

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture26

History of Television in India

Hello everyone. Today, we will be discussing visual narratives, focusing on the development of series in India. We'll trace their evolution from the era of Doordarshan to the present-day web series. It's interesting to note that all of this falls under the category of popular culture.

The trends we will discuss cater to a mass audience and involve media consumption, which, while intangible as material, acts as a text within the broader study of popular culture. Let's begin by tracing the origins.

Broadcasting in India started in 1923, and by 1927, the Indian Broadcasting Company had established stations in Bombay and Calcutta. Since this was the pre-independence era, series did not emerge during this period. It was only after India's independence that the series began to appear, largely through Doordarshan.

Doordarshan was the sole platform where people could watch series or TV telefilms, as they were known earlier. We will explore the different terminologies used, such as series, soaps, and telefilms.

Lionel Fieldon of the BBC became the controller of broadcasting in India in 1935, overseeing both All India Radio and broadcasting. The development of TV broadcasting during this time was quite remarkable. Television was introduced in India only in 1959, so between 1935 and 1959, the Indian audience did not have the opportunity to experience television.

In 1959, 21 TV sets were provided in rural areas near Delhi, and another 50 were supplied by UNESCO, marking the beginning of television broadcasting in India. The initial phase of television, or TV series, primarily focused on fulfilling social objectives, such as educational programs for farmers and children.

When Doordarshan launched its programming, it was largely educational, targeting farmers and children. Growth in TV infrastructure slowed, with All India Radio receiving its second TV transmitter only by 1972. The journey from 1935 to 1972 was long, but by 1975, Doordarshan expanded its reach. Initially serving Delhi and Bombay, new centers were established in Madras, Lucknow, and Calcutta.

Doordarshan, which had been operating under All India Radio and the direction of Lionel Fieldon, gained its distinct identity only in 1976, when it was established as a separate entity with its own Director General.

A significant milestone in television broadcasting was the introduction of SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment). SITE utilized NASA's ATS technology to broadcast TV programs to 2,400 villages, marking a revolution in reaching remote areas. Prior to this, there were only 50 TV sets, and the expansion allowed people in and around these centers to access television.

It was indeed a luxury at that time. After SITE introduced ATS-6 technology, 2,400 villages gained access to television broadcasts, which included news, educational content, general interest, and cultural programs. However, these were not available 24 hours a day; programs were broadcast in designated slots.

In 1983, the launch of the Indian National Satellite (INSAT-1B) marked another significant advancement. This period also saw the advent of color television in India, coinciding with the 1982 Asian Games. The introduction of color TV was revolutionary and greatly enhanced the viewing experience of the games.

In the 1980s, indigenous soap operas gained immense popularity in India. One notable program from this era was Hamlog, which premiered in 1984. This series was groundbreaking for its time, addressing important social issues such as gender equality, national integration, and smaller family size.

In contrast, contemporary TV series and web shows often present themes that are contradictory, particularly concerning violence and gender representation. The early 1980s series, like Hamlog, were progressive in their approach, tackling real issues with depth and sensitivity.

Following this, we saw the rise of *Buniyaad*, another significant series that continued to shape Indian television. *Buniyaad* was a significant program focusing on the traumas and experiences of families affected by the Partition of India. It depicted the sadness and challenges faced by those who lived through that historical event. Both *Hamlog* and *Buniyaad* primarily catered to the middle class, featuring characters and stories that resonated deeply with this demographic.

Following these groundbreaking shows, mythology became a prominent genre on Indian television. By 1988, approximately 90 million people, or 12% of the population, were watching television, though only 62% lived in areas covered by broadcasting.

India had a long way to go, but mythological programming did help bring people closer together. TV sets in neighborhoods became communal hubs where people gathered to watch these popular shows, boosting their popularity.

In the 1990s, just before the era of liberalization, Star TV, a Hong Kong-based company, entered the Indian market. This marked a significant shift for Indian audiences. The growth of the cable TV industry and the emergence of private channels like Sun TV further transformed the media landscape, introducing a wider variety of content. With these developments, we see the rise of several salient trends in Indian television.

These salient trends reveal the bias inherent in Hindi-language shows compared to vernacular programs. Hindi, being a dominant language in much of northern India, led to Hindi programs being favored over regional language content. Regional programs were marginalized, often relegated to less prominent slots. As previously mentioned, television programming was not broadcast 24 hours a day, so a significant portion of airtime was dedicated to Hindi-language shows.

Politics also influenced television content, exemplified by Mr. L.K. Advani's appropriation of the imagery from Doordarshan's *Ramayana* for political purposes. This mythological series, which enjoyed a long run, became a tool for Advani, a prominent BJP figure, to promote his political agenda. This intersection of media and politics mirrors earlier discussions about how advertisements can push certain ideologies. As Rajagopala has noted, these shows were aired on government-run channels but were often privately produced or sponsored.

By 2001, urban India had access to approximately 70 television channels, and this number grew to 61 by 2004. This expansion was significant, considering that television began with just one channel. By 2009, the number of channels had surged to 461, marking a substantial growth in the media landscape.

Between 1994 and 1996, the emergence of TV series brought notable changes. During this period, Doordarshan aired short programs primarily on Saturday and Sunday mornings, making use of the weekends when families were more likely to gather together. This scheduling encouraged family viewing of these short programs. On weekdays, the focus was on educational documentaries, reflecting a different programming strategy.

When discussing the politics of media, particularly around primetime shows airing at around 9 o'clock, it's important to consider the role of TRP (Television Rating Points) and the quest for mass consumption. This primetime slot often features popular serials or soap operas, which are designed to capture the largest possible audience.

During the weekdays on Doordarshan, the programming primarily consisted of educational documentaries. At that time, many women in India were not highly educated and were largely homemakers. Consequently, these educational documentaries had limited viewership among this demographic, as they did not cater to the interests or needs of homemakers beyond educational content.

In contrast, weekends saw a surge in diverse programming. Historical serials and animated shows for children became prominent, catering to a different audience. This scheduling strategy aimed to engage viewers with content that was both educational and entertaining, reflecting a broader attempt to address various viewer needs throughout the week.

Another very important popular show that came in Doordarshan was Surbhi and it was hosted by Renuka Sahne and Siddhart Kak. Both of them were very spontaneous and it was liked by the popular, imagination. and it was for a very long time sponsored by Amul. It was kind of a talk show where these two hosts would read letters which were sent by people.

Additionally, these programs often explored various non-political topics related to everyday life and philosophical reflections. Over time, the focus shifted from Doordarshan to private channels like Star Plus.

One notable show from Doordarshan was *Shanti*. This series, unlike many others, offered a nuanced portrayal of women and tackled significant social issues. The protagonist, Shanti, is an aspiring journalist who decides to write a biography about two friends, Kamlesh and Raj. The show addressed themes of women's empowerment and emancipation, presenting a more progressive view of women's roles compared to later portrayals.

In *Shanti*, the protagonist, Shanti, sets out to create a show about two men, Kamesh and Raj. As the series unfolds, it is revealed that she is searching for her father, who is one of these two men. This revelation exposes a fractured family dynamic filled with deceit and hidden truths. The series explores the strained relationships within the family and the secrets they harbor.

Shanti, a determined journalist, not only investigates the lives of Kamesh and Raj but also uncovers her own painful past. It is revealed that Shanti's mother, a laborer, was raped by these two men. The series addresses the issue of sexual violence and portrays Shanti's struggle for justice in a nuanced manner. Rather than adopting a purely didactic approach to women's emancipation, **Shanti** presents a subtle yet powerful narrative about resilience and the quest for truth.

This brings us to the thought that the series made during that time gave women a lot of agency. However, in the series that came post-2000, we don't see women having much agency. They are often limited to household or family roles. Moving on to another show called *Junoon*, which aired in 1996, the series revolves around the rivalry between two patriarchs from well-known families, Rajvansh and Dhanraj. These two families are in conflict with each other. We also see a business class clash happening post-liberalization, as people started investing in business.

They started new businesses, leading to increased competition and disparities. This reflects the contemporary phase of India post-liberalization, with the emergence of a new elite class due to the growth of entrepreneurship and business opportunities.

Between 1990 and 2010, there were significant developments in broadcasting and cable. National broadcasting was initially associated with the state-controlled Doordarshan. By 2001, Doordarshan had become a 24-hour channel. This period also marked a shift away from Nehruvian socialism and secularism, which had largely ended by the 1990s. Despite this shift, mythological series such as Om Namah Shivay and Jai Hanuman continued to be popular.

With the development of broadcasting, the number of TV shows began to increase significantly. The audience showed a strong preference for mythological series based on epics, marking a departure from the age-old Nehruvian socialism and secularism that had previously dominated the screens.

Star Plus emerged as a major player in this changing landscape with its highly popular show Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC), hosted by Amitabh Bachchan. KBC became a cultural phenomenon and remains closely associated with Bachchan, although Shah Rukh Khan also hosted a few seasons. This show not only boosted Star Plus's profile but also revitalized Amitabh Bachchan's career. In the 1990s, Bachchan faced financial difficulties, and KBC provided him with a much-needed comeback, making it a significant milestone for both the channel and the actor.

Everyone was glued to the television when *KBC* was aired.

The rise of private television began with Star entering the Indian market in 1990 as a Hong Kong-based company. This marked the start of a significant shift with the advent of cable TV networks. By 1994 and 1995, additional satellite channels began their services.

In 1996, several new developments occurred: EL TV, Jain TV, and three new Doordarshan channels were launched. These new channels included DD 1, the original and most watched channel; DD 2; and DD Metro.

In 1999, a surprising development occurred. Despite Star's initial lack of insight into popular Indian tastes, the network sought to better understand and cater to the needs of the Indian audience by collaborating with Zee TV.

Initially, Star and Zee had a joint venture, which was terminated in 1999. After the termination, Star began airing Hindi programs directly, whereas previously, Zee had been responsible for catering to the Hindi-speaking audience. With the split, Star directly competed with Zee, Sony, and Doordarshan in the Hindi market. Meanwhile, Zee shifted its focus and began launching new English channels, reversing their previous roles.

Joshi remarks on the irony of this image makeover: while Star, once associated with upmarket content, was now targeting the masses, Zee, the channel originally catering to the masses, began targeting the upper classes. Both channels thus ventured into new dimensions, adapting their strategies to address the other's former market.

With the rise of private television, a neoconservative portrayal of women began to emerge around 2000 and 2001. As the new century arrived, television content shifted towards more regressive representations of women, contrasting sharply with the progressive and confident portrayals seen in earlier Doordarshan shows. This shift reflected a broader trend towards neoconservatism, tailored to appeal to popular tastes.

Unfortunately, this trend of family drama and negative portrayals of women continued until around 2010. However, as audiences began to gravitate towards OTT platforms, which offered a wider variety of content and addressed different subjects, the dominance of traditional family dramas and the negative portrayal of women began to wane. The rise of OTT platforms marked a significant shift in the media landscape, introducing new forms of storytelling and representation.

To provide a glimpse into the evolution of television content, we turn to the rise of digital technologies and online streaming, which introduced Video on Demand (VOD) and Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. These platforms allow for direct streaming of video content over the internet. With the advent of affordable internet services, particularly due to Jio's impact and the availability of cheaper subscription plans, smartphones became more widespread, driving up both smartphone usage and OTT subscriptions.

The growth of OTT platforms can be closely linked to the launch of Ditto TV. By 2010, the portrayal of women in traditional TV series had become increasingly neoconservative and negative. However, by 2012, the introduction of Ditto TV

marked the beginning of a shift. While Ditto TV initially struggled with launching content, it represented a pivotal moment in changing how women were portrayed in media. This shift indicated the start of a transformation in content, driven by the new possibilities offered by digital streaming.

Zee Entertainment Enterprises launched Ditto TV, marking India's initial foray into homegrown OTT platforms before the arrival of global giants like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Ditto TV set the stage for the expansion of digital streaming services in the country. Following Ditto TV, Eros also entered the OTT space around the same time in 2012. Eros initially focused on music, releasing high-quality music videos that garnered popularity due to their superior picture and sound quality. This approach preceded the rise of T-Series and contributed significantly to the growing interest in digital content in India.

Later on, we see Netflix coming in 2016 and Amazon Prime entering India in 2017, just one year after Netflix. There were other Platforms that came like, now we have Jio Cinema. We have also Zee5, Viacom owned, Voot we have. So we have Hotstar, Disney's Hotstar as well.

However, the advent of OTT platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix marked a significant change in the content domain. As of recent counts, India boasts around 40 OTT streaming platforms, a number that continues to grow each year according to Soma Munshi. These platforms have firmly established vernacular content as central to their offerings. Unlike traditional television, which often continued with neo-conservative portrayals of women up until around 2010, OTT platforms introduced a fresh approach.

By the time OTT platforms emerged, they did not replicate the content of TV shows but instead offered narratives that were more aligned with local issues and everyday lives. This shift focused on depicting the real-life struggles and experiences of ordinary people, rather than the grand, often unrealistic portrayals of family dynamics seen in earlier TV series.

The major shifts in content observed today are pivotal as they highlight how broadcasting has evolved, particularly with the rise of the Internet and OTT platforms. The Internet first became available in India in 1986, but it was initially

accessible only to research institutions and government bodies. It wasn't until later that broader public access to the Internet became commonplace, facilitating the rise of digital streaming services and altering the media landscape significantly.

The Internet became widely available to the general public in India on August 15, 1995. This marked a significant shift from the earlier period, when only research institutions and government bodies had access. Initially, high Internet charges made it less affordable, but this changed over time.

By 2015, the Indian government launched the Digital India initiative, aimed at connecting rural areas with the rest of the country. This initiative was successful in providing high-speed Internet, which addressed common issues such as buffering that users had previously complained about. The result was a dramatic rise in mobile video streaming.

Unlike before, when people could not carry their television sets with them, mobile video streaming allowed users to download apps and save series or serials on their phones. This enabled viewers to watch their favorite content while travelling or when they were away from home, making media consumption much more convenient.

Additionally, the lower subscription rates further contributed to the rise of OTT platforms. With the advent of Jio and its 99-rupee plan, Internet costs became significantly more affordable, further boosting the accessibility and popularity of digital content.

The 99-rupee plan from Jio, which included a limited amount of data along with free telephone calls and messaging within the same network, was revolutionary, particularly for the younger generation at the time. This significant drop in Internet costs made digital content more accessible to a wider audience.

This trend of lower subscription rates was not confined to Internet service providers; it extended to OTT platforms as well. For example, Alt Balaji, known for its adult content, offered a subscription for just 100 rupees, making it

affordable for many people to access adult content on their phones. Considering these trajectories, it's important to examine the major shifts in broadcasting and TV series development up until now and to explore what has transpired since 2010.

Gangster and spy thrillers began to emerge, opening up a new genre for audiences. Shows like *Sacred Games* and others featuring espionage, thriller elements, and dark drama captivated viewers who had previously been engrossed in traditional television. This shift marked a clear demarcation between audiences who stuck with TV series and those who embraced live video streaming on mobile devices.

The divide was notably evident: TV series largely retained a female viewership, as prime-time shows were designed to attract families. The peak viewing time, around 9 PM, was targeted to coincide with family meals, creating a window to capture the household's attention. This strategic timing helped television shows become a central part of family routines.

Men, after a long day at work, often turned to prime-time shows as a form of leisure and relaxation, viewing it as a better alternative to watching news. In urban areas, even as more women began working, television served as a stress reliever from the pressures of both office work and household chores. For many, the content was less of a consideration; instead, television was seen as an escape from daily stress and a means of entertainment. This perspective shaped how television content was produced during that time, aiming to offer a break from the demands of everyday life.