

## CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN IN SOAP OPERAS

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**Abstract:** *Women are an important component of our society. The issue of the empowerment of women is a matter of serious concern and thought. Efforts are being made to establish the significant role that she can play to uplift herself, her family and the society at large. Women play an important role to make society progressive and lead it toward development. They are vital assets of a vibrant society required for national development. There can be no denying the fact that women play a key role in shaping the society provided they are given the right and equal opportunities at the right time. The efficacy of television as a means of communication is very high vis-à-vis women. Television has an important role in shaping and influencing their views, opinions and attitude. Soap operas are a very popular genre and have a huge viewership.*

**Keywords:** *Empowerment, women. Soap-operas, Doordarshan, social change, ideology*

### **Defining Empowerment**

The concept of empowerment is heuristic in understanding the complex constraints in Third World development. According to Fawcett, et al (1984:146), "community empowerment is the process of increasing control by groups over consequences that are important to their members and to others in the broader community." Rappaport (1987:121) describes empowerment as "a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighborhoods." Another definition describes empowerment as "an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources." (Cornell Empowerment Group 1989:2). Empowerment is the "manifestation of social power at individual, organizational, and community levels of analysis." (Speer and Hughey 1995:730). Empowerment is a process which changes existing power relations by addressing itself to the three dimensions - material, human and intellectual resources. It is a process which must challenge and change ideology, the set of ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices in which gender bias or social bias like caste, class, regionalism and communalism are embedded. The failure to address the ideology makes many empowerment programs ineffective in changing gender relations in the

long term. For some it could lead to a perception of control over their lives while for others it may mean actual control (Rappaport 1987;Young1994);it could be an internalized attitude or an externally observable behavior; it could be an individual achievement (Zimmerman 1990;Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988), a community experience (Chavis and Wandersman 1990), or a professional intervention using strategies that are informed by local realities Addressing transformation of ideological environment, in the way people think is a very integrated and critical task of the empowerment process. However, it is not hard to do with women, as people who are oppressed always somehow know that they are oppressed, they only need a social environment which permits them to articulate the oppression. The process itself defies easy definition and the starting point is a realization on the part of an individual, group, or community of its inequitable position, its powerlessness in the system, or the relative neglect of its needs by the larger society.

When defining and understanding female empowerment, power is the central word from which the definition and understanding have to depart. The power structure in which to intervene to empower women must be known to be able to create a sustainable change. Merely access and control over resources do not explain control over power relations. It is necessary to go beyond the resources themselves to the more complex dimension of ideology in order to understand the power relations. Ideology is a broad term used to signify the value systems, attitudes and beliefs which surround power relations. The term ideology can make us understand why changes in resources do not necessarily lead to changes in for instance gender relations. The whole element of ideology seem to explain why even when women are bringing in the bulk of resources they continued to uphold male power and continued to participate in their own subordination. The ideology is deeply embedded in the consciousness of women.

Empowerment is well suited to deal with social change in general and with inequitable structures in particular. It provides individuals, communities, and organizations with the necessary skills, confidence, and countervailing power to deal effectively with social change in a world that distributes needs, resources, and power unequally. However, empowerment facilitates sharing of knowledge and solution alternatives among the participants in the process.

Investing in women capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the most reliable way to contribute to economic growth and overall development (UN, 1995). United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Agenda 21, mentions women's advancement and empowerment in decision making, including women's participation in 'national and international ecosystem management and control of environment degradation' as a key area for sustainable development (Wee and Heyzer, 1995). The Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) called for the recognition that empowering people particularly women to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development and that empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decision determining the functioning and well – being of societies.

### **Mass Media and Women's Empowerment**

Mass media are regarded as powerful intervening factors in the process of modernization and social development. The question that needs to be critically analyzed and examined is whether the contemporary media are still aware of their basic functions – inform, educate and entertain people. Media as the watch dog of society have the responsibility of keeping an eye on the social changes in the major social institutions and their sub-systems. Women's empowerment should bring a situation where women can use their fullest potential and capacity to construct a better human society for all and media has a critical role to play in responding to these processes. Media commitment and support are seen as necessary for social reform and various movements towards achieving a better equality of life for women.

From the ultra – feminism of the 60's to the introspection on women's status in the 70's, to women's development in 80's and to women's empowerment in the 90's there has been a reshaping of paradigms of human development especially on the feminine front. The mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the development process through women specific policies and objective oriented intervention programmes is an important goal of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001). Images of the “new Women”, whose femininity remains intact as a consumer, or as a hard headed individualist, whose feminine side must be sacrificed, illustrate changing social and economic demands on women – whose “femaleness” remains the core issue (Melkote and Rogers, 2000). Mankekar (1993) argues that Indian television in early 1990's addressed up - worldly mobile women as the prime market for consumer goods and at the same time trying to engage them in constructing a national culture through Ramayana and Mahabharata – in which role of women in family, community and nation was depicted as cardinal.

Media are very effective, powerful and influential in disseminating new knowledge, useful for behavior change among women, thus influencing women's empowerment variables as well. Hum Log in 1987, which reached an audience of 80 million promoted smaller families and equal status for women. Humraahi focused on the rights of women to equal education and employment, to choose their own marriage partners, and to determine whether and when to have children (Tedesko, 1996). The exposure of woman to media, media portrayal of women in the media, are some of the important dimensions to be analyzed to examine the role of media in women's empowerment. Although the participation of women in mass media is increasing, they have not gained much parity with men in participation and decision making women and may lead to programmes in which there will be gender justice and a feminist based approach to the portrayal and presentation of women. Exposure to media, particularly television because of its visual aspect causes knowledge accumulation and behavior change among women reflecting the participation of women in decision – making, inter family communication and role-negotiation of women at home which can help in achieving better quality of life. The Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) outlines two strategic objectives in regard to women and media that are aimed at promoting women's empowerment and development-i) increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision – using the media and new technologies of communication; 2) promote a balanced portrayal of women in the media (Tiongson, 1999).

Empowerment of women involves the process of challenging unfavorable power relations that lead to their oppression and at the same time strengthening women's actions to gain control over their lives through strategies and policies based on greater gender equality. Communication through women voices and experiences is the basic step towards empowerment of women. Development strategies must focus on greater freedom of expression and communication to ensure women's empowerment.

### **Television and Women in India**

Doordarshan, with its social objectives which are, in part, to spread family planning, to control population and uplift family welfare and to uplift the well-being of women, children and the less privileged (Doordarshan, 1996), plays an important role in the states' efforts in the development of women in the country. Yet documentation squarely frame the recipients of development initiatives as helpless, lower caste and lower class women , and nationalist serials and dramas that construct the ideal women as chaste, middle class, upper caste and Hindu, have persisted through the 1980's (Mitra, 1993; Krishan and Dige, 1990; Mankekar, 1999 and Mc Millin 2002).

The introduction of economic reforms in 1991 to increase competitiveness in domestic and international markets through extensive government deregulation in both spheres, further complicated the development function of Doordarshan as it strived to maintain its foot hold in an urban television market (Gopal Saxsena,1996). Doordarshan revamped its programming to offer an entertainment – oriented mix of films and film based programming, sitcoms and dramas (Mc Millin, 2001) Although officials high in Doordarshan hierarchy reported the network produced

programming targeted at women and rural residents on issues of health, sanitation, agriculture and family planning, it was reported that Doordarshan content was increasingly entertainment oriented with large doses of film based programming. Development objectives were far from the objectives (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

Analysis of Doordarshan content have indicated that over the decades, development programming that presented a critical awareness of the diversity of women's groups and need were almost absent. Dhansraj (1994) after her analysis of *Adhikaar* (Rights), *Kashmakash* (Struggle), *Aur Bhi Hai Rahain* (There are other ways), *Stri* (Women) *Air Hostess* and *Udaan* (Height), notes that DD assumed women to be uniform in their needs and their representation was that of middle-class, upper caste, urban Hindu seen in most dramas, domestic labor was framed as an extension of the women's natural mothering role. 'Women in power' was defined by the patriarchal norm that saw it necessary to downplay her sexuality. Manekers (1999) analysis of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* -mythological dramas and of 'women oriented' narratives like *Rajani* and *Udaan* of the late 80's reveal that women in these programmes were either portrayed as divine beings within the constraints of Hindu revivalism or as progressive and powerful women who were limited by their women attributes as in the case of contemporary drama.

The attempts to diversify channels and programming to meet market demands as put forth by Joshi working Group in 1984 holds good in the current environment for Doordarshan. It is obvious that the role of the state in utilizing television for national development has been far from dynamic. If the potential of television for development in India is to be revived, it becomes pertinent to shift the programming from being centrist, top down patriarchal to the one that is critical, decentralized, alternative, grass roots and far reaching in its efforts. (Singhal and Rogers,2001).

With the coming up of cable and satellite channels and the proliferation of such channels, Doordarshan can no longer be solely responsible for development programming. A critical paradigm is suitable for the current television environment in India as it accommodates diversity in production as well as consumption. Also it recognizes that women are differentiated by their class, language and experiences. Communication projects using such a paradigm have resulted in far reaching and sustained change in such countries as Bolima (Ruiz, 1994), Thailand (Taylor, 1994), and Brazil , Chile and Peru (Radriguez 1994).The success of radio soaps in Lima, Peru, that dealt with their social and economic issues (Alfero, 1988) suggests that soaps on India TV could be built on the varied experiences of target audiences as well. The success of pro-social programming such as the 1969 Peruvian soap, 'supplements Maria' (Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers 1994), 1983 Japanese drama "Shin" (Singhal and Udorupin, 1997) point to the potential of television to disseminate development message on issues such as literacy, health, women's rights and so on, in entertaining formats. "Pro-social entertainment television programmes can be targeted to the oppressed and less empowered in a given audience and can strike a balance between production-centered and people centered programming". (Singhal and Rogers,2001). The phenomenal success of *Hum Log* in 1980's from Doordarshan can be a lesson for revival of entertainment – education programmes to meet the development objectives.

### **Women and Soap – Operas**

Soap operas are part of the everyday lives of their audience. They have successfully been able to present the everyday happenings and also form a part of the cultural exchange which goes on in both the home and the work place. Fiction is inter-woven with events in the "real" world- both those directly experienced by the viewers and those which have been reported in the media. The popularity of soap-opera rests on its undemanding nature and its preoccupation with everyday concerns (Livingstone, 1990;56). This could perhaps be the reason responsible for its immense popularity as a genre of television programming.

In families in which the gender roles are largely traditional, television may tend to serve to reinforce such gender roles. In this way television certainly plays a role in the construction of gender roles. All viewers have several options regarding gender images: to accept them, to disregard them, to interpret them in their own way; and to reject

them. As John Fiske puts it (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth, 1989): 'Television is not quite a do-it-yourself meaning kit but neither is it a box of ready-made meanings'.

Television offers a wide range of potential role-models, both positive and negative. Many people find these models of some use to them. It is not inevitable that viewers accept television gender images without question, but many popular commentators tend to assume that they are more discriminating than ordinary mortals. Not all women, children - or even men - are passive victims of patriarchal stereotyping. Though there is little doubt that television presents largely traditional gender images, there is mixed evidence about the impact of such images on gender attitudes and behavior. It is difficult to isolate the role of television, since people are influenced by their whole environment, although there is fairly widespread agreement that over time television seems likely to influence people's ideas about gender roles.

In "the official soap-opera annual", editors Bayna Laus (1977) states that soap-operas, "in their faithful portrayal of all the happiness and the sadness, the triumphs and the prejudices, the successes and the failures in their characters lives-proves once more that today's soap operas are indeed a reflection of life". It has been found that the soap-opera from 1970 onwards are more realistic than their predecessors. However, it is contended that no genre is realistic. In fact, through stories, a fictional representation of our social structure and social relations are presented. These fictionalized representations provide a mirror of the world, showing how power is allocated in society and how dominance and submission are idealized (Gerbner, 1972). The social demography of the soaps, their locales, and in particular the way social status, love and romance, sickness and health, crime and violence are presented, are at best a stylized representation of the real world, and, at worst, reflect the continuing in equalities and disparities that exist in our society.

The basic questions to be addressed in communication research implies finding out about the effects of soap-operas on the behavior of the viewer and how do soaps contribute to viewer's conception of reality that flow logically from the kinds of content of the soap-operas. Contemporary soap-operas telecast from satellite channels, mostly have female protagonists, who is traditional, yet at the same time independent and strong. Most of the soap operas focus on issues, related to women because soap-opera, since its inception were primarily targeted at women and the majority of the audience comprised of women. A prominent and striking characteristic of all soap operas is their focus on interpersonal relationship, especially interpersonal problems. For example, extra marital relationship among the characters in the soaps is very high. Thus, we could speculate that soap viewing might effect viewer's marital relations. Marital partners might argue more as a result of viewing soaps. Seeing relationship and marriages dissolve over misunderstandings and inappropriate behaviors may strengthen viewer's real world relationships. Some viewers may learn from soap characters mistakes and avoid making similar mistakes in their own lives. Others might adopt strategic steps that soap character used effectively or discard strategies that did not help to solve the problems concerning their own interpersonal relationships. These viewing interpretations happen at an unconscious level.

In comparison to interpersonal problems and situations, soap-operas spend less time on social issues which are dominant in the society. However, viewers are better informed about some issues, especially those believed by soap-writers to be more central to women's lives. Some soap-operas work on a level of empirical realism, in so far as the characters within them are presented as living in situations comparable to those of presented as living in situations comparable to those of significant numbers of their audiences. In other cases, the realism need not be of empirical kinds, which work at the emotional level of the audience. Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes on international readings of 'Dallas' was designed to investigate what it was about the soap-opera Dallas that made it compatible with the lives of its variously cultured viewers.

Watching soap opera many a times help in encouraging some women to enter the labor force, take on extra hassles and risks of developing a career for themselves. Modern soap-operas seem to have a strong work and career oriented portrayals emphasizing the professional high status goals. However, the difficulties that women face on entering the work force are rarely the subject of soap-conflicts. At times, attention is paid to work related threats to marital relationships. Women who are too dedicated to their careers after pay heavily for their ambitions. Viewing such representation makes the soap-viewer better equipped and prepared for marital problems, rather than the day-to-day problems of career.

Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue that television is the central cultural arm of society, serving to socialize most people into standardized roles and behaviors. They suggest that television cultivates people's beliefs about how the world works more through the sum total of interactions, behaviors, and values present in television content than through finite attempts to persuade. Soaps carry different messages and present different social relations-some show more women in professional occupations while others are not career oriented. Women are stereotyped in soap-operas, but the image of the modern women has changed. From being to a meek, docile, subservient housewife, she has grown and evolved into a strong individual. She not only excels in her profession but is also an able home-maker. This change in the role of women is partially if not fully perceptible in the soap-operas shown on Indian television as yet.

Television is a cultural commodity. At the same time, it is a two vision mirror-reflecting society and in turn being modified by society. McLuhans medium is the message holds true even in the new millennium. Genre of soap – opera has over the years made rapid development in terms of content, presentation and production. Issues like rape, extra marital relationship, murder which were considered taboo even to be talked have earned acceptance in the social setup of our country. People no-longer switch off their TV sets when a situation of this type arises. They are curious to see how the issue is resolved. But soaps portraying interpersonal problems, crisis in the family, balance between career and home, modern yet traditional in beliefs and values have gained immense popularity among the masses. Contemporaneously, soaps now have shifted their focus and many of them today reflect the class difference prevalent in society. The issue of child marriage and the message imparted through its narrative gained high place on the popularity charts and also led the attention of the viewer towards this menace.

By challenging the stereotyped roles of women in the Indian media, with male dominated formulas and inventing strong, active female characters, soap-operas have created orthodox narrative of femininity and women's desires. In comparison to the neat wrap up in movies which often ends up by showing women in a traditional role in society, soaps have had to invent new places continuously for women. As the format of soap – opera is open - ended and resists closure, soaps present strong women who resist their roles in male hierarchies and portray a female power

Soap operas contain many characters and many sub plots are inter -woven around these characters. Soaps like 'Bade Ache Lagte Hain', 'Punar Vivaah' and others are portraying women with independent minds and a decision making individual. There are a variety of women characters such as "grandmother types, married women, marriageable women, spinster types and young women and these various representations of women in the soap makes it more interesting for women to watch especially, if they can relate to certain characters in the show. In the contemporary soap-opera, the women character is considered to be a "strong women". Soaps include women who are not only capable in the personal sphere but are also capable in the business world (Perna in Kausati Zindagi Ki). These "strong women" are admired by the viewers. In a survey done by Star TV, it was found that women who were economically self-sufficient, had a stronger decision making power in the business and family, were very popular. The viewers also meant to achieve the same things in their personal lives as the characters do. Most women are shown to be on the top in the business world and women character in soap –operas may inspire some of the women audience. Portrayals like that of 'Perna' make the viewer continually watch the show.

Women feel connected to the soap operas since they can relate their own personal and business life to the show. The viewers sustain a steady relationship with the characters that relate to themselves and these characters help the viewers find their own inner self. Watching soap-operas is more meaningful to women. They are a reflection of the viewer's life. It helps the viewers deal with their own problems and it motivates them to do what normally women consider the impossible to achieve and do. Femininity is also shown by the way "the viewer is positioned by the narrative", who analyses the character he is watching. This makes the viewer utilize the skills she is watching being enacted. Also lot of beauty and glamour is attached to the different roles of women. This offers another "textual contribution of possible modes of femininity on which women can draw when constructing and reconstructing their feminine identities". Consequently, women can relate their life and themselves to soap-operas.

Danielle Blumenthal in "women and soap operas" views soap operas as a "stream of modern folk values that symbolically link (viewers) together. She believes that soap operas are an image of "women's culture". The author states that 'women meant to get in touch with themselves and achieve this through [watching] soap operas. This self discovery and emotional truth are dependent on their favourite soap-operas characters".

In the soap summit VII, held in Los Angeles, 2001, Arianna Huffington emphasized the truth of story-telling. "In order to change things, you have to be able to tell stories, whether in politics, in culture or in soaps, which will help people's minds open to other possibilities". It was contended that soaps have actually promoted the role of women both on television and socially rather than having a damaging effect on them. Without the soap – operas, television would be the kingdom of the "male centered story". With soap opera, television has become a source of empowerment for women.

Soaps undoubtedly have immense potential to present positive images of contemporary women, a potential similar to that of other forms of media designed for women's service-newspapers, magazines, radio forums and so on. Soaps focusing on relationships and family life could easily present more story lines and characters, discussing social issues and problems central to their changing roles. Soaps opera writers have contended that part of their mission is to teach the "lesson of life" to their viewers (Nixon, 1972, LeMay, 1982). Soaps are an example of women's literature that supports the status quo regarding women's place in the social order. Women's concern in soaps are changing somewhat. Many women leave a family – centered world to become an integral part of the work world.

## **Conclusion**

Social change is a complex, unstructured, and quite often, an uncontrollable process. Empowerment is a process that is well suited to deal with social change in general and with inequitable structures in particular. It provides individuals and communities with the necessary skills, confidence and countervailing power to deal effectively with social change in a world that distributes needs, resources and power equally. It privileges and empowers multiple voices and perspectives and truly facilitates co-equal sharing of knowledge and solution alternatives among the beneficiaries and benefactors. However, the variables used to factorize empowerment as with development also differ with geographic location, socio-economic status, gender, caste, population, culture and other indicators. As places change the conditions of empowerment change and so do the relationship between these different variables.

Contemporary media has undergone extraordinary transformations mainly due to the remarkable changes brought about by technological developments at a global level. Societies as a direct consequence, inevitably, have had to grapple with revolutionary changes which have affected the existing structure of the social behavior, pattern of status and role. Their impact on the social system has given every region of the world a reason to think, observe and plan paving way for the emergence of a social order based on equality and justice among genders and races. The media, with its mass influence and reach, are intertwined with the society in a dynamic yet reciprocal relationship where they shape, influence and reflect each other. The web of interdependence between media and society is a

critical background factor for understanding why media is regarded as central impact bearer of modern society. This very fact, however, tends to lose its objectivity, considering that the media is also a commercial establishment and therefore, at times, tends to forget, avoid or dilute its responsibilities towards society. This leads to questions being raised about its functioning as an impartial, independent and ethically responsible influence.

A popular entertainment genre like soap opera can contribute to the process of changes at two levels. The first level is that of generating a thinking role of women. The meanings derived from the knowledge of soaps challenge the dominant discourses about the role of women in the family, on the silencing of women's voice, on the social expectations of women's behavior and about the power of women's relationship with other members of society. Aspects like the pleasure of close-knit family, clothing styles, elaborate wedding spectacles, continue to have a meaning in the life of women. These resistive readings are enveloped in subtle contradictions and are not obvious to a casual observer.

The second level is that despite its public negative evaluation, women find time and space for these soaps in their lives. It provides for experiences, learning and pleasure for women in which feminine discourse can be spoken of and appreciated. Soaps also constitute "affective alliances" ( Grossberg, 1992) based on shared emotional responses.

Television has emerged as a sharp, double-edged sword which can serve important and significant functional purposes if used carefully and judiciously. The efficacy of television as a means of communication is very high vis-à-vis women. Television has an important role in shaping and influencing their views, opinions and attitude. Television has become the most persuasive and pervasive means of information diffusion in society. The medium of television plays a very significant role in bringing about change among people. Television has the potential and strength to act as a 'modern information multiplier' which can help people in smoothening the process of national development, economic growth and social development. The part played by television as a galvanizer in the spectrum of change cannot be overlooked or ignored. The need of the hour is to harness its potential in the right direction or rather than let it be a trite reflection of society's lowest common denominator.

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