

The 'Soap Operas' of the Epics: The Mythological Impressions on Visual Medias & The Expansions of Global Market Advertisements in India

Arun M.

Fellow of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR)

Department of History

SreeSankaracharya University of Sanskrit

Kalady, Kerala, India

Email:arunzdomain@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper promises to analyze the features of 'Soap Operas' (known as —serials in India), its growing experiences and emergence in India after the colonial regime. The study is focusing on the epic 'Soap Operas' especially like Ramayana and the Mahabharata and its popularity among the common folks in India. Here, the paper is discussing the role of Doordarshan as a national broadcaster and also efforts to find out its relevance within the socio-political and cultural scenarios of the post-colonial India. The paper discusses the mythological impressions and its visual reaches among the people and how these 'Soap Operas' impaired the common middle classes in India and their political and cultural perspectives.

Keywords: Bharatiya Janata Party, Hindu Consciousness, Mahabharata, Ramanand Sagar, Ramayana, Saas-Bahu, Star TV, Valmiki.

Introduction

By the mid-1950s, soap operas (known as serials in India), films, and film-based programs were the programs which attracted to increasing amounts of sponsorship and advertising revenue homologous to other daily features like news, sports, talk shows, quiz shows etc. Within two years, a program named Hum Log was begun and this became successful and popular entertainer in the genre of Indian soap operas. Later, the Indian epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata had become the significant part of mainstream 'soap operas' and the national broadcaster-Doordarshan initiated to serialize them. This study exercises to analyze the socio-cultural perspectives of the visual interaction of the people and these epics for the creation of a nation's political and cultural identity.

The Mythological Impressions of the 'Epics' in Indian Visual Media

During the 'post-colonial' phases of India, numerous private satellite television channels and the national broadcaster *Doordarshan* have begun to inflect Indian perceptions in interesting ways. These introduce newer elements by different ways to the experience of expressive culture and the self-understandings of nationhood (Natascha, 2006:33-34). As a national broadcaster, the state-owned *Doordarshan* channel established in India during the nineteen seventies. In its primary stages, *Doordarshan* programs telecasted often oriented to 'social education' rather than entertainment. After the failed experiments like *Krishi Darshan*, *Doordarshan* initiated the most popular show like *Chitrahaar* which showed music clips from Hindi films. The eighties saw a steady change. Nationwide color transmission was introduced at the time of the Delhi Asian Games in the year 1982. By the end of the decade, *Doordarshan* serialized renditions of the epics *Ramayana* & *Mahabharata* which proved to be immensely popular (Sanyal, 2008:65).

The juxtaposition of a series of episodes from the *Ramayan* the actors who portrayed Ram and Sita in the 1987 *Doordarshan* television serialization of this epic embodies the historical interpenetration. This television broadcast is widely accepted as a key event in India's movement towards the Hindu right, leaving in its wake a 'politics after television' (Rajagopal, 2002:278). The *Ramayan* screened its first episode on National Programme on Sunday, 25 January 1987, and the serial ran for seventy- eight weeks. It was produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar, a veteran of the Hindi film industry. Although the *Ramayana* is attributed to the sage *Valmiki*, there are many regional versions of the epic. The one chosen for *Doordarshan*'s production was mostly based on Tulsidas's *Ramacharitamans*, a seventeenth-century devotional glorification of Lord Rama, the protagonist of the epic. (To distinguish between the serials and the epics, the serials shall henceforth be referred to as the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*, and the epics as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, a practice espoused by some academics.).

As with all epics, there are many subplots and digressions contained within the tale. Thanks to the director's film background, the serial was filmed in Hindi with extravagant costumes, lavish sets, and opulent visuals. Although emotional, melodramatic, and overwrought, it was designed to move the viewer to feelings of devotion for their Lord or deity. For many, the weekly episode was a religious moment, a time for devotion. Academics point out that many bathed and purified themselves, even lighting oil lamps and incense sticks (symbolic acts of worship) in front of the tele-

vision set, prior to viewing the serial. Some have argued that the revival of Hindu nationalism and the election victory of the rightwing Hindu-nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in the regional and national elections from 1991 onwards can be traced back to the success of this serial.

The second epic to be screened on Doordarshan's National Programme was the Mahabharat. It was directed by another veteran Hindi film director, B. R. Chopra, and its production was as gaudy, garish, opulent, and extravagant as the Ramayan— and even more popular. The Mahabharata epic is made up 83,000 couplets divided into eighteen cantos. It is longer than the Ramayana, the Bible, and Homer's *Odyssey*. It was serialized in ninety-three episodes from September 1988 to July 1990.

Both epics form part of the Hindu consciousness, and references to their episodes sprinkle everyday life and speech. However, the two epics are fundamentally different. The Ramayana is a morality tale inhabited by idealized characters—Rama is the ideal king, his wife the ideal woman, his brother the ideal brother, and even the villain is an idealized example of villainy. As an epic it offers guidance on what constitutes good and evil, and what upholds righteousness. In contrast, flawed and tragic characters people the Mahabharata. No one is perfect. The wrong doers have poignant moments of goodness and the heroes have critical weaknesses that move events inexorably towards the tragic war. The epic holds in its heart a complex but deeply antiwar narrative and condemns the destructive nature of war.

Most critics, who had already sharpened their pencils for a frenzy of acerbic barbs and clever writing, panned both epics. They sneered at the advertising Shakti (power) in bhakti (devotion) and sought amusing alliterations in “mythology, make believe, and masala” and “devotion, dharma (righteousness), and drama” to describe the serials. But while the intelligentsia dismissed them as pure kitsch, the serials found an immense and devoted following among the general public.

At first the advertisers showed little interest in sponsoring the serials. But once they realized that almost the entire nation, particularly the urban middle class, was mesmerized by the weekly renderings, they promptly queued up to advertise their products during its transmission. Ramayan represented a milestone in the history of commercial sponsorship on Doordarshan, generating spectacular revenues for the network and out-grossing all concurrent programs. The Mahabharat outdid even the record-breaking revenues of Ramayan. According to a newspaper poll, nearly 92 percent of Indian television viewers watched the Mahabharat (Rajagopal, 2002:278).

The success of these serials established the mythological/devo-

tional genre as a permanent feature of Indian television—so much so that the genre, which originated in cinema, has been entirely appropriated by the little screen and has virtually ceased to exist in popular Hindi films. But the genre has not remained the monopoly of Doordarshan. When satellite television arrived in India in 1991, the new channels lost no time in offering their own daily devotional and mythological serials.

The Arrival of Satellite Television in India

The arrival of commercial satellite television in India dates back to 1990, when AsiaSat1 was launched. It was the first privately owned satellite communication network covering all of Asia, and its owners were a consortium led by three firms: the Hong Kong-based Hutchinson Whampoa, Britain's Cable & Wireless, and China's CITIC Technology Corporation. The northern and southern geographical extents of AsiaSat1 covered thirty-eight countries, from Egypt in the west to Japan in the east. The southern footprint of AsiaSat1 covered the entire Indian sub-continent. In 1991, STAR TV was launched as a joint venture between Hutchinson Whampoa and its chairman, Li Ka-Shing. Since STAR (an acronym for Satellite Television Asian Region) is an English-language network, Hutchinson Whampoa gambled on being able to attract the English-speaking elite communities of Asia by offering them high-profile Western programming. The venture was to be funded by the advertising dollar, with multinational firms vying to sell luxury products and services to this niche market (Barraclough, 2000:3-17).

Cable had begun unofficially in India in 1984, spreading from tourist hotels to apartment blocks and finally to individual households. Videocassette players, linked centrally to a cable network, fed the networks (hotels, a few apartment blocks, and individual households) by subscription, and by May 1990 there were 3,450 such cable networks. In the four major Indian cities—Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata—over 330,000 households had been cabled, forming an audience of 1.6 million (Ray, 1996:7-28).

In 1991, cable networks that had equipped themselves with satellite dishes gained free access to STAR TV and its BBC and CNN channels. The first real challenge to the Doordarshan's news monopoly came with CNN's broadcasts of the Gulf War in January 1991. This kind of access to a foreign war zone within the comfort of one's living room increased the Indian public's interest in cable networks. The death of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi, in 1991 was the first time Indians witnessed a major national tragedy live on a foreign TV network (Lahiri, 1995: 23-45.).

At first STAR targeted the urban, educated, middle-class viewers. It

offered special introductory rates for advertisements on its channels, which cost a quarter of the price of advertisements on Doordarshan. Small local companies advertising greeting cards, shoes, and fire extinguishers jostled with multinationals to sponsor U.S. programs such as *The Cosby Show* and *Murphy Brown*, which, together with *Santa Barbara* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, had become primetime viewing. In fact, *The Bold and the Beautiful* became the conversation topic in urban Indian society. Dinner parties were rescheduled to allow aficionados the pleasure of the broadcasts.

STAR also conducted research on its audiences and found that Indians tended to stay at home rather than head for the hills or the countryside on weekends, unlike viewers in the western countries, so they quickly revamped their lackluster weekend schedules. Within six months, subscribers to STAR TV had jumped from 400,000 to 1.2 million, an increase of over 200 percent. By the end of the year India had become the largest national audience for STAR TV, a phenomenon that astonished its executives in Hong Kong. However, STAR TV's audience, large as it was, constituted just a fraction of Doordarshan's, which in 1992 stood at around 125 million in the urban areas and around 75 million in the countryside (Rahman, 1992: 21-53.).

Despite the onslaught by commercial cable and satellite channels offering round the - clock entertainment, Doordarshan has remained resilient, even though it continues to broadcast public service programs that are so unattractive to advertisers and commercial television. In 2000, Doordarshan inaugurated Gyan Darshan, an educational channel along the lines of the Open University. More recently Doordarshan decided to rectify its battered image of a down-market, ungainly dinosaur by hiring a public relations firm to develop its image and brand. It has tried to improve its presentation by improving sets, professionally training anchors, and amending its programs to take account of viewers' preferences and the market.

General Entertainment Programs

Although, the results of surveys published by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Economic Times, and other newspapers and magazines, tend to vary, they all agree that the regional channels and general entertainment in Hindi garner over 80 percent of the total viewership and comprise the largest segment of the market. The programs include primetime soaps, quiz shows, music contests, comedy programs, and talk shows. STAR TV's Star Plus channel, which now broadcasts entirely in Hindi, leads the field in entertainment, with forty-five of the nation's top fifty programs, followed by Sun TV, Gemini TV, Sony Entertainment, ETV, and Zee TV.

The most-watched category of the general entertainment is the soap opera. At any given time, every broadcaster in Hindi and the regional languages has at least one and often more soaps. They are generally about extended families, with the struggle for power among various members of the extended family dominating the action. Central to these conflicts are the vicious power struggles between the mother-in-law (*saas*) and the daughter-in-law (*bahu*). Since most Indians, both in the cities and villages, live in extended families with several generations cohabiting under one roof, these soaps find great resonance with audiences. These *saas-bahu* struggles are epitomized in long-running soaps such as STAR TV's Hindi-language *Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. Others include *Kahani Ghar-Ghar Ki* (STAR), *Des Mein NiklaHoga Chand*, *KkoiDil Mein Hai*, and *Kkusum* (Sony). The leader of the pack is *KyunkiSaasBhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, which, in order to keep ahead of the rest, must come up with ever more innovative and daring ideas. For example, its production company, Balaji Telefilms, was the first to decide to shoot some of its episodes in Australia.

The soaps target female audiences, and most run only on weekdays. Drawing on unrestrained feminine greed and ambition, first introduced to Indian viewers by *The Bold and the Beautiful*, screened by STAR TV in the early 1990s, Indian soaps are intense family dramas. "Television clearly loves the new nasty that seduces husbands, steals boyfriends, exchanges babies and manipulates mothers-in-law," writes critic Kaveree Bamzai (Bamzai, 2004: 56-63).

The soaps concentrate on affluent, urban, unhappy Indians and unfailingly narrate incidents of rape, divorce, and extramarital relationships. "A good soap asks for the impossible," says television's top writer Manohar Shyam Joshi, who invented the genre with *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad*. "It must be high drama which can masquerade as reality" (Chandra, 1996: 33-48)

The most successful news channel is the Hindi-language *Aaj-Tak*, owned by Living Media India, Ltd., which also owns the news magazine India Today. The company's success can be attributed to its decision to woo the small businesses that had previously been shunned by advertisers as too insignificant or down-market. In doing so, it broke advertising records and showed that dedicated news channels could be lucrative business. The success of *AajTak* encouraged other broadcast companies to start news channels in regional languages.

According to the survey published in the Economic Times, the cable and satellite news channels' share of viewership, which was just 2 percent a few years ago, has risen to 6-7 percent. Advertising revenues have accordingly increased, too. News channels corner 14 percent of the total

television advertising revenue. The reason for this disproportionate share of revenue is the perception that the genre mainly attracts men, who are the decision-makers for the purchase of high-value goods in most families. Also, news viewers are often perceived as the opinion farmers of the nation. Advertisers therefore consider them a significant emerging market.

The international broadcasts include Indian programs and sometimes programs specially made for the immigrant population overseas, which constitutes an important revenue and target for advertising. So lucrative is the overseas market that many Indian programs such as the musical quiz-cum-singing contest *Sa Re Ga Ma* are shot in the United States and the United Kingdom with Asian audiences (Joshi, 1998: 51-68).

Conclusion

The most impressive feature of Indian television has been its exponential growth. Despite a late start, television is now the fastest growing area of entertainment in India, and the forecast for Indian television, particularly regional television, is one of continued growth. As penetration of terrestrial, cable, and satellite television into the rural areas increases, the regional sector is expected to grow considerably.

There are a total of 192 million households in India—56 million in urban areas. Of these, 43 million receive terrestrial television, with 27 million households also subscribing to cable and satellite networks. There is therefore scope for growth and this growth also depicts the expansions of advertisements also in urban areas, particularly in cable and satellite television connectivity.

Therefore, 136 million rural households of which only 39 million receive terrestrial television and 13 million have cable and satellite connections. Cable and satellite penetration in regional hinterlands, away from the main commercial capitals, is particularly low, and the scope for growth in the rural areas is tremendous. However, growth in television connectivity in the hinterland will depend on improved infrastructure, particularly the availability of electricity in the rural areas. The biggest advantage of DTH technology is that it renders the role of the cable operator redundant. Digital technology and signal compression also create savings on transponder services while allowing for greater numbers of channels. However the more expensive addressable system and aerial dish required for DTH result in increased costs for the subscriber, a very important consideration in mass media diffusion in India (Kasbekar, 2006: 151-174).

The mythological printed images in advertisements were popular at the time of colonial ages. The so called 'Soap Operas' provide and hike

in the popularities of such genres of advertisements and the expansions of media in the present level made it more wider and easier. The epic images and its later impacts made a new culture of 'consumption' and a 'consumer persuasions' in broad and which created a scope for the emergence of brands and brand images in the markets not only the regional level but also in the global scenarios. Nowadays, such depictions in advertisements also prevailed in popularly by using new mediums such as internet and social networks. The epics also get the popularity through its divine and satire depictions and both of them acted as an effective marketing methodology among the modern consuming system.

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