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VCR And Its Influence On Life Styles In South India

By

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Introduction:

In media rich societies of the west video cult may refer to a new trend of mass consciousness, brought about by an increasingly interactive process of the new technologies. Thus it would be difficult to isolate video from the larger cultural context of the new communication technologies and the emerging social science perspective of a 'demassification' process of the media, as also the concern for a cultural environment wherein the communication process is predominantly in a 'language we can see'¹. The socio-cultural dimension of video from a developing country with scarce media resources is vastly different. The phrase 'communication revolution' therefore, also emerges from a different context. It is necessary to clarify this ambiguity of meaning at the beginning itself, so that the analytical frame work of studying the impact of video is seen in the proper perspective.

The emergence of the new communication technologies on the Indian media scene may have much in common with other similarly developing countries. However, the present paper is confined only to the understanding of the Indian situation.

1. Waters, Harry F - The Age of Video; News Week; December 30, 1985 (P45)

Much like its predecessor the television, video just happened in India. The 'revolution' was confined to flooding of the hardware into a ready and expectant consumer market. There was no supporting software ideology or an independent cultural identity of the new medium. In such a situation, the conjugation of video to a vastly popular 'popular culture' - the Indian feature film was inevitable and immediate. It therefore, appears presumptuous to talk of a video revolution, whereas for all practical purposes influence of the new medium has primarily been to modify and redefine the marketing methods of an older product-the commercial feature film. Video has not in anyway diversified the content of communication, nor brought in newer frontiers of knowledge and experience within the reach of its consumers. If anything it has further enhanced and consolidated the Indian feature film as the most consistent primary source of mass culture. In the process, however, video has also brought in changes in the methods of consumption of this mass culture. These modifications vary from simple variations in exposure patterns to more complex reframing of legal, religious and other socio-cultural norms and value systems. The attempt in this paper is to touch upon some of ^{these} aspects as observed during a study of the socio-cultural implications of video technology in South India.

Collective Viewing Situation:

Depending on access to the medium, video is both collective public viewing and selective family home viewing. Consequently there is variance in the behaviour patterns in these two situational contexts. Collective viewing is in

what are popularly known as video parlours. Some operate legally under official license, while others informally as group viewing sessions. However, the entire operation of a video parlour is illegal within the strict framework of the Indian Copyright Amendment act of 1984. Depending on the locale, therefore, the parlours adopt the formal or informal approach of operation. Normally big urban centres are also the places where production facilities of media entertainment, particularly film, are located. These urban centres are also places where the officials holding responsible positions in the hierarchy of power are available to take prompt legal actions. Frequently, therefore, the parlours operate more informally in these urban centres. Besides, these urban centres are also places with considerable saturation of media entertainment, particularly cinema theatres exhibiting the latest film releases.

Consequently the parlours in such situation cater to an exclusive clientele, not necessarily in economic terms alone. Often the audience is in search of content stimuli not generally available for mass audiences in public places of exhibition such as a film theatre. The greatest demand in parlours located in urban centres is for high action, often extremely violent movies tinged with sexual overtones as also the blue films. Mostly these are films in English language produced in United States or some European locale and brought into the country through well organised smuggling

networks. The composition of the audience in most urban video parlours is predominantly male, college going youth in the age group of 14 to 20 years. Obviously the video film in this case is not a response to paucity of media entertainment. Rather, it is the vicarious pleasure of breaking the culturally taboo topic such as sex and sexual violence.

None, however, admit to showing or seeing blue films in parlours, though many acknowledge showing and seeing fast action "thrillers". Blue films obviously face the double disadvantage of societal disapproval along with legal objections of censorship. While a nauseating violent film may not get a clearance from censors, it is obviously more socially acceptable.

Conceptually societal tolerance of legal aberrations seems more fluid as compared to infringement of the moral code of conduct, enforced by a strong traditional culture. As a place of public entertainment a video parlour in an urban setting has to operate under the constant scrutiny of the law as well as the suspicious view of the local community. Placed in such a vulnerable position a parlour often has its own methods of surveillance and security checks of clients. Under these circumstances, the behaviour of the viewer cannot be anything but deviant.

The parlour viewer though a regular client, does not conform to the normal social patterns of behaviour. For instance there is no social differentiation of class

in the viewing situation. A migrant labourer, a derelict or a college youth from well to do family share the discomfort of a small, confined room for the duration of the show. The locale of the parlour is also often unusual. One report has come of the use of the mosque in a muslim burial ground for exhibition of video films. The researcher following the story was reluctant to enter the premises wearing shoes but was rudely asked to walk in by the attendant as there was no place to leave the shoes outside. Besides they could also attract others to the premises out of curiosity. The choice of the mosque was obviously because of its isolated location as also of its immunity from the authority. However it does raise the question about resilience of religious/ritualistic value systems in the emerging environment of a vibrant new technology.

Another popular approach to avoid confrontation with authorities is to make the parlour mobile-literally. It takes various forms - of shifting locales or using tourist coaches after the day shift. While the former is systematic and well known to the regular clients, the latter is just aimless driving outside the city limits, until the show is over.

A more socially acceptable but unique community viewing situation has been observed in the slums of Madras city. The Government has a scheme^{of} installing community television sets in the slums. The slum residents pool their resources and collect a nominal amount of two or three rupees from each family. Invariably the collection is sufficient to hire a

a **Video Casette** Recorder (VCR) and 5-6 Tamil Video films. The entire community then watches the films through the day or night. Mostly this is done over the week ends or holidays. Similar adaptation of video viewing has been reported among migrant workers on industrial construction locations. The half constructed buildings provide ideal locale for video exhibition.

collective viewing - Rural

In contrast to this situation, the operation of parlour in rural areas is primarily as a place of public entertainment. There is no confrontation either with the community or the law. Generally starved of any form of media entertainment, the rural communities by and large welcome a parlour into their settings. Inturn, the parlours make every effort to cater to the entertainment needs of the community.

Generally they are located in busy rural centres where public transport pass through regularly or the weekly market meets or has a temple that brings in devotees regularly. This floating population is apparently good business for a parlour. Good transport facility also ensures regular dependable supply of new video cassettes from the bigger cities. Often the bus driver or conductor is a willing agent who brings the cassettes. Invariably a part of the house, such as a hall or a big room is converted to operate as a parlour. The parlour owners are fairly well known people in the community. In a few instances the owners were respected landlords. Not surprisingly the parlours are also places for a family outing. As such it caters to the needs of the family.

Indian women in rural areas, either from middle class or the traditional families, rarely go out in the public with their husband or other male members of the family. Cinema theatres have always catered to this social custom by providing separate viewing facility for women. The parlours in the various villages where the study was conducted also recognise this social custom. In one instance the parlour owner had a separate room with a TV monitor for women audience. Significantly this had larger seating capacity than the 'general' viewing room. With a video distribution system he can feed the two monitors in the two rooms simultaneously. So the family do get to see the film 'together' in separate rooms. In a few areas, there are exclusive show timings specifically for women. A common observation at the village level of the study in all the areas of the four states was that a predominant segments of women audience were from the minority groups, mostly muslim and in some places catholic christians. The muslim population invariably had the husband or some male member working in the Gulf as migrant labour. Which might account for them becoming the regular audience in the video parlours. One christian family shared their reason for the video habit. In the community there is a general, though unspoken, disapproval of films by the church. Consequently public viewing in cinema theatre is avoided by the parish members, But seeing films in the informal atmosphere of a parlour is quite a different thing. So community patronization of the parlours appear rather strongly at all the villages surveyed for the study.

This close relationship of a parlour to the community can also be seen in a variety of mutual understanding by the parlour owners and people at village level. One parlour owner arranges regular film shows for children at reduced rates of admission. Films of Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy are popular and periodically shown. The information about the films are circulated to the local school ahead of time so the children would be free to see the films. One very popular film, still on demand was "Jungle Book".

There are frequent requests from regular viewers for personal favourites. Normally horror, fast action and murder stories seem to be very popular. One parlour owner gets the film 'Dracula' every few months for repeat shows by public demand. Sometimes block booking is done for family viewing. Social occasions like marriages, inevitably have a private show at the parlour depending on the economic status of the person.

The video parlours in the villages also admit to screening blue films once in a while. This is also accepted by the community as necessary for business. Invariably these are late night (after 11-00 PM) or once a week shows. These are clearly advertised as blue films and only the regular select clientele turn up for them. One parlour owner has a unique way of indicating a blue film as "(A) Comedy". Mostly the publicity is by word of mouth.

The village parlours also advertise their films with posters obtained from the video libraries. They are displayed boldly near the parlour or the bus stand. If posters are not available, they are written on black boards and placed outside the parlour and also some strategic points in the village. Most video parlours get their cassettes from the nearest city video library either in the Taluk or District head quarters. Some have their own agents travelling upto Metropolitan centres like Bombay/Madras for supplies. One or two seem to have relatives in Gulf area who send the cassettes regularly. On a few occasion, one of the local VCR owner might exchange a cassette with the parlour.

Such harmonious and friendly interaction with the local community ensures the survival of a parlour. The officials entrusted with enquiring into the legality of a parlour operation are mostly junior level - and tend to ignore the whole issue.

Home Viewing situation:

Changes in overt behavioral patterns such as socialisation and leisure time activities can be observed in a situation where the video enters the home. Clearly the limited segment of the population that are in the economic category of owning a VCR/VCP, provides only a partial picture of the socio-cultural impact of the video technology. The more significant factor observed was that ownership of VCR/VCP had penetrated upto the village level, an indication of the rapid diffusion of this new innovation.

Besides the owners of a VCR/VCP, the audience in a home viewing situation also comprises of close friends, relatives or neighbours. The profile of a home viewers is of a middle/upper middle class family member, well educated and in the age group of 20 to 40. Generally video viewing is a collective activity with children, friends, neighbours forming the group. Consequently there is greater socialisation among peer group members due to video, though in the rural areas servants seem to have equal access to viewing video along with family members. However, video access is still rather limited. Real changes in socialisation, interactions among people may be observed when a saturation of access to video is reached. An indication of this has emerged from the study. Among the four southern states where the study was conducted, Kerala had the maximum number of VCR owners. The opinion of the video viewers from Kerala is that socialisation is being affected by the advent of video.

Video is obviously perceived as a new means of entertainment and there is an anticipation of change in leisure time activities due to video. This opinion emerges clearly across all levels of viewers from the city to the village.

However, what this change is likely to be is not as clear. But the linkages of video to films are closer as compared to the associations of video and TV or TV and films.

Television, apparently, has had no impact on the film going habits of people. But video seems to have done so. Comparatively the impact of video on seeing films seems to be more at rural areas where cinema theatres are few and often inaccessible to small villages. In bigger towns and cities the regular clientele of a cinema theatre are generally drawn from the poorer or middle class families who do not generally own VCR/VCP but do have access to video viewing. There is thus a blurring of distinction between those who see films only on video or only at the theatres. Often it is a mixture.

The selective viewing situation at home also brings in decisions of individual preferences of video content. Children appear to have a fairly important role in this decision making process, whether in an urban or rural situation. While their role as decision makers is insignificant at rural levels.

While film and video are perceived as being closely linked the thematic preferences in the two media bring out some differences. Video is the main choice for viewing blue films. It is also preferred for educational themes. The choice of film or video does not seem to matter much when the theme is primarily social or religious. These opinions of preferences have emerged quite clearly from urban viewers. The response from rural viewers has not been as precise.

This does not necessarily indicate a lack of discriminating ability among the rural audience as to the educational or other non entertainment functions of mass media in general

or video in particular. If anything the rural population in this country has been constantly bombarded with educational/instructional content through the television network or even the sporadic film campaign of field publicity units. What it does seem to indicate, however, is that media must first fulfill the entertainment needs, before extending its functioning to other aspects of education/instruction. 'Preferences' as coming from the rural viewers here seem to be an indication of a greatly felt 'need' rather than a judgement of the effectiveness of video to serve varied purposes.

Similar tendencies are observed in the choice of language as indicated by the video viewers. Though the local, regional language is indicated as a first preference among all people, there is no rejection of other languages. This indication emerges clearly from the choice of Hindi and English ~~as~~ in almost equal proportion from the viewers in rural areas, where both the languages are foreign to the people.

Considering the information gaps that do exist between the rural/urban populace in India, such variations in needs is only to be expected. It also seems to strengthen the concern that emerging technologies would widen the gaps rather than provide a bridge; and that the newer categories of haves and have nots may centre around the criteria of access to video. But in terms of defining the utilisation of the video technology the viewers appear to have an undivided understanding - that it serves the primary function of entertainment.