

The Construction of Cultural Identity: Malaysian Indian Youth Reading the Indian Tamil Television Serial, *Chitthia*

*N. V. Prasad
Shanthi Balraj*

In this era of globalization, television artifacts from the cultural homeland have been studied in diverse diasporic settings for their socio cultural implications. In the Malaysian context, Tamil television programmes have not been the subject of intense scholarly debates on topics ranging from their ability to provide a source of cultural knowledge and identity to the Indians.

The present study explores an area of diasporic communication in the context of Malaysian Tamil television audience's negotiations of cultural identity. The study will focus on the role of television in the lives of Indian youth in Malaysia by studying how they read the construction of family in the serial CHITTHIA, a popular Indian Tamil television serial that was broadcasted by Astro Vaanavil. Specifically, it examines youth readings of the constructions of thematic content and characterization pertaining to the following themes in CHITTHIA: marriage, remarriage, sibling rivalry and gender. The study finds that the youths could identify with the characters and narratives created in this serial and that they shared similar experiences in Malaysia and this has drawn them to the programme, even though it was produced in India.

Introduction

Television as it spreads across the globe is a major source for the construction of cultural identity. In this era of globalization, television programmes from the cultural homeland have been studied in diverse diasporic settings for their socio- cultural implications. In the Malaysian context, Tamil television programmes from the original homeland India have not been the subject of intense scholarly debates on topics ranging

from their ability to provide a source of cultural knowledge and identity to Malaysian Indians. It is in this light that this paper aims to make a contribution to the understanding of television and cultural identity among Tamil youths in Malaysia.

Malaysian Tamils being away from original homeland India have strong links with the Indian language and the Indian culture specifically through media and television. This paper demonstrates how Tamil television programmes broadcasted from India through satellite pay channel ASTRO, promote the cultural capital and strengthen the Tamil cultural identity among Tamil speaking Indian populace. Living in a complex multi racial setting, Malaysian Tamils look for values, ideas and images that give a sense of identity and stability.

Cultural identity of the Malaysian Tamil youth can be defined in terms of their identifications of the self through the prism of collectively shared values, practices and expressions of Malaysian Tamils as well as Tamils elsewhere. (Ravindran, 2005). It is seen as important in the Malaysian Tamils as it is accommodating the realities in Malaysian everyday life in a globalizing world. Identities are borne of negotiations between lived cultural practices of the settled homeland and the imagined and borrowed cultural practices of the original homeland. Cultural practices must be seen as our daily taken for granted utterings, negotiations and expressions of our individual and collective cultural values and beliefs. They may border on the way we deal with dressing, eating, worship, marriage, family, society in the immediate environs of the settled homeland and the distant imagined worlds of the original homeland. This study explores the area of diasporic communication in the context of Malaysian Indian youth negotiations of cultural identity. Tamil television serials telecast from India act as a powerful tool and is an influencing factor in enabling Malaysian Tamil youths to make sense of the cultural experiences surrounding them. The focus on television families is a crucial one for young Tamil speaking Indian viewers as they learn to share similarities and differences in their understandings of the values, attitudes and the dynamics of relationships in families and everyday lives.

Media scholars (Goodwin, Andrew & Whannel, 1990) argue that with regards to perception and evaluation of television content, young people clearly operate on different dimensions than the producers of the programs. The genre depends on human interaction and emotion to connect with its viewers and their identification with its characters. These characters are carefully created to appeal to its target audience. Television serials tend to be a strong reflection of our culture today.

One's deepest feelings are always influenced by stories about one's own place, time and social condition.

The case for television literacy among the Indian Youth in Malaysia is an interesting one as television is blamed for escalating violence, for the erosion of traditional morality and the promotion of promiscuity and other social problems in the society. The generalizations concerning the role of television in relation to social problems among Malaysian Indians are hardly any evidence to support their views. Yet, these generalizations on Tamil youth and television have been presented in the local press without supporting evidence based on systematic research. Thus, this study tries to examine how Malaysian Tamils interpret meaning, values and attitudes presented both explicitly and implicitly in the serial *Chitthia*.

Television programs such as movies, talk shows and television serials that come from South India are extremely popular among Tamil Indian communities in Malaysia. Vaanavil, ASTRO is an exclusive channel that airs television programs in Tamil. Serials like *Chitthia*, *Annamalai*, *Rudra Veenai* and *Metti Oli* command high ratings and have enjoyed tremendous success on the local screen.

This study was conducted as part of a research project entitled *Engaging Malaysian Indian Youth with Television Literacy: Reading the Family in the Television serial, Chitthia*. This project was sponsored by Universiti Sains Malaysia's short-term research grant.

The main objective of the study was to focus on the role of television in the lives of Indian youths in Malaysia by studying how they read the construction of family in the Tamil television serial *Chitthia*. The study was interested in the significance of the family in the Indian community, as a social unit that grew to be part of communities and society. There was a growing need to focus on the role of family as the site of negotiation of meanings by the audience. The need was more pronounced now because of the increasing threats to the values and beliefs central to family as a social institution. Specifically, the study focuses on Indian youth readings of the constructions of thematic content and characterization pertaining to the following themes in *Chitthia*: marriage, remarriage, sibling rivalry and gender.

Chitthia was chosen, as it remains the most popular Tamil television serial ever made with a wide following in India and countries where the Tamil diaspora has strong presence. It is also rated highly in these countries for its ability to appeal to all sections of the audience. The serial drew old and young alike. According to Dr.N.C.Rajamani, Head of Programming, Astro-Vaanavil channel, the serial *Chitthia* was rated as the number

one programme during its telecast in the channel. He said due to the large number of viewer requests the channel had to eventually increase the telecast time from half an hour to one hour daily in January, 2002. Not surprisingly, later due to immense popularity the serial was rebroadcasted on the same channel at a different time slot.

As Dr. Karthikeyan ([Http://www.thehindu.com/the hindu/mp](http://www.thehindu.com/the_hindu/mp)) an eminent psychologist from Chennai puts it, "The narrative style will always be the most entertaining as story telling has always been an integral part of Indian culture. And today in nuclear families, the TV serials have in a way substituted for the stories grandparents used to tell their grandchildren".

Chitthia revolves around the triumphs and battering of a woman (Sarada) who strives to be bold, brave and upright. She carries on against the odds in her career as a District Collector in rural Tamil Nadu and later as a businesswoman. The woman *Chitthia* (which, in this story, means step-mother) shoulders the burden of running her family and raises the daughter, which her husband had through his first wife, as her own despite having three children herself. Her husband who wishes to fight social problems ably supports her in her endeavours. So do her children who want to carry on their individual struggles sharing some of the main ideas, beliefs and values shared by their parents. This series runs for more than 400 episodes in its original version. Radhika, the producer and the lead character (Sarada) of the serial explains that housewives identified with the character she played, which was the reason for its immense popularity.

The Methodology

The study was based on the methodological and theoretical frameworks central to audience studies. Audience studies will be useful to focus on the role of audience in constructing the meanings, particularly the extent to which the programmes are understood in the preferred manner in which the messages in the programme are encoded. As David Morley, (1992) argued: How we respond to messages from the media depends precisely on the extent to which they fit with, or possibly contradict, other messages, other viewpoints that we have come across in other areas of our lives?

The study focused on Malaysian Indian youth, who were not a homogenous group and included people drawn from different classes,

gender, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds but as Tamils constitute the majority. We deliberated on the different elements in the composition of the Indian youth and assume them to be of one homogenous group.

The respondents were audiences who had regular viewing habits of the serial *Chitthia* aged between 16 and 23. Participants came from both low and moderate-income families and were proficient in the Tamil language. Two major methods to collect the data were used; questionnaires and an audience focus group study. The questionnaires were designed to find out how the audiences viewed the serial and their self-perception about the serial. Questionnaires were administered to a sample of 300 respondents in Penang and the Klang Valley. The study employed focus group interviews among members of a select group of Indian youth who were avid watchers of *Chitthia*. A total of four focus groups of two in Penang and the Klang Valley were organized. Each focus group had six participants, mostly students from that particular area. The duration of the sessions were kept flexible to allow unhindered flow of discussions.

Descriptive Analysis of the Serial *Chitthia*

Like other television serials, *Chitthia* also provides an outlet for an individual to escape from the responsibilities of their own lives. As soon as the familiar theme music begins the viewer is transported to another world, pleasure of television serials is the continuity of the characters and settings. The familiar settings give a sense of stability to the viewer. The individual feels at home with the serial and its characters.

In this serial, women occupy important social positions and are often strong, powerful characters, giving the female audience the opportunity to engage with a whole range of characters. It is centered on women's struggle for survival and the focus is on the husband and wife relationship. It involves Sarada, the leading characters empowerment and decision-making in her family and business.

If we look at values in India, womanhood is something that is held in much respect. Even God (in Hinduism) is regarded as half man, half woman. The Indian constitution grants women equal rights with men, however strong patriarchal traditions persist, with women's lives shaped by customs that are centuries old. In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men. Sons are idolized and celebrated. "May you be

the mother of a hundred sons is a common Hindu wedding blessing. "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Gautier, 1996). Thus, women are only tended towards chores of a domestic nature.

Generally, television serials in India portray female characters in a stereotyped structure. Women characters are always revolving around the domestic environment and family development. *Chitthia* is an exception, the lead female character is represented differently, one who is successful and career minded. The serial directly urges the empowerment of women in a family and career.

Even in moments of severe stress, *Chitthia* (the main character) is controlled, composed, the emotions surfacing subtly. In contrast is the style of Prabavathy, a negative character portrayed in the serial. The serial clearly portrayed good and evil, Sarada fighting the evil Prabavathy and winning always. It may have helped youths understand good and evil. The weaving of both intense and deep emotions has made *Chitthia* a central part of TV viewing for thousands. There are twists and turns in the story. People who are good, face difficult times and manage to overcome the challenges. Even those painted as evil have finer human qualities – showing affection towards their kin and the family as an important entity.

Chitthia is a story about a family, which encounters challenges and hurdles before achieving success. This family faces many problems and the parents as the head of the family make efforts to solve each problem. The lead characters Sarada and Ramu guide their children since they were small and lead them towards victory. They have a disabled child (Seenu) who is showered with love and care. He is motivated by his parents and becomes a talented poet. The love, discipline and support given by Sarada (main character) to the children can be set as an example for others.

Advice, words of wisdom and proverbs spoken by Sarada and Ramu to their children are thought provoking and can be applied in real life. For example, Ramu often tells stories to his wife and children whenever they are confused. Sarada is honest towards her family and business as well. She advises her family members and the people around her to be fair, faithful and loyal towards their career and life.

The director of the serial successfully portrayed her character as a strict mother, at the same time loving and caring. Sarada is a determined person and works hard all the time without giving up. She wants to

achieve success by doing things the right way. The family problems that occur in our everyday lives are well featured in this serial. Relationships in a family are vital to ensure a blissful family. Relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children are well portrayed in this story. The impact of the series has been phenomenal and stupendous, which ran for 488 episodes.

Findings and Analysis

In the process of exploring how youths in Malaysia are reading the television serial *Chitthia* in the context of family construction and negotiations of cultural identity, we looked into the themes such as marriage, remarriage, sibling rivalry and gender. These elements are interrelated and provide smooth relationships and interaction with parents and other family members.

Marriage

The theme of marriage was an important content in this story. A number of marriages could be seen throughout this story, which definitely influenced the storyline. Couples who were married and built new lives, acted as a bridge to the storyline. Among the marriages we saw significant ones between Ramu and Sarada, Krishna and Prabavathy, Madavan and Kaveri, Kannan and Swetha, Danny and Brindha, Srivarsan and Sangeetha and, Yogi and Viji. The youth's perception and views on the best marriage relationship in the story were discussed in the questionnaire and during the focus group sessions. The answers given by respondents were analyzed and are as below:

Table 1.1: Which Couple Do You Think Have the Best Marriage Relationship?

Couples	Number of Respondents	Percent
Ramu-Sarada	139	46.3
Ramu-Vaithegi	24	8.0
Krishna-Prabavathy	10	3.3
Viji-Anand	7	2.3
Viji-Yogi	120	40.0
Total	300	100.0

This table shows that a majority of the respondents chose Ramu and Sarada (the main characters of the story) as their choice for best married couples with 46.3% respondents voting for them. The couples Viji and Yogi were chosen as the second best married couple with 40% of the votes. Then the respondents were asked to choose the particular quality of marriage relationships, which guided them to select the best-married couple in the serial.

Table 1.2: Why Do You Think So?

Qualities of Relationship	Number of Respondents	Percent
Because they are very understanding	126	42.0
Because they always compromise with each other	69	23.0
Because they care for each other very much	73	24.3
Because they are very faithful and trusting	29	9.7
Others	3	1.0
Total	300	100.0

The respondents chose the best married couple based on the following reasons – they had good understanding, they always cared for each other and compromised when necessary. The respondents were able to read these values in the marriage relationship of the characters Ramu and Sarada and, Viji and Yogi. Similarly when asked about the poor marriage relationships in the story, they identified the couple Prabavathy-Krishna as shown in the following table.

Table 1.3: Which Couple Do You Think Have a Poor Marriage Relationship?

Couples	Number of Respondents	Percent
Ramu-Sarada	16	5.3
Ramu-Vaithegi	33	11.0
Krishna-Prabavathy	175	58.3
Viji-Anand	69	23.0
Viji-Yogi	23	7.7
Total	300	100.0

Table 1.4: Why Do You Think So?

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percent
Because they always fight with each other	107	35.7
Because they are always jealous of each other	110	36.7
Because they always misunderstand each other	58	19.3
Because they act very selfish	25	8.3
Total	300	100.0

Around 58.3% (175) of the respondents chose Prabavathi and Krishna as the couple with poor marriage relationship. The main reasons were that they were always fighting with each other and were jealous of each other. Participants were able to identify the characters and understand the qualities of a good marriage relationship, which was evident from the comments made by the following in the focus group discussions:

Susila: Sarada and Ramu are like my father and mother. They do fight but always solve their problem by talking about it and understand each other. I think relationship like Prabavathy and Krishna can destroy a family.

Pushpa: I prefer my parents are more like Sarada and Ramu. They are a good example of a married couple. They trust each other and are understanding. They tell stories and proverbs to their children emphasizing moral values.

As Viveló (1978) notes, once a couple is married, they see themselves and are seen by others to have new rights, privileges, immunities, responsibilities and duties. A majority of the respondents seem to realize this fact and strongly criticize the character of Ramu, who abandons his family during a crisis like when Swetha (his daughter) ran away from home. They strongly feel that he has responsibilities towards his family and cannot abandon them in bad times like he did. This again was strongly expressed by the focus group participants:

Guna: I dislike the character of Ramu as he doesn't have the responsibility as a father. When problem occurs, he ran away from his family. He was there for them when they had blissful life, but

when they loose everything, he took a simple step that is to stay away from the family.

Maria: Yes, he was supposed to be there with them. He is the head of the family. I felt angry with him at that time.

Komathi: I was so angry when I watched that episode. How can he desert his family just like that? What he did is not correct?

Such situations also are seen as common in Malaysia but there is no public debate or discussion among Indian communities to address these issues. The role of television points out to critical controversies but does not delve to explain why this happens and what can be done to confront it.

Remarriage

Remarriage is another theme chosen for the study. Remarriage here means someone who was married and gets married again to a different person. In the context of the Indian society in Malaysia, remarriage is common when the spouse is divorced or dead, but it is seen negatively when polygamy occurs, the family will be flouted. In this story, the marriage between the two main characters, Ramu and Sarada is considered as a remarriage as Ramu was a married man with a child. He married Sarada as he had assumed that his first wife was dead. However, his first wife comes back alive and lives with him and Sarada under one roof. The respondents provided positive and negative comments with regards to remarriage in *Chitthia*. Respondents were asked about the polygamy relationship between Ramu, Sarada and Vaithegi and their opinion on the related issues.

Table 1.5: Polygamy Relationship between Ramu, Sarada and Vaithegi Does Not Create a Harmonious Family

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent
Strongly Agree	79	26.3
Agree	120	40.0
Disagree	43	14.3
Strongly Disagree	47	15.7
Undecided	11	3.7
Total	300	100.0

As you can see from the graph about 66.3% (199) respondents out of 300 agree that polygamy in Ramu's family does not create a harmonious family while 30% (90) respondents disagree and think that polygamy creates a harmonious family. And 3.7% (11) respondents were undecided. Well most of them seem to be aware of what polygamy can lead to. It can cause misunderstanding, arguments and many negative consequences. Those who thought polygamy created harmonious families seem to be unexposed to the consequences of polygamy. Given below are some comments from the focus group participants regarding remarriage in the serial.

Rohini: Which family will be happy, if the father has two wives? I don't think mine will. A family can't live harmoniously if there are two wives. Even in Chitthiâ, Sarada's family did not live happily.

Kavitha: Yes, what Ramu did was right. He had a daughter and she needs a mother. Furthermore, he married a good woman who loved his daughter.

There is a situation in the story where the two friends Ramu and Krishna exchange their newborn babies without the knowledge of their wives. Ramu convinces Krishna to do this when they discover that Krishna's baby has a physical disability and he fears that Prabavathy (Krishna's wife) would not tolerate this and she may abandon the baby. Respondents were asked to comment on this in the questionnaire and during the focus group discussions as it raises both moral and ethical issues.

Table 1.6: Do You Approve or Disapprove the Situation Where Ramu and Krishna Exchanged their Babies?

Exchange of Babies	Number of Respondents	Percent
Approve	67	22.3
Disapprove	192	64.0
No comment	41	13.7
Total	300	100.0

As you can see from the above table, 64% (192) of the respondents disapproved with the situation where Ramu and Krishna exchanged their babies, followed by 22% (67) respondents who approved this act. The majority of respondents disapproved this act because they felt it was the

parents responsibility to take care of their own baby and condemn the decision taken by Ramu as it was expressed in the following comments.

Kalaivanan: Ramu's decision is totally wrong! It is his baby and he should take care of the baby. Furthermore, he knows that Prabavathy won't lead the baby to right path. So why did he ignored that and gave his baby without his wife's knowledge?

Sara: Yes! I also did not like the way Ramu did. At least, after that he should have told Sarada and led a harmonious life.

Pushpa: I think what he did is right. Ehm he knew that Krishna's son is disabled and he doesn't want to destroy the baby's life by giving the baby to Prabavathy.

Sibling Rivalry

The competition between siblings often happens in a family to obtain something. Usually children will fight with each other to get toys, food and attention. The competition to get parents love is common. During childhood, this competition is obvious, but as they grow up, it fades with time and is not as obvious as during childhood. However, in *Chitthia* the siblings are competing with each other when they were young and also when they were grown up. Respondents were asked about sibling rivalry in Sarada's family.

Table 4.1 What Do You Think About Sibling's Rivalry in Sarada's Family?

Sibling Rivalry	Number of Respondents	Percent
Good	84	28.0
Not Good	148	49.3
Undecided	68	22.7
Total	300	100.0

As the table shows, a majority of the respondents feel that the sibling rivalry portrayed in the serial *Chitthia* is not healthy. About 50% of respondents have stated as not good, while only 28% thought the sibling rivalry portrayed in the serial *Chitthia* was good. A majority of them thought it was healthy when the siblings were small, they compete for

parents love, attention and affection. However, things change when they grow up. They keep fighting for their parents inheritance, which is considered as unhealthy. Given below are some of the comments

Kumaran: They fought for the property, Sarada's children Swetha and Srivarsan give more importance to money and property than their mother. Siblings rivalry happens in every family. This is an individualistic world.

Partiban: Sarada's children loved her but they fight for their property, like Swetha and Srivarsan. This is happening in many families.

Children fight for their parent's house, land and even car.

Jeevan: Look at Swetha, (Sarada's daughter) she demanded money from her mother when her husband was in jail. Srivarsan (Sarada's son) wanted money from his mother when Prabavathy cheated him and wanted him to pay a big sum of money.

Gender Representation

Gender portrayal in Indian Tamil television serials has strong relationships with the patriarchal system that has been practiced since the beginning of human civilization, which stereotypes gender roles. Good women in a Tamil drama is someone who is an obedient daughter, tolerant wife, daughter and sister in-law.

Women working for women's movement in India feel that television has done more harm than good to the women's potential as individuals by putting female conformity to convention and tradition at the forefront. They feel television's influence in shaping the Indian women's sense of self and her future is more significant. To promote more positive role modeling and change women's self image, television serials must portray women achieving self-realization through their careers and depict co-operation between men and women in performing household chores (Behera, 1989).

In India, most serials portray woman in stereotyped roles, which depicts a woman's place as being in the home, it becomes the centre of her life and domain. There were few exceptions like Sarada, the main character of Chitthia who is shown as a successful business woman and a mother. This serial projects women in a different light. The plot of the story is based on two vital characters, Sarada and Prabavathy (both are

female characters). Sarada plays a good and honest character whereas Prabavathy is the negative character. Sarada as a woman appeared bold and strict. She has three roles in this story as a woman, as a mother and as a businesswoman. All her children respected her more than they respected their father. There are male characters in this story but they play secondary roles. The male character, which is significant to the storyline is Ramu (Sarada's husband). In *Chitthia*, issues of imbalance portrayal of gender appear, women play more vital role than men. With regards to gender representation in the serial, we examined the respondents with the following statement.

As we can see 78.3% of the respondents have agreed with this statement. Only 21.7% disagree and opposed this statement. Most respondents feel that the representation of male characters in *Chitthia*

Table 1.8: Female Characters Played All-important Roles in *Chitthia*, Agree or Disagree

Important roles played by female characters	Number of Respondents	Percent
Agree	235	78.3
Disagree	65	21.7
Total	300	100.0

is weak. This is because the appearances of women in this serial are more than men. Teenagers especially boys feel that the serial did nothing for the male ego and they were not portrayed correctly in the serial. The participants in the focus group commented as follows:

Jayaganesh: The dominance of women is obvious. Look at Prabha, she dominates her husband all the time. Even Sarada, although Ramu is the head of the house, she has more rights and power than he does.

Guna: There are not many male characters in the story. All important roles are played by women. Ramu is the only leading character who stays from start to end.

Shanti: This serial shows women have more rights in decision making. Of course that does not happen in real life. Sarada and Prabavathy take their own decision without consulting their husbands.

Participants were also asked to identify the main element that motivates them to watch this serial through the following question.

Table 6.1: What Motivates You to Watch This Serial?

Elements of the story	Number of Respondents	Percent
Interesting storyline	82	27.3
Story has good family - oriented content/values	137	45.7
Good performance by actors	50	16.7
Good script	20	6.7
Good direction	6	2.0
Others	5	1.7
Total	300	100

As we can see from the above table 45.7 %(137) of the respondents have chosen the element of the story which has good family “oriented content/values,” as the main motivation factor in watching this serial. Followed by 27.3% (82) of respondents who think that the interesting storyline is the leading motivating factor in watching the serial. So a majority of the respondents agree that *Chitthia* portrays good family values to the audiences.

There were some other significant comments made by the participants during the focus group discussions. Like one participant says with regards to the caste system shown in the Tamil serials. In India the social divide seems to begin from birth, as shown in the serials. Caste and communal associations are also shown to be active in India. Many believe it is not so in Malaysia but we are afraid it is also coming up here among Indians. This could be a negative contribution of Tamil serials and films coming from India, which may poison our minds about social relations.

Generally the participants felt Tamil serials show their identity in terms of language and cultural practices. They feel serials and movies coming from the homeland promote their culture. They find the language used in the serials pure and they like the Tamil spoken by the characters. However, they are concerned about the use of various slang and accents in Tamil that is difficult to understand.

Both male and female participants admire the traditional costumes used by the Indian women in the serials and they are popular among the

Indian society in Malaysia. However, they are not happy with the portrayal of women wearing modern clothes as being always aggressive and rude in the serials. Some male participants felt that the costume worn by male characters are different from the way they dress here in Malaysia. They notice that male characters are in formal dress most of the time even when they are at home, which is unrealistic. They seem to like the portrayal of rituals and traditions, which they find educative.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted some of the main ideas about Malaysian Indian youth reading the Tamil television serials from India and how they connect to the stories, images and messages emerging from India in Malaysia. In general, the youths are able to understand and analyze the family values shown in this serial. It provides an understanding of the ways Malaysian Indian youths engage with television in relation to the construction of family. Issues like marriage, gender and sibling rivalry were seen as important concerns and they could link this to the formation of their identities as Indian communities living in Malaysia. In other words, while the programme was being constructed in India, the messages & images were close to the thoughts and feelings of the Indian groups living in Malaysia.

What is interesting here is that there are many complexities surrounding the television texts and the audiences that read these texts. Clearly more work and television literacy efforts can be initiated so that youths can engage in these television works in a more systematic, productive and meaningful way. In general, teenagers look at *Chitthia* as a family saga that can be watched by every member of a family. They enjoy watching this serial as entertainment and learn moral values related to family. It is also evident from the study that Indian Tamil television serials provide a source of cultural knowledge to Malaysian Indian youths and they are able to identify with the cultural practices like dressing, language, worship, traditions and gender shown in these serials. One positive point about the Tamil viewers approach is they have great love for the medium, so the programme producers should use the media effectively to cultivate the right attitudes in the minds of Tamil youth.

References

- Alvermann, D.E., & Moon, J.S. (1999). *Popular culture in the classroom: Teaching and researching critical media literacy*. New York International Reading Association.
- Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London: Methuen.
- Behera, S. K. (1989). *Gender role biases on Indian television*. Singapore: Media Asia.
- Brown, M.E. (1994). *Soap opera and women talk: The pleasure of resistance*. Thousand Oaks (etc)
- Buckingham, D. (1987). *Public secrets: East enders and its audience*. London: British Film Institute.
- Fiske, J. & Hartley, J. (1978). *Reading television*. London: Methuen.
- Fiske, J. (1989). *Television culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gautier, F. (1996). *Rewriting Indian history*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.
- Goodwin, A. & Whannel, G. (Eds.). (1990). *Understanding television*. London: Routledge.
- Gunter, B. (1986). *Television and gender representation*. London: John Libbey.
- Gunter, B. & Svennevig, M. (1987). *Behind and in front of the screen: Television involvement with family life*. London: John Libbey.
- HMSO (1963). *The Newsom Report – Half Our Future* Central Advisory Council for Education. London. Paragraph 475.

Livingstone, S.M. (1991). *Audience reception: The role of the viewer*. London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S.M. (1998). *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation*. London: Routledge.

Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the media*. London: Comedia.

New Comb, H. (2000). *Television: The critical view*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ravindran, G. (2005). Research report cinema and Tamil diaspora: Exploring the negotiations in the diasporic space by the Tamil cinema audience in Malaysia, USM, Penang.

Vivelo, F. R. (1978). *Cultural anthropology handbook: A basic introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.

[Http://www.Raadan/est/myes/conn.html](http://www.Raadan/est/myes/conn.html).

[Http:// www.thehindu.com/the hindu/mp/2002/01/24/stories](http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2002/01/24/stories). Downloaded on 1st July 2005.

N.V. PRASAD has been teaching television production courses at the School of Communication, University Sains Malaysia since June 2001. He specializes in Educational Television and has more than fifteen years of experience in the field as a programme producer. He has produced about thirty-five ETV programmes on various subjects for the countrywide classroom, which are telecast on India's National Television Network. His current areas of interest and research are television production, audience studies & programme research.

SHANTHI BALRAJ, PhD., (Associate Professor) is Head of the Film and Broadcasting Programme, School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She has conducted numerous workshops on media literacy and the reporting of news on children and women for both local and international broadcasters. She is currently working on several projects, which include a video project with school children in Penang, funded by FINAS; Research on Cinema, television and the Tamil Diaspora and an international project on Enhancing Environmental Journalism in Malaysia.

Appendix

Description of the important characters in the serial

1. *Sarada* is the leading female character in the serial, the story revolves around her. She is also called *chitthia* the title of the programme. *Ramu* is *Sarada's* husband.
2. *Ramu* is the leading male character in the serial, who is *Sarada's* and *Vaithegi's* husband.
3. *Vaithegi* is *Ramu's* first wife, who was assumed to be dead by *Ramu*. Appears in the later part of the serial creating complex situation in the family.
4. *Krishna* is *Ramu's* close friend and husband of *Prabavathy*.
5. *Prabavathy* is another leading female character in the serial, she is a negative character showing evil nature.
6. *Kaveri* is *Ramu's* daughter through his first wife *Vaithegi*. She marries *Madavan*.
7. *Madavan* is *Kaveri's* husband, who works as a Manager in a factory.
8. *Viji* is a female character from another family portrayed in the serial. Her first marriage with *Anand* ends in a divorce and she later marries *Yogi*.
9. *Yogi* is an important male character in the story; he works under *Sarada* throughout his career supporting her loyally in good and bad times.
10. *Anand* is *Viji's* first husband, who is a sadist in nature. He tortures *Viji* physically and mentally during his relationship with her.
11. *Prasad* is another leading male character in the serial, son of *Prabavathy* (actually born to *Sarada*), his aim is to take revenge on *Sara's* family for his mother *Prabavathy's* sake.
12. *Swetha* is *Sarada's* daughter who marries *Kannan* against her family members interest.
13. *Kannan* is a male character drawn from low class slum area in Chennai, he pretends before *Swetha* to be a social worker and marries her.
14. *Sriversan* is *Sarada's* second son, who is a doctor by profession. He is shown struggling to settle down in his career.
15. *Seenu* is *Sarada's* first son (actually born to *Prabavathy*). He is physically handicapped person, who becomes a successful poet.