

Portrayal of Minorities in Telugu Soap Operas: An Analysis on Culture and Characterization

Anitha Kaluvoya*

St. Francis College for Women, Department of Communication and Journalism, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

A common habit among most of the Indian families is watching soap operas in the evening as one of the best time-pass-activities. People from different religions of India like Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains etc., all of them enjoy watching different language soaps irrespective of their religion and culture. That is why; soaps have become part and parcel of most of its viewer's lives. Most of the soaps are featured around Hindu characters and families. Minorities have less importance and are very rarely seen as the centre of the story, even though these minorities occupy 15% of India's population. High amount of importance is given to the Hindu culture and customs on television serials when compared with minorities. The cultural and religious practices of these minorities are also seen very rarely on the small screen. This paper aims at examining the portrayal of minorities in Telugu soap operas in relation with culture and characterization. This is an analytical study throwing light on how much importance is given to minorities in Indian television's soap operas with a special focus on Telugu serials. Focused group discussions have been conducted with 60 participants who have been purposively selected from the city of Hyderabad to meet the set objectives of the study. The study reveals that the portrayal of minorities in soap operas is mostly negative and stereotyped. They are mostly portrayed as criminals, terrorists or people having links with mafia. This kind of portrayal of minorities on small screen is influencing majority to think negatively about minorities.

Keywords: Media; Culture; Minorities; Characterization; Diversity

Introduction

The present study entitled "Portrayal of Minorities in Telugu Soap Operas: An analysis on culture and characterization" was conducted with a view to ascertain the responses of television audiences regarding the portrayal of minorities in soap operas and also to study the influence of such portrayal on viewers. It presents an analysis on how minorities and their culture are projected in soaps; this paper also examines the impact of such portrayal on society. India is home to several thousand ethnic groups, tribes, castes, and religions. The castes and sub-castes in each region relate to each other through a permanent hierarchical structure, with each caste having its own name, traditional occupation, rank, and distinctive sub-culture. The Indian society is "regionally diverse (North/South/East/West), communally differentiated (Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian/ Buddhist, etc.), socially stratified (in terms of caste or class) and culturally discrete" [1]. The social structure, religion, family and kinship of the Indian society help in conceptualizing and comprehending its cultural profile to some extent.

Media, and Unity and Diversity of India

India is known for its unity and diversity all over the world. Since many decades, different religions, castes and cultures are existing on this holy land. Mass media plays an important role in retaining this cultural unity and diversity of India. It is well understood that the mainstream media always gives highest priority to Hindu religion, as they occupy the majority position in India. Mass media while discharging its functions of information, entertainment and education has always given less importance to minorities with regard to news and entertainment. This particular section of Indian society gets highest coverage in media mostly during religious conflicts. Religion is a very sensitive issue in India. There are many religions in India and every religion has its own recognition. But mass media, which is a mirror of society, gives rise to a question i.e., to what extent is the media successful in projecting this particular section called minorities in a positive sense to the society. Some viewers experience the pleasure of watching soap operas immediately and spontaneously, but for some

viewers, such pleasure in the text can be precarious and uncertain [2]. Viewers may find the pleasure difficult to explain through their rational conscious minds, hence Ang describes it as precarious. Also, pleasure is uncertain because the viewer cannot predict the moments that will be experienced as enjoyable [2]. Ang believes that the pleasure implies a positive relationship with the programme, in contrast to the view of some critical theorists that this is a false pleasure, a mask for the manipulation of the masses. Ang also reformulates the simplistic notion of pleasure as automatic and natural, since 'any form of pleasure is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context'. This context of pleasure is also that of entertainment, wherein release from societal demands and laws is encountered. However, the text sets its own parameters on the possibilities for the pleasure experienced in it.

Best Means of Entertainment: Soap Operas

Mass media is the best means of entertainment and that is the reason behind increasing popularity of this genre as well; due to the increasing stress in daily life, most of the individuals who cannot go out regularly for a changeover would like to prefer some means of entertainment which is readily available at home and they call it as 'soap operas'. More than print media, electronic media, particularly Television and Cinema, play a major role in entertaining mass audience [1-5]. Among all other programmes on television, soap operas have got special recognition as they are long running serials and concern with

*Corresponding author: Anitha K, St. Francis College for Women, Department of Communication and Journalism, Hyderabad, India, Tel: +91-9581448824; E-mail: anithakaluvoaya@gmail.com

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everyday life. Though the content of these soap operas varies across countries, they reflect the countries' own cultural values and social norms. What most soap operas have in common is that the elements of conflict and family are central. During the past few decades, Indian television channels have attempted to portray the social reality through soap operas. Telugu television channels have not lagged behind in this attempt. This study throws light on how much importance is given to minorities in Indian televisions soap operas, with a special focus on Telugu serials. The study also tries to know the way in which minorities are being portrayed in serials and whether their portrayal has any influence on the thinking of the majority about minorities. Hence, it is proposed to conduct a research study encompassing the above issues.

Background of Soap Operas in India

Indian television serials are telecasted in different languages throughout the country, depending upon the region. The television serials of India deal with different messages and themes for the society, or at times they are merely entertainment. Comedy, family relationships, social issues, mythology, children's shows, patriotism etc., are the few popular themes around which the Indian television soaps revolve. Hindi serials are however the most popular ones on Indian Television. With the coming up of a large number of channels through cable network, the exposure and expanse of television serials in India also increased. One of the most prominent names in the field of Indian Television is Ekta Kapoor who is regarded as the queen of Indian television serials, launching her 'K' series with Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kasauti Zindagi Ki, Kkusum, Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki and Kasam Se. Other than the mentioned ones, there are many more popular Indian television serials like Saat Phere, Maayka, Balika Vadhu, Mata Ki Chowki, Pratigya, Chand Chupa Badal Mein, Tere Liye, Maryada, Ye Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai etc. There are several English serials which have also gained and are still gaining immense applause from the Indian audience, owing to their global backdrop. After the regional network started on Indian television, several channels were launched that catered to the needs of local audience. Kannada serials reached out to its audience through channels like DD Chandana, Zee Kannada, ETV Kannada, Asianet Suvarna, Udaya and Kasthuri TV. A number of Tamil serials are aired in the regional channels like Star Vijay, Sun TV, Jaya TV, Kalaigarnar, Raj TV and Makkal. These Tamil serials are sometimes translated in Hindi and aired on national channels. The Telugu serials enjoy a wide group of transmitters. The Saptagiri Channel airs popular serials, namely Ruthuragalu, Manishi and Hima bindu. Nishabdham is a popular Telugu serial aired on ZEE Telugu. The Malayalam serials can also be seen on channels like Surya, Kairali, Asianet, Jeevan, Jaihind and Amrita. Indian Television is a vast diaspora of entertainment, movies, news and music. However, Indian television serials have earned a great success over the others for various concerning factors including show subject, casts, continuing episodes, time slot and so on. The Marathi serials are particularly aired on ZEE Marathi, Saam Marathi and Star Pravah channels. Similarly Gujarati serials have its own set of channels to reach out to its local audiences. The Indian television serials have gained fame in every form and thus created a massive competitive market on the basis of TRPs. The Urdu serials like Mehfil-e-Mushaira, Aao Urdu Seekhein, Guftgu, Hamare Masail, Zaban Pe No Lagaam and Hum Honge Kamyab are some of the popularly viewed Indian soaps. Punjabi serials have achieved great status in the northern parts of India. Soaps in India like Shree, Naagin, Teen Bahuraniyaan and Rakhi are popular with the Punjabi audience. Oriya serials mainly revolve around the religious connotations of the state and also its tradition, through channels like DD Oriya, O TV and ETV Oriya. The Assamese serials are well-known for depicting their

colourful social life, across DD Northeast channel. Indian television serials are among the most engaging slots on Indian television. The serials are telecasted after a full-fledged survey of its targeted audiences and their preferences. For instance, the family dramas are mainly aired during the afternoons and in the evenings, while the comedy shows are telecasted at tea-time. Thus, the Indian television serials hold a special place in the hearts of dedicated television lovers in India.

Telangana and Telugu Soap Operas

The new baby state of India, Telangana, has a special significance of its own in our country, whether it is in terms of politics, place, culture, cinema or soap operas. In the state of Telangana, Hyderabad is the hub of all the activities. Telangana has majority of its population using Telugu language as the major means for oral communication. As per the statistics, Telugu is the first official language of the state, spoken by 83.88%, followed by Urdu, which is the second official language of the state and is spoken by 8.63% of the population. The city of Hyderabad, India covering an area of 650 square kilometres (250 sq m), has a population of 6,809,970 making it the fourth most populous city in India. Though Hindus form a majority of the population, Muslims have substantial presence across the city and are predominant in and around Old City. The other religious communities are French-speaking Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Parsis. Iconic temples, mosques and churches are housed in the city. After the formation of Greater Hyderabad in 2007, the Hyderabad city religion statistics of 2011 census are: Hindus (69%), Muslims (27%), Christians (3.5%), Sikhs (0.2%), Buddhists (0.04%), Jains (0.04%) and remaining others.

There are around nine Telugu entertainment channels. They are ETV, Gemini TV, Maa TV, Maa Gold, Zee Telugu, DD Saptagiri (Public Channel), TV1, Asianet Sitara And Sitara TV. Among the above mentioned channels, four channels are very famous for Telugu Television Serials i.e., ETV, Gemini TV, Maa TV and Zee Telugu. With all the entertainment channels put together, there are 74 daily serials aired at present.

In terms of technical aspects also the city does not lag behind and is equipped to meet the challenges of producing good number of serials and shows. Hyderabad has more than 120 studios, most with sophisticated paraphernalia and trained technical assistance for TV serials production. Most of the Tollywood movie makers are now looking at the small screen for their entry into the hearts and houses of Telugu audience. This proves increasing market and demand for Telugu soap operas and definitely becomes an important reason to study about further.

Review of Literature

1. "The Portrayal of Racial Minorities on Prime Time Television" by Dana E. Mastro and Bradley S. Greenberg: A one week sample of prime time television (8-11 P.M.) for ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC was conducted to represent broadcast entertainment programming for 1996 [5-11]. In a systematic content analysis, the frequencies and attributes of ethnic minority and majority characters were documented, with particular attention to Latinos and their interactions with other TV characters. This study's findings update the current status of minority portrayals and identify prevalent attributes of minority portrayals that may impact viewer perceptions. Their findings indicated that depictions of minorities were both infrequent and stereotypical.

2. "Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities" by Minelle Mahtani, Ph.D. had conducted this study in the year 2001. He took interviews with media researchers in Canada

to gauge potential research avenues in the area of media-minority relations. Interviews were conducted via email questionnaires with academic researchers, media professionals, media directors in advertising as well as television and radio producers and reporters. This paper insists that the way the media portrays and reports on minority groups in Canada greatly affect the way the public perceives minority groups in the Canadian society. He says when media representations fail to represent Canada's minority's with sensitivity, the entire country suffers the consequences. Media workers need to consider and create alternative representations of minorities and it may well be our task to develop alliances with them to provoke other sorts of images. Researchers interviewed for this report have recommended routes for research through new methodological approaches that will serve as a means towards more inclusive and equitable representations of minorities in Canadian media, wherein minorities would no longer be marginalized but imagined as an integral part of the Canadian nation-state.

3. "Women and Minorities in Television Drama," by Gerbner, George, Signorielli, Nancy: This report presents an analysis of the characters created for prime time and weekend day-time network television drama and viewer conceptions associated with exposure to television. Data was gathered through 10 years of monitoring television programs, analyzing characters, and conducting surveys of child and adult viewers. Trends in representation of women and minorities (non-whites, Hispanics, young and old people), findings on role characterizations and occupations, a measure of violence as a demonstration of power, and associations between television exposure and viewer conceptions of social reality are discussed. Television drama is found to under-represent women and minorities. Typecasting of women is seen to restrict opportunities. Women and minorities are characterized as more vulnerable than their majority counterparts and are more frequently depicted as victims of violence. A positive and statistically significant relationship was found between the time an individual spends watching television and the individual's stereotyping of the role of women and the aged. Younger viewers born into a television world are found to be more imbued with its depiction of people and less likely to express an independent view of reality.

Aim

The primary aim of the study is to evaluate the portrayal of minorities in Telugu soap operas. It includes the analysis of projection of their culture and characterization in soaps.

Objectives

- To identify and analyze the content in relation with the portrayal of minorities in various serials telecast on different Telugu television channels.
- To examine the portrayal of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other minorities in these serials.
- To find out perceptions of audience on portrayal of minorities in Telugu serials and its impact on them.

Research Approach- Qualitative Method

To examine the portrayal of minorities in soap operas and the influence of it on audiences, the researcher adopted qualitative research approach. Qualitative method like focused group discussion with soap opera viewers was conducted. 60 Muslim and Christian participants who are regular viewers of soap operas were purposively included for these discussions. The age limit of the participants is between 18-25 years and all of them are female viewers. This study is limited only

to the city of Hyderabad. Few Telugu soap operas were identified to analyze the content in relation with portrayal of minorities pertaining to culture and characterization of them in soaps.

Scope and Limitations

As mentioned, this research is a qualitative one. Since it is a study using purposive sampling, problem of external validity would exist. The sample is taken only from the city of Hyderabad. The results of this study cannot be generalized across the whole population of Telangana. This study used qualitative approach which provides descriptive evidence on examining the influence of soap operas. However, it only provided a broad way to explain the phenomenon, which was not deep enough. Due to limitation of resources, this study used limited sample and was only subjected to female soap opera viewers.

Data Analysis

Age and profile of the respondents

The respondents who have participated in focused group discussions are between the age group of 18-25 years. All of them watch soap operas regularly. The sample for this study belongs to the city of Hyderabad, in the State of Telangana. All the participants are female soap opera viewers, some of them working professionals and some of them college-going students. The sample consists of 60 participants who belong to minority groups like Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. Six different groups consisting 10 participants in each group have participated in the focused group discussions to gather the data for set objectives.

Portrayal of minorities in soap operas

To know the portrayal of minorities in Telugu soap operas, a few popular Telugu soap operas in which minorities have been portrayed, were selected for viewing purpose. Some popular soap operas of Telugu language like Manjull Naidu's Chakravakam, Mogalirekullu and some other soap's from ETV have also been viewed. The qualitative content analysis of these selected soap operas reveal that minorities like Muslims and Christians are mostly portrayed in negative roles such as terrorists or criminals. Portrayal of their customs and cultural practices are also not close to reality. Most of the soaps celebrate Hindu festival and very rarely Muslim or Christian festivals are celebrated in these soaps. Their culture and characterization are mostly misrepresented; as a result the positive shades of these religions are not getting exposed in soaps. There are some characters in Telugu soaps which were very popular when they were on air for example from Charkravakam IQBAL, JAMES, WILLIAMS, all of them are criminals by profession, but IQBAL who changes over a period of time dies later, in the process of saving the heroine from criminals. In the same way Mogalirellu also portrayed few Muslim and Christian characters as main villains and criminals. Mostly Hindus were shown as doctors and IPS officers, whereas Muslims were shown as terrorists and mafia groups. Minorities are rarely seen characters in Telugu soaps and at the same time they are mostly shown in negative way and are always stereotyped.

Viewer's perception on portrayal

Most of the viewer's said they like to watch comedy soap operas because they feel that it is the best way to get rid of stress after a hectic working day. The other reason for preferring comedy soaps is because they can watch such soaps with their whole family, unlike the Saas Bahu serials. Majority of the viewer's felt that in India, Hindu religion dominates and their family structure becomes the target area for

television owners to make money; that is why most of the soaps portray Hindu religion characters. They even identified some soaps that catered to other religions like Islam and Sikhism. Zindagi Channel is an Islamic channel that runs shows for Muslim families, which they (muslims) prefer to watch the most. Regular and popular channels like Zee TV, Star TV, Colors etc., portray minorities like Muslims and Christians as subservient but not as protagonists. Very rarely Hindu soaps show minorities in their serial and hardly once in a year. The viewers also said that some Hindi serials do give equal importance to all religions and portray every religion and their cultural practices, for example Tarak Mehta Ka Ulta Chasma from SAB TV. But this trend is not yet seen in Telugu soap operas.

Some of them said that certain minority groups are misrepresented in TV serials and such projection can lead to misunderstanding about these minority groups in society. Marriages between different religions are also portrayed to grab the attention of viewers, but not to bridge the gap between each religion. They felt that Gujaratis and Punjabis are portrayed as dumb, and Christians are mostly portrayed as alcoholics.

Viewers felt that the stereotyping of minorities is slowly changing with passing time; that now more soaps with minorities as protagonists can be seen. Viewers also pointed out that it is only in Indian serials, which have this religion factor, and which dominates the show most of the time; whereas the Western soaps don't give much emphasis on the religion factor, but rather they give preference to other factors of life. The negative portrayal of some religions in soaps is creating a bad image among society that all people from these religions will be as cunning as they were shown in some soap operas, which creates gap among different religions in society.

Conclusion

Irrespective of the country, every soap opera is directly or indirectly dominated by the factor of religion—if it is America – it's Christianity, if it is India – Hindus and if it's Pakistan – Muslims. Whether it is a Hindi soap opera or Telugu, they are not close to reality in portraying facts about different religions existing in India. There is hardly any accurate portrayal of minorities in soap operas in Indian Television.

Minorities in Indian soap operas have no opportunity or scope to become a central character and they appear just like sidekicks to fill the gaps here and there. Soaps should also stop stereotyping them. Out of the seven religions existing in India, Hindu religion dominates the nation in terms of population and this is the reason for soap opera makers to concentrate only on one section of society. As a result we have more soaps on Hindu family drama; but there is a section in society which feels that even minorities need some attention from these soap opera as they are also part of the Indian society. Most of the viewer's strongly recommended that this trend of portraying negative relationships between minorities and majorities must change, and the portrayal should encourage healthy relationship between both of them. There is no serial where all the religions have equal importance in terms of characterization and cultural practices, which is very much needed. Soap operas must talk about every religion in equal manner, and every show irrespective of religion, should celebrate all Indian festivals to maintain peace and harmony in the nation, and to carry forward the rich culture of Indian society, in order to retain the unity and diversity of the nation.

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