

Channeling Cultures – Television Studies from India

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Seminars do not always engender significant books. Let me re-phrase it. Seminars do not always engender significant books unless their proceedings are made to yield their insights through a process of reviewing and updating. On that count, *Channeling Cultures Television Studies from India*, which traces its origins to an international seminar organised at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in 2009, is an outstanding example of what good editors can achieve. The topic of the initial discussion was focused on the first half century of Indian television, however the editors – Biswarup Sen and Abhijit Roy – have been able to extend the discussion considerably and not just in temporal terms.

The editors express the hope that this book, comprising 12 major commentaries from some of the best known academics and authors working on the media, will stimulate a rethinking of the role of television in the country's cultural politics. While it is true that significant later day developments, like the media-driven election campaign that saw Narendra Modi come to power in the summer of 2014, fall outside its timeframe, *Channeling Cultures* does go some way towards building an indigenous theoretical framework to study television. Central to the objective of theorising anew is the editors' view that television has had a major role in shaping many historical processes in post-liberalisation India, from assertions of citizenship and urbanity to defining family politics and sexuality. New York University Professor Arvind Rajagopal, in the Afterword to this volume, provides an explanation of why this is the case. Television, as he puts it, "is clearly an important avenue through which new modes of exercising power are being practiced". He goes as far as to suggest that television gets invested with an almost state-like authority with what is viewed on it, perceived to constitute authoritative knowledge.

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A major trope in this book is the evolution of this institution from being the state-run Doordarshan/Prasar Bharati to a multi-channelled entity shaped by the forces of economic liberalisation and globalisation. In its earlier avatar, television – according to Sanjay Asthana in his chapter 'Television, Narrative Identity and Social Imaginaries' – mimicked colonial broadcasting's centralised control over audiences. Abhijit Roy theorises this transition in a chapter entitled, 'TV after Television Studies', by adopting Raymond Williams' concept of 'flow'. In its earlier avatar, Doordarshan put out a realist fare tailored to state agendas of development. This gave way to the 'flow' of consumerist spectacles – soaps, pop music fare and reality shows – that came to mark television programming in the post-liberalisation age. The flow form then, according to Roy, is the inevitable signifier of the global flow of capital.

The transition was by no mean painless for the politicians of the day. Nalin Mehta, in 'When Live News Was Too Dangerous', reveals how even someone like Narasimha Rao, the man who as Prime Minister had ushered in economic liberalisation, was extremely chary about giving up political control over television. What did contribute to the eventual dismantling of the old order, Mehta writes, was an aspiring middle class which was clearly restive under a restrictive and frugal Nehruvian state and, of course, the possibility of handsome investment opportunities that came with globalisation.

But did anything really change for audiences? The writers in this volume differ in their assessments. Dipankar Sinha, in 'From Clients to Consumers', doesn't think much has changed and argues that both regimes did not allow audiences to develop their critical faculties or recognise sufficiently the importance of citizenship. Even the talk shows and phone-ins introduced later, hardly helped to deepen the capacity of viewers to exercise their own judgment.

Other writers note the decisive transformations that television underwent after liberalisation. In 'Television

News and an Indian Infotainment Sphere', Daya Kishan Thussu dwells on the commodification of news and the moot question he raises is whether such 'infotainment' debases political discourse or democratizes it. In answering this question, he quotes Robert W. McChesney's observation that the media system "is not only closely linked to the ideological dictates of the business run society, it is also an integral element of the economy". This has its own logic, even leading to the "narrative of the real" coming to resemble popular cinema, as Nilanjana Gupta concludes after her review of Bangla news channels in the chapter 'Sange Thakun'.

While television analyses generally revolve around the visual, Purnima Mankekar in 'Televisual Temporalities and the Affective Organization of Everyday Life' sets out to explore its affects. She unpacks the hegemonic impacts of the "liveness" of television with reference to coverage of events like the Twin Tower attacks of September 11, 2001 or the Mumbai attacks of November 26, 2008, both of which were televisual representations that were affectively charged. Such projections, as John Hutnyk reminds us in 'NDTV24X7 Remix: Mohammad Afzal Guru Frame by Frame', present some real dangers. Hutnyk – who is currently developing a critique of 'terrorism' as portrayed on television – suggests the possibility of serious miscarriages of justice when "the justice process is played out through the televisual public sphere". In the Mohammad Afzal Guru case, he uncovers how reality got transformed into reality television and issues of crucial concern reduced to the sum of their ratings.

Reality television representation is, in fact, where Biswarup Sen locates the globalised aesthetic. In his chapter, 'Big Brother, Bigg Boss Reality Television as Global Form', he attributes the great popularity the genre enjoys across the world to the capacity of the format to achieve space-time compression and travel easily across geographies and cultures. He sees reality TV then as "a sort of universal machine that engineers global effect through the mechanism of formal implementation".

Sen's privileging of reality television, however, begs the question whether the television serial cannot also be seen as a "universal machine". Could it not be argued that *Dallas* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* were also fungible templates for television serials across the world with local characteristics. In Tamil Nadu, to take one example, production houses produced, cookie cutter style, all manner of television programmes from tear jerkers to talk shows, as Uma Vangal points out in the chapter, 'Tears, Talk and Play'.

Such fare also came with distinct politico-cultural resonances. Santanu Chakrabarti, in 'The Saffron Hues of Gender and Agency on Indian Television', dwells at some length on the affluent, upper caste and conservative universe of the famous K-serials – *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*; *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and *Kasautii Zingagii Kayy* – which cast all women as domestic goddesses, albeit sometimes warring ones, and conflated an Indian identity with a Hindu one. Although he avoids attributing any direct causality between the popularity of these serials and the rise of political Hindutva, he is struck by the commonality of their social imaginary.

Several shibboleths have been interrogated in this volume. Shanti Kumar, in 'Spaces of Television', believes, for instance, there is a need to get away the public television-private television binary in order to better understand the hybrid character of the media culture in India today, although he is careful to state that he is not attempting to debunk left wing theories of ideology critique. In many ways, the contending ideological frameworks of the various contributors to this volume are never really resolved and lend it a piquant dissonance at times. The lack of a singular framework and a homogenous consensus can be a weakness in books that emerge from seminars. It can, at the same time, be a strength because raising questions and critiquing familiar positions are, as Peter Ronald deSouza states in his Foreword to this volume, crucial to a democracy. It is also a good way to better understand an institution as pivotal to Indian democracy as television.