

Global Media and Cultural Identity: Experiences from an Indian Town

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Abstract

Economic liberalization and expansion of cable television and satellite broadcasting have changed the Indian landscape. Using depth interviews, the current study explores the interplay between the lives of local people and the global information structures. More specifically, I examine how individuals in an Indian town make sense of their changing symbolic environment.

Introduction

Recently scholars have studied the growth and expansion of an international consumer culture. The expansion has occurred concomitant with the development of a complex global society and international flow of media and cultural products. Some researchers examine these changes from the framework of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1991; 1992) where media products are distinctly dominated by a few multinational corporations from Western industrialized countries. Other scholars have emphasized the role of audiences in processing, and interpreting these media messages (Tracey, 1985, Liebes & Katz, 1990). Regardless of their theoretical position, researchers have called for a closer examination of the accounts of audience experiences with global media.

A clear and distinctive example of global media experienced by audiences in a local context is India. When India changed its policy and opened its doors to international free market forces and its airwaves to global media, it set in motion enormous changes that affected the lives of all its citizens. The changing media atmosphere prodded a change in Doordarshan, the state owned broadcasting network. Doordarshan, in Sanskrit, means distant vision. Describing a changed doordarshan in a recent book, Unnikrishnan and Balaji (1995) write: "today commercial interests dominate Doordarshan's (the state owned broadcasting network) policies and action. The *mantra* now is – entertain, entertain, entertain." (p. 91).

Historical context

When India gained independence in 1947, the leaders of the time committed the country to socialist principles, which included a strong state (Adams 1990; Hasan 1989), and government-controlled, development-oriented mass media. When the government introduced television in 1959, the goal was to educate the public. Social development was the norm until corporate sponsored prime time serials introduced in 1984 created a gradual shift toward entertainment oriented programming and advertising.

When private cable television came into being in 1991 a total shift occurred. Some parts of the country (mostly urban centers) moved, almost overnight, from a single Doordarshan channel to multiple channels that included CNN, BBC and Star TV. Compelled to compete, Doordarshan switched gears, interspersing development oriented programs with more serials and movies, opening a second channel, and developing a third, international, channel. CNN, BBC, and other channels are privately owned. Right now the Indian government does not permit private broadcasters uplinking facilities for transmission of programs from Indian territory. All channels beaming into India do so from outside the country and are, therefore, beyond direct Indian government control. Doordarshan and All India Radio continue to be state owned and controlled institutions subject to government censorship.

The transformation of the media environment, has been viewed in many ways. Some are delighted by the availability of a wide range of programming. Others are quite concerned about the social, cultural and political impact of televised programming. For instance the 1994 report of the parliamentary standing committee of human resource development stated: "nothing in the recent past has had such dramatic and deleterious impact on both our cultural traditions as the invasion of the mass media, both indigenous and foreign" (cited in Crawley, 1996).

Somewhere between these two poles is the lived experience of the large Indian audience. One way of understanding this lived experience is through ethnographic work that examines media experience within the context of the everyday life of people. In this study, I will use interviews and ethnographic information to examine how the people in a small city and a surrounding village make sense of the changing media environment. In particular I will examine their views on the changing media environment, the rise of consumerism, and the issues of identity.

The paper is organized along the following lines. First, I will discuss cultural and critical media theorists to provide a theoretical framework. Next, I will explain the methods I utilized to conduct the study. And finally, I will use the comments of the participants in my study to examine how they make sense of their changing media environment.

Theoretical framework

Critical scholars who examined the place of mass media on the international scale have written extensively about the Western cultural domination of newly independent third world countries. The debate has expanded to include the domination of western products in countries that have opened their markets (such as India) and newly independent socialist countries (such as Ukraine). Writing in 1991, Schiller stated that the Eastern European States and the Soviet Union were in varying stages of capitalist development. "Rather than providing an oppositional pole to the First World, they are now eager adherents to that world, as well as its supplicants. They offer national space to the marketing and ideological message flows of their former adversaries." (p. 14) In India advertising for Indian-made products runs alongside with advertising for a host of goods, never seen before, now marketed within India. According to Schiller "The objective, whatever the national setting, is always the same – the creation of good consumers (1989, p. 121).

Schiller's analysis and those of others writing within the cultural imperialism framework has been criticized for not producing evidence for the claims it makes. Tracey (1985 p. 36) contends that their analysis "took a not very good inventory and pretended it was an analysis. One can say nothing of influences, of how those programs engage with a society simply on the basis of a surface description."

Those who produce the cable TV that viewers in India will watch have a very different cultural history and background. Cable television (although MTV has incorporated Hindi music within its programming) is produced by white, Western media owners. This is not to argue for a conspiracy but rather to acknowledge that these media products are the result of a certain ideological framework. Furthermore, such programming is produced with the intention of making a profit. In other words, it is a mechanism for entertainment, not education. Equally important is the issue of how, despite its mixed origins, the programming is experienced by the Indian audience.

Stuart Hall (1980) states that encoding (transmitting) and decoding (receiving) are two distinct processes that do not have any necessary relationship to one another. Audiences are seen as active agents interpreting messages within their own different contexts. As Liebes & Katz (1990) found in their study of *Dallas* (the soap opera about Texas oil millionaires) people from different ethnic groups vary widely in their interpretations of television. In other words, their interpretation was influenced by their social background and ethnic origin. Put simply, the same program can hold different meanings for different people.

There is an interesting story about the people of the Trobriand Island. Anthropologists first studying them found that the islanders had a society built on a rather strange interpretation of the role of water in their life. They believed that water was closely linked to reproduction. They thought that sexual relations had nothing to do with reproduction. Something as pleasurable as sex could not have a biological

function. In fact, it had to be a special gift from the gods. And so they had rather free sexual relations. What then of reproduction? They believed that after death the soul lived on, swimming in the ocean. And when a woman swam in the ocean one of these free souls would get into her body and make her pregnant. For this reason, they developed strict rules about when women could swim, but few rules about sexuality. This interpretation of their reality was real for them. And the interpretation worked well enough to ensure their survival. Every society lives within the codes of meaning that it produces for itself.

When decoding a message, audiences can operate inside the dominant code, use a negotiated code, or utilize an oppositional code (Hall, 1980). That is, media images are “resource banks from which meaning can be made and remade (Fiske 1991, p. 64). Fiske proposes that the audience is active and resists the meanings imposed by the dominant media creating resistant interpretation of the media they consume (1987).

But how people experience television is not always ‘resistant.’ Watching television is a pleasurable activity, often intended as an escape from the harshness of everyday life. As we examine the place of global media in the lives of people in small towns and cities of countries such as India where much of the population still resides in villages, it becomes imperative to look at the local interpretations of such media. As James (1995) states: “we need to find ways to investigate the articulation of global processes (such as cultural imperialism) with local processes (the actual engagement of people with those cultural products and practices that embody consumerism, acquisitiveness, and materialism)”(p. 290-291). Such advice is particularly relevant in a country like India where customs and traditions are jostling with a bit of Baudrillard’s (1983) post-modern idea of ‘hyper-real.’ In India centuries-old epics recreated in folk theater are re-enacted on television and over 80% of the country participates in a ritualized celebration and watches it avidly every week.

It is difficult to speak of Indian culture or Indian towns without anchoring them in some specific way. In this essay I write about Mangalore, a mid-sized South Indian city. Mangalore is located in the West Coast by the Arabian Sea. Christians (mostly catholic), Hindus and Muslims co-exist in this town known for its educational institutions - its colleges and medical schools and engineering colleges. The Catholics speak a certain version of Konkani, some Hindus (Konkana) speak another version of Konkani, other Hindus speak Thulu and the Muslims speak Hindu/Urdu; almost everyone speaks Kannada, the State language and most know Thulu. Although specific languages are identified with specific groups, most people are generally conversant with each other’s languages.

Method

This article is based on open-ended interviews I conducted. Several people from the city were interviewed about the mass media in their lives. The interviews were

conducted in English, Kannada and Konkani, depending upon the preference of the interviewee. They were tape recorded, transcribed and translated.

The informants included Shenoy, a yoga teacher, Asha, a newspaper reporter, MaryAnn, an accountant, Nandan Rao, owner of an advertising company, Naushad, an industrialist, Deepa a college student, Stephanie, a homemaker, Champa an elementary school teacher, and her son Nikhil, a high school student. The interviews were conducted in their households or at my mother's home. Apart from the taped interviews, I also had long conversations with the respondents prior to the interviews and many more later at social occasions, over tea and so on.

Cable television is an urban phenomenon, available only to families in Mangalore. However, cable television is not affordable by everyone. Shenoy, a 46-year-old teacher, for instance, says: "Cable TV is not in everyone's reach you see." He watches DD1, the Doordarshan channel. He prefers *Subah Savere* – a variety program that includes "a little bit of entertainment a little bit of music and a little bit of information." He also watches the Kannada Bangalore Doordarshan serial called *Mayamriga* (magic animal). As he watches these shows he is also bombarded with advertisements for different products, signs of a liberalized economy.

Consumer culture

My question addressing the changes in Mangalore was always answered with some reference to the changing economic condition. Asha's observation was that people were acquiring more wealth and they were "less people-oriented." In her analysis of *Thirty Something*, Anderson addresses the issue of a consumer culture that is removed from social action and seeks therapy for inner peace. MaryAnn who worked in the Middle East and then returned to Mangalore says, "The only yardstick of success in life is material wealth and a high standard of living. All of us want high paying jobs, are willing to work all hours at our careers." She is disconcerted by the growing materialism but finds it everywhere in the ads on television. Her comment reflects what researchers have pointed out as features of a consumer culture – that a consumer culture emphasizes the possession of the most recent and fashionable clothes, cars, furnishings and homes (Susman, 1984; Ewen, 1988). The drive to become rich is new not to India alone. In neighboring China, Deng Xiaoping, urging his country's move to a free market economy stated 'to get rich is glorious.'

Nandan Rao, the President of a successful advertising agency is quite clear about what is happening. "The advertisements encourage consumerism particularly with children. And the kids try to influence the parents. A particular brand of biscuit (cookie) has to be bought..." As Mahoney (1992) writes: "Failure to purchase the right product threatens one's very existence" (p. 18). Unnikrishnan and Bala (1995) who conducted an extensive study of the influence of television advertising on children in New Delhi found "that consumerism is the new religion of the day and that its most devout followers are children...the vision of the good life is being drilled

into viewers' minds by TV advertising." (p. 19). Maryann also commented on the boasts of her neighbor who had just bought a heavily advertised car that he said can go over "80 miles an hour." She did not see the point, as traffic on Mangalore's narrow streets barely touch 20 miles an hour. For generations of Indians who lived in austerity and whose lives revolved around family and work, advertising and television programming now represents a consumerist lifestyle.

Shenoy, for instance, believes that "lot of opportunities are created and I think people are heading towards better standards of life – they have a telephone, more luxuries." For years, few middle class people could afford a telephone. And often, the telephone links did not work or the speech was barely audible. As recently as 1989, Singhal & Rogers (1989) wrote: "India reputedly has the world's worst telephone service" (p.211). Now almost every middle class home has a telephone connection and it works pretty well. In fact, I call India frequently and have no problems either with a connection or with communicating except on those infrequent occasions when the monsoons down the telephone wires.

Economic liberalization has enabled the entry of a wide range of products. Deepa, a teenager who has never left her hometown says, "I love the U.S. and Europe because it looks so clean (on TV)." She loves to drink Coke and buys one at least once a week. Naushad, an industrialist, says: "If you have money in India you have the best of both worlds-the luxuries of things from abroad and the comfort of helpers and maids to do your work." He is delighted with the variety of television programming. According to Stabile, "The more distant subjects are from economic necessity, the more consent becomes a possibility. Consent is guaranteed for those who can afford to consent, or for those class factions for whom some marginal gain in privilege or a minor addition to existing privilege appears possible" (Stabile, 1995 p. 404). This view of consent is the case for the middle class viewers. But for Stephanie, the availability of new products did not mean much. "What is the point of having everything in the store if you don't have the money to buy it?" She asked. She has a black-and-white television in her living room, close to the kitchen so she can listen to the songs during *Chitrahaar* or follow the dialogue from the movie as she cooks.

While Doordarshan mainly provides Stephanie's media environment, others are exposed to satellite television bringing the whole world into their homes.

Identity

Cable television has made people aware of how poorly India is represented on the international screen. Nandan Rao said, "The British culture is given a lot of importance in a subtle way. BBC English. And the way they show pictures of other countries like India, South East Asia that is underdeveloped. That is the image you get after looking at BBC for about a week's time." Rao's observation contradicts Stevenson's claim that "speed, brevity, and nonpartisanship are the hallmarks of twentieth century Anglo American journalism and twenty-first century global

journalism" (1994, p. 171). Speed and brevity maybe, but nonpartisanship highly unlikely. In the past, ordinary people were rather insulated from the world's view of India. Not so now. Further, inaccuracies in reporting are aggravating some of the problems. For instance, in 1996, BBC ran a news report on the destruction of a shrine in Kashmir, a region over which India and Pakistan have an ongoing disagreement. The narration which said the Indian army destroyed the shrine (a disputed issue) was accompanied by footage from the conflict in Chechnya. The faux pas was splashed across the front pages of Indian newspapers the following day. Doordarshan replayed the footage in slow motion revealing the white faces of the Russian troops (Jha, 1997). Errors of this nature are a reminder that colonialism is not a thing of the past, but rather an ongoing process of India's present. But it is not the BBC alone that some people are critical about. It is the idea of how Western nations are portrayed versus most nations of Asia. Rao says, "Look at CNN. America is proud. Every time they show that America is right and proud. ...That's the value they ultimately propagate."

Doordarshan, on the other hand, propagates "a bit of patriotism" according to Shenoy. He believes the programs are geared toward harmonious social relations and pride in the country.

Conclusion

Opening up the airwaves and the markets has set the stage for dramatic changes in India. For the wealthy, it provides the luxury of the west within the familiar context of home. For the middle class, the lure of all the products provides a greater incentive to make more money. For the lower class there is a rupture between their lives and the lives on television. And these changes are only a part of the picture. The changing symbolic environment is not coupled by instantaneous changes in the social structures determined by caste, class, and sex.

In Mangalore, greater emphasis is now placed in the local language. Folk songs, previously part of an oral tradition, are now taped and passed on to the next generation. Part of a favorite konkani song (translation mine) goes like this:

Konkani is our language
 Konkani is our land
 In this konkani city we are konkani
 You son of konkani wake up
 Do not forget our konkani
 Become a strong pillar of this mother tongue
 As long as you are a konkani do not become a foreigner

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