INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture28

Television and OTT series for 21st Century

Now, moving into the 21st century and beyond, the content landscape has undergone significant changes. The content boom of the 21st century saw a proliferation of channels catering to diverse audiences. Regional content began to gain prominence, with series produced in various Indian languages reflecting regional cultures. Channels like Star Bangla, Star Telugu, Sun TV for the Tamil-speaking population, Zee Bangla, ETV Bihar, ETV Jharkhand, and ETV Madhya Pradesh emerged, marking the beginning of regionalization in television. Initially, Star and Zee focused on mainstream content, but they expanded to include more localized programming. As a result, TV series and soaps in regional languages became highly popular among local audiences.

The 21st century also witnessed a boom in reality TV, which gained immense popularity for its unique form of entertainment and audience engagement. Shows like Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC) continued to captivate viewers, and similar formats emerged, such as Shah Rukh Khan's Kya Aap Paanchvi Paas Se Tez Hai? (Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?). Despite its similarity to KBC, this show did not perform as well and was eventually discontinued. Bigg Boss also gained popularity and remains a well-known reality show, with its distinctive voice of the host adding to its unique appeal. And he never reveals his identity. The host of Bigg Boss is Salman Khan, who reprimands participants who do not perform well or who have been involved in controversies, addressing these issues in the episodes.

With the rise of streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, new competition emerged, significantly influencing content creation. Soma Munshi discusses how these streaming platforms introduced fresh dynamics into the content landscape. Today, content creation extends beyond OTT platforms to social media sites like YouTube and Instagram, where creators produce their own material. For instance, Bhuvan Bam became a top YouTuber with his series

BB Ki Vines, featuring comedy sketches that gained instant popularity. He began by playing multiple characters, such as a father and a mother, and quickly went viral, eventually transitioning into films.

The landscape has evolved with streaming services offering shorter seasons and exploring mature themes, as seen in shows like Sacred Games. These platforms cater to niche audiences, unlike traditional TV series, which often targeted broader demographics, primarily women. Streaming services, such as Amazon Mini TV, are pushing this trend further. For example, Amazon Mini TV offers content with episodes lasting around 15 minutes, a stark contrast to the longer formats of traditional TV series, which typically run for 30 to 40 minutes. This shift reflects a broader trend of decreasing attention spans and the demand for more concise content, similar to the transition from Test matches to T20 cricket.

Soaps and soap operas are long-running serialized melodramas with intertwined character lives. Unlike TV shows such as KBC or Bigg Boss, which are more episodic or reality-based, soap operas focus on serialized melodrama. They are characterized by highly dramatized and emotional storylines, often exploring social issues and moral dilemmas, though not always.

A common feature of soap operas is their continuous narrative, which frequently relies on cliffhangers to maintain viewer engagement. Cliffhangers are used at the end of episodes to encourage viewers to return for the next installment. Daily broadcast schedules are typical for soaps, airing on weekdays and often continuing for many years. For example, Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai began in 2009 and is still airing in 2024, showcasing the long-term continuity of soap operas.

In terms of production, soaps are generally more focused on efficient storytelling with lower budgets compared to telefilms and some TV series. The daily production schedule necessitates a lower budget due to the need for frequent and consistent content delivery.

Content in Indian daily soaps often focuses on emotional engagement, melodrama, and recurring conflicts. For example, if the soap begins with a conflict between the male and female protagonists who are not yet in a relationship, the storyline will extend these conflicts over a long period.

Ultimately, through these recurring conflicts, the characters are shown falling in love with each other.

Indian daily soaps, also known as daily serials, are distinguished by their melodramatic narratives and extended storylines. The plots are often repetitive, with similar incidents occurring across various serials. For instance, if a prime-time show on a channel like Sony, Zee, or Star features a marriage, other serials on the same or different channels might show similar events shortly thereafter. This repetition heightens melodrama and can draw more viewer attention, which other serials might want to avoid to maintain their TRP ratings.

Repetitive plot devices and tropes are common, including misunderstandings that lead to twists in the narrative, separation and reunion, and dramatic events like birth and rebirth. For instance, a soap might feature a scenario where a male protagonist dies but later returns, creating further drama.

The distinction between characters often includes the clear-cut roles of vamps and heroines. The vamps typically serve as antagonists, creating conflict and drama, while the heroines are central characters whose lives and relationships drive the plot forward.

The vamp is often portrayed as more modern and non-conforming compared to the heroine, who is usually depicted as traditional and conforming. Characters in these soaps are frequently shown in stereotypical roles with clear distinctions between good and evil. The vamp creates problems for the protagonist, who faces numerous challenges and demonstrates resilience throughout the series. Rituals and traditions play a significant role, with Karvachauth being a particularly notable example of emotional and traditional displays. These rituals often serve as a backdrop for unraveling new secrets, linking cultural practices to plot developments. Daily soaps may depict various cultural traditions, festivals, and religious ceremonies.

Visually, these soaps are known for their elaborate sets and costumes, especially for the lead characters. Saath Nibhana Saathiya explores the complexities of family relationships and often depicts the dehumanization of the female protagonist, who is mistreated for her illiteracy despite being married under those circumstances. Bade Acche Lagte Hain revolves around two people from different backgrounds who give love a second chance, delving into their

compromises and family dynamics. Kumkum Bhagya focuses on the intertwined destinies of two sisters, emphasizing social drama. Balika Vadhu, set in Rajasthan, addresses issues related to child marriage and gender-based violence. Anupama, a more recent series, tells the story of a middle-class married woman dealing with her husband's affair.

In the show Anupama, after the protagonist divorces her husband, she quickly takes charge of her life, portraying divorce as a form of emancipation. Before this, she had little self-belief or agency, but post-divorce, she transforms into a new person with newfound confidence. Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai deals with the complexities of love and family but often presents a regressive view, depicting women with no ambitions beyond their familial roles.

Supernatural dramas like Nagin and Dayan feature female protagonists who possess supernatural powers but are portrayed as grey characters with both good and evil traits. Nagin centers on a shape-shifting serpent woman seeking revenge, while Dayan combines paranormal elements with romantic drama.

The storylines of these soaps often draw from middle-class sensibilities. Munshi notes that they address real-life issues such as colorism, marital rape, and romance between older generations. For instance, Pavitra Rishta portrays middle-class family dynamics, while Bidai tackles colorism.

In Bade Acche Lagte Hain, the storyline delves into romantic love among older generations, reflecting real-life societal dynamics. Munshi notes that other soaps are influenced by epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Puranas, and Indian legends, not by directly portraying these epics but by drawing moral and behavioral cues from them. For instance, Ekta Kapoor, who has conceptualized many popular soaps, has openly acknowledged using these epics as a reference. She aimed to create modern narratives based on the essence of these ancient stories.

Kapoor's Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki is a prime example. In this series, she situates the lead characters within the framework of Ramayana and Mahabharata. For example, the protagonist Tulsi, played by Smriti Irani, embodies the virtues of characters from the Ramayana, particularly Ram and Sita. Kapoor once remarked that she wanted to make a modern Ramayana, suggesting that every home has its own Ram, which is reflected in the show's development.

In a notable episode of Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki, the character Parvati returns in the guise of Janki Devi, drawing a parallel with Mahabharata. Janki Devi is supported by Narayani Devi, who represents Krishna in this narrative. Janki Devi, having been previously wronged, returns in disguise and is mentored by Narayani Devi, mirroring the epic's themes and characters in a contemporary setting.

Before the war in the Mahabharata, Krishna provides crucial guidance to Arjun, who is conflicted about fighting against his own family. Arjun grapples with whether it is right or wrong to battle the Kauravas, which includes revered figures like Bhishma Pitamah. Krishna clears Arjun's moral dilemma by offering profound lessons on duty and righteousness. Similarly, in an episode of Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Janki Devi, who is Parvati in disguise, faces a moral dilemma. She struggles with whether seeking revenge against her family is justified or not. Here, Narayani Devi, paralleling Krishna, advises her on how to navigate her moral conflict. This illustrates how the epics serve as secondary subtexts within the soap operas, enriching the narrative with deeper moral and philosophical undertones, while the primary storyline progresses through episodic structures.

Another example is the soap Kavach, which draws inspiration from mythological figures like Savitri and Satyavan, Sita and Draupadi. These characters serve as models for the protagonists in soaps such as Prerna from Kasautii Zindagii Kay, Saloni from Saat Phere, and the heroines from Bidai. The qualities embodied by Sita and Draupadi are used as benchmarks for the characterizations in these series.

Moving on to web series, they offer a distinct format compared to traditional TV series. A web series is released online in episodes, typically shorter than traditional TV episodes. For instance, while TV series might consist of 300-plus episodes, web series usually have fewer, such as eight to fifteen episodes per season. Web series are specifically designed for online platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Amazon Prime, catering to internet users. They follow an episodic format, with each chapter or episode sometimes standing alone or contributing to an overarching storyline. The episodes are generally shorter and more convenient to watch on the go, making them accessible for viewers who are traveling or busy. This flexibility and variety in genres provided by web series surpass what is typically available on TV, which often focuses on repetitive formats like saas-bahu dramas.

Web series offer a diverse range of genres, reflecting the richness and variety seen in television but often with a contemporary twist. This genre flexibility provides a broader palette of storytelling options compared to traditional TV formats.

Crime thrillers on web series push boundaries with intricate plots and intense narratives. For instance, Sacred Games is highly acclaimed for its gripping storyline involving a cop's pursuit of a gangster and a cryptic message that unravels a deeper conspiracy. Similarly, Delhi Crime is a powerful dramatization of the real-life investigation into the brutal Delhi rape case, showcasing the challenges faced by law enforcement.

Dark dramas have also found a significant audience online. These series explore more somber and serious themes, often delving into complex characters and moral ambiguities. Scam 1992, for example, is based on the life of Harshad Mehta, a stockbroker who orchestrated a massive scam in the Indian stock market. Another notable series is Ashram, which tackles issues of exploitation masked by religious facades, highlighting the dark underbelly of seemingly pious institutions.

The ability of web series to explore such intense and nuanced themes often allows for greater creative freedom compared to traditional television. The genre variety—from crime thrillers and dark dramas to documentaries and animation—reflects the expanding scope of storytelling available in the digital age.

Web series continue to explore a wide array of genres and themes, offering viewers both entertaining and thought-provoking content. Light-hearted comedies such as Flames and College Romance resonate with younger audiences, capturing the nuances of teenage and college life with humor and charm. Gullak is another notable example of this genre, depicting the everyday lives of a middle-class family with warmth and wit.

Social dramas on web platforms tackle real-life issues with a level of depth and authenticity not always present in traditional media. Panchayat is a standout in this genre, set in the small village of Phulera. The series follows the journey of a newly appointed Sachiv (secretary), who, despite his qualifications as an engineer, finds himself managing the challenges of rural governance. The show's humor and heart come from his adjustment to village life and the quirky dynamics

of the local panchayat, particularly the unique situation where a woman holds the position of Pradhan, but her husband is publicly recognized as the leader due to electoral quotas.

These web series highlight the versatility and richness of content available in the digital space, from light-hearted entertainment to serious social commentary, reflecting a broad spectrum of human experiences and societal issues.

In Panchayat, the comedic narrative highlights a pressing issue in rural governance. The newly appointed Sachiv, despite his qualifications as an engineer, is stationed in a remote village where his wife, rather than him, holds the official title of Pradhan due to electoral quotas. This scenario reflects the often-overlooked reality in small villages where political titles can be more ceremonial than functional, with actual responsibilities often falling on others. The series offers a humorous yet insightful look at the complexities of village life and governance.

Similarly, Aspirants offers a realistic portrayal of the struggles faced by UPSC aspirants in Mukherjee Nagar, a well-known hub for civil service preparation. The series delves into the personal and emotional challenges of these aspirants, capturing their journey with authenticity and minimal melodrama. It also explores how their relationships and lives evolve, both for those who succeed and those who take different paths.

These series, telefilms, and web shows offer valuable insights into the study of popular culture. They serve as a site for examining representation and identity, illustrating how various aspects of everyday life are depicted and perceived. For instance, older telefilms like Aurat and Admi focus on the struggles of ordinary people, representing their experiences and societal roles. This focus on representation extends to contemporary series and soaps, which often reflect broader cultural signifiers in a diverse nation like India.

Gender and sexuality are also significant in these narratives, though often with limitations. While TV series and soaps may touch on themes of gender and sexuality, queer identities are usually presented in a minimal or secondary capacity. This reflects a broader trend where mainstream media does not fully explore or represent diverse sexualities and identities.

Audience reception and fan culture are crucial areas of study in popular culture. For example, the outcry and protests following the fictional death of Mihir in a popular show demonstrate the intense emotional investment and fan culture associated with TV series in India. This kind of viewer engagement offers insights into viewership patterns and preferences, and how these evolve over time.

Ideology and hegemony are integral to understanding popular culture. TV series and soaps often reinforce dominant cultural ideologies, particularly patriarchal ones. While there may be instances of resistance or subversion, these are usually limited, with the dominant narrative frequently reflecting societal norms and values.

Lastly, the political economy and industry dynamics of television production, including regulatory frameworks and production practices, are important aspects of this study. Understanding how these factors influence content creation and distribution provides a comprehensive view of the media landscape.

Methodologically, studying TV soaps and series involves analyzing them as texts, applying historical and comparative analysis, and examining how these shows reflect or deviate from historical narratives or other media portrayals. This approach helps in understanding the broader implications of media content on popular culture and societal perceptions.

We can historically place or compare TV series to assess whether they effectively represent or deviate from historical portrayals. This comparison can yield insightful observations about how media reflects or distorts historical narratives. By critically analyzing TV series through various methodological approaches, scholars can uncover valuable insights into the relationship between media culture and contemporary society in India. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of media's role in shaping and reflecting societal values but also provides a deeper look into how historical and cultural contexts influence media representations.