

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture27

### Telefilms and Indian TV Serials

Welcome to this new lecture. Today, we will continue discussing visual narratives, focusing specifically on television series and soap operas. Our discussion will cover the emergence of these forms of entertainment, their evolution, and their impact on daily life. We'll explore how television content developed from telefilms to TV serials and ultimately to soap operas, and later, we'll touch upon the rise of web series under the broader scope of OTT platforms. However, we will not delve deeply into the series that have emerged on OTT platforms today.

To begin, let's reflect on telefilms. What exactly are telefilms, and why were they significant? Telefilms are essentially made-for-TV movies. During the early days of Doordarshan, these films were created specifically for television, with a typical duration of 2 to 3 hours. These telefilms were usually standalone episodes, offering directors, many of whom also worked in cinema, the opportunity to venture into television.

Telefilms were self-contained fictional narratives, though at times they also drew from mythology or historical fiction. They were originally produced and broadcast for television as single programs, as mentioned earlier. A key characteristic of these telefilms was that they had limited episodes, typically just one or two, making them standalone stories rather than serial narratives.

The production value of telefilms was generally higher compared to the TV serials of those times. This was due to a variety of factors, including the fact that telefilms aimed for better quality in terms of both content and visuals. They were often designed with more attention to detail and used higher-quality resources than daily TV serials.

In terms of broadcast schedule, telefilms aired as singular events, with a significant amount of promotional campaigning leading up to their broadcast. This was unlike serials that were regularly scheduled, often daily.

When it comes to content and audience, telefilms spanned a wide variety of genres. These could include dramas, comedies, historical pieces, or even documentaries. The range was quite broad, allowing them to address different themes and appeal to diverse audiences. Telefilms during this period often incorporated Indian cultural influences, focusing on Indian mythology, traditions, social realities, family dynamics, religious beliefs, and social hierarchies.

Much of the content of these telefilms was deeply rooted in Indian culture. The stories and themes often reflected the richness of Indian heritage, bringing forward narratives centered around family structures, religious practices, and social hierarchies. We can see many of these elements in the series we discussed earlier, where Indian telefilms and TV series drew heavily from the same cultural, mythological, and social influences.

In these standalone telefilms, a wide variety of social realities, traditions, mythology, Indian culture, religious beliefs, and family dynamics were effectively packed into a single episode. They aimed to reflect the depth of Indian life and often resonated deeply with viewers by addressing these relatable themes. The integration of music, an essential aspect of Indian cinema, was carried over into telefilms as well. Much like Bollywood, music was used to heighten emotional intensity and enhance storytelling. It played a vital role in expressing the inner lives of characters and adding drama to the narrative, especially during climactic moments.

The focus on melodrama was a key element of these telefilms, where emotional intensity was amplified to evoke strong reactions from the audience. Dramatic conflicts were often accentuated with music, emphasizing moments of heightened emotion or over-dramatization. Themes like love, loss, sacrifice, and societal pressure were at the heart of these telefilms and formed the basis of their melodramatic approach.

While the production value of telefilms didn't match the grandeur of big-screen movies, they were still known for their impressive sets, costumes, and cinematography—especially when compared to the daily serials of the time. Telefilms focused on delivering a polished and engaging experience for viewers, which made them stand out in terms of quality, even though they had lower budgets than full-length feature films.

These telefilms acted as a bridge between daily serials and cinema, with their production value significantly higher than the former, but not quite at the scale of the latter. They were marked by impressive sets, costumes, and cinematography, which created a visual appeal and elevated them beyond what was typically seen on daily television. While they may not have matched the grandeur or budget of cinema, telefilms managed to strike a balance between quality and affordability, making them a unique viewing experience.

One key aspect that made these telefilms stand out was their adaptability. They drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including literary works, historical events, and even popular cultural trends of the time. Literary adaptations were particularly significant, with stories from famous Indian authors like Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore being transformed into telefilms. These adaptations brought classical and cultural literature into the homes of television viewers, allowing a wider audience to engage with these stories in a new format.

In addition to literature, telefilms also delved into historical events, often portraying the lives of kings, Mughal emperors, and Rajput rulers. These historical narratives not only entertained but also educated viewers about India's rich past. Moreover, the telefilms kept pace with the changing societal trends by incorporating popular culture into their stories, making them more relatable and appealing to contemporary audiences.

Social commentary was something to be, this telefilm was known for. Some telefilms might tackle social issues or injustices faced by different segments of Indian society, offering a platform for social commentary. And then we have *Aadmi* or *Aurat*, examples of telefilms, *Baksho Rahasya*, *Janam* and *Daddy*. These were the most famous telefilms that came in Doordarshan.

One particularly noteworthy telefilm to discuss is *Aadmi Aur Aurat*, directed by Tapan Sinha, a prominent figure in parallel cinema. Sinha is often mentioned

alongside influential filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mani Kaul. *Aadmi Aur Aurats* stands out for its raw portrayal of societal dynamics.

The film centers on a man from a poor background who works for the elite. Whenever they went hunting, he would accompany them, performing menial tasks. The protagonist, in terms of moral character, was far from virtuous. In his free time, he would harass women, follow them around, and use foul language, which starkly contrasts the qualities of a refined gentleman. He is portrayed as the antithesis of that ideal.

In *Aadmi Aur Aurat*, the protagonist is initially portrayed as a bigot, particularly harboring a strong dislike for Muslims. However, circumstances place him in a situation where he is compelled to help a pregnant Muslim woman who is struggling to reach the hospital. Through this telefilm, Tapan Sinha effectively highlights two key themes.

The first is the notion of humanism—in times of distress, the only real hope comes from our shared humanity and the innate sense of responsibility to help others, regardless of personal prejudices. The second theme underscores the struggles of life. Sinha suggests that life, for everyone, is a constant battle, a persistent series of challenges. The protagonist, despite his prejudices, ends up helping the Muslim woman, reflecting how human compassion can triumph over entrenched bigotry. Through this act, Sinha reinstates the importance of humanistic values.

With that, we now transition to the evolution of TV series. The era of TV series that followed the age of telefilms brought its own distinct set of characteristics. These TV series are serialized fictional narratives, meaning they are presented in multiple episodes. In today's format, they are often divided into seasons, with each season containing a set number of episodes—sometimes around 100 episodes per season—before moving on to a new season with a similar structure, especially on traditional television.

One key feature of TV series is that each episode can have its own self-contained story while contributing to a larger, ongoing narrative. An example of this format is *CID*, a long-running Indian TV series. *CID* is not a soap opera, but a series where each episode follows a crime investigation, while still fitting into the larger structure of the show.

The key difference between soap operas and TV series lies in their structure and narrative style. Soap operas typically feature long, continuous, and often melodramatic storylines that can run indefinitely, while TV series usually have more defined arcs and resolutions within a season.

We've seen the difference between telefilms and TV series. Telefilms were standalone episodes, each with its own self-contained story. In contrast, TV series consist of multiple episodes that contribute to a larger, ongoing narrative. For example, CID is a TV series, not a soap opera, it focuses on crime investigation. Each episode may address a different investigation or murder mystery, but they all align with the overarching theme of the series.

TV series can have an overarching theme, and each episode can be separately structured while contributing to the larger narrative. The narrative evolves, with characters developing across episodes. Cliffhangers are often used to maintain viewer engagement between episodes. For instance, ending an episode with a dramatic event like a murder can serve as a hook or cliffhanger, encouraging viewers to return for the next instalment to find out what happens next.

Typically, TV series are broadcast on a set schedule, either weekly or seasonally. This regular scheduling helps build anticipation and keeps the audience engaged with the ongoing story. Most often, TV series aired on a weekly basis at specific times, such as 7 o'clock, 8 o'clock, or 9 o'clock. Over time, the format shifted to include distinct seasons, with narratives sometimes changing or being presented in different segments. The content of these series was diverse, frequently focusing on specific themes or genres, and they developed a dedicated fan base. This fan base became so engaged that people in real life were often associated with their favorite characters or character names.

In her book *Primetime Soap Operas*, Shoma Munshi explores the key characteristics of these TV series and highlights the elements that contributed to their popularity. One of the central features was their family focus. TV series were typically scheduled for prime evening hours, around 9 o'clock, when the whole family was gathered together. This timing made it easier for viewers to relate to the family dynamics portrayed on screen. The series often delved into themes of duty, with central characters taking on roles that viewers could connect with. For instance, women could relate to themes of domestic duty, while men might identify

with the role of being the breadwinner. This relatability was a significant factor in the success of these series.

In TV series, themes of sacrifice are prevalent. Women are often portrayed making significant sacrifices for their families, while middle-class men are frequently shown as sacrificing fathers. These series often depict complex family relationships, especially in larger families where dynamics between multiple generations can create intricate interactions. For example, a man living with his parents, wife, and children might face unique and complex family dynamics.

Melodramatic elements are also a hallmark of TV series, similar to Indian cinema, though often more pronounced. While Western dramas might take a different approach, Indian TV series have carved out their own niche in melodrama, heightening emotional intensity and dramatic conflicts. Characters frequently face challenges related to love, loss, societal pressure, and moral dilemmas. To highlight these melodramatic events, TV series might extend a single storyline over several episodes. For instance, a storyline centered around a love challenge, or a significant moral dilemma might span three to four episodes, drawing out the drama to maintain viewer engagement and emphasize the emotional stakes.

So, if the protagonist is undergoing a moral dilemma, it won't be resolved in just one episode. Instead, it will be stretched across four, five, six, or even more episodes. Social commentary is also a key feature of many series, addressing issues relevant to Indian society, such as poverty, gender inequality, the caste system, and religious tension.

However, Shoma Munshi notes that while there were some series that included social commentary, these were relatively few. Most TV series focused on depicting women in traditional domestic roles, with their agency limited to their immediate family and confined within the walls of the home. They did not have influence over the outside world. Musical integration in these series was also prominent, often featuring dance sequences and music that helped advance the narrative. This use of music and dance was an important element, not just for enhancing emotions but also for propelling the storyline. TV series often followed either an overarching storyline or a more episodic structure, as seen in examples like CID.

The overarching theme of a series like CID is solving cases, with each episode featuring a separate, self-contained story within the larger narrative. This structure

allows for individual cases to be explored in detail while contributing to the overall theme of criminal investigation.

For a clearer understanding, let's highlight some popular Indian TV series and their genres. Historical dramas such as Chakravarti Ashok Samrat focused on the life of Emperor Ashoka, depicting his reign and experiences. Bharat explored the Indian freedom struggle, and Jodha Akbar told the epic love story between the Mughal Emperor Akbar and the Hindu Princess Jodha. This series, unlike the film Jodha Akbar, presented a serialized narrative covering Akbar's life from childhood through marriage and battles.

In the realm of mythological dramas, series like Mahabharat, Devo Ke Dev Mahadev, and Sia Ke Ram were notable. Many mythological series followed similar narrative arcs but were distinguished by their titles.

The first Mahabharata aired on Doordarshan, while a different version, Kahani Hamare Mahabharat Ki, was broadcast on Star. Though both series focused on the same epic, they offered different interpretations and narratives. Similarly, Siya Ke Ram was a distinct retelling of the Ramayan, diverging from the original version by Ramanand Sagar while maintaining Ram as the central character.

In the realm of crime thrillers, CID is notable as one of the longest-running detective series in Indian television. Reality shows, such as Kaun Banega Crorepati, Indian Idol, and Bigg Boss, drew inspiration from international formats. Kaun Banega Crorepati is based on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, Indian Idol follows American Idol, and Bigg Boss is modeled after the British show Big Brother.

As for the history of Indian TV series, we've touched on its emergence when discussing the development of television and TV series. We'll now proceed with a quicker overview of this historical context.

In the early days, between the 1950s and 1980s, television content in India was quite limited. Doordarshan's dominance restricted the variety of programming available. During this period, the focus was primarily on educational content and information. Television shows were largely limited to educational programs, documentaries, and news broadcasts.

One of the notable early Doordarshan serials was Humlog, which discussed family planning and ran for 157 episodes over 17 months. Unlike today's long-running

series, early TV series typically had shorter runs. The thematic trends of the time included social issues and family dramas. For example, *Buniyad* chronicled the lives of families in the post-partition era, while *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* explored societal issues faced by the youth.

The rise and diversification of television content began post-1990s with the arrival of private channels like Star, marking a significant shift in the landscape of Indian television.

The satellite boom of the 1990s significantly challenged Doordarshan's monopoly and introduced private channels, leading to increased competition in the television industry. By 2009, the number of channels had surged to over 400, reflecting the intense competition and variety in programming. This period saw a broad exploration of genres, including mythological tales, historical dramas, crime thrillers, and sitcoms.

Among the popular sitcoms of the time were *Hum Paanch*, which humorously depicted the lives of five sisters living with their stepmother and father. Each sister represented a different aspect of female identity, adding layers of comedy to the show. *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai* portrayed the comedic dynamics of a high-class family, featuring a mother-in-law who frequently made fun of her middle-class daughter-in-law and a son who fancied himself a poet despite his lack of talent. *Dekh Bhai Dekh* offered humor through physical comedy and everyday situations, such as falling or inadvertently sitting on food.

The rise of daily soaps marked a new phase in Indian television, characterized by melodramatic stories and long-running narratives. These soaps often followed the lives of protagonists over many years, from marriage and child-rearing to becoming grandparents, with the focus shifting to subsequent generations. Notable examples include the epic mythological adaptations of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as fantasy series like *Chandrakanta*, which featured a young Irrfan Khan in a minor role. Another example is *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, a long-running family soap that mixed various genres and themes, reflecting the diverse content now available on television.