

## Glocalisation, Cultural Identity, and the Political Economy of Indian Television

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From its Delhi moorings in the late 1950's till date, the Indian television has gone through steady evolution marked by phases of silent or radical revolution. Born with a political agenda of national reconstruction and turning out to be an ideological hegemony, its course has been redefined by absorbing transnational media participation and the dispersion of ideas in regional channels. It is to be noted that the Indian media market has shown resistance to both global as well as national cultural hegemony. While large scale glocalisation by the transnational media networks these days is the recognition that Indian market and culture cannot be radically colonised, the expansion of regional language channels later has weakened the hegemonic authority of national networks. The Indian market today is defined by the simultaneous presence of the global, the local, the regional, and the glocal media signifiers. Taken together, these significations point at a larger picture of glocalisation of market culture, especially, where the consumer agency consists of participants across space, class, gender, and generation.

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Back in my remote village in Odisha, as an outsider, if you are on an evening stroll, you will see a group of peasants coming home back from the paddy fields alongside flocks of cattle and goats. The younger ones in *lungi* (adopted from the Muslims, a single piece cloth put in from the waist to feet) and tee-shirt floating the counterfeit Reebok brand and a counterfeit Nike cap look distinct in contrast to the elderly peasants wearing indigenous *dhoti* (a single piece white cloth which is put in from waist to feet by unique folds near the navel and in the back) and turban. Often these youngsters would be listening to some Hinglish Bollywood item song on their Micromax cell phone while cheering intermittently to the school boys playing *desi* (indigenous) cricket nearby. Born after 1990s, these are the perked-up Y-generation peasantry who have hardly got high school education but represent the bottom of the pyramid of India's peculiar tryst with globalisation. Back home, they will have *desi pakhaal* (rice added with water, and fermented) and *shaag* (fry prepared from leafy vegetables) and talk to the family members in the *desi* way, but will relish the Hinglish *masala* (spiced-up) news, soaps, and comedy circus on the shared TV and will shout at if anybody switches over to a more traditional Odia channel or genre. And finally, when the festive season comes, they will retune the sacred chants *Hare Krishna Hare Ram Mahamantra* as per some memorable Bollywood movie lyric and dance accordingly while fiddling on the *mridangam* and the *karataal*.

This is the Indian society on a transition from its local mores, mandates, and manners to a global world ushered by new technologies, the media and the market. Customised, low-budget technologies have changed their life styles, organised marketing has shown them new possibilities, and the media has recharged their imagination. Here is a massive cultural swap: (i) re-configuration of global cultural forms and products in sync with local cultural priorities and (ii) renewal of indigenous

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culture by appropriating foreign cultural forms. Imagination is central to this life—the steering of which is made possible by the orchestrated ‘flows’ of ‘scapes’ (Appadurai, 1990).

More importantly, the glocal is no longer a middle class phenomenon, as a handful of literature (Kumar, 1998; Fernandez, 2000; Cullity, 2002; Cayla & Koops-Elson, 2006) suggests, but a massive awakening that has re-furbished the whole Indian society. The commercial media continues to construct lifestyles that are not simply locally anchored, but borrow heavily from a widely available cultural repertoire—global, local, regional, or imagined. That is why, irrespective of their importance, people today have to navigate among a vast range of mediated lifestyle alternatives (Jansson, 1999). These lifestyle signifiers are “sources of identity and ontological security” (Giddens, 1991, p. 36) which are negotiated by people in real time consumption. Consequently, the production and consumption of media usage affects and is affected by people’s notion of cultural identities. Mediated cultural products have been put in as new cultural referents, and thereby contribute to the epistemic construction of cultural identity in various mass media genres. This builds up an emerging context to analyse the evolution of Indian television and the re-conceptualisation of Indian identity in a mediatised, glocal society.

### **Evolution of Indian Television and the Quest for Identity**

From its Delhi moorings in the late 1950’s till date, the Indian television has gone through steady evolution marked by phases of silent or radical revolution. Born with a political agenda of national reconstruction and turning out to be an ideological hegemon, its course has been redefined by absorbing transnational media participation and the dispersion of ideas in regional channels. While the transnational media have failed to assure their Western cultural formats and have reconfigured themselves as glocal entities to cope with the local consumer agency, the emergence of local regional players has challenged the monopoly of national networks in the Indian market. It is to be noted that the Indian media market has shown resistance to both global as well as national cultural hegemony. While large scale glocalisation by the transnational media networks these days is the recognition that Indian market and culture cannot be radically colonised, the expansion of regional language channels later has weakened the hegemonic authority of national networks. The Indian market today is defined by the simultaneous presence of the global, the local, the regional, and the glocal media signifiers. Taken together, these significations point at a larger picture of glocalisation of market culture, especially, where the consumer agency consists of participants across space, class, gender, and generation. Therefore, glocalisation can be interpreted as the osmosis of decolonisation/decentralisation process in India (Dash, 2012).

### ***Politico-nationalist agenda for pan-Indian identity***

Subsequent to its inception in and around Delhi in 1959, the political leadership of India realised the television’s potential for national integration and development. Later in 1966, the prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, focused on the expansion of satellite television in India aimed at national integration, promotion of state-planned socio-economic schemes and the electronics industry (Ninan, 1995). The aim was to accelerate national integration and development of the postcolonial nation through democracy and technology. There was a common nationalist desire to imagine a source common identity for the nation’s diverse population through new technologies like the television. With this ambitious drive, the powerful state-sponsored national network called *Doordarshan* remained the most powerful agency to define the ideal identity for millions of Indians until the rise of a satellite-cable industry in the 1990s and the arrival of Star TV in 1991.

By the early 1970s, the government of India, under the aegis of Indira Gandhi, utilised Doordarshan’s potential to contribute to the sustainable development of strategic projects like rural education and poverty alleviation. In 1972, broadcasting centers were came out in Bombay, Madras

and Calcutta followed by Srinagar, Amritsar, Lucknow, Jaipur, and Hyderabad among others. In 1975-76, Satellite Instructional Television (SITE) was launched. SITE was strategic to the political, economic and cultural agenda for the vision of a television-mediated developed India. Although health, education, animal husbandry, agriculture and family welfare were the central issues, other genres encouraging quiz and information, children's education and entertainment, music and sports programs were also offered.

In 1982, colour TV was launched to host the prestigious Asian Games as a matter of national prestige. For the handful of urban middle class households having TV sets the then, it was the early opportunity to view a continuous entertainment program. The fervent response of the audiences to the new entertainment-oriented programmes augmented the competition among marketers to sponsor the Doordarshan for promoting advertisements. Because of its monopoly, Doordarshan could reach the audiences across the nation and the prime time show 'National Programming' gained popularity. The national programming drew dividends from the nation's mythological and historical past, so that an idealised past could be used for repairing the latter day divisions (Rajgopal, 1993). The mythic past was projected to nurture a distinctive Indian identity to the diverse population of the nation, but soon this identity was contested vis-a-vis the minorities, especially Muslims, as a blatantly Hinduised national identity (Ibid).

#### ***Transition from the political to economic elites***

While National Programming was a postcolonial project of nation-building by the political elites, the local and transnational businesses entities and advertisers looked upon it as the cheapest and easiest way to reach large number of audiences (Kumar, 2000). By the mid-eighties, the new generation of political and economic elites cherished a more commercialised entertainment-oriented culture. The younger, more urban, English-educated and techno-savvy generation savored a new, more cosmopolitan identity. This promoted a range of non-educational genres varying from television plays to serials and soap operas alongside the customary feature-film based programs (Mitra, 1993).

With advertising and commercial sponsorship on the rise, Doordarshan started broadcasting more sports events, sit-coms, serials, mythologies, and commercial films. By the end of the 1980s, Doordarshan was decentralised so that large metropolitan cities and a few select smaller cities could get at least one transmission center based on their respective regional language. Decentralisation allowed a language-based customisation to regional audiences across the various states of India. It is to be highlighted that in spite of linguistic customisation, the formats and the content of the programmes remained mostly similar across the nation. Therefore, through a loosely defined but highly centralised administration and programming (Kumar, 2000), the political desire for an ideal personality for Indian television still continued.

#### ***Invasion from the sky and changes in the wind***

Winds began to change with Star TV's transnational broadcasting threatening the monopoly of Doordarshan. In contrast to the highly censored news and documentaries, nationalistic songs and clichéd sitcoms of the government television, Star TV's programmes were fresh and sundry: Famed U.S. soaps like *Dynasty* and the *Bold and the Beautiful*, refreshing talk shows like *Ricki Lake* and Oprah Winfrey, striking shows like *Baywatch*, live telecasting of international sports, MTV and BBC *World Service*. Star TV offered alternate models of living to the well off English-speaking Indian middleclass, and the huge response to these models set the tone for radical transformations of the satellite and cable television industry in India (Bhatt, 1994).

By July 1995, News Corporation of Rupert Murdoch got the complete ownership of Star TV. With its new 'think global, program local' (Pendakur and Kapur, 1997) policy for the competitive Asian market, Star TV aimed at catering to specific local and audience tastes. After breaking ties with MTV, Star TV launched Channel [V], a pan-Asian music channel. In order to gratify the English, Hindi,

and other regional music demands of Indian audiences, Channel [V] transformed itself into a hybrid 'Hinglish' channel. The hybrid Hinglish identity enabled Channel [V] to cast itself as "a local channel with global flavor" in contrast to MTV's approach of being "a global channel with a local flavor" (Kumar, 2000, np). The next step was to recognize the large scale demand for Bollywood and Hollywood films as well as the US pop music in India, Channel [V] strategically took advantage of the market by promoting the budding genre of Hindi pop and by endorsing the growth of Indian music video stars like Remo Fernandez and Alisha Chinai. By 2000, global satellite TV networks such as CNN, TNT, The Cartoon Network, ESPN, Disney, Discovery channel and others had realised the importance of localisation. While some of them launched their services through satellite transmission, others aligned with state-owned terrestrial broadcasters.

In 1992, a privately owned Hindi channel, Zee TV, toed the line of Star TV. Its strategy was to fill the gaps in the services of Doordarshan and Star TV in 1992 and offered a Hindi-language version of globally popular serials, sit-coms, talk shows, and game shows. It ran a popular weekly program called *Aap ke Adalat* (your court) in which politicians, celebrities and business magnates were overtly indicted of corruption and grilled in quick-action question-answer rounds by a real-life lawyer. The program exploited the widely prevailing sentiment to see certain infamous politicians vehemently interrogated and exposed. The real motive behind such programs, of course, was not so much to create democratic spaces in the public sphere but to create audiences for the advertisers (Kumar, 2000).

#### **Vernacular voices and niche market sentiments**

Zee TV's popularity in the Hindi belts of India challenged other private commercial organizations to remain competitive, and, hence, they looked forward to certain niche markets. This led to the launch of regional language services by private players, particularly in South India where English and Hindi have a narrow audience reach. Tailor-made to the prerogatives of the regional and local audiences, local networks like Sun TV and ETV grew up by addressing the void created by the leading three networks: the centralised Doordarshan, the English language based Star TV or the Hindi language based Zee TV. ETV became one of the leaders of the niche marketing strategy by manipulating the triple psychological triggers relevant to the South: regional language, uniqueness of regional culture, and differentiated identity and, thus, grew stronger than the national and global networks in the specific markets of India. Since then, the vernacular media have come a long way to occupy a sizable space in the political and cultural economy of Indian television.

#### **Big Business Glocalisation**

The return of the Coca Cola, adaptation of the big budget reality show *Kaun Banega Kororpati* (KBC), and the surge of emotionally intelligent ads such as the *Karva Chauth* commercials of the ICICI Bank: Post-global Indian television is studded with spectacular examples of the convergence of global and local cultural factors. Coca Cola is a global corporation with business interests in the multiple locals of the world market. KBC is a Western-origin quiz show customised for the Indian TV. The *Karva Chauth* commercials by ICICI Bank are from an Indian bank targeting local Indian audiences. Together the three cases cited here demonstrate the varying permutations and combinations with which glocalisation as the 'localisation of the global', 'globalisation the local', and 'glocalisation of the local' (Dash, 2012) is taking place in the Indian media and market.

The curious case of Coca Cola, the transnational soft drinks giant, was a huge eye-opener for the big business entities aspiring for the Indian market. Not acquainted with the nuances of Indian political culture, the company was forced by circumstances to pack off its venture. In its second chapter with the multicultural India, realising the inevitability of glocalisation, in addition to political hand-shakes, Coca Cola adopts the creolisation of visual and linguistic factors in its TV advertising. The global company reinvents its advertising strategy by incorporating local heroes

and models (Prahalad & Lieberthal, 1998). The ad-campaigns present the cosmopolitan model Amir Khan in various ethnic roles and settings. The peculiar blend of English and Hindi, packaging and pricing fitting into the core Indian values of *affordability* and *hospitality* keeps Coca Cola as an emblem of negotiation between the global and the local (Kadri, 2006).

The effects of glocalisation can be traced to overwhelming success of KBC. The game show KBC is an adapted edition of the British show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. This show is one of the most successful ventures on Indian television. This Indian venture, with astronomical prize money coupled with the biggest movie star of India, Amitabh Bachchan, as its host and a mass-oriented programming strategy, was an instant hit in the year 2000. The show was three times hosted by Bachchan in 2000 and 2003 and 2010, and its third season in 2007 was hosted by Shah Rukh Khan, another popular Indian movie star.

Bachchan was India's first real working-class hero in contrast to his male predecessors who were mainly romantic heroes. Bachchan started playing the man who belongs to the urban lower class struggling for existence in a city. Playing roles such as a factory worker, miner, porter, construction worker, shoe-polish boy and even a smuggler, he was enthused with the image of the *angry young man*. Tall and long-limbed, slim and sturdy, and gifted with a thundering voice, he brought a new masculinity into Indian cinema (Dwyer, 2002). Similarly, with a humble, middle-class beginnings, Shah Rukh Khan epitomizes a middle-class man with aspirations for economic prosperity. In stark contrast to Bachchan, his character does not adhere to violence to do away with injustice, but builds upon negotiation and persuasion. With their respectively Hindu and Muslim background, these two cultural icons impart a secular aura to the show. Fulfilling the right answer to the aspirations of the millions of Indians striving for material success in a transitional cultural economy, the twin hosts enabled the audiences to associate with the rags-to-riches narrative.

The first three seasons of the show was aired by Star Plus. The channel was struggling to establish itself vis-a-vis the regional language channels in the Indian TV market of the 1990s. With its pan-Indian appeal, KBC became the readymade solution to the audience-starved channel. Thriving upon the twin virtues of *presence of mind* and *commonsense*, this popular quiz show stood out from the traditional knowledge-based, elitist quiz shows. The glocal aspect of the show can be seen in the conscious use of attire and language. For example, in the first season, following the British and American counterparts, Bachchan wore formal suits with a tie, but for the special episodes involving celebrities he was seen in traditional Indian attire, *kurta-pyjama* and *shawl*. With catchy, trendy, and innovative phrases such as 'Computerji', Amitabh Bachchan personalised his chat with the computer. The second season was called KBC *Dwiteeya*, pronounced with a stylish, comic flourish on the Indian word. Imparting high visibility to easily identifiable traditional as well as modern cultural elements such as references to cricket, Bollywood, Indian history, mythology, and religion; the program captured momentum by hosting famous movie stars, focussing on contestants' stories, and preaching. The Indian identity of the millionaire model was created by granting creative autonomy to local people, language, questions, and stories.

The recent flow of culturally sensitive and emotionally intelligent commercials in the Indian TV can be summed up in the *Karva Chauth* ads by the ICICI Bank. In one commercial the young wife is seen observing *Karva Chauth* (a North Indian festival when the wife fasts for the longevity of the husband). The time is evening. The setting is the spacious, marbled, and well finished balcony set against the outside greenery, and from which the full moon is clearly visible. The couple is tall, elegant, beautiful, loving, fun-oriented, and expressive. They are the models every Indian would adore. The husband wears a formal suit whereas the wife wears a traditional sari and traditional ornaments but chic in design. She is holding a *pujathali* (a traditional plate where all the ritualistic elements are kept for the worship of the Moon God) in her hand. Usually *puja*-moments in India happens to be serious and devotional, whereas the mood of this TVC is light and chic as the couple is engaged in deliberate, mock-comic, Hinglish banter.

The narrative unfolds when the husband is teasing the wife that he is sorry to feel that she might have thought of marrying a smart, handsome, hero-type person, which is not possible in this birth. The wife responds in the similar vein. The husband proceeds to say that she also might have thought of becoming a queen to rule over the palace. The wife mimics that this is also not possible! Continuing the comic-tease, the husband promises that each of her wishes will be fulfilled in the next birth. The wife questions why they shall be left for the next birth while they can be realised in this life. The husband assures that he will *try* his best. The light banter is cast aside, when the wife lovingly urges that he should fulfil all her desires in this life. The husband asks how that can be possible. The *puja-thali* is highlighted as the wife replies that it will be possible when he will have a lot of time to *try*. She wife takes the customary turn to look at Moon through the mesh of a sieve, and then at the husband through the same. A string of music composed after some memorable Bollywood movie song is played from the background. A role rehearsal starts when the husband comically takes the sieve from her and looks at her through the same. The wife feels coy and signals him to refrain from that. The husband keeps her hands on her shoulder and both of them look at the moon-lit sky. The Bollywood music continuing, a male voice over announces in Hinglish 'Like those of the *Karva Chauth*, good wishes for a happy and long life. ICICI Prudential Life Insurance, Live longer.' The logo and the punch line are displayed preceded by a full screen display of *sindoor bindi* (a small, round, red coloured material that married Hindu women put on their forehead in recognition of the husband).

Glocal cultural appeals in the *Karva Chauth* commercial are manifest in the putting together of diverse cultural materials such as traditional *sindoor bindi*, *puja-thali*; the chic elements such as the apartment, the suit and the ornament; the conceptual referents such as time, re-birth, and the moon as God; the worship versus the conjugal banter; and finally, the modern commercial constructs such as the logo, punch line, and the corporate message. The ICICI *Karva Chauth* commercial, like many other media and market-linked formations of our times, is a hybrid cultural product exemplifying our simultaneous global and local ontology.

### **Conclusion: The Reality of the Imaginary called Glocal**

Post-colonial redrafting of national identity by socio-political and economic elites was founded on a possible threat from the socio-cultural diversity of the Indian nation-state. Each of the elite forces perceived potential threats to their own identity and long term existence from the vast, ideologically unconnected, illiterate populace who were indifferent to a common vision of nationhood. Since a common, pan-Indian notion of identity never existed, or rather loosely existed, it necessitated an elitist-driven re-imagining of nationhood and identity for the diverse people for an imagined cultural mainstreaming. Time and again, such elitist projects failed because of the contradictions inherent to the political economy of India. While the quest for an imagined cultural commonness ended up in the formation of popular commercial cultures, cultural diversity fought back its multiple local grounds of survival. The end product was an increased fragmentation of culture and identity in the multiple peripheries of the nation alongside still powerful urges for commonness in the centre. With time, the forces of media, market, and politics have realised the inevitability of coping with the centre and the periphery: with coalition governments and commercial alignments.

Today, the imagined cultural identity in Indian televisual discourse is not necessarily confined to the one constructed by the state-sponsored network Doordarshan, but borrows equally from the alternate models promoted by the transnational networks like STAR TV and Channel [V], national private networks like Zee TV and local, vernacular media networks like ETV. Accordingly, the television mediated identity for India is rearticulated by the plurality of imagined Indianness in the "collective discourse of global, national and local networks" (Kumar, 1998, np). The *hybrid* or *glocal* represented in a variety of TV genres ranging from advertisements and news, education and entertainment programmes, quiz and talk shows, and serials and sitcoms provide the creative stimulus to the

audiences to re-imagine the culturally diverse Indian nation. Therefore, while the glocal shows like KBC have become synonymous with the modern Indian media, other adapted versions in the regional channel such as *Adarsha Dampathigalu* have completely appropriated the global elements to reassert the importance of the institution of marriage in Indian society. Down to advertising, the seat-anchor of the neo-liberal TV, Indianness is being re-imagined and re-constructed through recurrent Hinglish slogans like 'Kabhi sweet kabhi salty/*Khao* Britannia 50 fifty' or 'Knorr Soups *Banegaya* Indian' or 'Funda mint/*Dil se desi*.'

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