



# Indented Identities: The Quandary of the Indian Woman

Shlok Kumar\*

## Abstract

Indian television has come a long way since its humble beginnings. But while advancements are being made on the technical front, most soaps on Indian television lack realism and thrive by weaving new patterns on a tattered storyboard saturated in the tenebrous tar of patriarchy and superannuated social conventions. Television possesses the potency to mould public discourse on account of its pervasive- and invasive- nature. A vast majority of the public consumes entertainment proffered in the form of soap operas- which seem endearingly preoccupied with everyday concerns. Although the portrayal of women in Indian soaps has changed over the years, gender roles and behavioural patterns are influenced by a complex reworking of disempowering archetypes and stereotypes instilled in the public imagination by an intransigent, elite fraternity viciously dedicated to embracing overt aspects of modernity. In view of the largely deprecatory portrayal of female characters, it is high time to interrogate the role of the soap opera in shaping the identity of women.

**Keywords:** Television, women, identity, soap opera, audience

## The Great Indian Soap Opera

The Great Indian Soap Opera of today has its origins in 1980s- an era of rapid expansion of the national television network- and

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\* CMR Institute of Management Studies, Bangalore, India; shlok9@msn.com

especially with the introduction of extremely popular soaps such as *Hum Log*, *Buniyaad* and *Khandaan*. Indian television soap operas were directly inspired not by American daytime soap operas but by the success of the Mexican 'telenovela.' (Keval J Kumar, 2000). 'Telenovelas,' which air over a period of several years in a vast number of episodes have a definite sense of closure whilst most British, American and Australian soap operas are more open ended and are conceptually designed to continue ad infinitum. Because 'telenovelas' do come to an end, audiences cling on to these shows with anticipation and expectation, awaiting a harmonious resolution of all conflicts. The finite continuity and heightened melodrama of these programmes keep audiences fixated. Soaps such as *BalikaVadhu*, *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* and *Diya Aur Baati Hum* have become immensely popular on this account. With the extensive penetration of cable television and the DTH revolution-not to mention the augmented switch from analogue to digital and broadcasts in high definition- television has never been more powerful as a mass medium that it is today. In the 150 million homes in India with televisions, watching soaps has become a daily routine prosecuted to the accompaniment of the battle over the remote. The elevation of everyday life to an awe-inspiring spectacle surcharged with sentimentalism acts as a panacea for the enervating gashes of reality.

### **The Ten Commandments**

If the Ten Commandments (might we add that these are exclusively for female characters) of Indian television can be delineated sententiously, then they would be as follows:

1. If unmarried, thou shalt repress thy baser instincts and be cautious, coy and courteous
2. If married, thou shalt be courteous, caring, conventional and punctilious; thou shalt also be bound to the household and discharge thy duties with alacrity
3. Thou shalt unconditionally venerate thy mother-in-law (*saas*) with your every breath (*saans*)

4. Thou shalt ever fear thy mother-in-law and defer authority unto her
5. Honour thy husband and thy seniors
6. Thou shalt bear with dignity the slights of thy mother-in-law and accede to her postulates
7. Thou shalt not have an independent source of income, nor shall ye apply unto thy parents for currency
8. If eager to enter the workforce, unbeknownst to thy mother-in-law, thou shalt occupy an office subordinate to thy spouse or more ideally, assist him directly
9. Thou shalt endeavour to best of thy ability to deck yourself meretriciously and mispend the emoluments of thy spouse
10. Thou shalt observe a sanitised code for evincing amorousness, bear thy worthy husband offspring and engrain in them hoary dynastic usages

It is no surprise that nine of the Ten Commandments pertain only to married women: married women- more precisely, married women living with their mothers-in-law- are the veritable mainstay of the predictable, rusty plots that are emblematic of the Great Indian Soap Opera- a charade that passes off as entertainment. One cannot also not avoid noticing that Commandments 3, 4 and 6 stress the centrality of the *saas-bahu* relationship: a trope that buttresses the mighty edifice of the Great Indian Soap Opera. In the twenty-first century, in which we Indians continue to consume western culture and adopt western lifestyles, we are still rigidly entrenched in dated, patriarchal values. This might seem like an overwhelmingly powerful and arrogant statement to make. But if we accept Indian television as even vaguely representative of the Indian ethos- a fallacious assumption, some might argue- this is exactly the reading that emerges.

It is perhaps only on Indian television that we can come across face transplants that take place in a trice, DNA test reports being falsified and characters who never seem to age themselves but instead blithely continue to orchestrate events in the lives of their fourth generation. But the metronome of the misadventures of the

Great Indian Soap Opera is the ideal of sacrosanct family values. The (often aged) mother-in-law is the embodiment of these family values; she volunteers advice- often unasked for and particularly unwelcome-, is the arbiter of peace in the household and reigns as the voice of Providence seeking to harmonise an ideal past with a present in a constant state of flux. We can aver with confidence that soaps on television have no bearing on our day-to-day activities and that the portrayal of women therein is not in the least bit representative of the power equations in the typical Indian household. But what we fail to realise is that in holding on firmly to this notion of the incorruptibility of the Indian mind (itself a conundrum), the monochromatic picture of Indian society that emerges to outsiders even from a casual viewing of these programmes, does great disservice to our society as a whole, a society that is as diverse as it is vibrant. This article will - using specific examples- examine how soap operas influence identity-formation in women and hinder true women's empowerment by reinforcing and reworking stereotypes and archetypes.

### **Willful Suspension of Disbelief**

The multitude of characters that speckle the landscape of the Great Indian Soap Opera are a hapless breed that exhibits predictable, customary patterns of behaviour. The stereotypes- both male and female- are almost innumerable: we have the industrious, dutiful son who magically transforms the fortunes of the family by realising the Indian equivalent of the elusive American Dream; the restless, single, young daughter who is rather passionate but has to abandon any attempt to explore her sexuality in the interests of tradition and respectability- the hallowed benchmarks of the Indian bourgeoisie; then there is the dutiful wife who prides herself on her chastity- following her husband like a second shadow- and strives to please all and sundry (read mother-in-law); next we have the prodigal son who is redeemed eventually by willowy ma'am; additionally, we have the garishly dressed, intractable, garrulous, malevolent sister-in-law who, along with equally insidious female characters- masterminds several lurid crimes and leads a life of unfettered privilege; next in line is an estranged family member- a rapacious widow (or more recently, a divorcee) on the prowl;

further, we have the successful, unabashed eldest son- a young bronzed Apollo, touting an alpha male attitude; subsequently we have the sweet younger brother with a placid temperament and a bewitching smile who eases the substantial burdens of his elder brother(s); besides, we have the travesty of the professional woman who- because she is independent and commands significant financial resources- is castigated, stigmatised and caricatured as a hyper-sexualised and ignominious appendage of the illustrious family tree. Other stereotypes are that of the meddling neighbour, the indolent maid with a keen ear for gossip, the idiosyncratic outsider (in Hindi soaps, invariably a scrupulous, swarthy South Indian who struggles- with absolutely humorous effect- to articulate the aspirated consonants in Hindi), the corpulent and voracious *Maharaj* or cook, the clinically detached doctor who performs breath-taking medical procedures unheard of in the annals of medical science, the ostentatious astrologer with a predilection for exaggeration and a spotless record in matchmaking, jaded teenagers, the grandfather: a senescent übermensch endowed with remarkable insight and extraordinary potential, the overzealous isolationist husband, gun-toting gangsters whose collective strength and practical judgment are significantly diminished if their sole opponent is 'righteous' and of course, the elderly matriarch (baa) who- rosary in hand- enjoys an astonishingly long lease of life and saunters through large hallways without a care in the world. But the crown singly belongs to archetypal *saas*: a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bestial, misogynistic, racist, megalomaniacal tormentor of an unyielding temperament. The mother-in-law of the Great Indian Soap Opera in her various manifestations represents patriarchy in its unalloyed and most perfected state. That audiences in modern India yearn for these aggrandised and repulsive characters in ridiculously improbable situations to populate their TV screens requires a willful suspension of disbelief.

*The Chambers English Dictionary* defines terrorism as, firstly, "An organized system of violence and intimidation, esp for political ends," and secondly, "The state of fear and submission caused by this."

The violent tactics represented on the small screen assume a macabre aspect when sown in the fertile imagination of the Indian middle-class. Considering the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of women on Indian television and the self-conscious nature in which we consume and relish such entertainment in which several indignities are inflicted on women- in keeping with spirit of our times-, it would not be wholly inappropriate to deem the viewing of contemporary Indian soaps as an act of terrorism.

*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (KSBKBT) was a grotesque and vagarious saga that ran on Indian television for eight years, the longest-running soap opera in the history of Indian television. And there are any number of producers who want to best that score. The story of the upper-class, Gujarati Virani family, KSBKBT attained very high TRPs and won several awards. Prime reasons for its popularity- and indeed the popularity of most soaps on Indian television- were the kind of family and lavish lifestyle it represented. In most Indian soaps, tales of love and betrayal are played out in gilded halls. These soaps place glamourised characters in aspirational settings. With the rise of the billionaire class in India, wealth and the exhibition of possessions have become all the more alluring to India's nouveau-riche.

Producers of Indian soaps have very perceptively responded to the dominant ideology of the middle-class. Actually, the title *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* is a misnomer because, if the *saas* actually recollected what it was being a daughter-in-law (*bahu*) herself, she would certainly not behave in a despotic and overbearing manner. Being a *bahu* is a memory of madness which the *saas* wants to erase but unfortunately, the privileges of being a *saas* are so exhilarating that in a curious irony, the oppressed becomes oppressor.

Tulsi Virani, the protagonist endears herself to the matriarch Baa, but struggles to adapt to the volatile affections of her *saas* Savita. The preposterous shifts in the plot are far too numerous to mention. But very recurrent themes in this soap are the importance of *parivaar* or *khaandaan* (family) and *sanskars* (values). These themes strike a chord immediately with an Indian audience. The 1,833 episodes of KSBKBT were peppered with chants from religious texts that reinforced the attributes- dichotomously classified as either positive or negative- of various characters. And the religious

worldview presented in this soap as in most others, is essentially a Hindu worldview. The viewing public was enamoured of Tulsi because she was the ideal *bahu* and wife. The most pressing question that needs to be answered is whether the Tulsi model of ideal *bahu* and wife is irrefutably apposite to women of all religious communities.

A love triangle is established between the characters of Ansh, Karan and Nandini. Tulsi hopes to reform her long-lost son Ansh who is represented as a coarse and licentious young man. The culmination of the misinterpretation of religious text *The Bhagavad Gita* occurs in Episode 939 when Tulsi- an extremely devout woman-transforms into God by shooting her own son Ansh for ravishing Nandini, citing a verse in the text which declares that God incarnates whenever there is a decline in morality and a rise in irreligion. Tulsi's brave and dutiful act was feted: she became a personification of the highest religious principle. One need not be perspicacious to infer how this fallacious logic can be used to justify violence and aggression in the household. The *saas* can well-nigh declare that God is on her side and that she is agency through which God is acting; therefore, the *bahu* must submit to her demands and remain submissive. If the *bahu* has a mentor like Baa, then she too can mount a defensive. The consequence of such new-fangled imaginings is utter chaos in the family with ramifications for society as a whole. In this way the archetype of a protector and guardian of society grounded in righteousness is reworked to suit the needs of a particular plot and appeal to the masses. The introduction of the religious element in Indian soaps is what makes them especially endearing to octogenarians, who can celebrate and gloat over their exploits in days of yore and soothe the wounds in their conscience. It is also worth mentioning that whilst both male and female characters are eager to speak about tradition, family and duty, the onus of ensuring the continuity of tradition and thereby family, rests almost entirely on the female characters. They must refrain from dressing provocatively, they must speak politely, they should veil themselves in the presence of their husband or a senior family member and they must observe endless fasts even if their husbands are unfaithful. The code of conduct for men is much more uncomplicated and nuanced: pursue any profession of your choice, have relationships, break relationships if they hinder your

duty to your family, dress as you please, drive around in fancy cars and flaunt your wealth, having extra-marital affairs is strongly discouraged but you will be forgiven for an occasional fall from grace, belabour your wife as and when necessary, demand a handsome dowry, assume agency in expressing intimate feelings, listen to your mother, observe festivals with your wife, manage your finances however you please- borrowing and lending at will. Yes, there are soaps in which the husband is understanding and loving, as we shall see later. But such soaps do not in any way minimise the unbridled freedom which male characters seem to enjoy; often, when the husband relinquishes control of his wife, the *saas* usurps that void in the domestic power equation and continues her reign of terror.

For Tulsi to be deified, she must endure the whims of her capricious *saas*, observe fasts and vows and bear herculean responsibilities- a triad of duties that entails much emotional trauma. By contrast, Mihir, by virtue of merely being married to Tulsi was immediately canonised. Such was his popularity that when he was killed off, a group of ladies protested on the streets of Mumbai. Of course, Mihir was resurrected, in order not to compromise the TRPs of KSBKBT. Mihir was not a particularly dutiful man; he had a scandalous relationship with another woman named Mandira, portrayed as a rather nefarious and depraved character, not least because she was modern and professionally independent. Thus the *bahu* becomes a metonymic representation of the family or *khandaan*. What follows is that the connotative and denotative meanings of 'bahu' are not the same. Fortunately, Star Plus discontinued this pestilential soap in 2008. But such is the popularity of this programme that we will witness its second coming this year, thanks to the indomitable efforts of Ekta Kapoor. The matriarch Baa, who was alive even after Tulsi became a grandmother will hopefully not return because she breathed her last in episode 1,831. But then again, one can never be certain. KSBKBT has supplied enough fodder to sustain tea-time prattle and interminable discussions at kitty-parties. KSBKBT was even dubbed for Sri Lankan television and enjoyed record viewership overseas.



Another programme on Star Plus which is centred on the melodramatic turn of events in a wealthy Gujarati family is *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* (SNB). The family in focus is the Modi *parivaar*. There is an enormous disconnect between the modish and opulent lifestyle of the Modi family and the primitive mentalities of most of its vexatious members- particularly the women. The redeeming virtue of the Great Indian Soap Opera is its predictability. So one may skip even twenty episodes only to realise that the plot has hardly inched forward. SNB, like the rest of its ilk, is one such programme.

SNB which premiered in 2010 continues to remain a primetime show. The protagonist Gopi or more affectionately, Gopi Bahu is the epitome of human sacrifice and suffering, striving for wholesome, equitable acceptance into the Modi family. Like Tulsi, Gopi is also very devout and dutiful, but Gopi is so incurably servile that to the casual viewer she may seem more like dunce than an ideal *bahu*. The loquacious younger *bahu* Rashi is her rival; Rashi acts in collusion with her wily, gap-toothed mother Urmila. The gaudily-decked Kokila is remains the *saas* to beat, a monumental shrew. Kokila is a choleric, provincial woman who lords it over everyone in the house and mirrors an imbecile in her maturity. But strangely, Kokila herself is the younger *bahu*. Hetal, the affectionate and affable *saas* is Kokila's senior. A pragmatic *saas* actually ought to be more like Hetal. But the viewing public is so used to the hysterical *saas* stereotype that Hetal is denied the attention she deserves. Kokila is a very busy person and her daily schedule follows a somewhat predictable course: she admonishes her husband, she supervises work in the kitchen; in between, she speedily rushes to the living room only to find Rashi engaged in hatching a novel, sinister plot; Kokila chastises Rashi and returns to the kitchen only to chastise Gopi; she remonstrates with Hetal and dominates the discussion at the dinner table; Kokila retires for the day after having offended and nagged her family members, completely gratified. Only on rare occasions is Kokila checked by Baa, the elderly matriarch. Even then, Kokila does not give in without a fight. It is surprising to see the kind of menial work that Kokila and Hetal seem to be preoccupied with: having clothes and utensils washed, ordering groceries and sometimes cooking themselves. The two also engage their *bahus* in these activities. In a

palatial bungalow with numerous cars and several servants, it is absolutely astounding to see the mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law engaged in such petty chores. Rashi is an educated young woman, but she is not allowed to work. Why is it that when her husband Jigar can work and enjoy financial freedom, Rashi must stay at home supervising the maid and washing utensils? Kokila's agenda is a rather complicated one: she concerns herself not just with her own *bahu* but with Hetal's as well. Kokila wants to domesticate Rashi and rob her of the ability to think for herself.

Rashi is no paragon of virtue, in fact, she is viciously jealous but one must understand that Rashi has become a gold-digger precisely because she is deprived of an independent income and the opportunity to socialise. Overworked and abused repeatedly, characters like Rashi leading an insulated life will gradually metamorphose into mad women in the attic and bring about utter ruination. But the producers of these soaps are shrewd enough to preclude their dear characters from descending into hysteria. Even troublesome characters like Rashi are humanised occasionally before they return to their old ways and then the cycle repeats itself.

This flip flopping from good character to bad and vice versa is a recurrent malady in most soaps. These extremes are observed in the case of female characters alone. On the one hand we have Gopi who is extremely submissive and on the other hand we have Rashi who craves freedom and is demonised for it. The unlettered Gopi does receive a school education after becoming a part of the Modi family, but why is she not allowed to complete her education? Unfortunately, both the *bahus* are left to deteriorate in the household doing mundane work. There is something in the Indian psyche that does not desire professional success in a woman.

Rashi's inertia stems from the lack of suitable preoccupation. Little wonder she spends her time plotting and scheming. Gopi- forced to lead an unresisting existence- spends her time ingratiating herself with her *saas* and her husband, being alternatively exiled from and welcomed into the Modi household. We would do well to juxtapose the character of Gopi with that of Kinjal, Kokila's fiercely-independent daughter. Kinjal enjoys a privileged upbringing and is modern in her outlook. She falls in love with a

handsome young man of her social standing but is unable to marry him. The punishment meted out to Kinjal for her modernity is excessive: she is forced to marry Dhaval- a benevolent but pusillanimous cypher; she has to live with the wicked Urmila and also has to abandon her professional aspirations.

The associations being made in this programme are most disturbing: an illiterate woman can somehow enter a prosperous family and thrive in due course, but a motivated, self-confident and educated young woman is doomed to eke out a meagre existence. And what precipitates this win-lose situation? The yielding nature of Gopi, who manages to gratify the outlandish expectations of her *saas*. What will ensure Rashi's continued presence in the Modi family? Her willingness to play by Kokila's rules. By marrying Dhaval, not only does Kinjal have to sacrifice her extravagant lifestyle, she even has to endure the taunts of Urmila.

Undoubtedly, in the final episode of the programme, all family members will be united in prosperity and Kinjal, too, will be able to finally experience the social mobility she so much desires. But are we likely to remember episode 2,008 more than episodes 1-2007? Urmila is not very different from Kokila; the two just use different means to achieve their objectives. Urmila and Kokila both use intimidation, verbal violence and aggression. Urmila is 'bad' but Kokila is 'good.' In the Great Indian Soap Opera, whether you are good or bad depends largely on the extent to which you subscribe to the dominant ideology. Ultimately, Urmila is Kokila's dark double. Here the archetype of the *saas* has been reworked to create a much vilified character. The *saas* Kokila enjoys social sanction but her dark double Urmila is universally detested.

*Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?* Which started airing in mid-2011, had an unusually short life, finishing in a mere 398 episodes. Again the name *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon* (IPKKND) is a misnomer, because the romantic relationship that develops between alpha male Arnav and the comely young Khushi has a dark, sadomasochistic fervour. Arnav- the successful businessman used to getting his way- likes to play rough and takes great sadistic pleasure in inflicting indignities on Khushi; Arnav also likes to provoke Khushi and their 'loving' exchanges have a masochistic aura. Khushi, in fact, starts subconsciously looking forward to

Arnav's virile aggression. Indeed, it would be much better if such 'love' were not given an appellation. What particularly works against Khushi's favour is her membership in the lower-middle-class. So for the viewing public the 'love' between Khushi and Arnav is an exemplar of how loving affairs must be or ought to be conducted between a rugged, macho upper-class male and a dainty lower-middle-class girl. Fortunately, IPKKND was free from the travails of the *saas-bahu* melodrama. But the male characters represented by Arnav and Shyam more than made up for the dearth of a spiteful, perfidious *saas* with vulpine cunning and her amoral co-conspirators. Arnav comes across as a distraught schoolboy with a troubled conscience; Arnav is particularly sensitive about his parents who died tragically. Khushi provides Arnav emotional succour and Arnav is humanised only towards the end of the programme. What the Great Indian Soap Opera lacks is realism.

Perhaps this is what accounts for the popularity of soaps: the constant endeavour of the producers to make characters emotionally human rather than literally real. Ian Ang(1985) notes that:

In a fictional text like the television serial the characters are central. Through the characters the various elements of the text (situations, actions, locations, indications of time and so on) obtain a place and function in the plot. Because the viewer imagines the characters as active subjects, those elements are stripped of their arbitrariness and obtain meaning in the narrative. Furthermore, the 'lifelike' acting style ensures that the distance between actor and character is minimalized, so that the illusion is created that we are dealing with a 'real person'. The character therefore appears for the viewer as a person existing independently of the narrative situations shown in the serial. (pp. 29-30).

The theme reinforced in IPKKND is the importance of loving your husband and convincing yourself of his latent goodness; also reinforced is the sacrosanct principle of female acquiescence. One may argue that Khushi, in finally winning the crown in the

Mrs.India contest- with due support from Arnav-, has actually realised her goal of autonomy. But at what cost? Why is it that female characters have to- to borrow a byword from the soaps themselves- pass through 'an ordeal by fire' to obtain emancipation from the clutches of tradition, culture and duty- all of which are constructed and reconstituted to reinforce patriarchy? Why is liberty highly conditional only in the case of the woman? Is there an acute scarcity of success stories of professionally successful women in our country or are they an eyesore for producers greedy for TRPs?

Television is a powerful medium that has immense potential. But in our country television has never been an insurrectionary force. The popularity of the soap opera can be attributed to its uncomplicated nature and preoccupation with everyday concerns. According to Sonia M. Livingstone (1990):

Just as with everyday interactions, watching television has often been seen as a routine, unproblematic, passive process: the meanings of programmes are seen as given and obvious; the viewer is seen as passively receptive and mindless. Again, this simplicity is illusory. In recent years, both interpersonal and mediated communication have been increasingly recognised as complex, rule-governed, constructive set of processes. People's role in such communications must be correspondingly understood as knowledgeable, skilled, motivated, and diverse. (p. 3).

In other words, the viewing of television involves the conveying of subliminal implications. Sonia M. Livingstone (1990) further argues that:

One might protest that people use different interpretative frames for television and everyday life, that they can maintain a distance from the former, bracketing it off from the latter as unreal. This is doubtful as a general claim on several grounds... Careful analysis of people's reception of television programmes... reveals the complex

intertwining which takes place between television and everyday meanings. (p. 5).

*Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?...Ek Baar Phir* which debuted in 2013 continues the ignoble precedents established by its predecessor. The bestial insensitivity of Shlok is the apogee of Arnav's thwarted achievement. This programme benefits immensely from the addition of the despotic *saas* Anjali Agnihotri and the stiff-necked, doctrinaire father-in-law (*sasur*) Niranjan Agnihotri. Aastha, who falls in love with Shlok is initially presented to us as a damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued by her knight in shining armour. But Shlok is no chivalrous gentleman; he is a control-freak. Aastha continues the tradition of the meek, obedient wife. But in order to enliven her character, the producers have made her occasionally rebellious and iconoclastic. Her frayed attempts to wrest control of her life from the stranglehold of established tradition are an allegorical representation of the modern, educated *bahu* acutely aware of her rights, trying to redefine her role and influence in the household. Aastha's seeming insubordination is a primer for the *saas* on how her progressive *bahu* will repel attempts to curb her ambitions and aspirations.

Certainly, the soaps discussed herein are in no way representative of the very genre of the soap opera on Indian television. But the archetypes and the stereotypes we are presented with in these soaps are reworked in endless variations to create the fabric of television programming in India. Seema Pasricha (2007) warns of the dangers of stereotypes:

Stereotyped images may comfort us by representing persons to whom we can feel superior. In other cases we may deny undesirable traits in ourselves by projecting them outward upon other people, guided and justified by cultural stereotypes. In still other cases we may use stereotypes to justify our own characteristics on the ground that such is only human nature- even our best friends may show such feelings. (p. 164).

Perhaps the only show on Star Plus that is finally willing to permit the woman (albeit only one woman) agency and meliorate her

social standing is *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, which is broadcast also in Romania. Sandhya is an educated young woman who hails from an urban family but by misfortune, ends up marrying an illiterate confectioner named Suraj. Sandhya wants to become an IPS officer and enjoy professional success. Suraj is unbelievably progressive for a confectioner living in a small town: he adores Sandhya notwithstanding the spurious allegations his mother Bhabho makes against her and encourages her to realise her dream. Handsome and surprisingly urbane, Suraj mentors his darling wife and their relationship epitomises an idealised romance.

Unsurprisingly, Bhabho rules the roost and takes on the onerous responsibility of disciplining her family by mediating and interpreting tradition. The wretched woman is civilised every now and then with grandiose references to revered family traditions presented in accompaniment to her self-confessed role as the custodian of family virtue; this process is also greatly enhanced by her theatrical paroxysms of grief and anguish laced with feelings of guilt and remorse. Consequently, the audience shares a love-hate relationship with the matriarch celebrating her fallible human nature, capable also of munificence.

As long as Sandhya lives with Bhabho, the latter appropriates the vacuum in power created by Suraj's disinterest in controlling his wife. Bhabho is also envious of her *bahu* because Sandhya is well-educated and vigilant. Bhabho's envy transforms itself into a yearning for domination over her *bahu*- which is enacted artfully and purportedly in the ultimate interest of Suraj. Meenakshi, who thrives on *schaden freude*, is also envious of Sandhya and schemes tirelessly to cause a rift between Sandhya and her *saas*. With the sole exception of Suraj, Bhabho's remaining three children-petulant, avaricious and obstinate-, are reflections of the varied facets of her unevolved conscience.

Whilst Sandhya is firm and at times daring in her dealings with outsiders, at home she is very much the soft-spoken, *saas*-extolling *bahu*. And this pliancy of Sandhya is what audiences adore. That Sandhya is victorious everywhere else with the exception of the household- the bastion of patriarchy-, is a source of great solace to viewers. Incidentally, Sandhya is able to realise her dream of becoming an IPS officer only with the sanction of her *saas*, whom

she tries to conciliate in every way possible. In a 2013 poll by *Business Standard*, *Diya Aur Baati Hum* ranked first among the top ten shows of 2013, with a staggeringly high average viewership of 9.3 million.

It is also worth noting that the soaps we have discussed are often broadcast on more than one channel and in multiple languages. They are also available online on numerous video-sharing websites like YouTube. So the characters we have discussed thus far do not have a merely fleeting stage presence. In fact, the affiliation between the characters themselves and the individuals portraying them becomes so entrenched in the public mind that the actors are expected to be more like their onscreen personas in real life. If this is the fate of the actors themselves, what shall we say of people uncritically accepting programmes being aired on television? And if the lives of real people are likely to be circumscribed by the puerile characters they play, then it is time to start rethinking the role of television in our lives.

## **The Deliberate Dumbing of India**

Everyday life is not uncomplicated. Considering that the viewing television is a daily activity, the soaps we watch play a crucial role in shaping our worldview. As noted earlier, the reach of television in India is stupendous. The negative portrayal of women in soap operas does much to hinder women's empowerment and identity formation. Professionally successful women will suffer their conscience to be overwhelmed with guilt and penitence after watching these soaps in which feminine resistance is quashed systematically and dramatically.

In the Great Indian Soap Opera we are presented with a very prudish, sanitised form of love that compromises the woman's control over her body. The indirect allusion here is not to the absence of sleaze in soaps, but to the alarming extent to which a woman has to suppress her sexuality to remain a functional and 'respectable' element of the family unit. The preponderance of extremely beautiful heroines in Indian soaps serves to further whet the repressed sexual appetite of the Indian male and commodify



the female body. The result, of course, is an increase in rape- a pandemic of epic proportions in our society.

For the urban *saas*, soap operas are training programmes that introduce her to the dangers of minimising her control over her son and allowing her *bahu* unrestrained liberty. The gruesome saga of female infanticide and foeticide in our country can supply enough subject matter for innumerable prime-time soap operas. But then again, realism has never been a hallmark of Indian television. Viewers in rural areas are exposed to science and modernity by watching television and considering the loathsome state of contemporary soap operas, their worldview is likely to be very restricted and even more worryingly, misinformed. Flawed representations of women and their role in the family- and consequently in society- leads to a deliberate dumbing of the Indian audience.

A deconstruction of the Great Indian Soap Opera is a daunting task. But an attempt has been made in the following figure:

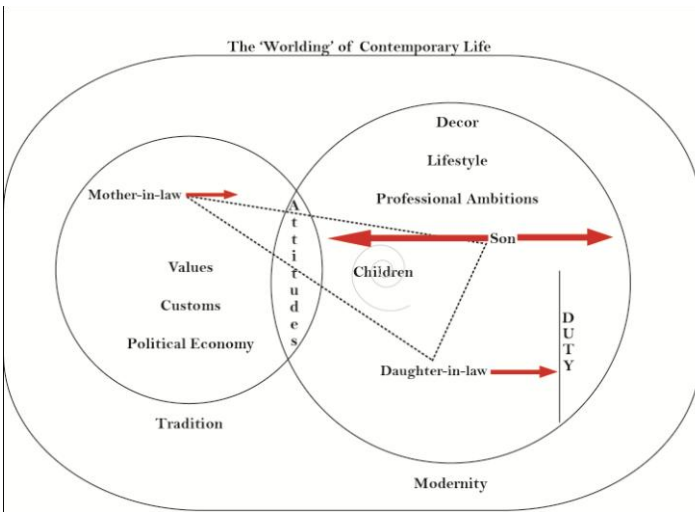


Fig 1: The "Worlding" of Contemporary Life

We can see in Fig 1, the 'worlding' of contemporary life in the Great Indian Soap Opera. Attitudes of characters, as we can see, are influenced by the hybrid zone created in the interaction between

tradition and modernity, with certain characters feeling conflicting pulls of loyalty. That modernity will gradually eclipse tradition is begrudgingly acknowledged. Caught in the triangular relationship between *saas*, *bahu* and son (*beta*) are the children, caught in a time-warp and simultaneously being instructed in ancient customs and modern modes of living. The *saas* knows that in due course, she must modify her outlook. The son is trapped in between two worlds, by reason of a need to harken back to dynastic practices in order to legitimise control over his wife and household affairs. The *bahu* cherishes the desire for freedom and a longing for distancing herself from oppressive ordinances, but is conveniently checked by the wall of duty. Ironically, values, customs and the political economy of socio-religious ideology—all of which manifest as sanctimonious talk about the importance of being dutiful and resisting ‘western’ influences—are dictated by tradition. However, the décor, lifestyles and personal ambitions (of various characters) are conveniently in consonance with modernity. One can also observe how the *bahu* wields the least influence in the household.

Sixty-five years after Independence, Indian television has shown very little promise as a force that is capable of ushering in a new social order free from the rigid bounds of tradition, caste and patriarchy. Undoubtedly, the revolution has begun but is progressing at a very slow pace. That educated, urban Indians working in MNCs and forging successes in the professional sphere continue watching such recement is both startling and perplexing. Also disturbing is the preoccupation of most soaps with exclusively Hindu concerns. Muslim and Christian women hardly feature in any of the prime-time soaps. When the Christian Emily marries Mohit in *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, Bhabho launches an all-out effort to make Emily an ideal, *Hindu* wife. What is missing from the narrative is the agony of Emily in enduring an inter-religious marriage not made particularly easy by her patronising husband.

In *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, the role of Suraj is played by Anas Rashid whilst in *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* Mohammad Nazim plays the role of Ahem Modi. The worldview of their community finds no expression in the characters they play, for both Suraj and Ahem are very much *Hindu* husbands who participate quite actively in religious undertakings. It is indeed most tragic that while

producers of soap operas embrace pluralism in their choice of cast, other communities are othered; their concerns, by not being adequately represented, are trivialised. Thus the public's conceptualisation of the ideal husband or wife is monolithic.

Granted, prosocial, issue-based soaps such as *Balika Vadhu* and *Mere Ghar Aayi Ek Nanhi Pari* have generated much discourse about the transformative power of the soap opera but *Mere Ghar Aayi Ek Nanhi Pari*- in which the storyline revolves around a family which celebrates the birth of a daughter after eighteen long years- had an unusually short lifespan, not even completing one year on air. Perhaps Indian audiences were unwilling to exult in a soap in which a girl child is pampered and adored unreservedly by her family.

### **Exorcise the *Saas* and Liberate the Women**

It is high time to exorcise the archetypal *saas* of the Great Indian Soap Opera and endow female characters with greater autonomy and self-esteem. The transformative power of the visual medium must be harnessed to effect changes in social dynamics. The identities of women should no longer be indented by derisively flawed programming. Viewers themselves must refuse to remain passive participants in the misadventures of contemporary programming and instead influence directly the entertainment widely consumed. Soap operas must be more inclusive, thereby enfranchising women from diverse religious backgrounds. These, however, are not prescriptions for remedying the infirmities of the Great Indian Soap Opera. In the information era of Web 2.0, resolutions are likely to arise from discourses in the social media.

Soap operas at their best, are capable of giving utterance to the experiential world of a society shaped by the interplay of complex forces governed by global socio-political dynamics and at their worst, are capable of enforcing the regimented *weltanschauung* of a redundant, opportunistic fraternity eager to embrace only the overt aspects of modernity. The Great Indian Soap Opera, in its present, unwholesome state is a gangrenous limb of Indian television which is in need of immediate treatment.

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