films when it comes to the proper representation of Indian women. Women can have so many faces and all these faces are developed from different angels in the soap operas whereas the films just show women as show-pieces. Soap operas at least make an attempt to show the life of a woman in various situations.

These young educated women from different regions appreciate the change in the portrayal of women in popular media. They not only appreciate the positive characters in soap operas but also the ones with a negative shade.

Against this backdrop it is interesting to analyse the representation of women in soap operas and the variety of readings of these characters by audiences. Here, we are going to see that the boundaries between the binary opposites like ‘good woman’ and ‘bad woman’ are getting blurred because the definition of ‘good’ is questioned by audiences. The moment ‘good’ is questioned it becomes difficult to define ‘bad’ and most importantly ‘the bad’ which is a label attached to the deviants can be judged as point of departure from the conventional. Hence, ‘bad’ can be judged as the torch-bearer of the future as in a subtle manner they bring change in the society. The present study analyses the complicacies within soap opera texts and the complicacies at the level of reception by its regular viewers.

5.2.1 Who Is the Favourite Character and Why?

First we will see why audiences admire characters like Tulsi (in *KSBKBT*), Parvati (in *KGGK*), Saloni (in *Saat Phere*), Sadhna (in *Bidai*) and Vidya (in *Banu Me Teri Dulhan*). I have specifically named these characters because they were more frequently referred by my respondents than other characters. These characters play the lead roles in different soap operas on different channels. The commonality among these characters is that they all are house-wives; work hard to keep the family together, adjust with everyone in large joint families; in short are positive/good characters. Their patience and sacrifice is always admired by their fans. As McMillin says, ‘Socialized to accept women in roles limited to house-wife, caregiver and

subservient to men, audiences identify with and accept television portrayals of women in these roles as “natural” (2002: 10). But, some of my respondents reject these characters on the basis of these characters being too idealistic and unnatural. There are others who still remember characters like Kavita (in *Udaan* on Doordarshan) and Simran (in *Astitwa* on Star Plus) because these women were ambitious and independent.

Now, it becomes interesting to ponder on questions like which respondents appreciate these house-wives and why and which respondents love to watch independent women? Do these two categories of audiences belong to two different ‘interpretive communities’ with well defined boundaries or they keep moving between them, making the interpretive communities unstable? Can the interpretive communities be explained with variables like age, gender, education, region and religion or they are more complicated? We will examine below some of the responses of our respondents and look for answers to the questions that we have raised here.

5.2.1.1 Why Tulsi/Parvati/Vidya/Saloni/Sadhna are the Most Favourites?

What are the characteristics identified by a segment of the audience that make these characters special? Here, I am going to look at some responses through which we can have an idea about the characteristics which appeal to the audiences most.

A young Hindu house-wife from Bihar who was a regular viewer of *KSBKBT* liked Tulsi because:

She was perfect in every role that she played in the family. She was not only a good daughter but also a good daughter-in-law, not only a good mother but also a good mother-in-law. She was very impartial while giving judgments.

So the impartial nature is the chief characteristic that she liked about Tulsi and after Tulsi it is now another character Sadhna from *Bidai* because,

She adjusts so much with her uncle's family, helps them financially when her uncle loses his job, silently bears all the taunts from her aunty and finally marries an abnormal man so that her cousin can get a good match. I like to see her sacrificing attitude.

A woman, who adjusts with everyone, helps others, silently bears all kinds torture and sacrifices her self-interest, is also her favourite. So the two characteristics that my respondents find attractive in their favourite characters are "impartiality" and "sacrificing".

Another middle-aged married Hindu woman from Orissa likes Tulsi because:

...she keeps the family together. She knows how to control the members of the family. She knows how to pass on the family values to the daughters and daughters-in-law of the family so that their next generation can inherit it. She also gives a lesson on how to manage the family properly. She guides every one on what is moral and what is immoral, how to face difficult situations, and most importantly how to do justice.

So keeping the family together is not everything. One should also know how to control the family members and pass the family values to daughters and daughters-in-law. Presentation of women characters in soaps in their domestic caring and nurturing roles, always upholding the moral order, where the women serve as exemplars of bearers of 'tradition' to the younger generation of daughters and daughters-in-law, is referred by scholars as the "feminisation of tradition" (Munshi 2010: 215). Here, the questions that come into account are:

- (1) Is the woman allowed to control men in her family?
- (2) Is there no need to pass on the family values to sons or other male members of the family?

In accordance with the Hindu women's idea discussed above a middle-aged Muslim house-wife from Bihar repeats very similar words while explaining the reason behind her liking for Tulsi.

She was very nice and her way of talking was too good. She always tried hard to keep the whole family together and was always good to everyone. She loved and respected her husband's grand-mother and at the same time was very caring and loving towards her daughters-in-law.

All these women love Tulsi because she portrays a perfect Indian woman. A young Hindu house-wife from U.P. likes Tulsi, Saloni and Vidya and says that the common thing about all these characters is their patience.

Tulsi (*KSBKBT*) has a lot of patience and never loses it under any circumstances. That is something I love about that character. I like Saloni (*Saat Pher*) and Vidya (*Banu Me Teri Dulhan*). The common factor is their patience. They do not accept defeat under any circumstances. Every time they are thrown out of their houses or misunderstood by their beloved ones, they come back with a new spirit. They fight for justice. They fight for the good of the whole family.

A Hindu middle-aged Maharastrian house-wife said,

I loved to see how Tulsi used to manage her family, the way she respected elders and loved everyone...In spite of being a woman she was taking care of everything in the family but she never disrespected the male members and always gave them equal importance in the decision making process. I enjoyed watching a very positive and powerful woman in her.

She likes Tulsi because in spite of her power and popularity within family she gives equal importance to men in the decision making process. She is the back-bone of the family but still not dominating and not misusing her power. Tulsi does not challenge the male authority and thereby conforms to the patriarchal structure of the family. So, here Tulsi represents the '*sati* principle wherein the woman is represented as subordinated to her husband' (Das 1988: 27).

This observation stands in sharp contrast with the way most the male respondents of Raghavan conceptualize the character. She says, ‘...for men, Tulsi appears as a dominating character when they see that many of her actions do not fit with the common conception of a daughter-in-law...that a woman could be better than her husband in managing even family affairs appears problematic to this young man’ (2008: 129-130). Even Shoma Munshi through the textual analysis arrived at a similar conclusion. ‘Men, and even elders in the family, look to Parvati and Tulsi for advice and guidance as their moral righteousness elevates them in their families, even with respect to male family members’ (2010: 218). But, in my sample all men except one admire the ‘good women’ characters including Tulsi.¹

Here we saw some of the women respondents, who are from different religion and socio-cultural back grounds, have similar interpretation of the ‘good’ women characters. They like these characters because they adjust with everyone, keep the family together, take care of everyone by sacrificing their personal interest, do justice to everyone. They are good daughters, good daughters-in-law, good mothers and good mothers-in-law. To be brief women audiences like the ‘good’ women characters for their patience and they are positive and powerful. None of these respondents claimed to be like their favourite characters instead they tried to learn from them.

Now, it becomes interesting to see why some men like these characters and this discussion will make it clear that both male and female audiences subscribe to the same patriarchal ideology that television draws its codes from.

¹ I will discuss how some of my viewers criticize these up-right characters in the section titled ‘Why Audiences dislike these So-called ‘Good’ characters?’

5.2.1.2 Why do men like the characters Tulsi/Parvati/Vidya/Saloni?

Unlike Raghavan's research where 'most men chose not to discuss the character, but revealed their disapproval of her through broader disapproval of the serial itself', my male respondents were enthusiastic while talking about Tulsi and other women characters who dominate the shows.

A young unmarried Hindu upper-caste man liked Tulsi and explained:

She with her rich culture and good conduct managed to win the heart of everyone in the family. She has a very good personality. She is an epitome of a perfect Indian lady. She always follows the path of truth and always fights for justice. She is a woman who can go against her husband, children and whole family if she finds them guilty. I liked her dedication for truth.

Thus it is the 'rich culture', 'good conduct' and 'dedication for truth' that makes Tulsi a perfect Indian woman.

An old married Muslim man found women like Tulsi/ Parvati very realistic.

They adjust to all kinds of situations and sacrifice their self interests for the betterment of the whole family. Such women are very much there in our society. In fact some of the plots in those soaps have close resemblance with my life and my family. Sometimes I feel that they are showing what has happened and what is going to happen in our families.

Quite similarly a young unmarried Hindu man loved to watch these characters and could relate these characters to his own mother.

Such good people are there in our society though their percentage is very low. I feel my mother is one of them. She can adjust to all kinds of situations. She knows how to handle things when there is a problem. She never gets depressed when there is a challenge and at the same time she does not rejoice much during the good days. She is a very balanced lady and that is why I respect her and love her a lot.

Another young unmarried Hindu man, who was highly inspired by the characters of Kumkum and Tulsi, wanted to see a reflection of these characters in his life-partner.

I do not want to make a comparison between real life characters with reel-life characters but I have certainly seen such women in my family who have maintained relations wonderfully through out their life. I believe women are centre of family... if a woman in that family makes a small mistake then the whole family might get into problem. Their mistakes can have more impact on children and other family members.

...especially when it comes to my life partner I will expect her to understand me and take care of my family. She need not be very intelligent but should be able to face all kinds of situations in life, both good and bad, should be able to handle them, not cunningly but with patience... We know that sometimes some people behave very abnormally. All we need to do in such situations is to keep quiet and face them with patience.

So the whole responsibility of making the home a peaceful place to live in is that of women. They should handle things with patience, should not make mistakes as it will have bad impact on children which can shatter the family. Though he denies any comparison between reel and real life characters, somewhere he wants to see an imprint of Tulsi or Kumkum within his life partner.

On the other hand, a married Hindu man in his mid-thirties who was a regular viewer of *KSBKBT*, *KGGK* has stopped watching them for past few years. Initially, he told me that he stopped watching them because he felt that he was neglecting his family as these soaps were taking away some valuable time in his daily routine. But later on, during the discussion what I found was quite different and interesting.

The characters Tulsi in *KSBKBT* and Parvati in *KGGK* were very inspiring. ... We all want to be a part of that kind of family, where we will be surrounded by such persons but we never get that. It is a desire which is not fulfilled so when we see them on screen we get tempted to see them again and again. ...When you regularly watch something and like them then definitely you start imagining such things happening in your life. If you are an emotional person and you take things to your heart then such things do come to your mind. I also thought that if I will also get a wife like this (Tulsi/ Parvati) then my life will be so beautiful. My family will never break. But is it possible in reality? (He laughs very loudly).

So, like my earlier respondent, this man also wanted a wife like Tulsi who would keep the family together. Now, he feels frustrated because he did not get a partner like Tulsi/Parvati who could maintain harmonious relationship with his family. When the comparison between the on screen daughter-in-law and the real one did not work according his expectation, he felt disgusted and stopped watching them. Now, he feels that he was an idiot because he used to watch them and related them to real life and called these onscreen ‘perfect women’ a strategy to attract audience. He did not rule out the presence of such women in reality and assumed that they were present with a very low percentage.

Responding to the changing reality and nature of relationships, another young Hindu man from Orissa said:

I think in our generation the number of such good women is going down drastically, because now-a-days girls are getting educated and coming out to work, as a result of which their life-style has changed.

Like others this young man also wanted to have a wife like Vidya/Tulsi/ Parvati but, was afraid of the changing life-style of women, especially those who were coming out of his native place and working in metros. According to him, with their education, independence and changed life-style, they were no more ‘good women’. As the number of educated, independent women is growing fast in the younger generations, the number of good women is going down drastically in the perception of many men. It is not as though these men are unaware of the economic significance of the non-domestic labour of women in the family or for that matter the contribution of working women towards the family income and status but ‘they need constant reassurance that traditional household arrangements will not be disturbed’ (McMillin 2002: 15).

It is quite clear from the above responses that men like women who resemble Tulsi, Parvati and other female characters with their submissive, impartial and sacrificing nature. But, one can find that it is only the old Muslim man that calls them realistic, whereas a young Hindu man could relate them to his mother. Apart from these two respondents others feel that such women (who are highly desirable) are absent in the younger generation because of the changes that are taking place in the society.

All the respondents of Shoma Munshi during their interview on Indian soap operas (the creative heads, producers and actors) pointed out that such a reel life ideal woman is a real life impossibility. 'Real life women are not like that, but they would like to be. Interestingly, men and in-laws would like them to be perfect as well!' (2010: 216).

Although these men respondents talked so much about the 'good women' characters none of them even attempted to compare themselves with those characters or mentioned anything which they would like to learn from these characters. For them, these women are the ideal types of women in the India society and hence they compare them with the women in their life; want to have partners like them and are afraid and frustrated when they do not get one like them.

On the contrary, most of my female respondents looked up to these characters as their role models; some of them could identify with one these characters, whereas some felt sympathetic towards these long suffering women. Viewers' and especially women's identification, 'not simply with a character but with situations and subject positions, is seen as crucial by the feminist critiques' because of 'notion of the power of popular

culture (women succumbing to its lures) combined with the women wanting to be like their popular cultural representations (not through an active exercising of their agency but because they are imbued with false consciousness)' (Niranjana 2006: 288). Thus feminists like Neera Chandoke (2001) believe that this kind of false consciousness which is a product of the prime-time soap operas have undone what the feminist movements have achieved so far. But, at the same time I agree with Ang when she says 'we should not underestimate the struggles for self-empowerment engaged by 'ordinary women' outside the political and ideological frameworks of the self-professed women's movement' (1996: 104).

We will see as we go along that the women viewers admire, imitate and sympathize with their favourite character but within that one can see that it is not based on any false consciousness as they analyse and compare these characters to their own life and what they see around them. One also gets to know that in the due process of consumption and analysis they contradict, criticize and show their anger frustration towards what is happening and in the soaps and the real life situations.

5.2.1.3 Not just Favourites but also Role Models

A young married upper caste Hindu woman from Orissa who works as a manager in an international firm feels that it is worth while to watch soap opera only when one can imbibe the moral values shown in the soaps in their real life.

Like Smriti Irani in *Teen Bahuraniyaan* and yes her character Tulsi in *KSBKBT*. ... Her character and her dialogues are really very good. In fact I have changed as a woman looking at her. The way she leads her life, the knowledge that she imparts to all her family members, has influenced me a lot. What I feel is you have to imbibe those moral values into your life which will also add value to the act of watching serials. Unless you do that I do not think there is any point in watching serials. You should always look for gaining something positive from them.

The characters that Smriti Irani has played in soap operas have had such a great impact on my respondents that she did not even hesitate to change herself as a woman. She finds it worth while to learn the values that Tulsi imparts through the soap opera and she recommends it for all the viewers of soaps.

A middle aged Oriya house-wife claimed to have learnt things from Kumkum (in the soap *Kumkum*) and done similar things in her life.²

I have learnt a lot from Kumkum (In *Kumkum*). She is my most favourite character as well as my role model. I always see myself in that character. She takes care of everyone in the family and this is the reason why she suffers a lot. My life has a lot of resemblance with hers. I have always sacrificed my self interest for the betterment of my whole family just like Kumkum. The women in the soaps are too tolerant but in real life no one can tolerate so much. I do not think these characters are realistic. But no doubt we can do some adjustments in our lives.

Even though she finds it impossible to do everything that Kumkum does, she does not mind doing some adjustments in her real life. It is not the soap opera or the character that is important. It the roles and the characteristics attached to these roles which these women look up to. We can see that the soap opera characters do influence the mind of its audience and to some extent shapes their attitude towards their own life as well as towards others.

Here, we can see that two women from different age group and work status take similar lessons from their favourite characters. So, it is not necessary that a working woman will read the text differently from a housewife. But, they might disagree at some other point. Thus women can not be put in two separate interpretive

² I would like to mention here that although their work status is different both these women belong to the same region.

communities because of their differential work status as here we have come across a case where they belong to one interpretive community.

5.2.1.4 'I' can identify with 'Tulsi'

'Studies by Janice Radway and Leslie W. Rabine suggest that women derive great pleasure from romance reading by identifying with the heroine whose true worth is eventually affirmed by the hero's undying love' (Uberoi 2006: 16). Some of my respondents could identify themselves with Tulsi's character but for a very different reason. For example, the oldest woman in my sample could identify with the suffering that Tulsi went through. So, she found Tulsi's character quite realistic and empathized with her.

Everyone should be like Tulsi. She is so nice...She only thinks good things for others. That is why nobody can ever harm her. Her own daughter-in-law threw her out but it was because of her good deeds, a stranger has given her shelter. I always respected my in-laws and treated my daughter-in-laws like my daughters. But my daughters-in-law have done the same thing to me with the help of my sons. They sold my house, divided the money, gave me a part of it and got separated. I accepted everything silently for their happiness. God is there to take care of me.

This old Muslim woman could relate to Tulsi's character as a mother-in-law and could feel her pain as she has also gone through the same experiences in her life. In fact, she could identify with Tulsi as she was also a good daughter-in-law and a good mother-in-law. Just like Tulsi's, her daughters-in-law also could not understand her and left her.

A Sindhi woman in her 50s found both Tulsi and Parvati very inspiring but can identify with Tulsi.

Tulsi was very well cultured and she used to teach her children the same... I can identify myself with her character. Even I have very similar culture and

principles in my life. My home is like a temple for me. I make sure that there is always peace at home. Nothing should go wrong with anyone. This is the reason why all my relatives also like me. But not all women think like me. Now-a-days women have become very modern and such women neglect their families.

I also liked Parvati in *KGGK*. She had very similar attributes. She faced so many hurdles but still she never left her family. This is the culture that elders pass on to their next generation...When we watch these things we also think that we should not make such mistakes in our life and we also get some lessons regarding right and wrong. We also get to know how to handle different relationships in life.

So, like the old Muslim woman respondent, family is the main issue for this respondent and her home is her temple. She thinks modern women neglect their families and is happy because her daughter-in-law is not one of them. Here, we can see that religion is of no consequence in the reading of the text as a Muslim and a Hindu woman read the text in a similar manner.

Among my respondents, I never found a woman in her 20s or 30s identifying her with these characters. It is always the older women (40s and above) who see a reflection of these good women in themselves. Thus, here age becomes the key axis in the formation of interpretive communities.

Younger women and men have compared them to their mothers, whereas the older women feel that younger women can never be like these characters because of the impact of modernization. For example, a young Muslim woman feels her mother is even better than these soap opera heroines. She says,

There are good women like Tulsi, Parvati and Saloni. But, I feel that my mother is even better than them. My father was living in another place because he was a government servant. My mother took care of us and maintained all the family ties. She was not only doing the job of a mother but also playing the role of our father. A few years back when my father expired, my grand mother was in bed. My mother looked after her for two years. After doing all these things I have never seen my mother complaining. So I have a living example

of a perfect woman in front of me and so I feel such good women like Tulsi and Parvati do exist in our society. But, it is equally true that every good woman also possess some bad attributes. It comes out only when the circumstances force her to do that.

So, this young woman feels that she has a living example of a perfect woman, who is even better than Tulsi, Parvati and Saloni. But, the last two sentences make a departure from the way viewers have interpreted these ideal typical good characters so far. No one is perfect and good women may behave differently when situations demand them to. So, it is quite natural for good characters to have a darker side which is never highlighted in soap operas.

5.2.1.5 The sympathy Factor:

Some of my respondents like a particular character because they feel sympathetic towards these poor women. For example, a young Sindhi housewife likes Saloni because,

She is so sacrificing and adjusts in all kinds of circumstances but often it happens that her in-laws as well as her husband misunderstand her. I feel bad and get very sympathetic towards Saloni when they show such things.

Sobha De refers to *Saat Phere* 'as a brilliant stroke of tapping into the mass neurosis we have in India of a dark skinned woman' (cited in Munshi 2010: 139). As such women are not treated properly and hence, they as well as their parents possess an inferiority complex. Here, this young woman respondent lived with her husband, son and in-laws and has no complaints about her own life and she feels happy with whatever she has got. A common thing between her and her favourite character Saloni is that they both have dark complexion whereas, their husbands are very fair and handsome. But, unlike Saloni's husband, her husband and in-laws understand her properly and she is happy with her life. This is the reason why she feels sympathetic

towards Saloni who is still struggling to settle-down in her life. Thus the soap opera has provided a reason for her to be satisfied with her existing condition. She has nothing more to ask from her own life or from the family.

A middle-aged Bengali housewife also likes to see the struggling woman as she could relate them to the reality, even though not with her own life.

I like Vani in *Kasamh Se*. She is the wife of a very rich man but she is living in such a poor condition, still not complaining about it. She is struggling so much. It sometimes makes me think like how women are struggling in reality also.

Thus a soap opera has made this upper middle-class woman think about the struggle of ordinary women in real life. She can see an image of these suffering women in that character. In a different context she said,

In *Dulhan* the protagonist Vidya tolerates too much. I feel like slapping on her face. How many times a woman has to prove herself? It is better to leave that house instead of doing all these things. Actually she does not have anywhere to go. Just imagine if such things happen to you what you will do (she asks herself)?

It is clear that she is not happy with any of these two (neither the woman in soap nor the helpless condition of women in real life). So, an ordinary woman can be aware of the situations of women in real life even though she is unable to do anything to change their situation. Her sympathy, frustration, anger and helplessness are genuine and it reflects the condition of women in the present day society.

Another middle-aged Bengali housewife (middle-class) sympathizes with Sanjana (in *Stri Teri Kahani* on Doordarshan) as she suffered because of her parents' fault.

In that soap what happens is Sanjana goes for an arranged marriage but the marriage turns out to be disastrous. Now Sanjana has come out of that family and is staying with a friend and struggling for an independent identity. I like

her character because I am sympathetic towards her situation. Sometimes parents get very adamant over their decisions and put their daughters into trouble.

Just like the viewer we discussed earlier, this woman likes Sanjana's character because she can see the helpless Indian women through her. Women in India are treated as a burden for their parental family, and to get rid of their burden they send them to live with complete strangers. If the marriage does not work then again it is the woman who is cursed and often left on her own to fight the battle. Women can relate this reality to the story and the character in the soap and hence feel sympathetic towards her. There is no fantasy, melodramatic imagination or pleasure in this. Rather here is an element of identification which leaves the viewer with frustration and pain.

Similarly, a young Muslim house-wife from Bangalore points out to the lower status and vulnerability of women in family. She likes Sujata (in *Sujata*) because:

She is a woman who is fighting for her family. But, the family members blame her for everything. When something good happens no one recognizes her contribution but the moment something goes wrong everyone, especially men in the family blame her a lot. Here they show how a woman never gets due respect in spite of all her contribution. People just search for opportunities to downcast women. This is the reason why I like to see *Sujata*.

All these young and middle-aged women respondents discussed in this section have talked about the struggling helpless women, who are misunderstood and ill-treated by their own people and never get their due respect within their families. These are not just mere observations in soap operas; rather they can relate these things to the real society in which they live. Even though none of them talked about similar incidents in their lives but, the observations, close remarks and the analysis of the situation of their favourite character looked as if they have seen it happening very closely, may not be in their own life.

Unlike the older generation we discussed in the last section that could identify with and derive satisfaction by watching the tolerant good women characters (like Tulsi and Parvati), these middle-aged and young women felt sympathetic towards the helpless struggling women (like Saloni, Vidya and Sanjana). Here, what is worth noticing is, these middle-aged and young women do not derive satisfaction through “identification” but through “distinction” of their life from that of the struggling helpless women in soaps as well as in reality. So, one can see them differing from the interpretive community formed by the older generation (in the last section), another interpretive community is formed by the middle-aged and young women.

5.2.1.6 Favourites but Non-existing

Here, we will take a look at the viewers’ perspective on the realism of their favourite characters. Many of my respondents said that such good tolerant women do exist in reality but, their percentage is very low whereas, there are some who say that such characters do not exist in today’s world or among the younger generation.

For example, a young house-wife said,

Such women might be there but I feel that in today’s world no one can be so good. I do not think any woman can ever have so much patience to prove herself again and again when they are misunderstood.

Even though she loves watching a sacrificing woman with so much patience, she rules out the possibility of their presence in the younger generation which includes her as well.

Some of my respondents felt that such good women are a thing of past. For example, middle aged Muslim woman (mother of a grown up son and a daughter) who likes Tulsi, Vani and Vidya and feels that such women were around in their generation.

Such good women, good daughters-in-law were there in our generation but in today's society they have disappeared... Now-a-days women want to get educated and go out for work. There are very few who will be interested to become housewives. With so many new technologies, the work pressure in the domestic front has got reduced drastically. All these have contributed in empowering women and they are no more willing to be controlled.

So, it is the younger generation of women who are empowered with all kinds of modern technologies, do not fit in the good tolerant women category. Does this mean here that the technological changes enabled or empowered women to break away from family as well as societal control?

Another middle-aged Muslim (mother of two grown up daughters) woman agreed with these women and said,

Women like Tulsi are there in our society otherwise how the society is functioning. For example, my elder sister lived in a joint family for around twenty years. She was beaten up, ill treated, but she never revolted. She tolerated everything. But who will tolerate these things in the young generation. My daughters will not tolerate if someone beats them up or tortures them. They will revolt and get separated in no time. So women like Tulsi were there in our generation but I do not think the next generation will have any Tulsi.

Now it becomes very interesting to see the opinion of her younger daughter (18 year old unmarried Muslim girl) who said,

In all these soaps they show women sacrificing and adjusting so much in their families but in reality no one can do that. Especially in our generation people are very selfish and I do not think anyone is going to tolerate others so much. There might be few but the percentage of such people will be very low.

All these women (both young and middle-aged) agree that the good tolerant women were there but, with their education and independence, women in the younger generation are no more willing to sacrifice their personal interest and tolerate any kind of torture. Here the young women respondents agree to the perceptions of the middle-aged women respondents. What is very interesting about these young women is they seem to be at ease with their independent, assertive and confident attitude.

In agreement with these viewers, an old Bengali house-wife admired Tulsi, and called that character an ideal type.

Tulsi's character tells us how to live within a joint family and how to maintain the family ties. ...But, women like Tulsi do not exist in reality. If such women were there then we should have a much better society. These characters are completely imaginary.

Here one can see that older women, who appreciate Tulsi, think that such women were there in their generation and before that. In this fast changing world women have got educated and economically independent as a result of which they have become less tolerant. But, in the younger generation even though women appreciate Tulsi they do not see her as a contemporary woman. We have seen earlier also how younger women do not identify themselves with Tulsi, except one who could identify her with her mother.

So, far we discussed about those viewers who appreciate the positive characters in the soaps. Their reading differs mainly based on their gender and age. But, then there are exceptions. For example, we have seen in the section 'Not just Favourites but also Role Models' that a young working woman admires the character of Tulsi (in *KSBKBT*) and tries to learn the values that she imparts. On the contrary, in the section

‘Favourites but Non-existing’ young women claim the characters like Tulsi as women of past and they admit that they can never be and would not like to be such tolerant good women. As a result we can identify multiple interpretive communities among the viewers of the same age group. Hence using a term like ‘the preferred reading’ (Hall 1981) for all those viewers who appreciate the good women in the soaps may be too simplistic and not capable of grasping the complexity.

But, there are others who do not like these good characters for various reasons. Though these viewers go for an ‘oppositional reading’ of the text, the question is do they all belong to one interpretive community. In the following discussion we will see that there are variations within these group of viewers (mostly women) as well and thus attempt to identify the multiple interpretive communities within them.

5.2.2 Why Audiences Dislike the So-called ‘Good’ characters?

Not everyone likes to see and identify with the perfect Indian women in soap operas. The data suggests that a good number of respondents (18 out of 60) who either hate or do not like these characters for various reasons.

For example, a young house-wife from Orissa did not like Tulsi because she found her too perfect. Initially she said that she could relate Tulsi to her eldest sister-in-law who lived with her in-laws in their native place, but later on criticized the character as she was shown killing her own son.

No mother can ever do this. She could have disowned her son but how could she kill him. They are trying to show ‘Mother- India’ kind of characters which are too ideal and so I hate them.

Another house-wife from Kanpur found the character of Tulsi ‘crazy’. She said,

I find Tulsi a bit crazy. She keeps giving lectures to everyone. How can someone become such a perfect person? Every individual will have some negative traits along with the positive ones.

Some other respondents feel that these characters cross all limits of normalcy to become ideal. Some call them authoritarian whereas others find them interfering into others' personal life. A few others feel that women 'can not be', 'need not be' and 'should not be' so good.

5.2.2.1 Crossing the Limits

Some of the viewers feel that these over righteous characters cross all limits to be labelled as a normal house-wife. The reason here could be that even though these ideal women 'apparently seem to fit comfortably into the mould of patriarchal discourse, a closer examination makes clear that, if anything, such representations pose a threat to such notions' (Munshi 2010: 217). Viewers perceive that these ideal women characters like Tulsi and Parvati dominate the most popular soap operas in such a manner that they surpass the patriarchal authorities within the respective families in the soaps.

For example, a young married man hates Tulsi because 'she is too righteous and keeps imparting knowledge to others'. He also feels that 'she gives a lot of lectures'. Quite like the male respondents of Raghavan, this young man 'finds it irksome that Tulsi makes decisions on behalf of the family, on her own will, without explicitly consulting others...' (2008: 130). This man hates Tulsi for very strong patriarchal reasons.

An old Sindhi woman said this ‘Tulsi factor’ does not work in real life. She compared her sister with Tulsi who was equally good and always wanted to keep her large family together. But finally she gave up because others did not like her ‘authoritarian position’ in the family.

But, no one can be so authoritative that the whole family will listen to her as it is shown in the soap. My elder sister had six brothers-in-law. They were all living in one family. My sister was too good to everyone in her family. All her brothers-in-law used to like her and respected her a lot. But their wives did not like it much. Later on they started accusing my sister saying she is having an affair with all her brothers-in-law. My sister was shocked hearing this and then she decided to live separately.

So, others revolt when one person starts controlling everything in the family, as a result of which joint families break, whereas the soap operas show that the good women characters always work hard to keep the family together. Here we have a young man and an old woman from two completely different socio-cultural backgrounds and both of them hate Tulsi for her authoritarian attitude. This stands as a clear contrast to what the soap operas are trying to show. In the following discussion we are going to see other respondents raising similar issues where they object to the centralization of power in the hands of one daughter-in-law.

Another young Muslim woman raises a very important question. Why there is nobody like Tulsi or Parvati in their own family for generations (the soap operas *KSBKBT* and *KGK* were showing four/five generations of people living together when they were stopped abruptly in 2009 because of their low TRPs³). She finds these characters unrealistic because the soap operas show joint families run by these women and no one else has a say.

³ TRPs – Television Rating Points

...in a joint family the opinion of each and every member is considered as important and a family can never be run by only one daughter-in-law.

In a similar context Raghavan says, ‘the same kind of discontent would not have been expressed, if similar actions were perceived to have been carried out by Tulsi’s husband or another male character in the serial’ (2008: 130). Here the objection is against the all powerful women who dare to replace the patriarch.

One interesting observation about soap operas is they do not have patriarchs. Hence one does not get to see the usual tension and clashes between the patriarch (who is usually the eldest male member of the family) and other family members, for power and authority. Tensions and contradictions are always shown among women in the family. It is always women fighting against women for power and authority. Thus, in the following discussion we will see that viewers also blame one woman as the problem creator for other women. In fact, some of my respondents blame these positive characters as the main reason behind the origin of the negative characters.

For example, a middle-aged Bengali house-wife talked about the improper distribution of power and importance between daughters-in-law in soaps which ended with making others in the family look like villains.

In both these soaps *KSBKBT* and *KGGK* Tulsi and Parvati happened to be the eldest daughters-in-law in their respective families and were shown as very good and everyone in the family blindly followed them. When other daughters-in-law came into these families they were compared with these very nice daughter-in-laws and hence it was natural that they resisted and revolted against Tulsi and Parvati.

So the younger daughters-in-law turn into negative characters because they revolt against the all powerful elder daughters-in-law of the family. A similar type of sentiment was shared by a young girl from Kashmir as she said,

When we watch a character suffering so much, we start sympathizing with her. When I was watching *KSBKBT* and *KGGK* I always sympathized with Tulsi and Parvati. Due to this other characters lose their charm. Either we start hating them or we are simply not bothered with what is going on with their lives.

Here is an interesting observation that when audiences see these good women suffering so much in their lives they start sympathizing with those characters, as a result of which other characters lose their importance. When other female characters are compared with these heroines, either their role looks insignificant to talk about or if they dare to challenge our heroines they turn into villainesses.

So, villainesses are individuals who are created by the activities of the good women and the kind attention and importance these good women get from other family members. Hence, it is not just the villainess who is a threat to the patriarchal power structure; rather it is the good women who create these villainesses and carry the potential to threaten the patriarchal authority, and thus, are dangerous for the overall society. This argument gets further strengthened in the following discussion and here one can also sense that these viewers (all women) are sympathetic towards the villainess because they are seen as the outlet of feminine anger and frustration when neglected by their families or not given something which they really deserve. We will see a detailed discussion of this in the section ‘Villainess as a Challenge to Feminine Passivity’.

Some of my respondents do not like the way these characters are shown as solving each and every problem in the family. What annoys a young Muslim house-wife the most is, these women do not share things with anyone in the family including their husbands.

Every now and then they show that all other family members start fighting and these so called good/perfect daughters-in-law keep solving the problems. A person might be very good but at a certain stage of life everyone has to think of one's own life. Whenever there is a problem in the family these characters start investigating things on their own. Why do they need to investigate things on their own and hide it from others in the family? They can take the whole family with them and solve the problems together. What annoys me the most is these women do not even involve their husbands in their activities. I do not think that a woman can ever go to that extent. I can buy a few cloths or some jewellery without my husband's knowledge but I can not go around the whole world without telling him (she laughs).

Another young girl from Kashmir pointed out the same thing about these characters.

These characters like Parvati and Tulsi do everything on their own and never involve other family members in their plans. Others rarely get to know what is going on in their mind. These women never share their secrets and problems with anyone which is very difficult to digest. As a result of this only one character is shown as suffering through out her life whereas others enjoy.

So even though these women are shown as suffering, they are threatening because they take their decisions independently, without even consulting with their husbands.

This kind of oppositional reading is still done from within the dominant discourse.

Another woman respondent made this point very clearly.

They show these women as all powerful. They can go anywhere at any point of time. They meet the kidnapers, pay them huge amount of money to release their family member and they do all these things without the knowledge of anyone in the family. This is so absurd. A woman may be very good but she can not go out of the house with such huge amount of money and meet strangers at night without the knowledge of anyone in the family. They sometimes do not share it with their husbands. In our families men handle such situations and it is never a woman. When someone is kidnapped and the kidnappers demand a huge ransom then the whole family comes together to discuss the matter, sometimes loans are taken to arrange the money.

She can not accept it when they show a woman handling tough situations without the support and knowledge of men in her family. Quite like Raghavan's finding 'That a woman could be better than her husband in managing even family affairs appears problematic' but unlike her study where it is problematic to a young man, in this case to this young woman (2008: 129). The objection here is against these powerful women, who try to solve everything on their own and encroach into those areas which are considered to be male domains so far.

In this whole discussion one can notice that gender, age, region and religion do not make any difference in this altered reading of the so-called good women characters in the soap operas. All the readings by these viewers are strongly influenced by the patriarchal ideology of the society that they live in and they oppose to any kind of deviations that they notice in the text.

5.2.2.2 Interfering and Impractical

In soap operas the tolerant good women take a lot of interest in the lives of other family member. They try to find out the problems in others' lives and take all kinds of risks to sort them out. They do it all in the name of family harmony. For example, Saloni (in *Saat Phere*) behaves like a detective to find out the evil intentions of Urvasi to save the marriage of her brother-in-law (Brajesh) and sister-in-law (Tara). In this process she loses the confidence of everyone in her family including her husband. But, still she does not step out and finally resolves the tension with the help of some miracles.

Some of my respondents find these activities of the positive characters as interfering into others' personal space. For example, a middle-aged Muslim house-wife said,

I do not like to watch all these good characters because I think women should not be so good. These women take so much of risk. I think they should mind their own business and should not interfere into others lives. I do not think such women exist in our society. No one has got so much of time to interfere into others' lives and to solve their problems.

She feels that in the younger generation nobody can be like these women and she thinks that 'women should not be so good' because while being so good to others they create problems for themselves.

Another young Muslim woman also pointed out that 'at a certain stage of life everyone has to think of one's own life'. There are others who hold very similar views. In fact, a young married Hindu man said that a woman can be equally good like Tulsi only for her husband and children.

I admit that a woman can be as good as her but only for her family which comprises her husband and children. A woman can do everything that Tulsi does in that soap opera but only for her family and when it comes to the society at large I do not think any women will be so good. Well a woman can be good towards other family members but she will not do everything for them. For example, all these good women in the soap operas can put their marriage at risk and sometimes even their own life in risk for the other members in their family which is not true in reality. But as I said they will do all that for their husband and children.

This kind reading of the good women characters stands in contrast to what the soap operas intend to say (as the soaps always try to valorise these self sacrificing attitude of good women) and the way other respondents (those whom we have discussed in the sections above) read these characters. The viewers we have discussed here are from different age, gender, religious and regional background. So, as we have seen it before, here also the interpretive community is formed by a complex set of viewers.

Quite similar to the views we discussed here there are other viewers who get angry and feel frustrated watching these ever sacrificing and problem solving women in soap operas. In the following section we will see how audiences (mostly young women) reject the so-called good women in soap operas by reading the text in a very different way than those audiences who love and appreciate and make these characters their role models.

5.2.2.3 Women can not, need not and should not be so good: an Oppositional Reading

Mercer and Shingler (2004) note that while in earlier feminist interpretations pathos was aligned with oppression, in contrast to anger which was seen as liberating, later feminist interpretations have queried this equation (cited in Raghavan 2008: 91). Arguing in a similar line Linda Williams conceives tears as having the potential for ‘future power’ by provoking anger at the spectacle of pathetic and virtuous suffering, thereby arguing that pathos does not necessarily imply powerlessness (ibid.). Here we will see how the suffering, sacrificing women in the soap operas leave a negative impression in the minds of the viewers. As Monteiro and Jayasankar put it ‘For many housewives, caught in a humdrum, unromantic existence, with little familial recognition of their contribution or desires, watching soaps becomes not merely an escape but an affirmation of their hidden anger, their revolt against the image of a good mother/wife...’ (2000: 311). Quite similar to these arguments here we will discuss how viewers (mostly young women) feel frustrated and revolt against the tolerant good women characters in their favourite soap operas for different reasons.

A young Bengali house-wife hates to watch these ‘brainless, helpless, suffering women’. She said,

I and my husband are watching *Betiyaan* together. But, I hate to see those four sisters. They are brainless and behave stupidly. ...The eldest sister is brainless. She is exploited by everyone. I hate to see the way her parents as well as her in-laws torture her and she tolerates everything. She is shown as a helpless victim. I do not like to see so much of suffering in the life of a woman.

Similarly a young unmarried working Hindu woman complains against Soni in *Maika*.

No woman can be so good like these heroines. For example, in *Maika* they show that Soni can not open her mouth for simple explanations also. Her in-laws keep insulting her for no reason and she tolerates things silently. I do not think one needs to be so good. In fact I do not believe that any one can be like these characters.

Another young married working Muslim woman hates to see women being tortured and tolerating everything silently.

I can not tolerate when they show a very good house wife tolerating everything. Both *KSBKBT* and *KGGK* were focusing more on such things. Tulsi and Parvati were too good and used to tolerate all kinds of things. They bear all kinds of torture and suffer silently. I find that too much. I do not think any one on this earth can be like them.

I do not like Saloni's character either. *I believe every human being has different shades in his/her personality. Good, bad, love and anger are the basic things which we can find in everyone* but these characters are good and loving all through their life. I also do not like her character because she interferes in others lives (emphasis added).

So, one can be tolerant but not always. She feels no one can be perfect all the time.

We have seen it in the previous section also that many other respondents dislike the interfering nature of good women characters. Here we see that all these young women, whether housewife or working woman, married or unmarried, Hindu or Muslim, strongly reject the tolerant, self-sacrificing and ever suffering good women.

After talking about her dissatisfaction towards the ever and over sacrificing character Saloni (*Saat Phere*) a young married Hindu Oriya woman expressed her happiness

towards the fact that not many men watch these soaps because she feels if they watch these women then their expectation from their partners will become very high.

When I see a husband taking his wife out for a dinner or a vacation or buying her a gift in soap operas, I ask my husband to learn something from them. So, it is very obvious that their expectations also must be increasing from their women when they watch these self-sacrificing women on screen. It is good that not many men watch these soap operas.

We have discussed it in the section ‘Why do men like the characters Tulsi/Parvati /Vidya/Saloni?’ that men who like to watch characters like Tulsi and her clones, do expect to have a partner like them and feel frustrated when they do not get one. This young woman’s assumption regarding the influence of these good women characters on male viewers actually matches with the views of men discussed in this earlier section.

Unlike the men and women discussed earlier who made an affirmative reading of the good women characters in soap opera texts, all these women discussed above who differ in religious, regional background, age and work status (as some are house-wives and some working), negate that pattern of reading. There are others who do not always like to see the self-sacrificing and suffering women. In fact, they love to watch women who are strong and confident like the villainess.

Here I am going to look at the response of a young Bengali house-wife who was highly qualified and working in Kolkatta before getting married, towards the character Tulsi. She hates her and hates her more because her father-in-law idealizes himself like Tulsi.

I hate it because I had never seen a man getting so much involved with soap operas before this. He idealizes himself just like Tulsi. In the family it is a one man show, which begins with my father-in-law and ends with him. He takes

care of all the relatives but forgets about his own wife, son and daughter-in-law. He has spent all his money on others. It is good if you are concerned about others but at the same time you should also keep something for yourself and should not burden your son with everything. He feels by doing all this he will be blessed by everyone and by God as well. But he is left with nothing. You see Tulsi thinks about everyone in the family and also gives 'Judgments'. He also does similar things. He will give a judgment on each and every issue and you have to follow him.

I told my husband, 'They show very good things like, having children before marriage, not loving your own brothers and sisters, not respecting your elders. This is all they show and your father watches them so carefully'.

Quite similarly a young married Muslim woman from Maharashtra who is an Engineer hates the character Prerana (in *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*) because she is the favourite of her mother-in-law.

My mother-in-law loves to watch Prerna in *KZK*. In that soap they showed that Prerna was madly in love with Anurag, they got married, then they got divorced and Prerna married Mr. Bajaj, again went to live with Anurag, and then came back to Mr. Bajaj. In the soap it was shown that she had children from both the men. Still she was a *Sati Savitri* (a chaste woman). But, here I, who is living with one man and tolerating a mother-in-law like her, is still not good (she laughs). For her what ever Prerna is doing is correct. Whereas I go to office, work there for 8-10 hours, come back, cook, take care of everyone, but she can not see all that. She keeps finding my flaws and tells me what is right and what is wrong. She can not differentiate between her real life daughter-in-law who is struggling so much and the actress in the soap opera.

These educated independent women hate to see their family members (especially their in-laws) comparing the reel characters and their situations with the real life. These women completely stand outside the dominant mode of analysing the text.

Here one can see that the less educated women go for a different reading of the text and feel frustrated about the way these positive character handle things, whereas those who are highly educated and working, move ahead and question it. They question it because audience who appreciate these characters start comparing the real women in their families with the characters in the soaps. Young daughters-in-law's in reality are

expected to behave like the ideal characters in soap operas which makes their life burdened and difficult. The discussions above reflect that though some young women still idealize characters like Tulsi and Parvati, they clearly state their unwillingness to become one like them.

Moving a step ahead of all these women discussed above, a 48 year old Muslim housewife said that she liked it when Vidya became Divya with a rebirth. She said,

There is a lot of difference in Vidya in her last birth and in this birth. In last birth she was very innocent but now she is very smart and she can notice each and every step of her enemy, i.e. Sindura. So this story is better than others. The heroin should be equally strong and smart like the villain and should not keep tolerating and forgiving others.

Here this rebirth means a lot more than a new life. In fact, soap operas always show rebirth and the return of the dead to bring a structural change within the text, which replaces the helpless protagonist with that of a confident and strong woman. So, the text itself makes the distinction between the past and present, older and younger generation, and replaces the weak protagonist with a strong one through structural inversion. Here we have a middle-aged woman who likes the assertive, confident young protagonist compared to the earlier one who was helpless and sacrificing because now she can challenge and deal with the negative characters smartly. Very similar to the young women we have discussed above this middle-aged woman also dislikes the ever-suffering woman in the soaps and hence she finds this shift within the text impressive.

Having discussed about the different perspectives through which audiences' read the positive women characters, now we will move ahead and discuss their binary opposites, i.e. the villainesses.

5.3 Soap Operas and the Bad Woman

One interesting characteristic of soap operas is, they have strong women characters playing negative roles. Mandira in *KSBKBT*, Pallavi in *KGGK*, Kamolika in *KZK*, Kaveri in *Saat Phere*, Jigyasha in *Kasamh Se*, Sindura in *Banu Me Teri Dulhan* are some very popular negative women characters in Indian soap operas.

These negative women characters are shown as engaging in premarital and extramarital affairs, having illegitimate children, seducing younger men, and defying parental restrictions by pursuing erotic desire but unlike cinematic representations of erotically assertive women who are presented as ‘hyper-Westernized vamps’ these women are the ‘modern Indian women’ (Mankekar 2004: 424). These women are quite different from the villainesses we normally get to see in Hindi films. ‘Very importantly, and in a distinct departure from Bollywood films, women’s bodies, even the slim, svelte ones of Kamolika and Mandira, are not explored as sites of sexuality’ (Munshi 2010: 151).

But, at the same time soap operas regulate the sexuality of women by keeping them within a “legitimate space”, i.e. household (Niranjana 1997: 115). There is clear demarcation between the “private” and the “public realms” (Krishnan and Dighe 1997) and those who transgress the spatial norm become sexually immoral. Quite similar to Uberoi’s analysis of classical Hindi films, the soap operas also show the dutiful, loyal wife as confined to the space called home, whereas the other women or villainesses, to the office, club or to some other space outside home (Uberoi 1997). But, unlike the villainesses in the films, they do not drink and smoke. They are not seen going out of the house and getting engaged in unsocial activities. They live

within the four walls of their house and play dirty tricks with their family members. They are mothers, sisters, daughters, and daughters-in-law. So, unlike films where the bad women are those who are not part of the family or do not like to be a part of the family, the soap opera villainesses live within the family.

These are beautiful Indian women who are part and parcel of traditional joint families. They wear Indian cloths (normally a *sari*); though sometimes they tie it in a typical way. For example, Kamolika (in *KZK*) and Kaveri (in *Saat Phere*) had their unique style which was very popular with the soap opera fans. They entered the scene with a back-ground music. It is their style of wearing sari and the back-ground music which differentiates them from the ‘good’ characters.

During the interview I never asked about any particular negative character or ever mentioned the gender of these characters. But, invariably everyone talked about the bad women characters from their favourite soaps. The responses on this particular matter can be divided into three major categories.

1. Out of my 60 respondents, 35 said that such bad women were very much part and parcel of every household. They said that these characters were very realistic and they had heard about such people through different sources. Some said they had seen such people in their own family. Some others said that though such women existed in reality the soap operas exaggerated them a lot.

2. Some others who admitted the presence of such women in reality said that they enjoyed watching them on screen, whereas some of them even claimed that they would show their own negative shade if the situation demanded.

3. But, there were respondents who could not accept this kind of portrayal of women and said such kind of presentation of women could have lot of negative impact on the minds of the audience.

Here the three categories of respondents read the same set of character from different angles. Now let us have a look at formation of different interpretive communities by the audiences when it comes to their understanding of the ‘bad’ women characters in soap operas and then try to find out the characteristics of these interpretive communities by identifying the nature of its members (i.e. the audiences who have similar interpretations).

5.3.1 Good is Highlighted against the Bad

Some of my respondents find these bad characters very interesting because they feel there is something worth learning from them. For example, a young Oriya Hindu housewife feels that soap operas show the real strength of women. According to her,

If they will not show bad women how will you differentiate good women from the rest? How will you compare if there are no contrasts? The comparison can not be proper if they show a good woman fighting against a bad man. So they show a bad woman so that the good woman can prove her righteousness and strength.

She thinks that soap operas do the right thing by putting a woman against another woman and not a man. For her, comparing a woman with a man is not the right thing to do. The real strength of a woman can be judged against another woman and soap

operas are doing that. Munshi also shares a similar attitude and says ‘One needs the villainess because everything is comparative. Good is only good because there is bad. You need evil to enhance the good’ (Munshi 2010: 149).

A middle-aged Muslim man (an engineer) from Karnataka talked about the positive impact of these bad characters on audience.

I enjoy watching these negative characters and their activities because I think we get to learn more from them. There can be a solution only when there is a problem. These negative characters create a variety of problems and hence we get to see how these problems can be solved. If there is nothing bad then how can we know the value of good? This is why I believe that the existence of negative elements is inevitable to prove the strength of positive elements.

These soap operas always show that it is ultimately the truth that wins. So when a person with a negative bent of mind will watch this stuff then he/she will definitely think before taking a further step in real life because they can at least see the consequences of their activities, whereas a positive person will get a moral boost and will also learn how to face difficult situations in everyday life. At least there will be some self-realization. So the soap operas can be beneficial for both. I think both good and bad people contribute positive things to learn from soap operas.

A young Bengali Hindu housewife holds a similar attitude towards the negative characters in the soap operas when she talks about and compares Savitri and Menaka (the good woman and the villainess) in her favourite soap *Ghar Ki Lakshmi Betiyaan*.

Both Savitri and Menaka are married to the same man and live together. Savitri has four daughters and Menaka has one son. This is the reason why Savitri holds a low status in that family. She is a very nice woman and often shown as helpless whereas Menaka (being the mother of a son) is very powerful and controls everything in the family. I think both these characters are very realistic. Both good and bad women are a part of every society. There are good women like Savitri, though their percentage is very less but women like Menaka are very common. I think audiences should learn something from characters like Savitri. But, at the same time we should be ready to face women like Menaka in our day-to-day life.

So, soap operas are nothing but the reflection of our society and audience can really benefit by learning to face the reality through soap opera characters. All the

respondents discussed above differ in terms of gender, age, region, religion and work status. But they all agree that it is justified to have the binary opposites within the text. Thus, the interpretive community in this case is also too complicated as its members can not be divided along any particular axis.

5.3.2 Villainess as a Challenge to Feminine Passivity

In my M.Phil I had tried to show how educated, independent, powerful and rich women are constructed as villainesses in soap operas. Though I did not ask any specific question to my respondents in the present study to get this kind of opinion, many (especially women) talked about it on their own.

An old Sindhi woman respondent held the opinion that ‘when women get educated, they get money and power and then they become arrogant; this creates problem in the families’. But, unlike her, most of my respondents who talked about it, had very different opinions. Some of them said that there was no relation between education, independence, power, money and bad behaviour. It all depended on the nature of the person. Many said that house-wives could be more dangerous than working women as ‘empty mind is a devil’s workshop’.

A young highly educated Bengali house-wife felt that women should revolt against any kind of injustice and there was nothing wrong in it.

We have to revolt, otherwise we will be tortured. I do not think women need to tolerate so much. One need be extremely good or bad. There can be something between these two binary opposites. So, what I feel is, the soap operas should also show their characters like this.

In fact, she told that she had revolted against her dominating father-in-law. She felt that sometimes it was necessary to do so; other-wise you got exploited.

My father-in-law is very dominating. He always keeps an eye on me. I kept quiet for a year but after that I opened my mouth. I told him that I am from a very cultured family, I am educated and I respect you. But, I will not allow anyone to take an undue advantage of my silence. I am your daughter-in-law and not your servant. No one has ever asked me so many questions and it will be better if you stop guiding me so much. So, now he is better.

A young unmarried working woman (a software engineer) from Orissa says that she will use her money and power against others, if the situation demands it.

Education, employment and money definitely give some power to women. It gives us a voice. When I get married tomorrow, if I do not like something that my in-laws want me to do then I will also use my money and power. I do not think there is any harm in doing so.

So, education, money and power give woman a voice to fight against oppression and injustice in her life. These two young educated women give their consent to the revolting villainesses in soap operas. By doing this they sharply contrast what the old woman had to say. Here these two interpretive communities, those who call the villainess a bad woman and those who can see the villainess as a challenge to feminine passivity, are clearly divided along the axis of age (i.e. opinion of women from the older generation vs. opinion of young educated women).

Arguing along the same line, a young housewife from Bihar who was physically and mentally tortured by her in-laws said that women with money and power got better treatment in the family and were often treated as assets.

I think when women have money and power; they get authority to run the family in their own way. Because they possess money, other family members also treat them with respect. She is treated as an asset to the family who can come to their rescue in bad times. This is the reason why she gets a better place in the family. Had I been working or having some money for myself I would not have adjusted in this family after all these things. At least in that

case I could have saved my child. I am still here because I have no other option.

This young woman had a miscarriage because of physical exhaustion for which she blamed her in-laws. But, still she had to adjust with them as she could not leave them and go, whereas a woman with money and power could have easily revolted against this kind of torture by the in-laws.

None of the women respondents above were interested in breaking families or exercising control over men but they were all against any kind of oppression and if given a chance, were ready to revolt like the villainesses. Tania Modleski asserts the same thing when she says ‘the soap villainesses work towards *control* not over men, but over *feminine passivity*’ (1982: 97). These villainesses are shunned by the older generation but they reflect the secret desires and aspirations of the younger generation. The young women discussed above were ready to overcome the feminine passivity with their money and power and more than the female protagonists, they could relate to the villainesses. In the following section we will see how the younger generation question the way the bad women get constructed in soap operas.

5.3.3 Construction of Villainess in Soaps: Generational Change

In this section we are going to see it through the perceptions of the young women that villainesses are nothing but the embodiment of the generational changes. A young self-employed married Muslim woman (from Bangalore) talked about the image of women in soap operas and their impact on real life. She said,

These soap operas play a major role in creating images of people based on their education and other backgrounds. Watching these soaps people start thinking that an educated girl is not good, a poor and illiterate man is always bad and things like that. So, soap operas are creating a false image of an

individual based on certain baseless elements. We see every educated and rich daughter-in-law in soap operas thinks in this same line without an exception.

On the other, hand all good daughters-in-law are shown as being tortured by their rich and bad in-laws. I remember how Vidya (in *Dulhan*) was tortured by her sisters-in-law because she was illiterate and was from a poor family. She was always told that she could never fit into this family because she was of lower status and illiterate.

She explained how soap operas construct the educated, independent, urban women as villainesses and the illiterate, helpless, rural women as heroines, who always became a victim. Audiences start constructing images of people based on their education and other backgrounds and then they start judging the real life characters according to those images.

A married, working Muslim woman (from Maharastra) felt that soap operas showed independent women in a negative shade which was nothing, but a trick to fool bored lazy house-wives like her mother-in-law.

Soap operas show women with education, money and power as negative characters because with this type of representation of working and independent women they can easily appeal to the sentiments of the bored lazy house-wives. Women like my mother-in-law will definitely enjoy when they see a house wife as the good woman and the independent woman as a bad woman. These soap operas are catering to the needs of such foolish audience.

A young Oriya house-wife who was a practising lawyer before marriage felt that this type of portrayal of women was nothing but a product of the patriarchal social structure and of those who were jealous and had a sense of insecurity about successful independent women.

Sometimes when women become more successful than men, the society can not tolerate it. People always try to find out flaws in such women. This is the reason why women who are successful become an object of constant scrutiny and often become the victim of our patriarchal society. From my personal experience I will say that professional women are more dedicated than their

male counterparts and this becomes difficult for our patriarchal society to digest. That is why these soap operas always try to present them in a bad light.

She puts the blame on the social structure and the status of women in Indian society. She feels that soap operas are representing the ‘dominant patriarchal hegemony’ successfully (Virdi 2006: 10). But, this kind of representation of strong, independent women as bad women leaves a negative impression on the innocent minds.

A working Muslim woman (from Maharashtra) talked about her husband’s insecurities because he was afraid that his wife would also start behaving like a soap opera villainess.

The way these soap operas are showing independent women is certainly influencing the mindset of the audience. When I was newly married my husband used to tell me ‘I hope you are not going to behave like Pallavi (the villainess in *KGFK*)’. I used to tell him that I could never become like Pallavi, because Pallavi went to that family again and again just to take revenge, but if someone did something bad to me then I would never like to see their face. I told him that I could not be so good like Parvati or Tulsi but at the same time I could not be like Pallavi. I am not a fool who will spend so much of time in taking revenge. I have got better things to do in my life.

These remarks and questions tell us how young educated and independent women observe the stories minutely and analyse the reason behind the way strong and ambitious women in soap operas are constructed as bad women. The women who question and challenge the patriarchal structure of power relations get portrayed as bad women in these soaps which construct a negative image for such women in real life.

5.3.4 Social Change: New Generation questions the Stereotypes

There are many respondents who find the soap opera villainesses too unrealistic but they are sure that these characters are having a lot of negative impact on the

audiences. But, there are some who also find them too bad and unnatural to have any such impact. In the following section we will see that some of my respondents reject these women saying they do not exist in their society. But, most of them agree that such things are influencing women audience especially the housewives. There are some who feel these characters are creating a false and negative image of women which is ultimately having a negative effect on the status of women in Indian society.

For example, a middle-aged Muslim house-wife expressed that such kind of portrayal was nothing but an insult to women in general. She also said that because of these things men have stopped respecting women.

Women can be negative but not all. All women can not be equally negative and dangerous... There is no decency in the cloths of these women characters. This is degrading our status in our society. People, especially men have started comparing us with one or the other soap opera character. The respect for women has disappeared and these soap operas have played a big role in this.

A middle-aged Muslim man, on the other hand, felt that these villainesses looked too unnatural and hence they had little scope to influence the audiences. But, he also said that soap operas had made a mockery of not just women but also the institutions of marriage and joint family.

Here a middle-aged Muslim man and woman agree that soap operas are helping in degrading the status of women in Indian society.

A middle-aged Muslim house-wife (from Bihar) argued that the very existence of a society meant that it could not have so many wicked women in it; other-wise it could not sustain itself. Quite similarly, a young Bengali house-wife was surprised with the number of villainesses that was shown within the private domain of traditional joint

families. She also wondered how societies could survive if women in families started to behave like these soap opera villainesses.

This middle-aged Muslim woman (from Bihar) differs from the other Muslim woman we discussed above. At the same time a Muslim and a Hindu woman from different age groups and regions negate the existence of such woman in real society.

Similar to these two women, a young unmarried unemployed Oriya man felt that soap operas were creating a false image of Indian women. As he could not relate these villainesses to his immediate surroundings he believed that such women might be from the western society or the upper-class. So, his notion of 'Indian women' did not include women from the upper-class. As almost all soaps show upper-class (very rich entrepreneurs) families he had every reason to make this guess. I have not spoken to anyone from the upper-class, so I can not say how audiences from the upper-class interpret these things but one thing is clear that soap operas are playing a major role in constructing a stereotypical image of women from other class and region. For example, a young Oriya house-wife who could not relate these women to her immediate surrounding but said they might exist in places like Bihar. So these two respondents who belong to the same region assume that such bad woman might exist in another class or society.

So, the viewers discussed above find these villainesses unrealistic but do believe that they are creating a false or negative image of women in our society and the last two respondents assume that they do exist but not among the Indian middle-class.

In this particular section we can notice that the interpretive community consists of members from different religion, region and age group. But, there are smaller groups with similar reading within the interpretive community. For example, respondents from Muslim community, middle-aged viewers and respondents from one particular region i.e. Orissa hold similar views with audiences from their own religion, age group and regional background.

5.3.5 Unrealistic but have lots of Negative Impact

A young unmarried Oriya man thinks if films can have so much impact on audience then soap operas must be influencing people, especially women's behaviour.

There are examples where people learn robbery, and other criminal aspects from films and implement them in reality. So, the film audience can become a threat to the society. Similarly when they show these negative characters playing all the tricks to put others into trouble and break the family, people will learn from them and more families will break.

He is afraid of the negative impact of soap operas because he feels audience will learn from them and they will become a threat to the family and hence quit naturally to the society at large.

Similarly, a young unmarried Muslim man (from Karnataka) is confident that if somebody watches it regularly then there will be a major impact on them. He is afraid that women will become like these villainesses and hence he requests women in his family to stop watching this stuff.

Another married Rajput man from Bihar strongly feels that women learn bad things from the soaps. He also says that though few men watch them there can have be little impact on them.

Being a man I can tell you that what ever these soap operas show have a very little impact on men. They never try to relate those things to their real life but it does leave a lot of impact on the minds of its women viewers. Women get deeply involved with the characters in the soap operas and they start assuming themselves in the place of their favourite characters. They compare themselves with the lives of those characters. I strongly feel that women learn very few good things from the soaps but they learn more negative things. They start internalizing those silly fights in the soaps and make them a part of their own life. It is a basic human tendency to learn bad things faster and I feel women do that faster than men.

He is confident that women learn bad things faster than men and they bring in the silly fights of their favourite soaps to their personal life. On the contrary, men forget things once the soap is over; never relate those things to their personal life and never do day-dreaming. As we have seen in another section where we have discussed about the good women and why men like them, men do compare things with their personal life and their immediate surrounding and they do expect wives like Tulsi and Parvati. They compare their favourite characters with women in their surrounding and sometimes with their life partner. Now one has to see whether that is good impact or bad impact. But, certainly it cannot be called 'no-impact'.

All these male respondents discussed above hold a gendered observation regarding the negative impact of the bad women characters on the women viewers. Agreeing to these men a middle-aged Bengali housewife said,

...such things can have a tremendous impact on its audience, especially on the housewives. They not so empowered. When they see such powerful, rich women they get all wrong desires, to achieve something beyond their limitations. They should not show such things.

She thinks the powerless women at home get all wrong aspirations and try to achieve them which can have very negative influence on their life, on their family and on the society at large.

Like other young women respondents we have discussed in the previous sections this woman also thinks that the bad women in soaps are empowered women, but their empowerment is threatening.

Similarly, a middle-aged house-wife from Karnataka thinks women who watch these things regularly must be learning these entire negative elements from them and the impact could be so strong that a person might change completely. She also gives an interesting remark like ‘women end up hating another woman’. As women are the main target audiences, it is they who watch these villainesses and for very obvious reasons most of them end up hating these women. She talks about her own reaction towards these women when she watches the soaps.

When I see such characters deeply then I feel such women must be existing and I get annoyed with those imagined woman. When I see such women again and again I start hating them thinking that when they are focusing so much on such characters then they must exist. If such characters exist they must be creating so many problems for the family. But, I know that I hate another woman without being sure of her existence.

Like the male viewers this middle-aged women also find the villainess threatening.

In this case (also what we have seen earlier) old and middle-aged women and men are part of one interpretive community whereas young women belong to another. Thus here age and gender turns out to be major factors which influence the reading of the text.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that there is no one way of reading the text. There is no homogeneity in the way viewers perceive the positive and the negative characters.

Gender, age, social, cultural and family backgrounds influence the process of meaning construction but audiences can not be categorized into specific interpretive communities based on these variables. For example, while analysing audiences' interpretation of good and tolerant women characters the interpretive communities got divided along the lines of age and gender but that division was not very clear. Men and older women like these characters and compare them with real life characters in their family and sometimes to themselves. They like these women characters even though they dominate the families in the respective soaps. On the contrary, younger women show their frustration at these good characters and revolt against them. But, this division between interpretive communities along the axis of age is not very clear because we can find younger women appreciating characters like Tulsi and calling them their role models whereas we have middle-aged women respondents who dislike them. Thus, the category of women respondents emerges as very complicated thus giving rise to multiple and complex interpretive communities within it.

The established stereotypical images get further strengthened by the way the popular genres portray women. For example, we have seen some of the audiences from Orissa saying they can not relate the activities of the villainesses to their society or family but they think such people might be existing in Bihar or in upper-class families or may be in western society. Here region and class become the significant variable in shaping the interpretive community. A young Muslim woman feels that such women are unthinkable in the Muslim communities in Kashmir. But, there are other Kannadiga Muslim women who talk about their own life experiences and relate them closely with soap opera characters and plots. So, again it is region and not religion that plays an important role in the process of meaning construction. Here the

interpretive communities are less complicated and have more clearly defined boundaries than the one we discussed above.

There are some who enjoy these negative characters and feel that the strength of good can be tested and retested only when there is bad. Men and older women respondents feel that they learn to be careful to face such people in real life. Nobody wants to be like the negative characters but the young educated women respondents feel that one should not be tolerant like the good women in the soaps and there is nothing wrong in revolting against any kind of exploitation or oppression. They support the villainesses because they revolt against the oppressing forces. They do not feel that by doing it they will turn into a villainess. The young women respondents argued that bad is not always bad and it is the over righteous women who are responsible for the construction of the villainess. The young, educated, upper middle-class women feel that it is better to become bad than being good and being tortured. Here both age, gender, education become the defining characteristics of the interpretive community.

The section on the construction of good and bad women characters in the soaps highlights that men vary in their interpretation. While talking about the positive characters most of them agree that such women are realistic and they wish if they can have such women in their families. But, there is frustration among those men who have not found a partner like that. Irrespective of these variations all of them appreciate and admire the good women characters in their favourite soaps. But, their opinions are widely divided when it comes to villainess. There is difference among men from the same Muslim community where one can relate such bad women to one of his family members whereas the other man finds them highly unrealistic and

impractical. In this case the difference in their opinion can be related to their own life-experiences. Thus, men constitute a comparative more consistent interpretive community while analysing the tolerant good women characters whereas they belong to different interpretive communities when it comes to their understanding of the bad women characters. In the first case gender becomes the major axis of formation of the interpretive community whereas in the later the interpretive communities are more influenced by the individual life-experiences than any other variable like gender or religion.

Similar to the last chapter where we discussed the formation of multiple complicated interpretive communities while analysing audiences' interpretation of the major institution like family, marriage and property in their favourite soap operas, this chapter also highlights presence of the multiple and complex interpretive communities while analysing viewers understanding of the good and bad women characters in their favourite soap operas.

Arguing in a similar fashion the next chapter attempts to analyse audiences' interpretation of religious and regional bias in the texts of soaps and tries to locate the formation of major interpretive communities among the respondents.

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CHAPTER-VI

Religion and region: two axes of discrimination

Chapter 6

Religion and Region: Two Axes of Discrimination

So far we have discussed the depiction of various institutions in soap operas and the changing trends in them; construction of ideal ‘womanhood’; and how audiences’ understanding and interpretations of these aspects in the texts is shaped up by their age, gender, education, regional and religious background and most importantly their individual life experience. In this chapter we will discuss about the religious and regional discriminations within the texts of soap operas and audience interpretation and reaction towards these biases.

The first section of the present chapter addresses the religious bias and construction of stereotyped images of the religious minorities within soap opera text and its interpretation by viewers of two religious communities, i.e. Hindus and Muslims. Here we will discuss the formation of two interpretive communities on the basis of religion with comparatively more defined boundaries (compared to those we have discussed earlier) but, then it will also examine the complexities within each of these interpretive communities.

In the second section we will analyse the regional discriminations in the texts of soap operas and the audiences’ interpretation of this kind of bias and marginalization of certain segments of the society by mass media. It is interesting to look the varied readings by audiences from different regional back ground. As the sample of this study includes respondents from eight different states (though majority of them belong to two states, i.e. Karnataka and Orissa) one gets a wide range of responses based on their regional background.

6.1 Hegemony through Homogenisation:

India not only comprises all the major religions of the world, but is also very diverse in terms of regional, ethnic and linguistic groups. But, television ‘soap operas’ project a homogenized image of this highly diverse Indian society. In this process of homogenization it fails to address the existing tensions within various segments of the society and on the contrary adds to them by simply not representing a large section of audience. It plays the role of an ‘ideological apparatus’ by imposing the ‘dominant ideology’ on the masses and validating the ‘natural superiority’ of one section over others. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2001 [1976]: 39) have said ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations ...the ideas of its dominance’. In other words cultural texts contain a social meaning, which carries the potential to generate political effect.

In India, commercial Hindi cinema has always operated as an agent of the ruling class by adhering to the dominant ideology, and by stereotyping and excluding other classes and ideologies. Talking in this context Kazmi (1999: 72) argues that ‘conventional cinema helps in the establishment of the hegemony of the ruling class, not through its capacity for sheer domination and deception, but because of its ability of appropriating visions of the world and diverse cultural elements of the dominated classes, transforming them and articulating them in forms which carefully neutralise any inherent or potential antagonism to the existing system’. Similarly Niranjana (1994: 80) says, ‘the hegemonic definition of the nation today may not overtly manifest itself as Hindu’ but ‘the claiming of the nation by the new middle class and

the series of exclusions (of dalits, of Muslims) it produces as *natural* feeds into the agenda of the forces of Hindutva...’. The same can be argued in the context of television programmes as well.

One can see regional and regional biases within the texts of the television serials since the Doordarshan era. For example, ‘several analysts contend that the Doordarshan version “homogenized” the Ramayan tradition by imposing a hegemonic north Indian, upper-caste narrative on its captive audience. They allege that it excluded regional and “folk” traditions, and critical, heterodox interpretations’ (Mankekar 1999: 171). Anand Mitra (1993) made similar allegations against the Doordarshan version of Mahabharat. As a consequence of reproducing a North-Indian Hindu India as ‘normal/natural’, other practices get marginalized and/or are represented as deviant and non-Indian which contribute towards the growing Hindu fundamentalism in India.

Interestingly, Shobha Kapoor (producer of Balaji Telefilms) in her interview with Shoma Munshi said that the depiction of Hindu prayers and rituals in the K soaps ‘has taught the younger generation about them, since they do not really know about all our festivals or the rituals associated with them’ (Munshi 2010: 180). It is clear from Sobha Kapoor’s words that the media software industry owners are using the popular genres for the religious socialization of the younger generation and when she says younger generation, she means the Hindu community and not the minorities. One can also see a clear dominance of Gujarati, Rajastani and Punjabi culture in the soap operas which explains their dominance over culture industries of India. We will discuss both the religious and regional discrimination in detail in the following section.

Till now scholars who have worked on various genres of media like films, news, serials, epics have looked at this mostly with the help of textual analysis and from the reader-response perspective (except Mankekar and Monteiro) whereas in the present study we will see the audience response towards this kind of media bias through their discussion on soap operas, or in other words, here it will be done through the audience discourse. In the following discussions we will see the media's bias with respect to religion and region (linguistic and cultural categories) respectively.

6.2 Hinduisation of Soap Operas:

The dominance of Hindutva ideology over different forms of popular culture, especially films, has been discussed and debated by many scholars. As Robinson (2008: 5) claims 'Films and other forms of popular culture after the 1990s are deeply implicated in the spread of Hindutva ideologies' (see also Rajagopal 2001, Brosius 1999). Even though 'the Muslims and Hindus as brothers is one of the enduring metaphors of Hindu cinema', the Muslim is not the patriarch (see for example in the block busters like *Hum aapke hain kaun*) as that privilege always already belongs to the Hindu male (Robinson 2008: 5). One can also see a reflection of this in the soap operas.

In soap operas we get to see Muslims only during festivals. For example, the whole Virani family gets an invitation to attend an Iftar Party from a Muslim friend of Tulsi during Ramzan. But we never get to see any Muslim friend of Tulsi or anyone from that family attending any function or festival hosted by the Viranis. There is no other interaction between these families during rest of the year. This clearly proves the

commercial interest of the soap operas makers. They just want to add another party into the story, so that they can drag it for some more episodes.

There are many other cases where Minorities are openly stereotyped and demonized by the popular media. As Jinabade (2008: 298) says, 'Bollywood has invariably stereotyped the depiction of Indian Christian characters as cigarette-smoking call girls, raving drunkards, church padres, and your everyday anti-Indian smuggler in league with the Muslim gangster'. John W. Hood (2008: 311) adds to it saying that a movie may not actually cause a person to act in a certain way but it can strengthen already existing beliefs or attitudes of a person.

After Bollywood as we have discussed here the trend has started on Television and within it, its most popular genre i.e. a soap opera. If we take a look at the number of soap operas in the past decade on various Hindi Channels, soap operas based on Hindu family and culture clearly out number the soaps based on any other religion, be it Muslims, Christians or Sikhs. As Jinabade (2008: 299) says,

Even on TV, no wailing soap operas are made based on Muslim families, or drama series made depicting Muslims leading lives as company executives, government employees, or progressive writers, etc... There was once a serial telecast by Doordarshan called *Gul Gulshan Gulfam*, which was based on a family of Kashmiri Muslims. That was many years ago, and no one from that family was a terrorist or a gangster or a qawwal or a mechanic.

There are few more names that could be added to this list, like *Heena*, *Nargis*, *Jannat*, *Kwhaish* (both on public and private channels in last few years). Even though some of them (like *Heena* on Sony and *Nargis* on Doordarshan) were widely popular both among the minority as well as the dominant community, none of them survived for

long, unlike *KSBKBT* or *KGGK*. We will get an answer for their short life and limited popularity in the following discussion.

I have 22 Muslim respondents in my sample, so it is interesting to look at the way Hindus and Muslims have reacted towards this particular aspect. ‘I have never thought of it’ was the first response to this question from most of the Hindu respondents. It seems as if Hindus take it as something very natural. But there are some who look at it very critically.

For example, a young Rajput man from Bihar said,

The soap operas do show some Muslim characters here and there but they are never shown in a dominating role. Almost half the actors in the film and television industry are Muslim but the stories are always Hindu dominated. I have never thought before why they do not show Muslims in dominating positions. As we know that the target audience for these soap operas is the women at home. As very few Muslim women step out of their houses for work they must be watching these soaps...

But, the attitude of my Muslim respondents is not homogeneous. Though they are aware of the under-representation of their community in the soaps, most of them do not express any concern. However, there are some who talk in a complaining voice. But before discussing it we examine the attitude of the dominant community towards this aspect.

6.2.1 A Conservative Hindu Attitude: Upper Caste Respondents

Though almost all my Hindu respondents said that they had never thought of the representation of the minority communities in soap operas, some of them tried to rationalize Hindu dominance in the popular media. They held a very conservative

attitude towards the minority communities, especially Muslims, and gave various reasons behind this dominance of Hindu family and culture based soaps.

A young highly qualified Brahmin house-wife from West Bengal said,

In India every one knows that a large chunk of Hindus hate Muslims. May be that is why they are not showing Muslims to avoid any kind of controversy. But I used to watch *Heena*.

Her apprehension gets confirmed in the response of a young Oriya Brahmin man, who said,

Right now there is one serial on Muslims on Sony. I was watching it for some time but stopped because I could not make out the relationships. After returning from office I can not break my head to understand their relations. So I do not watch it anymore. Another reason is when I see Muslims in a TV programme or film, I immediately relate them to riots and terrorism. I respect Muslims a lot. I do not think that all Muslims are involved in riots or all Muslims are terrorists but whenever there is a riot or a terrorist attack, it is by a Muslim. So when I see them on screen, those images first come to my mind.

If you talk about Muslim serials then I remember names like *Alif Laila*, *Alladin*, *Sindhbad Jahaji*, because these serials are very popular. As they are historical serials, they still give a good image of Muslims. So I like to stick to them.

These are the popular perceptions despite the fact that in so many of the recent terror attacks, the accused are Hindus. Perceptions given above and some given below are from upper-caste Hindus, particularly the Brahmins.

A young Oriya Brahmin woman working as an HR manager in an international firm said,

Muslims are the minorities. Majority of Indians are Hindus. Only Kashmir is dominated by Muslims. Well Muslims are there all over India but India is Bharat, where Hinduism is predominant. We worship lord Vishnu. We have 13 pujas (rituals) in twelve month (a crude translation of an Oriya saying). Maximum holidays are Hindu holidays and not Muslim or

Christian holidays. I do not disrespect any other religion but Hinduism is Hinduism, you can not deny the fact.

Brahmin respondents, which include men and women, house-wives and working women from different regions of the country, seem to share the strong 'India for Hindus' ideology.

A middle-aged Brahmin house-wife from Karnataka said that soap operas were not only situated within a Hindu dominated country, but they also showed the culture of those regions which were Hindu dominated.

India is a Hindu dominated country... Another reason is they are showing so many serials where the families are Gujarati, and in Gujarat the Muslim population is very low so they show Hindus. They do show some Muslim characters but I have never seen a Christian character so far. For example, Tulsi in *KSBKBT* has a Muslim friend; they celebrate Id and have parties together. I do not know whether majority of Christians understand Hindi or not. So that can also be reason why they do not find it necessary to show Christians. We are the majority and we do understand the language and so they show us more.

Gujarat is one of the fortresses of Rastriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) and holds a very biased attitude towards Muslims. Repetitive communal riots in Gujarat have shaken the whole nation time and again. Priya Raghawan (2008) could not get access to many Muslim families because of the persistent tension between the two communities in Gujarat. So it is perceived as justified that when soap operas are showing Gujarati families, how can they show Muslims in it. So on the one hand this respondent talks about and shows her concern towards little or no representation of other communities, on the other she justifies the channels showing more Hindu soaps.

All the viewers discussed above are upper-caste Hindus and their words reflect a very strong Hindu sentiment. It sounds as if India is for Hindus. Others can stay here but

when it comes to sharing of the media space Hindus should have a dominant space. These Hindu respondents are either ignorant of the Muslim culture or they have constructed a stereotypical image of Muslims, which is both a result of the global propaganda against the followers of Islam as well as their demonisation within the Indian society. As we have discussed it earlier Indian media especially its popular media (like cinema) have significantly contributed towards this.

Here we can say that upper-caste Hindus belong to one interpretive community when it comes to their understanding of construction of the minority communities in the media. Gender, age and region do not play any significant role in the formation of this particular interpretive community.

After discussing the attitude of the upper-caste/class over the dominance issue, let us examine the response of the marginalized sections. As I have said it earlier, it is difficult to put them in one category. Unlike the interpretive community discussed above, in this case the opinions vary on the basis of age and class. Even though they are aware of the discrimination, they do not know who to blame; the government, the private players in the market or the commercialization of the media where profit making is the only goal. Another important observation to note is that, soap opera as a genre has a better acceptance among the minorities compared to other genres in the mass culture industry. Soap operas have very limited and marginalized representation of the minority communities. But, through this limited representation itself they have successfully undone the hatred of the minority community towards mass media and the dominant ideologies, and have widely divided the opinion of the community towards them. These aspects are discussed in the following sections.

6.2.2 Never thought of it: A Muslim Response

Some of the Muslim respondents reacted just like the Hindu respondents. Like some of the Hindu respondents they never thought of the discriminatory role of media in their everyday life, especially in the genre they are so fond of.

A young, unmarried, lower middle-class Muslim girl from Bangalore said, 'No such thing comes into my mind. We get to watch serials, that itself is a big thing'. For this girl, who works as a sales girl in a garment show-room, television is the cheapest and only medium of entertainment because it is highly unlikely for her to go out and watch a movie in the theatre or afford any other kind of entertainment. But there are others from the higher income group and with better education who never feel that non-Hindu communities do not get proper representation within this popular cultural form.

A young, married, highly educated, upper middle-class Muslim woman from Bangalore said 'I have never felt that they do not show Muslims'. Agreeing with her another upper middle-class Muslim house-wife from U.P. said they did show Muslims, and also added that,

There are soap operas completely based on Muslim families and they are on different channels starting from the Doordarshan to the private channels. Earlier I used to watch *Heena* on Star Plus and now there is something on Sony which I have not started watching yet.

A middle-aged middle-class Muslim man from Karnataka also agrees with the women discussed above. He said,

I never feel that Muslims are not shown in the soaps. I used to watch *Heena*. Initially it was good but once it became popular the same kind of stories were added to it. There also they started showing two three marriages of Heena. When they started doing that I stopped watching. There was another soap

which was based on the Sikh community. Initially it was very good but I do not know why once these soaps become popular they get spoiled.

So for these Muslim viewers, who are from different age, gender, class and regional background, representation is not the issue. Either they are satisfied with what they get or they are simply indifferent about the religious dimension when it comes to soaps but, the problem is with the kind of stories they show. Here the interpretive community is formed along the line of religion and other variables like age, gender, class and region do not have a role to play.

6.2.3 Upholding the Secular Ideology: Another Muslim Response

I came across many other Muslims who regularly watch serials based on Hindu Gods and Goddesses, even though they do not watch soap operas. Most of them also mentioned the names of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata* as the first TV serials that they saw in the late eighties and early 90s'. Some of Muslim respondents expressed their interest in watching soaps based on Hindu mythologies, making it clear that they watch television soaps with a secular ideology.

For example, a middle-aged Muslim house-wife said,

I watch the soaps as family dramas. I also watch soaps on Hindu gods and goddesses. Recently I was watching *Maa Vaishnav Devi*. In that some people insulted Mataji so much, just because she was a woman. I do not like it when someone disrespects god, be it a Hindu God or our Allah because I am very God fearing.

Another Muslim house-wife in her late 30s said,

I always feel that first I am an Indian and in our country we have so many religions. So it never comes to my mind that the culture I see belongs to a different community. Sometimes my husband says that they are showing too much of Hindu culture but no such thing ever comes to my mind. When he

talks like this I say God is one and we should not divide him. I also believe that if I disrespect any God then I will face some problems.

Similarly a young Muslim girl from Bangalore (a student) said,

All the soaps that I watch are based on Hindu families so they show Hindu life-style, their rituals and functions. If I will watch a Muslim family based soap then I will get to see things related to my religion.

It reflects a secular ideology of these women. All the Muslim viewers discussed here are God fearing but they do not mind watching Hindu Gods and Goddesses, festivals and rituals. Someone could interpret this as the result of the continuous, repetitive and ultimately successful propaganda of the Hindutva through which it has achieved a hegemonic influence over the minorities. Nevertheless, there is no reason to deny agency to these viewers and challenge their genuinely tolerant worldview.

6.2.4 The Indifferent Muslim:

There is another category of Muslim audience who do not show any special interest to watch soaps based on Muslims. For them it all depends on the convenience. If a new soap starts showing Muslims but, its time clashes with an ongoing favourite soap of theirs' then they do not shift to the new one just because it is showing Muslims. They prefer to continue with their old favourite ones.

A middle-aged Muslim man, an Engineer from Karnataka said,

I have seen a few episodes of *Heena* but I was not regular. I have not seen any other soap based on Muslims. I am very particular about my soaps and never watch anything else. Even if it is showing Muslims I do not care much.

A young Muslim girl, a student from Bangalore added to it as she said,

They do show some Muslim soaps. I used to watch one on Doordarshan and I think right now also there is something on Sony. But we do not watch that. I

have not seen a single episode of that because we watch something else during that time and until and unless we stop watching that one, we can not start something new. As we like what we are watching I do not find it necessary to see something else during that time.

Very similar to the above respondents, a middle-aged house-wife from West Bengal said,

I have never seen a soap opera based on a Muslim family. I might have seen one episode because I got there while changing the channels but I have never seen one regularly. I watch those soaps which I like and I watch them very regularly and it is not possible to watch so many soaps regularly. I watch the soaps when I like the stories and the characters and never felt like watching one based on Muslims as such because I am Muslim. I have never thought of it also. I like what ever I watch and have no complains like they do not show Muslims much.

For these soap opera fans, consistency with their favourite soaps is more important than longing for something which depicts their religion and culture. None of them is ready to stop watching their favourite soaps.

This attitude clearly challenges the stereotypical image that Muslims are obsessed with religion. Muslim viewers discussed in the last two sections are like any other section of religious categories for whom religion is peripheral in most situations and sentiments of all religious believers should be recognised and respected.

In the following section we will see that a good number of my Muslim respondents feel that religion does not matter when it comes to soap operas because they are after all family dramas. Some stated that Hindu family or Muslim family, they do not find any difference in the stories of the soap operas. May be this is the reason why the respondents discussed above do not find it necessary to stop watching their favourite

soap for something new because they ‘know’ it already that there will not be anything substantially new in the story which is based on a Muslim family.

6.2.5 Insignificance of Religion in Family Dramas:

Some of the Muslim viewers find the role of religious aspect in soap operas insignificant and some of them can relate to the stories in soap operas based on Hindu families. They feel that even though the families are Hindus, the situations and events, politics and problems, tensions, contradictions and resolutions are similar for non-Hindu families.

My oldest respondent, who is a 65 year old lower middle-class widow, watches her favourite soaps at night and then the next day repeat telecast. Soap operas are her only source of entertainment. She said,

In our days there was nothing like television. Films were the only source of entertainment. But my husband never allowed me to go the theatre to watch films. Now in this generation you people have at least a good source of entertainment at home. How does it matter whether the family is Hindu or Muslim? The stories that they show in the Hindu families are very similar to what has already happened in my family.

Adding to this old woman, her daughter said that there was not much difference between the soaps based on the Hindu families and the Muslim families.

Right now they are showing one soap called *Khwaish* on Sony. But I do not like that because in that they are showing the same thing, the story is like any other soap opera. In the soap the female protagonist’s husband dies and she gets married to another man. But she is not able to accept this man. She has a baby from her first marriage and that is why her in-laws are not happy with her. So the story goes on like any other saas-bahu serial.

Similarly a middle aged house-wife from Bangalore felt religion did not matter when it came to the family drama.

I do not care whether they show Hindus or Muslims. What matters is how they are showing the relations in the families and what can be their impact on the audience. When it comes to families, relations and emotions, religion does not matter. But those who are making the soaps should be careful that they should not send any wrong message through what they are showing.

Adding to all these women, a 54 year old Muslim man from Karnataka said,

These are family stories. If they put a *Tika* (Vermilion) then they are Hindus, if they take it out then they become Muslim, but the family values remain the same.

A young married Hindu woman from Bihar speaks in a similar way. She does not find any great difference in the content of soap operas based on Muslims and Hindus.

I have also seen a couple of serials which were based on Muslims like *Heena* and *Sahin*. I used to watch *Heena* regularly but when they started showing her getting divorced and again getting married, I lost interest and stopped watching.

She gave the same reason for which she stopped watching soaps like *KZK*, *KSBKBT* and *KGGK*.

Here the interpretive community includes viewers from different age groups, gender, religious, regional categories. Unlike the interpretive communities discussed above which were divided along the axes of religion, this one is much more complicated as both Hindus and Muslims share a similar view when it comes to the significance of family values over religion.

However, not all Muslims are comfortable with their representation in the media. This is discussed in the following section.

6.2.6 Disappointment over Under-representation:

Not all Muslim respondents tried to justify the media moves. Here we find disappointment of a section of the respondents from the Muslim community regarding over representation of the dominant Hindu Community and the under-representation of others including the Muslims. Viewers need not be hostile towards these homogenising forces of mass culture but they have reason to be wary of it. And most importantly, they 'have no choice but to live with these representations of the 'Other' in the absence of alternative networks and narratives' (Bharucha 1994: 108).

A middle-aged upper middle-class house-wife from Bangalore felt that these soaps were over-representing and overdoing the Hindu traditions and rituals. She said,

I remember once they had shown the celebration of Ramzan in *KSBKBT*. But that was all. They always show *pujas* and *Hawans*. Which family keeps a *hawan* at home every now and then? I know so many Hindu families... They invite us during festivals and we go to their houses. But I have never seen a family having *Puja* at home in every fifteen days. Hindus also do their routine rituals every morning the way we read our namaz everyday. But they are not as grand as we see in the soap operas. Sometimes I do feel that they do not show Muslims. But when Ekta Kapoor is making the soap operas how can and why should she show Muslims in that.

This Muslim woman not just questions the grand and repetitive celebration of Hindu rituals in the soaps, but she compares them with what she can see in the Hindu families she knows. And then the blame goes to the Hindu producer-director of soaps Ekta Kapoor. She could be right as Soma Munshi (2010: 209) observes 'personally, and within their work space, production houses pay visible obeisance to deities of gods and goddesses, astrology and *vaastu*. This finds reflection in the stories our prime time soaps tell. As we have seen, prayers and celebrations of (Hindu) festivals are an integral part of soap narratives'.

Another middle-aged lower middle-class woman from Bangalore said,

All these soaps show only Hindu families. Instead of focusing so much on only one religion they can show others religions also. They can be friends or colleagues. But we never get to see such things. They show the Hindu culture so deeply. Similar things are also there in Muslim religion and culture but no one gets to know about them other than Muslims because we never get to see them. If we look deeply into these religions then we will not find much difference in them. They all have similar messages for the follower with little difference which we see at a surface level.

Adding to her views a young middle-class, highly qualified Kashmiri girl said,

Though I do not miss my culture in the soaps, I am tired of watching the same things in all soaps. Whenever they show a marriage it will be the same *saat-phere*. They can show marriages from different parts of India. They can show a Sikh or Christian wedding. They only show Holi and Diwali. These things force us to think differently. They can show Id and Christmas celebration sometimes. Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are also part of India.

In the film *Aamir* they have depicted a reality for the first time. Such things are very realistic where innocent Muslim youths are trapped by these extremist groups and then used for some wrong cause. I have seen it happening in my surrounding. In such cases their own families also hesitate to defend them. Even their mothers do not trust them. In such cases the young boys get further alienated from their families and society and get closer to the world of crime.

This is a very tolerant view of a multi-cultural society like India and a strong critique of the culture industry which depicts a lop-sided view of Indian society.

Another young lower middle-class Muslim girl talked about her disappointment with the under-representation of Muslims in soap operas but felt delighted when an episode showed Ramzan festivals.

I really feel bad that they do not show Muslims or their culture. But recently on Ramzan the whole Virani family of *KSBKBT* was invited by their friends. So they were talking about the festival and they also celebrated it with their friends. I felt so happy seeing all that. I think when they are making so many serials they could have shown us a little more.

The soap operas show Muslims only during the festivals. Several respondents talked about the celebration of Ramzan in *KSBKBT*, where the Viranis were invited by their Muslim friends and this was all done to satisfy the viewers of the minority community and increase the TRPs.

But, their response shows that it could not satisfy some of them. It is the Viranis who get invited for the celebration of Ramzan but none of the soaps ever showed the presence of any Muslim friends in the Hindu families during their festivals (like Holi and Diwali). It appears as if 'Muslims may be embraced in the fold of the nation or the home, through kin and neighbourhood ties, but this enfolding is a hierarchical one and is fundamentally non-reciprocal' (Robinson 2008: 9).

Moving ahead the same respondent said,

In DD-1 there were more number of serials showing Muslims but these private channels rarely show them. May be such serials will not be able to attract more audience and that is why they are not showing them.

Similarly a young Muslim man, a software engineer said that he felt bad about under-representation of Muslims in soap operas but talked about the better representation of his community on Doordarshan.

I had seen some soap operas on Muslims on Doordarshan but there is nothing on these private channels. Television has become biased towards the Hindus and other religions do not have any representation in them. Now-a-days we are getting habituated to accept whatever they are showing because there is no one whom we approach and ask to show our religion. We have to watch what they show and we watch it even though sometimes we feel left out. Even now there are soaps showing Muslims on Doordarshan but these days who watches Doordarshan.

This shows not only the frustration but also the helplessness of this young man as he feels that there is no way he or his community can influence the media which is in the

hands of private players. It also shows that even though 'Doordarshan' (which is the only government owned media channel) is trying to strike a balance by portraying the minority community and culture, it is losing out in the overall market competition to its private counterparts most importantly when it comes to its share in viewership.

Talking in a different tone than the young man above, a 54 year old man from Karnataka felt that though Muslims were still under-represented, things were getting better. He said,

Earlier these media people used to focus a lot on Hindus but now-a-days they are mixing up Hindus with other religions. They are doing it deliberately so that these communities do not fall apart from each other. I have heard my colleagues discussing these matters during the lunch break. They talk about that song *Mile sur mera tumhara*. In that they have shown Hindus from different regions of the country but there are no Muslims or Christians. Soon after independence, media used to focus on all religions and now also they are doing the same. But there was a period in-between when all other religions got neglected. Good relations between different religions had prevailed and are going to stay in this country.

There are other media forms which he talks about other than soap operas. Unlike the young man who gave the state-owned channel an upper hand over the private channels, this man tells about the dissatisfaction of his community over under-representation of Muslims on Doordarshan in past (when it was the only channel). In fact he looks satisfied with the present scenario. Here age and experience are the two variables which contribute to lack of coherence in the way these two men have understood and interpreted the existing condition. The older generation is satisfied with the changes whereas the younger generation wants/demands/expects more.

A 45 year old house-wife (the young engineer's mother, a widow) also spoke in a complaining voice about the media representation of Muslims. She said that media,

especially News and Films, represent Muslims as terrorists. But, she appreciated the way soap operas showed Muslim families and their culture. She felt that though soaps did not show Muslims much but at least they did not show them in a derogatory way.

They show Muslims but very rarely. There was *Heena* and right now there is a soap called *Khwaish* on Sony. When Muslims are shown on television and films they are mostly shown as terrorists. They are rarely given good characters to play. There might be one Muslim in a thousand who will be a terrorist but these media people turn all Muslims into terrorists. But I never feel that Muslims are missed out in soap operas because often in the Ekta Kapoor's soap operas they show the Dargha in Mumbai. They also show Id celebration.

Very similar to these views a 48 year old house-wife also complained against the news channels but not the soap operas. She said,

Sometimes I do get such feelings when the news channels highlight small Hindu festivals but do not pay any attention to our festivals. But I do not get any such feeling watching these soap operas. I was watching *Jannat* and *Khwaish*. Both of these got over in five-six months. So that was good.

Looking at all the views above, one thing is clear that the minority community feels neglected and stereotyped. But it is hard to find out where the flaw lies. Sometimes they feel better watching soap operas because at least they do not show Muslims as terrorists. Even though the number of soaps based on Muslim families and the number of Muslim characters in other long running soaps is very few, they are at least there unlike the Christians. The older generation feels the public channel and the news channels are biased whereas the youngsters feel the private channels, which are more profit oriented, focus less on minorities. Hence it is difficult to reach a consensus to blame any single institution. However, both the private and public channels have used a successful strategy of showing Muslims at least during their festivals even though such plots do not have much to do with the overall story.

Thus, there is frustration and helplessness on the one hand but also pockets of satisfaction and delight on the other. Most importantly, we find a very tolerant attitude towards a multi-cultural society among our Muslim respondents and in turn, they seek a similar tolerant attitude in Others.

6.2.7 ‘Misrepresentation’: A great Insult to Islam

Some of my Hindu respondents feel that Muslims are very conservative unlike Hindus. So those who are making these soap operas are showing more number of Hindu families to keep themselves away from any kind of controversy.

A middle-aged, highly qualified, Hindu Maratha house-wife from Maharashtra said,

I have seen a couple of Muslim soap operas. But one main problem with this Muslim community is they are very conservative in their attitude. In a Hindu soap they can show anything and no body will care for what they are showing. But Muslims make a lot of issue of their religion and customs. Those who are making soaps have to be very careful with what they are showing if they show a Muslim family, otherwise they will get into trouble. But Hindus are very liberal in this respect.

So it is the liberal attitude of the Hindus regarding their religion which makes the task of these soap opera producers hassle free, which can be a reason behind not showing too many Muslim soaps.

A Hindu Rajput man from Bihar said,

Muslims do have a fairly good population in India. But they are rarely shown in films and serials. One reason could be Hinduism is a very liberal religion. You can show anything about it and there will be no strong resistance from anyone. In our religion it does not make any difference if you do not follow the prescribed rules and that can be manipulated according to circumstances. But other religions are very strict about their codes of conduct. They will not allow any kind of deviation from the prescribed set of rules. So the soap operas makers will not get this amount of freedom that they have when they are showing Hindu families.

Indeed, some of the Muslim respondents voiced their concern at the misrepresentation of Islamic institutions and rituals.

A middle-aged upper-middle-class Muslim woman from Bangalore said that she was watching a soap opera based on a Muslim family but stopped watching it because she could not accept what they were showing.

I was watching one soap called *Kwhaish* on Sony which was based on a Muslim family. In that the husband of the female protagonist dies and immediately she gets married to her brother-in-law (devar). I did not like that. They also showed that her second marriage takes place when she is pregnant with the child from her first husband. This is strictly against our Muslim laws. That is the reason why I stopped watching it.

Similarly a middle-aged lower-middle-class Muslim woman from Bangalore said,

In *Heena* they showed the concept of Talaq in Islam so beautifully. Talaq is a very complicated and crucial thing in our religion but others think differently. In *Heena* they showed the whole thing in detail which was both informative and educative and at the same time entertaining. But, there are not many soaps like this, may be because our religion is very conservative and we do not like to see deviations. For example, in Islam women are not allowed to wear make-up while reading namaz. We can not touch the Koran with make-up. But in the soaps they show women with full make up doing it. It is an insult to our religion. These small things matter a lot to us. May be the soap opera makers do not want to get into these things and that is why they are avoiding the religion as a whole. But, Islam is not just about namaz and roza. There is a lot more than this in our religion. We also have families and we also have problems in our families just like Hindus.

Even though she is very particular about the religious matters she feels that Muslims do have a social and family life like Hindus which can be shown in the soap operas.

Disagreeing with the above women an upper-middle-class Muslim working woman from Maharastra expressed just the opposite view. She felt,

...whenever they show Muslim families they show that they are very modern in their external life-style but they have very conservative attitudes and

ideologies regarding religious and social behaviour. That is something I can not digest.

We see here that some Muslims are conservative about their religion and rituals as the Hindus assumed, but it can not be generalized. And because soap operas are family dramas they can simply ignore the religious aspect. If there are conservative Muslims, then there are conservative Hindus too. Similarly, there are liberal-minded Muslims as well as Hindus. There are tolerant and secular-minded individuals in both the religious categories. Yet one 'community' is stereotyped, underrepresented, misrepresented or simply made invisible. These concerns of the Muslims respondents reflect the frustration and a sense of helplessness among some sections of the Indian Muslims. Their responses are not entirely homogeneous even with respect to representation of Muslims in soap operas. However, there is a larger consensus on this issue than in the case of issues discussed in the previous chapters.

Thus, unlike the previous chapters where gender and age played significant roles in the formation of interpretive communities, here it is religion that shapes it and within the interpretive community one can see the formation of smaller interpretive communities based on age.

Having discussed the secular and not so secular attitudes of my respondents, now we move to see another set of responses where both Hindu and Muslim respondents agree that market plays a major role in deciding the content of any media text.

6.2.8 The Role of Market:

Unlike the respondents discussed above some of my respondents tried to find some logic behind under-representation of Non-Hindu communities. Most of them blamed it on the commercial motive of the media industry. Here ‘His Majesty, the Economy’ which serves the ruling class interest, suppresses any questioning about the role of human agency and motive behind the role of the mass media (Rajagopal 1994: 1660). This over economism provides an easy explanation to the dominant group and helps in winning the consent of the Others, thus strengthening the hegemonic influence. As competition for audiences decides what shows are produced, it also helps explain why there is hegemony in products which is ‘constituted within systems of production with established generic codes, formulaic conventions, and well-defined ideological boundaries’ (Kellner and Durham 2001: 19). This is discussed in the following sections from the point of view of the dominant category i.e. the Hindus, and the marginalized religious category, i.e. the Muslims, separately.

6.2.8.1 The Hindu Perspective:

A young Oriya Brahmin house wife gave a detailed list of reasons behind the television channels’ showing more soap operas based on Hindu families and therefore showing Hindu religion. Her explanation puts the commercial purpose at the centre; however one can also perceive a stereotyping of Muslim festivals and rituals.

They also show Muslim serials. Right now there is one called *Khwaish* on Sony and *Nargish* on DD-1. I watch them occasionally. The fact is that majority of Indians are Hindus and so it is obvious that majority of the audience for these soap opera are Hindus. And secondly when they show Hindu serials they have got so many festivals and rituals to show. What will they show in a purely Muslim serial? If they start showing a Muslim serial then people will get bored very soon. Hindu culture has so many dimensions which can be developed from episode to episode. For example, when they show a marriage or Durga Puja or Ganesh Puja being celebrated in the soaps they can drag it for the whole week, but if they show Muslims or Christians

than they can not do that. These are the reasons why they show more number of soaps based on Hindu culture compared to other religions.

There was a similar response from many other respondents. A young unmarried Oriya working woman loved watching soap operas based on Muslims but she also felt that the number of such soaps was less due to the ‘simple rituals’ of this community as well as some commercial purpose of the private channels.

I have seen *Heena* and *Jannat* which were based on Muslim families. I liked *Heena* because its story was different. They show more Hindu family based serials because in India Hindus are the majority. So if they show Hindu family based soaps then their TRPs will be more.

When they show Hindu families they can show so many festivals but if they will show soaps on Muslims then there will be just one or two festivals. When they show a Hindu marriage they can drag it for ten episodes because Hindus have so many rituals, starting from sagai, mehndi, mahurat and marriage which are again followed by post-marriage rituals, whereas in a Muslim wedding they just say Kubool, Kubool, Kubool and it gets over. Similarly in Hindu families it takes so much of time to get a divorce whereas for Muslims it is so easy. They just have to say Talaq, Talaq, Talaq.

It is this stereotyping based on lack of understanding that irks so many Muslims.

A young upper-caste Hindu man, an Engineer from Bihar in a way summarized all these responses even though he claimed that he had never seen a soap based on a non-Hindu family. He said,

I think if they will show a soap opera completely based on a non-Hindu community then its viewership will get limited because as we all know Hindus are a majority in India and hence they also constitute a major chunk of audience of these soaps.

And second thing is looking at the present terrorist image of the Muslims people must be afraid to make a fully Muslim community based programme. People might be afraid to show Muslim community because they might get caught for spreading a wrong message against other major communities especially Hindus.

So we can see so many Muslims working in the television industry but they are not interested to make a soap completely based on their community.

Muslims do not carry a good image in India so who will take interest in spending money to show them. Ultimately all those who are putting their money into these industries want a good profit. So they prefer to be on the safer side and do not want to get into all these community issues.

So it is not just number of festivals or the number of rituals or their minority status in the demography of the country which is keeping other communities especially Muslims out of these family dramas. There is a much bigger and a serious reason behind this denial of screen space. There are economic and political issues. Especially the demonization of the Muslim community plays an important role behind the biased representation of the community within all kinds of media texts including the popular forms like soap operas.

6.2.8.2 The Muslim Perspective:

Quite similar to the Hindu respondents discussed above, a young married Muslim woman, an Engineer from Maharashtra rationalised the reason behind not showing too many soap operas on Muslim families and culture. She said,

I feel that these soap operas always show those communities and religions whose members are rich, who live in joint families and who have more number of rituals and functions to celebrate. For example, these Gujaratis are rich businessmen and they live in joint families. Punjabis are also rich and they celebrate rituals very lavishly with food, music and dance. The soap operas often show these communities because they can focus a lot on the cultural aspects and the celebrations can add some visual pleasure to it. They can not show so many celebrations if they show a Muslim family.

A middle-aged Muslim man also pointed to commercial success as the main reason behind negligence of minority communities.

Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are minorities and the majority of audience is Hindu. The soap opera makers are doing business. Sometimes they do show characters from the other religions when the situation demands it but such things are very rare.

A middle-aged middle-class Muslim housewife tried to explain the reason behind the limited viewership of these soap operas among the Muslim community. She said,

They do not show Muslims in the soaps because not many Muslims watch them. In our religion we have to read namaz five times and if we have something special to pray for, then the prayer time increases. After these we have to do all the house hold work. So Muslims get little time to spend in front of the TV. Now-a-days with so much of violence around us, our religious community is coming forward to protect the youngsters. The young generation is asked to stay away from television because that is a big source which is misleading them. Now the clergy men are taking special interest and giving more attention to young generation. ...Soap operas are fine as they show family stories but there are channels and stuff which have no good lesson. ...But there are many others who do not take interest in soaps also. I think these are the reason why there are not many Muslim viewers for these soap operas and that is why they also do not focus on them.

While talking about soap operas she mixed it up with other genres and gave a religious and moralistic explanation for the limited viewership among Muslims and hence justified their limited representation in the mass-media.

Going beyond what the above respondents said, a young middle-class highly qualified Kashmiri Muslim girl, criticized the way media represented both her region and community. One can see that both her religion and region are under-represented in the various forms of popular culture on both national and private channels. She said,

Frankly speaking I always feel that India is for Hindus only. As if people from other religions are quietly being asked to leave India. ...in Films also whenever they show Muslims, they will be playing some negative character, though there are some exceptions. We are never treated as a part of this big Indian family...

There should be more number of films and serials which should show the real image of the Muslim community and discuss their problems on par with other communities rather than blindly labelling them as terrorists.

The life of Muslims in Kashmir is seldom shown in the mass media and when ever they are shown, they are labelled as terrorists, or one can say Muslims in general are stereotyped.

We never get to see Muslim families in the soap operas, may be because those who are writing and producing these stories do not know much about Muslims and their culture or there might a deliberate attempt to keep the Muslim community from this popular form of story telling.

There is no doubt that when she talked about the writer and director of soap operas, she had the most successful Ekta Kapoor in her mind. But if Ekta can tell a story about a Bengali family in *Kasauti Zindegi Ki*, why can she not make a soap on Muslims in general or Muslims from Kashmir. It is difficult to find an ultimate answer to this question here.

In this section we discussed how the Hinduisation of soap operas have generated a mixed response among its audiences (both Hindus and Muslims) and it is difficult to arrive at a consensus regarding the ways audiences from different religions perceive and react towards it. And most importantly even though there is some reaction among some viewers it is not channelized in a proper manner to create any demand in the market.

Here we can say that even though the interpretive communities are largely shaped by the religious orientation of the viewers but, still they are not homogeneous groups. One can indentify smaller communities within these interpretive communities based on age. Having discussed discrimination in the religious aspect let us move on to the other dimension of discrimination, i.e. regional disparity.

6.1.2 Regional disparity in the Hindi Soaps

Mankekar (1999) has discussed about the discontent among south-Indians regarding the representation of their society and culture in the serials on Doordarshan. Mitra (1993) also talks about the dominance of North Indian language and culture in Doordarshan programmes. But things have changed over time. Now not just Doordarshan, but many other private companies like, ETV, Sun TV, Gemini have their regional channels catering to demands of the local viewers but none of them enjoy the reach and popularity of the national channels. The picture and programme quality of the national channels are always better than the regional ones because ultimately everything depends on the audience following, which decides the kind of revenue flow through advertisements.

As my focus was on Hindi soap operas on national channels, there were no specific questions in my mind to find out whether people watched non-Hindi soaps but some of them talked about it on their own. Most of these respondents were Bengali women. A few Oriya, one Kashmiri, one Kannadiga and one Tamil respondent talked about non-Hindi soaps. Interestingly only one of my Muslim respondents talked about non-Hindi soaps although 17 out of 22 are from Karnataka, and one each from West Bengal and Maharashtra. The only Muslim respondent who talked about regional soaps was a young middle-class highly qualified girl from Kashmir.

Three out of six Bengali respondents watched Bengali soap operas on different regional channels. Hence they were comparing Hindi soaps with the Bengali soaps. For example, a middle-aged housewife said,

In the Bengali serials they generally do not show so many generations and I find them a little bit more realistic. The way these Hindi soap operas show

someone blackmailing the family and the daughter-in-law going out to pay the money, is something very unusual. They also show it in Bengali serials but very rarely. They also show so many marriages which is very unacceptable.

She finds the Bengali soaps more realistic compared to Hindi soaps but just like the Hindi soaps they also show characters getting married again and again. This is something she is unable to accept.

Just like her, an old housewife also finds the Bengali soaps more realistic compared to Hindi ones. She said,

I find the Bengali soaps more realistic compared to the Hindi soaps. I can relate those stories to my day-to-day life and my surroundings.

She finds them realistic because she can relate those stories to her own life and to the society¹ in which she lives.

Similarly a young housewife also finds the Bengali soaps more close to her heart but for a different reason.

I am also watching a few Bengali serials. The drama is the same in both Hindi and Bengali soaps. But the way they present things, the way they talk, the food, the way they celebrate the pujas (functions), I can relate more to the Bengali ones and so I think the Bengali serials are more close to my heart. But compared to Hindi Soaps the sets are poor in the Bengali soaps, the make-up is also not good. In Hindi soaps the sets and make-up are very bright and heavy, as if there is a full time party.

Unlike the other two Bengali women, she does not find the stories more realistic. Rather it is the food, functions, language and presentation of the whole performance in general which touches her heart. She finds the sets, costumes and jewellery in the

¹ Manisha lives in a locality where there are a good number of migrants from other states including Bengalis. One of my Bengali respondents introduced her to me and she herself took me to one of her neighbours who were also a Bengali. So when she says that she can relate the stories to her surroundings it includes a good number of Bengalis.

Hindu soaps too bright and heavy whereas in the Bengali soaps these things are poor and not so good. So ultimately the major difference according to her lies in the culture, language and presentation and not in the stories. Later on we will see how people from other regions also talk in a similar way.

Though a majority of Hindi soaps show Gujarati, Marathi and Punjabi families there are some based on Bengali families. The Bengali women also talked about those Hindi soaps that show Bengali families in particular and their culture in general.

The young housewife discussed above did not seem to be very happy about the dominance of certain regions in the soaps but she told me how it was done for purely commercial reasons. She was also not very happy about the way Bengali culture was presented in the Hindi soaps. She said,

They keep showing those Gujarati, Marathi and Punjabi families. The reason is majority of the NRIs belong to these three communities and that is why they focus on them so much. Recently I saw a new soap called *Ardhangini*, which is based on a Bengali family. She wears the sari in a typical Bengali style whereas these days the Bengalis wear it only during functions and pujas. They show weddings in Bengali style, they keep addressing each other Bhattacharya but actually the essence of West Bengal is missing.

So even though the Hindi soaps try to show the Bengali culture through sari, marriage rituals and names, she finds something missing in them. Very similar to her, the old woman also said,

There are Hindi soaps like *KZK* where they show a Bengali family but I do not see the Bengali culture in it. It only show cased the Bengali style marriage but there was nothing more than that. But I do not miss the Bengali flavour in Hindi soaps because now-a-days we have special Bengali channels like E-TV Bangla and there are plenty of Bengali programmes there.

Though these women and my other Bengali respondents do not feel the flavour/essence of Bengali culture in the Hindi soaps they do not miss it much because of the availability of plenty of Bengali soaps on the Bengali channels.

Quite like these Bengalis who complain about the lack of representation of their culture in the Hindi soaps, a young middle-class highly qualified girl from Kashmir also talked about the absence of Muslims in general and Kashmiris in particular in the Hindi soaps. She said,

I have only seen the Kashmiri channel depicting stories about Kashmir and its people but neither the Doordarshan nor the private channels have any stuff to show. When the Kashmiri channel talks about the culture of Kashmir then only people in Kashmir watch it, who already know these things. But if they show it on private channels then the whole of India will get to see it. I do not think anyone here knows about the life of people in Kashmir, be it about terrorism or about the Muslims.

I have never seen a Hindi soap that tells the story of Kashmir. We have so many problems there. Some are due to the terrorists and some because of the army. When a son goes to college then no one in his family can give a guarantee that he will return safe. He might become a victim either in the hands of the terrorists or the army. There are stories which talk about the misery of those families whose innocent members are killed by army in the name of encounter. Later to hide the matter they are declared as terrorists by the army. The life of the surviving members of their families becomes miserable because the society starts cursing them. But nobody knows about these things because they are never shown on these private channels. So if Kashmir and North-east are considered to be parts of India then their culture should be shown just like others.

There is both frustration and anger in her voice. Being a Kashmiri Muslim she feels abandoned when it comes to representation of her culture and narration of the story of families of her state. There, the politics in the family is very different from the rest of India because of the presence of Army and terrorists and these issues are dealt with only in Kashmiri serials. The Hindi soaps show something very different, to which she

can not relate. She feels the soap operas are showing the culture of Mumbai and not India because there is no variety in them.

Though the soap operas claim that they show Indian culture, I do not agree with that. If they are showing the culture of India then where is South Indian culture and where is North-east and Kashmir's culture? They are just showing the culture of Mumbai.

Unlike my Bengali respondents' complaints this girl's points are much stronger and focused. She does not think that soap operas are just for 'time pass'. They can also become a medium to pass on the culture and the distinct problems of different regions to the larger Indian audience. She feels such things will help the rest of India in having a real taste of Kashmiri culture and they will understand the problems of Kashmir and North-east with much more clarity.

Unlike these Bengali and Kashmiri respondents, my Oriya respondents did not talk much about Oriya soaps. Only one of them, a graduate house-wife, said that she watched them regularly and enjoyed them just like the Hindi soaps. She explained how the Oriya soaps were equally good. She narrated the stories of her favourite Oriya soaps to tell me that there was not much difference between them.

In *Gayatri* (an Oriya soap), that girl Gayatri is helping her deceased brother-in-law's (sister's husband's) family. Both her sister and her husband have died in an accident. In the sister's husband's family nobody knew about their marriage. So Gayatri goes to their family and tells them she is their daughter-in-law and helps them. Now they have thrown her out but still she is taking care of them. In this also I like to see how Gayatri is struggling to help her dead brother-in-law's family.

In *Tulsi* also that character Tulsi suffered in her father's house and now she is suffering in her husband's house. I do not think such women exist in reality. No can ever have so much of patience. Who will tolerate so much of torture?

Another young Oriya housewife (who was practising law before marrying a software engineer) also said the same thing but in a sarcastic tone.

They are just the Oriya remakes of these Ekta Kapoor style soap operas. You will not find any flavour of our culture in them. There is no difference at all.

Unlike my Bengali respondents who complained about Hindi soaps, this Oriya respondent of mine complains about the absence of the Oriya flavour in the Oriya soaps. They all made the point that there is hardly any difference between Hindi and Oriya soaps. Probably this is the reason why not many Oriyas even bother to watch them.

A young man (who is a college student, a Tamil born and brought up in Bangalore) who knows all four south Indian languages watches soaps in Tamil, Kannada and Hindi, said,

The main difference is in the costume and the setting. They are very rich in these Hindi soaps but the regional soaps are casual, just like what we see around us in our day-to-day life. The Hindi soaps show north Indians. So their costumes, jewellerys, functions and rituals are very different from the regional soaps. In Hindi soaps the temples also look very different from what we get to see in others.

For him the main differences are language, culture and presentation. He did not speak anything about the content of the soaps in south India.

On the contrary, a middle-aged Kannadiga house-wife, who prefers to watch Hindi soaps than the Kannada ones, said,

They were showing *KSBKBT*, *Kasauti Zindegi Ki* and *Kahin To Hoga* in Telugu and Kannada. But they stopped them in one year. They just showed one generation. In Karnataka the audience will never accept so many marriages and divorces. So they cut those things when they showed those serials in Kannada.

She makes it clear that even though she watches the Hindi soaps there are certain things in them which are unacceptable in her society and culture. This is the reason

why the life of the remake of the same soaps in Kannada is short. They want to avoid the twists and turns in the soaps to make them popular among the south Indian audience. The same things which sell well for the rest of India have to be changed to appeal to the South Indians.

Unlike the Doordarshan audience, my respondents did not complain much against the national or satellite channels because of the presence of a good number of channels in different regional languages. But still everyone was aware of the big fan following of soap operas in Hindi compared to any other language. This is the reason why the Kashmiri girl wanted them to become a medium to spread the culture of different regions especially those who are in trouble, like Kashmir and North-East.

In this work the North-South dichotomy has got blurred and new issues have been raised. The issue of language has got sidelined may be because most of my south Indian respondents are Muslims (out of 24, 22 are Muslims), which can be considered as one of the major limitations of my study. Here culture is the most debated concept. Audience wants to see the authenticity of their culture even if it is in a different language. One can say that as most of my respondents are migrants they speak different languages but the only thing that they cherish and want to preserve is their culture which can keep them connected to their extended families in far off places.

Finally, I would like to say that representation of a diverse nation like India needs the construction of a common platform where everyone will find an opportunity to speak but as, Bharucha (1994: 110) says, ‘through the creation of several voices of dissent, multiple points of attack and defence, sharply individuated, yet linked’.

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the media discourse and the audience discourse play equally important role in the construction of meaning and hence the reception analysis has to take the text, context and the audience into consideration while analysing the ideological dimension of culture and its reception by the spectators. We also saw that regional and religious biases are inbuilt within the texts of soap operas and audience vary in their interpretation of such ideological construction of text; as some are ignorant, some are indifferent, and some critical.

Here the interpretive communities are shaped by variables like religion and region. These interpretive communities have comparatively more defined boundaries than the ones we have discussed in the previous chapters. But, still it is important to note that the critical viewers discussed here are also not homogeneous categories. Their understanding varies based on their age, class and personal experience. For instance, we saw in case of religious bias in soap opera text that the older viewers blame it on the public channel whereas the youngsters on the private ones. Some blame it on the directors and producers, whereas some on the market. There is no clear agent who they can blame.

Another important thing that we saw here is that soap operas have generated a good number of faithful audiences within the minority communities and from regions which are rarely shown in them. We saw people complaining against news and films for their biased representation but we rarely get to see someone complaining against soap operas. Soaps have succeeded in manufacturing consent in favour of the dominant ideologies among its dedicated viewers. So, it has become a successful

ideological apparatus in the hands of the ruling class. Even though some of the viewers are critical but they are too confused to generate a debate.

The growing number of soaps in the regional channels has reduced the burden on the national channels and hence the debate of the regional disparity in the popular mass media has lost its vigour. But still there are some who expect more from the soaps on national channels. Some feel that certain messages can spread and stereotypes can be removed (like that on Muslims, Kashmiris and the North-east region) if the national channels (which have larger viewership compared to any regional channel) focus on them.

Though we have come across some ‘oppositional readings’ by the active spectators, they are helpless because control of the medium ultimately lies in the hands of the capitalists, and for capitalists the ultimate ‘faith’ is not any religion but accumulation of ‘surplus’ which comes through ‘profit’ and these capitalists, whether they belong to the majority or the minority community, target the majority community for the maximization of their profit. This ultimately helps in the reinforcement of the culture and values of the dominant community and works as ‘ideological apparatus’ in regulating ideas of the masses and constructing consensus through hegemonic influence over minority communities and regional categories.

This is where the ‘effect’ studies tradition, which was highly influenced by political economic theory, critical theory and theory of hegemony, still holds a strong position and can not be rejected in favour of the reception analysis.

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CHAPTER-VII

Conclusion: Unstable Interpretive Communities

Chapter-7

Conclusion: Unstable Interpretive Communities

This thesis attempts to make sense of the popularity of Hindi soap operas on various national channels of Indian television by taking into account the interpretive strategies and observations of the urban middle-class audiences around a time when neo-liberalization has impacted the middle-class for more than a decade and television in India has completed fifty years of its existence. Out of these fifty years, last twenty years have seen the fastest growth in this industry which started with liberalisation of the economy.

This era of liberalisation has brought with it bonanzas for the middle-class with rapid changes in their life-style while keeping the poor out of this carnival. It has brought new hopes and aspirations for a fast growing Third-World country like India but at the same time it has made its economy susceptible to global risks. Instability has become the order of the day and people are struggling hard to cope up with these newly emerging trends in the society. The large scale migration has shaken the spirit of traditional joint family.

There is significant increase in number of educated and independent women, who are now trying to redefine their position in a patriarchal society. There is sharp increase in the number of love marriages, divorces and remarriages, which were not easily accepted a few decades back. These changes in the basic institutions of the society have added to the already existing tensions and contradictions of the society in general and in the lives of the individuals in particular. The stability of categories like caste, class and minorities can no longer be taken for granted and individual

experiences have become important. This is what one gets to see in the texts of the popular genre called soap operas which have very wide appeal across regions and communities and also in the way audience construct meaning out of these popular texts.

This study takes into consideration the texts of some popular Hindi soap operas on the national channels and the audience reception of these popular soaps within the domestic setting. It makes an attempt to understand how the interaction of the text, the audience and the context of consumption play equally significant role in the construction of meaning.

The present study was carried out in an urban ‘middle-class’ setting in the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore and the units of the study were individual viewers who were embedded within the domestic setting. This choice of picking individual viewers as units of analysis was made purposively because during my field work I found that most viewers (that is almost 50% [29 out of 60] of my respondents) prefer to watch their favourite soaps alone. This is how the study differs from another recent study on Hindi soap opera audience in India carried out by Priya Raghawan (2008) where she picked up family as the unit of analysis.

The study addresses the limitations within the ‘cultural studies’ and of ‘uses and gratification research’ of media audience by taking into consideration the everyday life as well as the individual life experiences of the viewers. Thus, it can be placed within the still evolving ‘third generation’ reception studies. Methodologically the study can be situated among the ethnographic studies of media audiences as it purely

banks on data collected through qualitative method like in-depth interviewing. But, it makes advancement over other major ethnographic studies in this area (like the *Nationwide* audience study by Morley and the study of viewers of *Dallas* by Ang) by placing the viewers and their media consumption habits within the domestic setting. It also moves ahead of other media audience studies by taking into consideration a wide range of factors such as age, gender, class, caste, religion and region. It looks at the interaction between these socially and culturally constructed categories on multiple and often simultaneous levels in the process of meaning construction of their favourite popular cultural texts and the characters within them. What emerges from the study is that, individual life experience plays a very significant role in the process of meaning construction along with other variables like age, gender, class, caste, religion and region.

Before getting into the study of soap operas and its audience, this study outlines the growth and development of television and its audiences in both the rural and urban settings of India in the past 50 years and then tries to focus on how soap opera as a genre has evolved in it. It broadly divides the genre of soap operas into two categories: the development oriented soaps (on Doordarshan) and the entertainment oriented soaps (both on Doordarshan and Private channels). It explores the texts of these soap operas both in the pre-liberalisation and post-liberalisation context. In this process of textual analysis the work focuses on “women” as they are constructed in the texts and at the same time women as the target audience of soaps and hence the prospective receivers of the messages of the soaps.

In the pre-liberalised context the textual analysis of the soaps carried out by various scholars (like Punwani (1988), Monteiro (1998), Mankekar (1999), Chakravarti (2000)) shows that inspite of Government guidelines women are constructed stereotypically in soap operas, both in the pre-liberalized and post-liberalized context. On the contrary, recent studies by scholars like Jensen & Oster (2008) and Munshi (2010) claim soap operas as a source of empowerment for the audience, especially women. Instead of calling them stereotypical or sources of empowerment, the present study examines the construction of various institutions in soap operas and the status of women in these institutions, through textual analysis of the texts of soap operas and through the analysis of audience perception.

For instance, in an attempt to compare the construction of women in soap operas in the pre and post liberalisation context, respondents of this study feel that women in the early Doordarshan serials were much more progressive than the ones shown on various channels (both Doordarshan and private channels) at present. The middle-aged and old respondents (those above 40 year) compared the character of Kavita (in *Udaan*) with that of characters in contemporary soap operas like Tulsi and Parvati (in *KSBKBT* and *KGGK* respectively) and appreciated Kavita for her ambitious and independent attitude.

Initially in the post-liberalization era with the entry of the western genres like soap operas and reality shows, the focus of research shifted towards the assumed effect of these new genres on Indian audience and their value system. For example, it was believed that the dubbed soap operas on the different private channels which had a western origin and carried an alien culture had negative effects on Indian audience.

But, these studies found that the audience were aware of the harmful effects of these programmes with a foreign origin, thus they could not have any bad effect on their way of living or thought process.

After briefly discussing this phase of research on Indian media and audience, the thesis moves ahead and discusses the development and Indianisation of soap operas and then analyses the changes that have taken place within the genre in the last two decades. Here one gets a clue regarding the strategies deployed by the production houses to address the fragmented audiences like urban/rural, young/old, women/men by adding new dimensions to this popular genre.

For example, the broadcast of the dubbed version of U.S. soap operas could only appeal the urban upper-class segment of the Indian viewers. In order to attract the attention of other segments of viewers the local production houses came up with the local versions of soap operas as well as reality shows. This trend started with the broadcast of *Shanti* and *Swabhimaan* on Doordarshan in the mid-nineties and then towards late nineties they got extended to the new private channels like Zee, Star Plus and Sony. Since then they have mushroomed in number and have become the dominant form of entertainment in the primetime. For almost a decade the trend within soap operas remained constant with few deviations here and there. These soap operas were located in the urban upper-class setting and revolved around themes like family, marriage, divorce, remarriage, property disputes.

In the past two years a new set of soaps have come up on new channels like COLORS with so-called progressive themes. These soap operas deal with issues like child

marriage, widowhood and teen age pregnancy (in *Balika Badhu*), female infanticide (*Na Ana Is Desh Lado*), poverty and illiteracy. But, they had just started when the field work for this study was being carried out. Hence my respondents were not very familiar with them as they were still stuck with the older soaps which they used to watch regularly. Thus, the present study does not deal with these new set of soap operas in detail. The third chapter of the dissertation briefly deals with the structure, popularity and debates pertaining to these new so-called progressive soap operas but there no analysis of audience perception regarding these soaps as the respondents rarely talked about them. This leaves a scope for further research on television audience in India.

Similarly the study does not deal with the reality shows and their viewers. Initially the reality shows were very few in number and variety and were shown only during the week ends when they did not have to compete with soap operas. But, in the past few years the reality shows have also spread over different channels and have become very popular. Now there is a huge variety of reality shows (based on themes like song, dance, adventure, matrimony) on Indian television and they have also started encroaching upon the primetime schedule in the weekdays which were so-far dominated by soap operas. Thus they have become a challenge to the undisputed popularity of soap operas and hence need to be studied critically.

Along with the above two limitations there is one more constrain in the present research which leaves scope for future research on television and audience, i.e. soap operas on the provincial channels and their reception in both urban and rural settings.

The subsequent chapters of the thesis deal with the interaction between the text and the audience, and then with the process of meaning construction. It reflects on how variables like age, gender, class, caste, religion and region along with individual life experiences play significant role in this process of consumption and analysis of the media texts by the viewers. To identify the patterns in the process meaning construction, the research tries to locate the viewers within various “interpretive communities”.

The first analysis chapter deals with the construction of institutions like family, marriage and property in soap operas, and their interpretation by the viewers. Here gender and age turn out to be the major axis along which the interpretive communities get constructed. But, then the analysis shows how these interpretive communities are too complicated to be divided into two absolute categories based on these variables. It also focuses on personal life experiences as another important factor (along with gender and age) in the formation of interpretive communities. Quite similar to the discussions in this chapter, the next analysis chapter tries to locate the interpretive communities with respect to audiences’ understanding of the positive and negative characters in their favourite soap operas. Here also age and gender appear as the significant variables in shaping the interpretive communities. Quite like the previous chapter, here also we get to see that the interpretive communities are too complicated to be divided into specific categories as their members keep shifting, thus making the borders fluid. The last chapter talks about religious and regional discriminations within soap opera texts. Differing from the previous two analysis chapters here religion and region turn out to be the significant variables in the formation of interpretive communities. Unlike the interpretive communities discussed so far these

interpretive communities have comparatively more defined boundaries though one can also locate smaller interpretive communities within them based on variables like age, personal bias and individual life experiences.

Studies so far have shown that interpretive communities can be constructed along the axis of variables like age, gender, race, education, marital status, religion, and cultural background. In the present study I have also made an attempt to locate them along many axes like age, gender, education, religion, caste, regional background, but still I do not claim to have exhausted all the possibilities as there can be lot more that can be deduced from a respondent's association with different variables. What emerges, significantly in this study is that the interpretive communities are not fixed entities. They keep getting dissolved and re-emerge *depending upon the context and issues under analysis*. Having said this I am not rejecting the idea of interpretive communities as such. Rather the argument here suggests that it is not possible to reduce audiences into 'interpretive communities' based on variables like gender, religion, class and region.

As John Fiske (1996 [1989]: 536) in the article 'Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience' points out that '...there is no such thing as "the television audience" defined as an empirically accessible object... The "television audience" is not a social category like class, or race, or gender – everyone slips in or out of it in a way that makes nonsense of any categorical boundaries: similarly when in "it" people constitute themselves quite differently as audience members at different times'.

Here one can see that, when there are issues like the marginalization of religious minority in the popular media there is a clear demarcation between the way Hindus and Muslims have responded. But again between each of these communities one can see sub-categories. For example, there are Hindus who feel that the media is doing just the right thing by focusing on Hindus because Hindus are the dominant communities in India. Whereas these are Hindus who feel that media should be impartial when it comes to representation of religious communities. But, one can notice that this kind of view does not come out very strongly from the dominant community. On the other hand, one can see that the respondents from the Muslim community (who also can be divided into sub-categories just like their Hindu counterparts) speak much more clear and loud when it comes to the issue of their under-representation in the popular media. Very often it was found that while talking about soap operas they also compared it with other genres like news and popular films. Of course there were some in this community who even attempted to rationalize what the media was trying to do by naming it as a strategy to make more profit and to sustain in the market by beating the competitors. And there were those who even tried to defend the media representation by saying they are satisfied with what ever they get to watch.

Quiet interestingly, religion looked insignificant and gender as a variable appeared more prominent than others when my respondents were talking about the joint family, its representation in soap operas, its advantages and disadvantages in the present urban middle-class society. Here there was difference in the response of men and women even though it can not be reduced to that. Men always showed interest in the way soap operas construct joint family and also showed their willingness to go for it

even though none of them actually lived in a joint family (some of them mentioned that they lived in joint families when they were children). But, women had a mixed response towards the institution. Though some of them said that they were for it, they were more specific about why they wanted to go for it. One could see that men want to live with their extended family for emotional reasons whereas women want it for practical purposes. Both housewives and working women long for the joint family but for different reasons. For instance, housewives miss it when they are depressed or sick, whereas working women like it because they will get some assistance in the household work as well as child-care. So, those who prefer it, feel joint family has more advantages compared to nuclear family, whereas there is one section of women respondents who have cited personal life experiences (bad experiences with in-laws) to explain why they prefer nuclear family than joint family. None of the women respondents show much interest in living in joint family though they say it differently. Both housewives and working women like to go for a joint family only if there will be no one to create problems at home. They did so either by specifying the kind of people they want to live with or by simply rejecting the household structure. So, when it comes to the reception and interpretation of joint families in soap operas, gender along with personal life experience appear as the major criteria based on which the interpretive communities are formed.

There are studies which treat women audiences as a distinct category. Janice Radway's work on romance readers, Ien Ang's study on the *Dallas* viewers focus on women as a category and through their studies they try to find out how these women position themselves with respect to the text and construct meaning out of it. The group of women that they talk about belongs to a particular class and race and hence

these works treat them a uniform category. But, as the theory of intersectionality claims dividing viewers on the ground of gender and thus addressing woman as a category is insufficient to describe her experience. Along with gender it is also necessary to know her class, religion, age, marital status to describe her interpretation and attitude towards the way media represents various institutions and the changes in them and the changing status of women in them.

There are works which divide women along the axis of class, race, and ethnicity and classify them as members of different interpretive communities. But, the present study further complicates these categories of women by taking their personal life experience into account. To simply put it one can say that women from two different class, race, and ethnic background might share a similar experience in life and that will have an impact in the process of interpreting a text as a result of which they can come together to form an interpretive community. For example, a Hindu woman and a Muslim woman, a rich and a poor woman, an upper-caste and lower caste woman will differ in their interpretation while talking about religious or class/status aspect in the text. But, they all might share a similar experience (which can be good or bad) with their mother-in-law/sister-in-law/husband and that will reflect in their interpretation of the way relationships are shown in the soap operas. Such interpretive communities cut across the lines of gender, class, religion, race etc.

There are cases where men and women belong to two different interpretive communities but there are instances where men and women belonging a particular class, or, caste or religion belong to the same interpretive community. For instance, while discussing about the negative impact of media on ‘others’, middle-class, upper-

caste, educated men and women form one interpretive community as they feel that lower-class, lower-caste, poor people are at the receiving end, whereas the same set of men and women belong to two different interpretive communities when it comes to the analysis of family structure and politics in soap operas. Similarly, Hindu men and women might share a common understanding as opposed to Muslim men and women while discussing about the way minority communities are represented in popular genres like soaps. But, while talking about the way women are constructed in the soaps this Hindu-Muslim bloc dissolves and men from all communities, caste and class come together to form one interpretive community as opposed to that of women as a whole.

Moving further the attitude and interpretation of viewers belonging a particular age-group differs from other age-groups. The older ones (those who are in their 40s and above) who have seen the televised serials on Doordarshan and have witnessed the growth of the genre of soap operas on Doordarshan as well as Private channels possess an ability to compare them with the present generation of soaps. Here it hardly matters whether the viewer is a man or a woman, Hindu or Muslim, more educated or less educated, upper-middle-class or lower middle-class. In this case a 50 year old Muslim man and a 40 year old upper-caste Hindu woman belong to the same interpretive community as their age equips them with a different way of understanding than other member of their own community or class or gender but belong to a different age group.

So even though sometimes we get to see ‘interpretive communities’ being formed by audience who can be divided on the lines of different variables, the ‘interpretive

communities' are not fixed and homogeneous. Instead they are dynamic, evolving and fluid and an individual simultaneously belong to various such communities, depending on the context. One can see the formation of smaller groups or communities within these interpretive communities based on people's educational background, or exposure to other forms of media, or personal bias or individual life-experiences.

This was just one aspect of looking at reading of the texts. If we look at it from another perspective we can see that a person's interpretation varies within the same textual discourse. For example, a Muslim man who loves the characters Tulsi and Parvati and hates characters like Kamolika and Pallavi can be called as someone who belongs to the category of audience which reads the text 'operating within the dominant code' (Hall 1993). But, at the next moment when he talks about the negative media influence on teenagers and talks about frustration within the Muslim community against their biased representation in the popular media, he automatically shifts to the 'oppositional reading' of the text as he challenges the dominant discourse. So, the same individual reads the text differently when it comes to the reading of different sections/aspects of the same text. In other words 'the relationship between medium and audience is not one-sided and that the role and social situation of the viewer may help to govern his selection and response' (McQuail et. al. 1996 [1972]: 450).

So, it is not just the interpretive community which is complicated to be labelled as a homogeneous entity, rather what we saw here was the reading of an individual audience can be equally complicated and hence can not be labelled under any fixed

category like preferred or negotiated or oppositional for that matter. To conclude this one can say that, '[I]t is unlikely that any universally valid structure of media-person interactions could ever be erected on an empirical basis, since the phenomena in question are to some extent variable according to changes in audience experience and perception and also to changes in communication content and differences of social context' (McQuail et. al. 1996 [1972]: 452).

The study shows that the interpretive communities are unstable. They can have their boundaries defined along few axes but they overlap with others as the viewers belong to multiple interpretive communities at the same point of time. As we have discussed here, interpretive communities can cut across the lines of gender, class, religion, race and form "intersecting interpretive communities" and similar to the theory of intersectionality, these "intersecting interpretive communities" can be used to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine.

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Annexure
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Name: _____
2. Age: _____ 3. Occupation: _____
4. Income: _____ 5. Caste: _____
6. Favorite pastime:
7. How many hours a day you watch television?
8. What are the programmes you love to watch other than soap operas?
9. Which was the first Soap Opera you saw?
10. What are the Soap Operas you have seen till now?
11. Which was your favorite among them?
12. Why did you stop watching them:
 - (a) It got over.
 - (b) You lost interest in it.
 - (c) You started watching another Soap Opera during that time schedule.
13. What are soaps you are watching at present?
14. Which is your favorite one and why?
15. When do you prefer to watch your favorite soap opera: (a) during prime-time, (b) the next day/evening repeat telecast? Why?
16. During the prime-time when the whole family is around, who selects the programme (which particular soap opera) to be watched?
17. Do you have to negotiate with other family members to avoid unpleasant situations?
18. Which one you enjoy the most:
 - a. Watching with family;
 - b. Watching with friends;
 - c. Watching alone;
19. What are the other activities you are engaged in while watching?
20. You choose to do some domestic work while watching or you are simply forced to work when your favorite soap is on?

21. Do you prefer to do something other than your domestic work while watching?
22. How do you react if interrupted during an interesting scene or dialogue?
23. Do you talk while watching soap opera? If yes, then do you talk something related to the story-line of the ongoing soap opera or you also have conversation on other topics?
24. Do you talk about or discuss what is happening in the soaps with your family members or in your friend circle?
25. How do you catch up with the story if you miss an episode:
 - (a) From other family members;
 - (b) From friends;
 - (c) From the programme *Saas, Bahu aur Sajish* on Star News;
26. Which is/are your favorite character/s and why?
27. How do you react when you do not like a decision taken by your favorite character?
28. What are your feelings towards the strong negative characters?
29. Do you think men are portrayed properly in the soap operas?
30. Do you find any realistic element in the soap operas?
31. How do you relate the issues in the soap operas to your day to-day life?
32. Have you ever felt like learning anything from them, starting from a moral lesson to any simple materialistic element?
33. Have you ever stayed in joint family? You see all these people in soap opera live in joint families. How do you feel when you watch it?
34. What is your reaction towards the way they show marriage, divorce and remarriage?
35. Do you think these things are happening, particularly the divorce rate is increasing in reality or they are showing it just like that?
36. Do you think our society is going through a phase of transformation where class is taking over caste, especially with respect to marriage?
37. Which is the relationship that attracts you the most in soap operas?
38. What are the things in or about the soap operas that irritates you?

39. They show only Hindus in the serials but we do have Muslims and Christians in our country. But they are never shown in these soap operas?
40. They only show upper-class people? What is reaction towards that?
41. There everybody is fighting for money/ property. Do you find it realistic?
42. Do you ever get emotional while watching these soap operas?