REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION CONTENT AND INDIAN CULTURE: A FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

Dr. Sathyaprakash M. R.
Assistant Professor , Department of Journalism and Mass Communication ,
Kuvempu University , Jnanasahyadri, Shankaraghatta Shimoga, Karnataka, India.
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ABSTRACT :

Television has become one of the most significant modern day technologies. Given the ever expanding reach of the medium coupled with its advertising potential, the small screen is going to be bigger than all the other media technologies. Television content or programs becomes decisive in order to reach out to the changing tastes and preferences of burgeoning viewers. Historically content in the Indian television has evolved from essentially development oriented to entertainment centred. Indian television is also influenced by the programming ideas from the transnational borders. Foreign content or Indian content influenced by foreign shows or concepts are commonplace in the Indian television. This paper attempts to understand the impact of such content on the attitudes and opinions of the students through focus group analysis. Students' views on television induced western culture and their perceived impact of foreign content on Indian values are interpreted in the paper.*

KEYWORDS : *Television, culture, modernity, transnational TV channels, transnational content, western lifestyle, western food, western clothing, Indian culture, identity, foreign programs, cultural behaviour.*

INTRODUCTION :

Television and its role in facilitating social change are universally accepted. Many 'top-down' studies emanating from USA dealt on the importance of television in bringing about a social change. Daniel Lerner, Everett M. Rogers, Marshall McLuhan and others have emphasized the power of television in initiating a social change. Herbert Schiller's Marxist approach paid attention to the structural features of media and information and its consequential influence on culture. Scholars from Latin America and Asia have also made attempts at theorizing about media's role in a country's development.

Television and culture dichotomy has not yielded much of academic material in India. History of Communication research itself is replete with impact studies, uses and gratification approaches and studies on those lines. James D Halloran commenting on the history of mass communication research rightly points out, "rarely were attempts made to study the social meaning of the media in historical or sociological contexts. Moreover, the bulk of the research was unbalanced, tending to concentrate on one aspect of the process (effects and reactions) to the neglect of the factors that influence what was produced (Halloran, 1998)." This argument holds good for history of mass communication research in India as well. He further argues for a holistic approach to mass communication research. "Ideally, the media should be seen not in isolation, but as one set of social institutions, interacting with other institutions within the wider social system." It is towards this end, that the present study attempts to focus.

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In India, studies on television have basically centered on finding out its role in facilitating development. There have been many studies focusing on television and violence, effects of television on children, portrayal of women in television advertisements, and the like. In fact most of the studies on television in India borders on assessing its effectiveness in bringing about change in social behaviour and its role in development. And of course there are rich ethnographies of Indian television audiences, conducted from the early 1990s onwards. Barring few exceptions not much of academic works have been done especially on television's nexus with cultural change.

Post 1990s there was an unprecedented expansion of the TV network in India, and towards the end of the decade TV broadcasts got nation-wide reach. The TV scenario in India today may not be much different from that of the United States. But scientific studies on the effect of TV on society are not undertaken on a regular and systematic basis as in the United States. That is exactly why this study was undertaken.

PROBLEMATISATION

Post 1990s, the Indian television landscape has undergone a far reaching transformation from government controlled national broadcasting system to a deregulated, transnational, multi- channel system. Fuelled by economic liberalization, television channels, state owned, private and foreign channels are vying for ever growing audiences' attention. In this background, this study attempts to examine the cultural impact of transnational television.

The research paper has attempted to measure the impact of transnational television content on the cultural behaviour of the post graduate students of Kuvempu University, Shimoga. In other words the study attempted to gauge the extent of impact made by the transnational television content (programs) on the "ideas, customs, and cultural behavior" of the students. It was done by looking at the perceptions related to western lifestyle, food habits, clothing, values related to marriage, social status among others and the role of transnational television in influencing the same.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dwelling on the term culture in his influential work Culture and Anarchy (1869) Mathew Arnold said that by culture he meant 'the best that has been thought and said'. He treats culture not just as something that we can acquire or possess, but as an active force in its own right. For him, culture is about an ideal human life, a standard of excellence and the fullness for the development of our capacities, aesthetic, intellectual, and moral. Arnold also recognizes that culture is not innate; a true understanding of it is acquired only by effort and by exposure to the results of the efforts of previous generations. Culture, he argued is an important passage, to be 'carried from one end of society to the other.' Mathew Arnold in essence likens culture to finer or refined human behaviour.

Globalization and modernity: Arjun Appadurai (1996) provides a critical analysis of globalization and modernity dichotomy. He strongly believes that no theory can explain the concept of modernity because societies themselves are much complex and therefore a universalistic theory cannot exist. He focuses more on cultural dimensions of globalization and examines it in terms of homogenization and heterogenization. He says, migration of people and media, especially television, can produce different cultural spheres in different countries.

Television and Religion: Focusing on religion and television nexus, Sanjay Asthana writes (2008), "... although studies of television in India have examined the dominant historicist constructions of nation in terms of the discourses of modernization, gender, and rightwing politics, other modes of imagining the nation, particularly through the interplay between secularism and religion, have not been analyzed." In his study Ashthana seeks to engage religion and secularism articulated on Indian television.

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He goes on to analyze that "during the period between 1982 to 1996, a range of programs, fictional drama series, current affairs, and documentaries broadcast by state run Doordarshan drew upon, and related to, larger historical changes from the point of view of the Indian nation-state: nation-building, secularism, citizenship, and social development become visible as key themes in various television narratives."

Citing the case of the drama series Hum Log ("We People"), he says, it sought to address the middle-class national community through state discourses of family planning, literacy, public health, and other social issues; taking the example of another popular drama series, Buniyaad ("Foundation"), explains that, it dwelt on the partition of the country into India and Pakistan and its consequences for some families. According to Asthana, in each of these programs the nation remained the central signifier. For him both Hum Log and Buniyaad elaborated ideas on culture and community as key to the nation's identity. The titles of the series themselves serve as powerful tropes for the nation. The representations of family values in Hum Log were moulded in line with the state's developmental ideologies.

Television and cultural crisis: Mira Desai and Binod Agarwal (2009), in their work titled *Television and cultural crisis- an analysis of transnational television in India* provides a scientific insight into the problem. Extensive, detailed information collected from the cosmopolitan city Mumbai, provides real insight into the television viewing patterns of urban India. It also provides demographic and psychographic information about the people interviewed for research. Interestingly, much of the information provided doesn't tally with the popular beliefs but are quite revealing. In a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai, only 7.5 percent use English language in combination with their mother tongues while 86.5 percent Guajarati's converse in Gujarati whereas 93.5 percent Marathi's converse in Marathi only.

Program formats of transnational television: Focusing on the program formats of the major transnational television channels, Divya McMillan (2010) notes that an increasing accessibility to television and wish for entertainment programs in all parts of the world has led to program cloning and copying but also to a development of new formats. In an article titled 'Media globalization and diversity- mutually exclusive or compatible?' McMillin examines the all important questions: Does media globalization constrain the representation of diversity? Will television consumers in future only be exposed to "universalized" images? How can diversity in representation be implemented?

McMillin says that the increasing accessibility of television in remote parts of the world, the expansion of the middle class in countries of the Asian, African, and Latin American continent, and the increasing demand for entertainment programming has led to frantic and large-scale program cloning, developing, and illegal copying or pirating of program formats. In an era of media globalization, hybrid representations of global and local, and of traditional and modern, have serious implications for ethnic and gender minorities.

As it is evident from the above review of literature, a good number of research articles and works have been carried out on issues pertaining to transnational television and various aspects of culture. Eminent communication scientists like Appadurai, Binod Agarwal among others have provided revealing insights into the working of television content in the cultural domain, thereby establishing the medium as an important factor in influencing the cultural behaviour of the audiences. This study was taken up to reaffirm the notion of television acting as one of the agents of cultural change.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
1. To measure the impact of transnational television content on views of the post graduate students of Kuvempu University on modernity.
2. To measure the impact of transnational television content on views of the students on Indian culture and identity.
3. To understand the importance given by the students to transnational television content.

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4.   To find out the inclinations of the students towards television induced western culture and lifestyle.
5.   To understand the opinion of the students on foreign programs and their perceived impact on Indian culture.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research proves to be advantageous while studying human behaviour, their likes and dislikes and to find out reasons behind such attitudes and behaviour. Qualitative methods are flexible and provide opportunities for an in depth understanding of phenomenon under study. A data collection tool like questionnaire is unlikely to provide reliable insights about the questions that were not asked and sometimes, also about the questions that were asked too. But a person conducting a focus group would definitely be able to understand the various facets of a subject that were not even considered before the study. Hence, the present study takes up the focus group method for understanding the attitudes and opinions of the samples.

Study Area: The study was carried out at the Kuvempu University, located at Shankaraghatta, around 30 kilometers away from Shimoga town. It has a 41 post graduate departments belonging to arts, science, commerce, education and law faculty, offers 45 post graduate courses and four PG diplomas and one undergraduate programme. According to the University sources, the student enrolment ratio at Kuvempu University stands at around 2000, considering the average taken from 2007-08 to 2012-13. Post graduate students at the university come from both urban and rural background and represent various income groups, but rural students outnumber their urban counterparts.

Focus Group design: Focus Group is a qualitative technique best suited for acquiring in-depth information about the attitudes and opinion of the participants towards the research problem. Although size of the group is smaller, the focused discussions provided decisive insights on transnational television content and level of its reception at the receiver end.

Two focus groups, comprising post graduate students of Kuvempu University, were constructed considering the variables like gender, family income and cognate subject in mind. 12 members each were allotted for the two groups and discussions were held separately. An interview schedule incorporating the objectives of the study was prepared for this purpose. The schedule comprised questions on modernity, cultural identity, social institutions like marriage, family and the values pertaining to them. Role of transnational television content in the entire process, were incorporated as well. These two focus group discussions were videographed and later analysed objective wise.

TV CONTENT AND STUDENTS' CULTURAL BEHAVIOUR

These focus group discussions were conducted in order to ascertain and understand the participants' perception on modernity, cultural identity, food and dressing habits; lifestyle, values related to family, marriage, social hierarchy, customs and tradition and other cultural dimensions and its relationship with transnational television content. The focus group discussions had two objectives; one, to find out the value system of the participants; two, to find out the role of transnational television content in influencing the cultural change. In order to do that, it is necessary to identify at the outset, whether they watch transnational television content. However, watching transnational television is not the criteria for selection of participants because the impact of it in some cases could be indirect. Those who may not have watched these channels may have been influenced by those who watch and imitate what they watch.

All the participants have watched transnational content on television. Although they are not aware of the term 'transnational' television, they do understand and watch foreign English television channels like Star Movies, HBO, MTV, Channel V, and VH1 among others. Participants watched television for information, entertainment, education and passing time. They felt that television provides exposure to role models, icons, latest trends and global brands. The participants had the awareness about the mass media and advertising

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nexus. Some of them felt that advertising and mass media always try to influence the attitudes and behavior of the people.

i.   On modernity

The focus group data provides interesting insights about the participants' perception related to important concepts like modernity, cultural identity among others. This would prove crucial in determining the participants' attitudes and opinion towards transnational television channels. Majority of the participants have a holistic understanding of modernity concept. Although individualism was well appreciated, greater common good was viewed as modernity. Modernity was not plainly equated with advances in science and technology and economic growth. However they felt that tradition is quite important for an individual; tradition and modernity can co-exist in one individual.

a: A person who overcomes the burden of old customs, tradition, and orthodoxy, a person who adapts westernization in terms of dressing, food habits but not in terms of thinking is a modern man. Accepting and adapting best of the knowledge from different parts of the world is important in being modern.
        (FG1)

b: A person who is able to come out of the imposed customs and tradition, values which could be good or bad, and who adapts to contemporary socio-economic situation is a modern man. He should be an actively sharing his thoughts and opinion with the rest of the society. A person with an independent bent of mind is a modern man.
        (FG2)

The adaptability and acceptability of new thinking, new lifestyle, and western ideas are some of the characteristics of modernity identified by the participants. But there are others who negate this argument. They say that western clothing, food habits and lifestyle doesn't make one modern. Modernity for most of the participants is a holistic idea. Interestingly, emphasis on individuality, education were revealing as it indicated a notions of capitalist ideology operating in a dormant manner. Capitalist values that emphasizes on individual excellence and profiteering is viewed by the participants as normal. They had no problem in being individualistic.

Some of the participants were able to identify the role played by mass media and advertising in modern cultural economy, without prompted by the researcher. A participant was able to identify the role played by advertising in changing the buying behaviour and attitudes of the people. She blames mass media for influencing people in buying products. Another participant says that there is too much of restrictions in Indian society which has created hurdles in India being modern.

ii.   On Indian culture and identity

Indian culture could denote various meanings to different people. The concept incorporates the idea of India, its multicultural and secular practices, various communities, sects and their art and architecture, poetry, performing arts spread across the sub continent. The responses given by the participants also indicate the difficulty of understanding this complex idea. Some of them talk about the concept of Indian culture and a few talks about the manifestations and practice part of the culture.

f: Our art, agriculture, and all the positive values makes Indian culture. Caste and feudal structure is not our real culture. But sadly, they have become part of Indian culture.

a: Media, especially television serials have to be blamed because they show Indian culture in a bad manner. Instead of showing positive values, they glorify feudal and regressive values.

J: Orthodox customs and traditions are being shown as Indian culture. There is a conspiracy behind this. Some organizations are wrongly using our culture for political gain.
(FG 2)

Participants were able to identify the political angle given to Indian culture. Interestingly, many of them pointed out that women are being made victims in the so called protection of Indian culture. Organizations and persons who show disrespect to women don't reflect best of Indian culture.

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g: Organizations like Sriram Sene assaulting and manhandling women in the name of protecting Indian culture is wrong. They should be punished. Showing disrespect to women and assaulting women is not our culture. Our culture venerates women. Traditionally she is worshipped as a manifestation of 'Shakti' (Power). (FG1)

A participant was able to identify the difference between Indian culture and Hindu culture. She called it Brahmanism. According to her, Brahmanism imposes orthodox values on the society for its (Brahmins) own benefit. Talking about the Indian identity most of the participants felt that, to them being Indian comes first. Regional, linguistic, religious and other identities does matter, but being Indian is given a top priority. A participant said that the programs shown in foreign (transnational) television channels do not have any effect on him. Watching English channels do not undermine his idea of India and Indian culture.

Another participant provided a very important argument. The very idea of Indian identity he said is an elite concept. He said it is an urban centered concept. Nobody bothers about Indian identity in villages. It is the urban educated class who are more concerned with religious or national identities. They should be blamed for preparing ground for partisan parties occupying influential space in the mainstream.

Caste, a major criterion for marriage: So far as Indian culture and Indian identity are concerned, participants were able to point out both the positive and negative aspects. While some participants blamed the negative side of Indian culture like caste discrimination, disrespect to women, others celebrated the diversity of India's multicultural outlook. They felt that sustaining this diversity, recognizing and respecting numerous cultures of communities spread across the country is important. Although participants were highly against the social discriminations and untouchability, some of them were not averse to social stratification. Most of them favoured parental nod for marital alliances, suggestively implying that caste is a major criterion for marriage.

Women prefer working outside: Women participants were increasingly in favor of working outside. Interestingly, some of the participants were ready to be single. Although they are not against phenomenon like 'living together' they preferred safety over experimenting. They felt that living together without social sanction might land them in trouble. They also said living together is not an Indian value. Most of the participants said that they have no problem living in a joint family as they have always been part of such families. If the relationships are good with the in-laws, living separately doesn't make sense. However, quite a few preferred nuclear family over joint family.

iii.   Affinity to transnational television channels
The discussions revealed interesting insights about the participants' attitude and opinion towards western lifestyle. Although many of them deny that they have not been influenced by English channels, their body language and speech told a different story.
g: What is shown in Indian serials is not real. I find it silly and laughable.
c: Indian soap operas are boring and unnecessarily lengthy compared to English serials which do not depict melodrama and have great sense of humour. I particularly like the actors' expressions in English serials such as Friends, Big Bang Theory.
(FG1)
d: I don't want to watch Indian serials because they are too much women oriented. Instead of that I would like to watch songs, music in channels like MTV and Channel V.
e: English serials are lot of fun. I like them. There is lot of melodrama in Indian serials.
(FG 2)

Although most of the participants despised Indian language soap operas, some of them preferred Hindi music over English music. A participant summed it up nicely when she said, "I listen to all language music depending upon my interest and mood at that point." As pointed out by a participant, there are many reasons for audience to watch a particular channel and particular genres of programs. Their preferences

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might have been influenced by stress, boredom and the need for entertainment. However, preference for Hindi music over English songs, would be the result of cultural upbringing.

The participants' observations reveals that their preference for English programs and films are based on their interest to watch good quality content which are technically superior and use lot of visual graphics and animation. Genres of films mentioned by a participant such as animation, horror, Sci-Fi and action films are not available in plenty in Indian languages. Lack of availability of such films, could have been one of the reasons for the preference given to English films.

So far as participants' affinity to transnational television channels are concerned, many of them deny that they have not been influenced by English channels, but their responses indicated that they were equally interested in watching English channels along with the Indian language channels. However, participants preferred to watch movie and music genres channels among the transnational channels. Some of them said that they prefer to watch English films and music toward of mental stress and boredom. The participants' observations also revealed that their preference for English programs and films are based on their interest to watch good quality content which are technically superior and use lot of visual graphics and animation.

iv. Inclination towards Western lifestyle

The focus group discussion on this dimension provided lot of revealing information. Participants have shown inclination towards western food and clothing influenced by watching English television programs. However, most of them make it clear that their interest towards western lifestyle is short-lived and momentary. They said that they fantasized about having a similar lifestyle as shown in English films and programs but it wouldn't last beyond few days.

j: I watch English movie channels such as Star Movies, HBO. I do get a feeling to have a lifestyle like the actors shown in English films and serials whenever I watch them. But it is just momentary feeling. After few days I will be accustomed to my reality.

a: While watching English movies I do wish to have a lifestyle like them. The gadgets, costumes, food, house, interiors shown in them, attracts me.
   (FG1)

f: Lifestyle shown in English films and serials does have an impact on me. I try to adopt whatever that is within my reach. I know I can't have luxuries shown in English films. While watching, I have felt many times that it would be nice to have similar house and interiors. But once the television switched off, I come back to my reality.
(FG2)

However, some participants categorically dismissed the impact of western lifestyle on them. A participant commented that "whatever that is shown in English films is momentary. I don't imitate them. I live according to my comfort level. I don't adopt whatever we see on television. I watch such programs only for entertainment." Participants did show inclination towards western food and clothing while watching English television programs. But most of them made it clear that their interest towards western lifestyle is short-lived and momentary. They said that they have fantasized about having a similar lifestyle as shown in English films and programs but it wouldn't last beyond few days.

Western clothing is comfortable: Most of the participants preferred wearing Western clothing and accessories because they felt 'comfortable' wearing them. Although they attributed importance to modern home appliances like refrigerator, washing machine, air conditioners, computers, vehicles etc. for leading a comfortable life; more than these material comforts, the participants felt, that it is the values like love, mutual understanding, peace, sharing, togetherness, that makes a comfortable life.

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v. Cynicism about Foreign programs on Indian culture

Focus group discussions also provided important insights about the programming strategies of transnational television channels in India. Some of the participants expressed strong dislike for programs aired in channels like MTV, Star World etc. They felt that programs such as *Splistvilla, MTV Roadies*, are indecent. Although some participants said that they do watch channels like *Fashion TV, Fox History and Traveller*, they felt that these channels are not good for India or Indian culture.

They even pointed out that lifestyle channels like *Fox History and Traveller, National Geographic* sometimes show Indian culture in a superficial way. A participant felt that *NDTV Good Times* which show lifestyles of the rich and the famous, their marriage ceremonies is elitist. Although there is some amount of cynicism about the western lifestyle, values shown in transnational television channels, it is not the result of dislike to western culture; neither does indicate the obsession for Indian culture.

Participants were also in favour for showing social and ethical Indian values on television. However, some of the values they pointed out were regressive in nature. In summary, the participants said that they watch English television channels for entertainment. They don't take television content seriously, although its unwitting influence cannot be ruled out. Most of the participants said that they preferred watching Indian language television channels over English TV channels. However, some of the participants who appeared Western in their outlook, said that they like watching programs like *Dil Dosti Dance*, a program in MTV, narrated in Western format featuring up market young Indians. Some of the participants felt that watching a particular channel or program is their personal choice.

CONCLUSION

The focus group discussions have provided some interesting insights. Although the basic objective of the study was to find out the participants' points of view on transnational television content and its impact, the scope of discussions ranged from modernity to westernization, Indian values, customs and tradition to western food, clothing and lifestyle. Understanding the social context and the broad cultural outlook of the participants was necessary in order to understand their attitudes and behavior towards transnational television content.

Contrary to the expectations of the researcher, the participants were more broadminded and accommodative with regard to the concept of modernity, as they understood it as a holistic concept rather than in a restrictive and superficial manner. They do acknowledged that the mass media have played an important role in shaping their opinions and thought processes. So far as the Indian culture is concerned participants were more categorical as they could differentiate between Indian culture and Hindu culture. Interestingly, they said that the very concept of Indian culture is urban and elite. Expectedly, caste is considered as one of the major factors in marriage. Barring one or two glitches, the participants were progressive and open minded on most of the variables; be it their preference and support to working women, or for both joint and nuclear families.

The participants were also aware of transnational content and channels. They don't think that foreign content can undermine indigenous values. However, some of the participants did express their reservations on some of the content aired in transnational channels. The influence of transnational television content on the lifestyle, food and clothing, although acknowledged by the participants, were not the decisive factors, as the impact could be from other variables like peer group, or neighbourhood. In short, on many variables like modernity, western life style, food and clothing, transnational content did have an impact in influencing the attitudes and opinions of the participants, but only in a limited manner. Hence, it can be said that the transnational content has a limited effects on the participants on a set of concepts chosen for the study.

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