



Gender and soap operas: Issues in Hindi language family based Teleserials in India

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Abstract

Teleserials in India constitute major share of the time devoted to entertainment programmes on the Hindi language channels of Indian television. Teleserials rose to popularity after *Humlog*, the first TV serial that became a major success on Doordarshan. Liberalization and globalization led to the private channels started telecasting mega serials about big business families. The year 2008 saw the birth of Colors TV as a new channel, and *Balika Vadhu*, as a women centric thematic soap. There was a shift in the emphasis in the content of family based teleserials. UN and CEDAW guidelines as well as Beijing 20 laid emphasis on portrayal on women in media and its linkages with gender empowerment. Content of teleserials became a question of primary concern.

As a part of the doctoral study on 'Gender issues in the Hindi language family based teleserials', an analysis of the primary themes of the content of 182 teleserials on YouTube over the time frame 2008-2016 was conducted. The four popular Hindi channels included were Starplus, Zee TV, Sony and Colors. Out of a total of 182 family based teleserials telecasted across the four identified channels between 2008-2016, 87 teleserials (47.80%) revolved around women and gender as their primary theme. Out of a total of 87 gender centric teleserials, 47 teleserials had some issue related to gender as their primary theme; 31 teleserials focused on the challenging life journeys of women in a diversity of situations as the primary theme; and 11 teleserials focusing on women centric relationships. The 47 teleserials focusing on gender issues, 32 teleserials focused on issues related to marriage and gender, 03 teleserials focused on issues related to gender based discrimination, 04 teleserials focused on issues related to gender based violence; and 08 teleserials focused on a variety of other gender issues as their primary theme. Channel wise, more than 50% of the total family based Hindi language teleserials on ZeeTv, Sony Tv and Colors Tv had gender as the primary theme. Starplus, though had the highest number (28), the proportion was 40.00%.

Keywords: family based teleserials, gender issues, gender centric teleserials, challenging life journeys of women, gender and relationships, women protagonists

1. Introduction

Soap operas or teleserials have stories generally revolving around 2 to 5 families associated with each other. All soap operas have a basic plot and sub plots, with a central theme. Stories reach the viewers' homes daily. Stories may have one or more protagonist. Viewers get involved with the content of the story at the level of their psyche. The viewers develop a symbiotic relationship with the protagonist and other key characters of the teleserials.

Teleserials in India constitute nearly 80% of the time devoted to entertainment programmes on the Hindi language channels of television. In India, teleserials rose to popularity after *Humlog*, the first TV serial that became a major success on Doordarshan. This was followed by many others like *Udaan*, *Buniyaad*, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata* on Doordarshan in the pre-liberalization era.

After liberalization and globalization, the private channels started telecasting mega serials about big business families and their family relationships. Teleserials like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kasauti Zindagi Ke*, and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* rose to unparalleled popularity in the post liberalization and globalization era (Munshi, 2012).

Kyunki and *Kahaani* redefined televiewing space through their mega stories, film like visual quality, and a content that brought day to day household level issues of relationships to

people's homes. *Tulsi* and *Parvati* became popular household names. Many such teleserials journeyed for more than 4-5 years. Due to their unending length and stories losing relevance, these teleserials started inviting a lot of criticism. Gender was beginning to find a negative treatment through some of these serials.

In the year 2008, with the introduction of Colors TV as a new channel, and *Balika Vadhu*, there was a shift in the content of family based teleserials (Kottary, 2009). Gender issues began to find a voice and space.

1.1 Theoretical framework

- i) The question of content: Since teleserials are highly popular, the question of content with respect to gender needs to be visited. Images, issues and stories carried in the teleserials have a high potential of influencing the viewers in some way. The influence could be positive or negative.
- ii) Mass Media Effects: Denis Mc Quail's *theories of Media Effects*, *Cultivation theory* and *Socialization theory* emphasized the role of mass media, particularly the entertainment programmes in influencing the viewers in a subtle manner. The effects could be short term or long term. (Mc Quail, 2010).
- iii) Gender and sex: Sex and gender are different. Sex is

biological, helping to categorize people in to male and female; and gender is sociological. The socio-cultural role expectation of men and women are called gender. Therefore, gender is the social and cultural definition of men and women (Bhasin, 1999 and Bhasin 2000).

- iv) Global initiatives on women and media The *Beijing Platform for Action*, set up in 1995, emphasized on the need for a positive role of media in shifting the gender stereotypes. Twenty years later, the *Beijing 20* emphasized, that *‘Everyone deserves to live free from the burden of harmful gender stereo types’* (Beijing 20, 2015). A UNESCO-SWAN (South Asian Women’s Network) initiative, *‘Women for Change: Building a Gendered Media’* also developed a set of gender sensitive guidelines for women in media for the South Asian Region (UNESCO, New Delhi, 2016). CEDAW, UNIFEM in its 2006 report also focused on the linkages between Sex role stereotyping and prejudice, Status of women in India and Role of media. It stated that the absence of clear censor guidelines on sexual stereotypes promoted women’s subordination through media portrayals. The report emphasize that *‘the absence of any regulations in television programmes resulted in a stereo typical portrayal of women in serials.* (CEDAW, UNIFEM, 2006).
- v) Broadcast regulation in India- Broadcasting Contents Complaints Council (BCCC) was set up in India to regulate the content of cable Television. The BCCC guidelines, applicable to all non-news broadcast programmes, discourage portrayal of women as *‘an object of sexual exploitation’* and discourage promotion *‘of social evils like child marriage, dowry, bigamy, son preference’ etc* (IBF Guidelines).

2. Content analysis of Hindi language family based teleserials

Trends in content of the Hindi language family based teleserials related to gender were studied through an analysis of the primary theme of the storyline, over the time frame 2008-2016. Epic and mythological teleserials were excluded from the sample Teleseries like crime shows, talk shows, talent shows etc were also excluded.

2.1 Content analysis

To analyze the trends in content with respect to gender, in the family based Hindi language teleserials telecasted 2008 onwards, data was gathered by visiting the websites of each channel, over the time frame of 2008-2016. Four popular channels identified for inclusion in the study were Starplus, Sony, Zee TV, Colors, as these were the most popular channels. Other channels were excluded for the purpose of manageability of the data.

2.2 Methodology

Each teleserial on air between 2008-2016 was viewed briefly for a few episodes on You Tube for an idea of its basic storyline, content, background and type of teleserial. Teleserials were visited through their channel websites and YouTube. Teleserials on air as on 2008 even if they were continuing from the past were also included. This exercise was undertaken to study the trends in content and range of themes and issues.

2.3 Analysis

Based on their thematic content and basic storyline, three broad categories of content emerged among the teleserials. The three broad categories that emerged were General (Themes related to family and social life with no specific emphasis on gender or women); Gender centric stories (stories around women protagonist or issues related to women or gender as a primary focus or both); and Gender as an issue built into script (primary theme did not revolve around women or gender but some aspect of gender roles emerged as a part of the story).

2.3.1 Channel wise classification of teleserials (2008-2016)

Table 1 reveals that a total of 182 family based teleserials were telecasted across the four identified channels between 2008-2016. Of them, 87 teleserials (47.80%) revolved around women and gender, either focusing on stories of women protagonists or some gender issues. Channel wise even though Starplus (28) had the highest number of gender centric teleserials, proportion wise Zee, Sony and Colors were nearly equal and faired much higher than Starplus. More than half of the family based teleserials on Zee TV, Sony and Colors revolved around women and gender as the primary theme.

Table 1: Channel wise classification of teleserials (2008-2016)

Name of channel	Number of Teleserials (Total) (N)	Family based teleserials (Total) (n)	Family based Gender centric tele serials (n1)
Starplus	74	70	28 (40.00%)
Colors	45	42	22 (52.38%)
Zee TV	41	39	21(53.84%)
Sony	33	31	16 (51.61%)
Total	193	182	87 (47.80%)

2.3.2 Gender centric teleserials; channel wise thematic analysis

An analysis of the content of gender centric teleserials based on the primary theme around which the story revolved; was conducted channel wise as well as theme wise. Based on the primary theme of the content, the gender centric teleserials were classifiable in to three broad categories: a. Teleserials

around specific gender issues, b. Challenging life journeys of women protagonists in the teleserial as the primary focus; and c. Relationships challenges of the women protagonists as the primary focus.

2.3.3 Themes and issues raised in gender centric teleserials

A channel wise analysis of the trends in gender centric scripts

of the tele serials is presented below.

2.3.3.1 Channel wise summary of themes in content

Table- 2 reveals that out of a total of 182 family based teleserials, there were a total of 87 teleserials with gender issues as the primary theme, with stories on the lives of

women protagonists across four popular channels under study. Channel wise, out of a total of 87 gender centric teleserials, 50 teleserials i.e. 57% were contributed by Starplus and Colors together; and 71 teleserials i.e. 81% were contributed by Starplus and Colors and Zee TV together. Starplus and Colors Tv had the largest number of gender centric teleserials.

Table 2: Channel wise thematic breakup of Gender centric teleserials

Channel name	Total gender centric	Issue based teleserials				Total	Total	Total
		Issues related to marriage	Issue related to gender based discrimination	Issue related to gender based violence	Others issues			
Starplus	28	10	02	02	02	16	08	04
Colors	22	08	01	02	03	14	04	04
Zee TV	21	08	—	—	02	10	09	02
Sony	16	06	—	—	01	07	08	01
Total	87	32	03	04	08	47	31	11

2.3.3.2 Issues related to gender

The 87 gender centric teleserials included 47 teleserials around issues related to women and gender as the primary theme. Again channel wise, 30 out of 47 teleserials around gender issues as primary theme were contributed by Starplus and Colors together. Starplus and colors together accounted for 30 teleserials i.e. 63% of the total number of teleserials on gender issues as the primary theme. Also Starplus, Colors TV and Zee TV together contributed 40 teleserials i.e. 85% of the total issue based teleserials.

2.3.3.3 Challenging life journey of women protagonists

31 teleserials out of a total of 87 gender centric teleserials had primary themes focusing around the challenging life journey of women protagonists under in a diversity of difficult situations. It is important to mention that the 31 stories on challenging life journey of women had emphasis on the women protagonists and their tough situations, their self development, contributions to family and society in some way as the primary theme. In these stories the journey of women in addressing the challenges and facing them, the process was given the primary focus in the stories.

In the category of teleserials on challenging life journey of women, 80% of the teleserials i.e. 25 teleserials were contributed by Starplus, Zee TV and Sony TV together. In the category of gender and relationships, out of a total of 11 teleserials, 08 teleserials i.e. 72% were contributed by Starplus and Colors together.

2.3.3.4 Gender and relationships

There were a total of 11 teleserials around gender and relationships challenges of women under specific circumstances, particularly with respect to societal expectations as the primary theme.

The stories on gender and relationships focused largely on relationships of women with respect to gender roles. These stories focused on the relationship aspects and challenges of women in family and society.

2.3.3.5 Overlapping Content

Many teleserials because of their overlapping content related to gender and women were classifiable into more than one

category like discrimination, violence, empowerment etc. Some crucial examples included Balika Badhu and a Na aana is desh lado. Balika badhu, though a teleserial on child marriage and consequences as its primary theme, it traveled through the largest possible range of gender issues like discrimination, violence, health, literacy, rape, empowerment etc. Na aana is desh lado, though had female feticide as its primary theme, it touched a huge range of issues related to discrimination and violence and societal prejudices. There were many similar examples. Therefore, the classification for the purpose of this analysis has been undertaken and presented based on the basic primary theme and plot of the stories in the gender centric teleserials.

2.3.3.6 Gender issues in Gender centric teleserials

Analysis- Out of a total of 47 issue based teleserials, 32 teleserials had marriage and its related dimensions and challenges with respect to gender and women as the primary theme. The diversity of issues related to marriage included widow remarriage, remarriage of separated people, marriage challenges of dark complexioned girl; marriage challenges of girl from lower class and caste backgrounds; marriage of orphans; marriage for girls with disability; gender role expectations in relation to marriage; superstitions related to marriage etc.

Three teleserials focused purely on the issue of gender based discrimination against the girl child in some way. These stories revolved around non acceptance of girl child by the family or a warm welcome to a girl child born after many years in the family.

Four teleserials focused purely on the issue of gender based violence as the primary theme. The range of issues included female feticide, rape, stalking, domestic violence, sexual abuse etc.

Eight teleserials focused on a variety of other gender issues as the primary theme. The range included women and disability, mental health, life of Devdasis, superstitions related to girl child and skin disease, women and sports, Chardham Yatra of parents and role of girls etc.

3. Summary and Conclusion

The introduction of Colors TV and Balika Vadhu in 2008, the

unending length of K serials (Kyunki..., Kahaani..., kausati...) and their unrealistic content led to a change in the emphasis of the content in Hindi language family based teleserials. A study of primary themes of 182 Hindi language family based teleserials across four popular channels i.e. Starplus, Colors, Zee TV and Sony TV was conducted over the time period 2008-2016 by visiting the teleserials on YouTube and channel websites together.

The study revealed that out of a total of 182 family based teleserials on these channels, there were 87 teleserials focusing on either women protagonists or issues related to gender and women. Interestingly, gender centric teleserials accounted for 46% of the total number of family based teleserials on the four channels.

Among the 87 gender centric teleserials, 47 teleserials focused on some gender issue as the primary theme, 31 teleserials focused on challenging life journey of women protagonists and their contributions to family and society in some way. 11 out of 87 teleserials focused on gender roles and relationships of women as the primary theme.

Among the 47 teleserials on gender issue as primary theme, 32 teleserials focused on issues related to marriage, 04 teleserials focused on gender based violence as primary theme, 03 teleserials focused on gender based discrimination as primary theme; and 08 teleserials focused on other gender issues as their primary theme. There were 31 teleserials focusing on challenging life journey of women, there self development, dreams and life goals. 11 teleserials focused on gender and relationships as their primary theme.

Channel wise, Starplus, Colors TV and Zee TV together contributed 40 teleserials i.e. 85% of the total issue based teleserials.

In the category of teleserials on challenging life journey of women, 80% of the teleserials i.e. 25 teleserials were contributed by Starplus, Zee TV and Sony TV together.

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