

Soaps on Indian Television and the Formation of Interpretive Community: A Study of the Response Pattern of Women Viewers of Silchar Town towards Select Television Serials

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Abstract : *The study tries to examine whether 'interpretive communities' can be defined or explained on the basis of age, gender, class, caste, race, and education. It also tends to find out how audiences shift between different interpretive communities as they shape their life style by understanding the texts. The research paper tries to study the soap opera audience and the formation of 'interpretive communities'. The study attempts to find out the relationship between the audience and soap opera texts and how audiences construct meaning out of these texts within the context of family and everyday life. The study also tries to find out how soap operas by using the institutions like marriage, family, and religion represent women, men and the power of relationships and also their interpretation by audience. It also looks at how audiences with similar social, political and economic structure vary in their interpretation of these medium or texts. Lastly, the study concludes with the finding that women can sometimes form an interpretive community on the basis of their socio-cultural inclination.*

Keywords: *Interpretive Community, Indian television, Silchar, Soap Opera, Women viewers*

I. Introduction

Globalization resulted in the revolution in cable television and satellite television due to which India has entered the global market. The global influence has helped the television industry to experience a complete new transformation. There was a major shift not only in its content and style but also in its purpose and presentation. Western entertainment genres like soap operas and reality shows have entered our home because of the revolution in satellite television.

Discussion on the study of soap operas on Indian television reveals that there was lot of confusion regarding the definition of this genre, often serialized programs like sitcoms and also mythological serials like Ramayana and Mahabharata were also labeled as soap operas till 90's as the scholars of US defined soap opera. Earlier serials were imported from western countries; later Indian production houses started producing them. Production house like Balaji Telefilms produced many serials like *Kyunkisaansbhikabhibahuthi* and *Kahanighargharki* became very popular and were one of the longest running serials of Indian television industry. A recent study by ShomaMunshi (2010) in production houses (Balaji Telefilms, Sphere Origin, and Director'sKut) has given a closer look at the text of the soap operas and the popular characters (especially women like Tulsi, Parvati, Ragini, Saloni) in them and argued how these empowered characters depicted in soaps can empower the audience as well.

The content analysis of Doordarshan (DD) indicated that over decades, development programming that exhibited critical awareness of the diversity of women groups and their needs were almost absent. Dhansraj(1994), after her analysis of serials like *Adhikar*(Rights), *Kashmakash* (struggle), *Aurbhishairahain*(There are other ways), *Stri*(women), *Air hostess and Udaan*(height), found that DD assumed women to be uniform in their needs and their representation was that of middleclass, upper caste, urban Hindu seen in most dramas; domestic labor was framed as an extension of a woman's natural mothering role. 'Women in power' was defined by the patriarchal norm that saw it necessary to downplay her sexuality. Mankekars (1999) analysis of mythological dramas like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and of 'women-oriented' narratives like *Rajani* and *Udaan* of the 80's reveal that women in these programs were either portrayed as divine beings within the constraints of Hindu revivalism or as progressive and powerful women who were limited by their women attributes as in the case of contemporary drama.

II. Defining Indian Soap Opera

There are certain characteristics which are extremely common in Indian soap opera. ShomaMunshi (2010) in her recent study pointed out the following generic features of Indian primetime soaps:

1. Open-ended narratives told in serial/episodic form which resists narrative closure.
2. Multiple characters, plots, and sub-plots.

3. Use of time at a dual level - one, which parallels actual time and implies that soap characters' lives go on whether we watch or not; and two, when the narrative takes a generation leap to introduce new characters and new story lines.
4. Emphasis on dialogue and attempt at resolution.
5. Mixing of genres of melodrama, myth, realism, and entertainment.
6. Hook, Recap and Precap.
7. Male characters whose actions move the narrative forward.
8. Women as the central protagonists.
9. The family home as the main setting for the show

The crucial element of a soap opera is its open-ended nature of narrative, with stories spanning several episodes. The defining feature that makes a television program a soap opera, according to Albert Moran, is "that form of television that works with a continuous open narrative. Each episode ends with a promise that the story line is to be continued in another episode".

It is said that in Indian context soap operas possesses all the above characteristics of a soap opera. With its primetime broadcast schedule, the target audience is always women.

III. Soap Opera and Reception Studies

In western developing countries a huge number of research works have been done on soap opera whereas in India only a few studies have been conducted on this subject .Many books have been written and number of research works have been done but with different perspective and yardstick to fulfill the outcome of the subject matter.

The reception studies originated from the combination of cultural studies & uses and gratification tradition. It uses the method of "interpretative content analysis" done by readers' response theories within cultural studies tradition, after that it is compared with the empirical data about the audience which is done through in-depth interviewing and participant observation.

Again on a variety of other theoretical framework like symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis, the reception study has been developed. Through reception studies we can say that cultural practices as well as individual acts of interpretations are independent of the various structures of the overall society, e.g. political and economic structures. In other words reception analysis intends to study how specific audiences differ in the social production of the meaning.

In this tradition, most of the work except a few like that of Radway (1984), Morley (1980), Ang (1985)] did not examine the audience empirically. They have been found as analytical constructs from the media discourse. This kind of traditional studies gives more emphasis on the social and historical contexts within which the social system of diverse practices (like subculture based on gender, class and ethnicity) took shape and helped in the formation of the 'interpretive communities'.

By defining 'the interpretive community' as a sub-culture which is based on factors like gender, class, ethnicity within a broader social system made a generalization which got rejected within the feminist media studies of Ang and Hermes (1996) and Zoonen (1994) pointed out within this tradition how studies treat women as a unified category without actually embarrassing the category of 'women' itself and how gender was assumed to provide cultural preference and behaviour. As a result, Zoonen stated that how instead of treating these identities (gender) as something given or fixed; one should look at them as an ongoing process by which subjects are constructed often in Paradoxical ways. But adopting reception studies tradition the limitation within the cultural studies could be addressed. For example, 'theory of inter sectionality' addresses the limitation of the feminist studies.

Morley's work on 'Family Television' got more emphasis on gender dimension. He has isolated it from other factors like class and age. Hence, arguments related to women as a heterogeneous social category (and not merely a biological category) based on age, caste, class, education, income, region and religion (Morley 1992) get reduced. Other researcher like Hebson (1981), Radway (1984), and Ang (1985) started their work with 'a pre-existent' interpretive community of women.

This study takes into account how gender along with age, class, caste, religion and regional background influence the consumption of the media texts

IV. Objectives of the study

1. To find out how far women audience can be a part of an interpretive community,
2. To examine how far the dominant meaning accepted by the women viewers.
3. To examine how far these women viewers reject the texts.

V. Research Design

The researcher has adopted analytical survey method for the study. The study focuses mainly on the female audience of Indian soap opera. It is a qualitative study of soap opera audience and the data was gathered through interview of the regular viewers of the soap opera.

For the purpose of eliciting viewer's response, the researcher has taken two explicitly violent serials aired on Life OK India channel and two soaps based on family drama aired on Star Plus India and Sony India channels have been chosen. The researcher has taken Hindi serials of national channels because of their bigger and wider fan following.

Initially quantitative approach has been used in order to collect data. The data collection involves multistage sampling. First, the researcher has undertaken a preliminary fieldwork with the audience who watch the soap opera for more than an hour for which a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was used for the purpose of pre-test to finalize the questions. The questionnaire had structured and standard questions both open and close ended, to get the idea about the audience's taste and attitude towards their favorite serials and characters. The whole range of questions addressed issues like, the significance of soap opera in everyday life of the audience, how meaning is made, how they derive pleasure by watching and talking about the soap opera in the social circle. And also how it has enriched their knowledge and whether soap operas influence their life style.

For analysis part the researcher has used simple analysis method. The 400 respondents have been divided into 3 categories 1) Students 2) workingwomen 3) Homemakers

Again, for more detailed study, the student's category has been divided into two sub-groups. The students who study in co-education colleges falls under one group and the second group consists of students who study in women colleges. The researcher has done this division to study the thinking differences of the respondents. Again, the homemakers consists of both house wives and non- house wives i.e., female respondents who are not into job and are also not married falls under this category.

Survey research study was conducted among the urban middle class women of Silchar town from the age of 19 to 50.

The researcher has taken 400 respondents as her sample size. Initially a pre-test was done on 150 samples. The universe for the research was the urban –middle class and higher middle class women of Silchar town. The respondents in the age group of 19 to 50 were included in the sample.

The variables for the study are gender, age, education, class, religion, regional background, workingwomen, and non-women.

VI. Findings

The research outcome is that the women audience can be a part of an interpretive community. Small interpretive groups have been formed. A woman with same age, occupation, family background and income forms a community. But at the same time women with different occupation or age group forms another group or interpretive community as they agree or share similar opinion. The researcher has observed that on many occasions opinion of a group of students are in congruence with a group of working women which ultimately leads to another interpretive community of varying age.

Out of 400 respondents 176% of respondents are students, 114% of respondents are working women and 110% of respondents are homemakers. Here, the researcher has found three big interpretive communities sharing similar occupation. Similarly, many small interpretive communities have been formed.

The researcher has taken variables likes gender, age, education, class, religion, regional background, working and non-working, marital status to find out how these variables helped to form interpretive communities of different interest.

The research found that the dominant meaning of the serials accepted by the women audience. As most of the respondents believes that what is depicted in the TV serials are similar to their real life. The outcome of the survey says that family dramas are more than violent serials.

34.5% of respondents watch *Baade Aache Lagtey Hain* and 40.5% of respondents watch *Diya Aur Baati Hum*. The women audience watches these two family dramas because 32% of respondents find the storylines are accurate representation of real life. The family crisis or bonding which is shown in the serial is similar to the respondent's real life. 35.5% of respondents find the character of the serials almost similar to real life. The protagonist of these two serials Priya and Sandhya are mostly liked by the students and the working women as these characters are careerist and outspoken. Again, the side role characters like santosh (bhabo) and Meenakshi are liked by the homemakers. It is observed that the careerist and outspoken characters are mostly liked by the working women and students. And the characters which play the role of a house wives are mostly liked by the homemakers. Negative characters are liked by both students and homemakers, comedy characters are liked by the homemakers. And child characters are liked by students.

Again, 35.5% respondents feel that the storylines of the serials represent them. Ironically, when the respondents were asked whether these serials connect them 49% of women find them to be too dramatic to be true.

The researcher observed that most of her respondents like to watch family drama than violent serials. It is found that out of 400 respondents 36% of respondents loves to watch family drama and 13% of respondents watch violent serials. And rest of the respondents watch other serials of different genre like Love Stories, Horror and Detective and Comedy.

Family dramas like Bade Ache Lagtey Hain and Diya AurBaati Hum is watched regularly than the violent serials like AmritManthan and Dil se di dua... SaubhagyavatiBhava.

When asked why they do like these serials 40.75% of respondents watch these serials for entertainment and 27% of women respondent watch as because it depicts the real life. And rest of the women watch it either for information or to keep updated on fashion or due to fascination for a particular character.

The text is rejected by 33% of respondents who find non-violent family dramas useless. They watch it for entertainment. 25.50% of respondents become restless by seeing the correct ways the women characters of these serials. And again, 34% of respondents find violent serials also useless to watch. 26% of women feel disgust about the increase of violence in human life.

The above factual data and analysis conclude that women in general usually reject text of the violent serials. Over exaggerative melodrama portrayed by the protagonist of the family drama are also usually rejected by the women viewers.

VII. Conclusion

The outcome of the study is that the female audience can form an interpretive community. Women with same age, occupation, family income, gender, class, marital status, religion, regional background, forms small groups of interpretive community. The study has also revealed that by watching soaps, these female audience derive pleasure as they believe that the soaps depicts the same story and situation of their life. On the other hand the female audiences try to imitate the life style portrayed in the soaps.

VIII. Annexure: List of Tables

Table No 1. Occupation of the respondents

Sl.No.	Occupation	Total number of respondent out of 400	Percentage%
1.	Students	176	176%
2.	Working women	114	114%
3.	Homemakers	110	110%
	Total	400	400%

Out of 400 respondents 176% of respondents are students, 114% of respondents are workingwomen and 110% of respondents are homemaker.

Table No.2 TV serials the respondents watch

	Family Drama	Per %	Love Story	Per %	Violent	Per %	Comedy	Per%	Horror and detective	Per%	Total	Per%
Students	63	15.75 %	49	10.75 %	15	3.75%	35	8.75%	17	4.25%	179	44.75%
Working women	36	9%	6	1.2%	25	6.25%	45	11.25%	10	2.5%	122	30.5%
Home maker	45	11.2%	16	4%	12	3%	19	4.75%	7	1.75%	99	24.75%
Total no. of respondents out of 400	144	36%	71	17.75 %	52	13%	99	24.75%	34	8.5%	400	100%

Out of 400 respondents 36% of respondents watch family drama in which 15.75% are students 9% of respondents are working women 11.2% of respondents are homemaker, 17.75% of respondents watch love stories in which 10.75% of respondents are students 1.2% of respondents are working women 4% of respondents are homemaker, 13% of respondents watch violent serials in which 3.75% are students 6.25% of respondents are working women 3% of respondents are homemaker, 24.75% of respondents watch comedy serials in which 8.75% of respondents are students 11.25% of respondents are working women 4.75% of respondents are homemaker, 8.5% of respondents watch horror and detective serials in which 4.25% of

respondents are students 2.5% of respondents are working women and 1.75% of respondents are homemaker.

Table no 3. The soaps that they can't miss and watch on a regular basis

	Bade aache lagtey hai	%	Amrit Manthan	%	Diya aur Baati hum	%	Dil se di dua..	%	Total	Percentage
Students	59	14.75%	25	6.25%	46	11.5%	30	7.5%	160	40%
Working women	52	13%	4	1%	53	13.25%	6	1.5%	115	28.75%
Homemaker	30	7.5%	12	3%	73	18.25%	10	2.5%	125	31.25%
Total no. of respondents out of 400	141	35.25%	41	10.25%	172	43%	46	11.5%	400	100%

Out of 400 respondents 35.25% of respondents watch Bade aache lagtey hain on a regular basis and can't miss it in which 14.75% of respondents are students 13% of respondent are workingwomen 7.5% of respondents are homemakers, 10.25% of respondents watch Amrit Manthan on a regular basis and can't miss it in which 6.25% of respondents are students 1% of respondents are workingwomen 3% of respondents are homemakers, 43% of respondents watch Diya aur Baati hum on a regular basis and can't miss it in which 11.5% of respondents are students 13.25% of respondents are working women 18.25% of respondents are homemakers, 11.5% of respondents watch Dil se di dua ... Saubhagyavati bhava on a regular basis in which 7.5% of respondents are students 1.5% of respondents are workingwomen 2.5% of respondents are homemakers.

Table No. 4. Feelings associated with Non-violent family serials

	Findin g new friends among the women characters of the serials	%age	Findin g a reflecti on of your own mistakes in these characters	%age	Restless ness by seeing the correct ways the women characters of these serials	%age	How far more you should correct ...	%age	None of the above	%age	Total	%age
Students	24	6.00	18	4.50	36	9.00	22	5.50	48	12.00	148	37.00
Working women	22	5.50	7	1.75	34	8.50	26	6.50	33	8.25	122	30.50
Homemakers	19	4.75	8	2.00	32	8.00	20	5.00	51	12.75	130	32.50
Total no. of respondents out of 400	65	16.25	33	8.25	102	25.50	68	17.00	132	33.00	400	100.00

Out of 400 respondents 16.25% of respondents say non-violent family serials gives a feeling of finding new friends among the women characters of the serial in which 6% of respondent are students 5.50% of respondents are workingwomen 4.75% of respondents are homemaker, 8.25% of respondents say that non-violent serials gives them a feeling of finding a reflection of your own mistakes in these character in which 4.50% of respondents are students 1.75% of respondents are workingwomen 2% of respondents are homemaker, 25.50% of respondents become restless by seeing the correct ways the women characters of these serials in which 9% of respondents are students 8.50% of respondents are workingwomen 8% of respondents are homemaker, 17% of respondents say that it gives them a feeling of how far more you should correct your ways of living to make your family a better place in which 5.50% of respondents are students 6.50% of respondents are workingwomen 5% of respondents are homemaker, 33% of respondents say that none of the above in which 12% of respondents are students 8.25% of respondents are workingwomen 12.75% of respondents are homemaker.

Table No. 5 Feelings associated with violent family serials

	Restlessness and tell you...	%age	Disgust about the increase ...	%age	Unhappiness to see the people...	%age	Developing a certain amount ...	%age	None of the above	%age	Total	%age
Student	20	5.00	37	9.25	27	6.75	12	3.00	47	11.75	143	35.75
Working women	19	4.75	33	8.25	25	6.25	14	3.50	43	10.75	134	33.50
Homemakers	13	3.25	34	8.50	22	5.50	8	2.00	46	11.50	123	30.75
Total no. of respondents out of 400	52	13.00	104	26.00	74	18.50	34	8.50	136	34.00	400	100.00

Out of 400 respondents 13% of respondents says that violent serials give them feelings of restlessness and tell them to avoid violence in life in which 5% of respondents are students 4.75% of respondents are workingwomen 3.25% of respondents are homemaker, 26% of respondents feels disgust about the increase of violence in human life in general in which 9.25% of respondents are students 8.25% of respondents are workingwomen 8.50% of respondents are homemaker, 18.50% of respondents feel unhappiness to see the people being tortured for no fault of their own in which 6.75% of respondents are students 6.25% of respondents are workingwomen 5.50% of respondents are homemaker, 8.50% of respondents say that violent serials develop a certain amount of need in their life sometimes to use violence in which 3% of respondents are students 3.50% of respondents are workingwomen 2% of respondents are homemaker, 34% of respondents says none of the above in which 11.75% of respondents are students 10.75% of respondents are workingwomen 11.50% of respondents are homemaker.

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