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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2411">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2411</a></td>
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Children & Television (India)

By

Parvati Menon
1. India is a vast country of continental dimensions. It has a range of diverse languages and cultures. Its variety is infinite. The Television therefore has a wide spread to cater to the various demands - both rural and urbane.

2. The Television in India is Government controlled with no private channels nor private networks. The cable Television with its wide variety has started making its presence felt, though only in major cities bringing the contemporary world almost into the poorest slums of metropolitan cities. There are only two channels at present on the national scene.

3. The national network is spread over a breakfast show, a noon show for people at home and again from evenings right up to late nights. These shows are interspersed with a variety of University programmes sponsored by the University Grants Commission.

4. A couple of hours daily in the mornings and evenings are devoted to regional languages which emphasise local news and local needs.

5. Thus the news, for instance, is read out to every Indian in English, Hindi and his own mother tongue (so no excuse for him not to understand the world happenings!).

6. Television in India was just chugging along with a very limited range, and only a limited number of stations. Then there was the sudden leap from the bullock cart age to the space age in the '80s. The ASIADS was a catalyst and Television Stations by the scores were established within a short span of time (1983-86) and Television imports and production grew phenomenally.

7. However, along with the proliferation in hardware, the software development does not seem to have kept pace.

8. It resulted in the Television creating a strong appetite for popular film oriented programmes. Instead of being a competitor, the Television became a distant co-partner to the film industry so to say.

9. Children's programmes were given limited slots in the evening regional languages or on Sunday morning national telecasts, in this matrix of variety which has to cater to many levels.

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(INDIA)
10. This could be related partly due to the National Television going commercial when it started the sponsored commercially backed serials.

11. There was quick returns to the producers and sales intense interest from the product manufacturers. In such an atmosphere of primetime reservation to potential clients, children's programmes were bound to be relegated. Children are not direct buyers!!

12. The soapbox serials were (and are) a strange bag of mix. There have been laborious efforts to create family dramas which also willy nilly get the children glued to the sets along with the adult members of the family.

13. Thus, as on the parallel film front, the opportunity to identify and develop an exclusive Children's Television has been lost sight of.

14. Programmes for children, to get his undiluted attraction and attention calls for top class quality. Children have a built in sense of selection - and credit must be given to his sense of quality consciousness. If however there is a dearth, then he switches onto adult programmes, like the way kids have been hooked on to adult-oriented mainstream commercial cinema for years. The effect of continuous and unthinking patronage can have a detrimental effect, both on the media concerned and the audience. Each takes the other for granted and there is bound to be a fall in standards. It then becomes as hazy as a chicken and egg situation knowing not which is responsible for the other.

15. Habit forming takes an easier plunge with things that has a prohibition angle. The phenomenal growth of cigarettes, alcohol, vice dens, etc. are examples. And since nobody ever lost money while making profits, so anything that sold well proliferated.

16. Children reportedly form one of the largest segment of cinema audiences for commercial formulae oriented films with its popular recipe of romance, songs, violence, rape scenes, blood curdling fights, etc. all centered around a thin story line.

17. One man's pleasure can be another man's business, but vice versa may not be true. When it comes to children, the thumb rules have to be different - because the audience catered to are in the most receptive age.

Contd...3
18. Leisure is not a luxury but a legitimate necessity, especially for the growing child. His intellectual, aesthetic and cultural growth starts with the type of books he reads and the kind of cinema or Television he watches.

19. Television and films have the built-in advantage of capturing his undivided attention and imagination with programmes that should be properly presented in a sensitive manner. Even education in a broader sense - comprising of time tested values and principles and positive thinking can become integrated into his viewing diet - without seeming to make it a sugar coated pill. A certain amount of honesty and conviction is called for so that the child accepts certain values for its own merit.

20. Today we are far more equipped to spread the rudiments of knowledge, peace, good living, cleanliness, fraternity, etc., etc., through the technologies available to us than in the distant past. It is amazing how religious beliefs, philosophies, messages, myths, legends, etc. spread in the past, in spite of unsurmountable difficulties, by the word of mouth. It is so much easier now, for all nations to co-ordinate and to harness the information spreading power of the Television through global satellites. Each country with its own priorities and social commitments should introspect on this issue.

21. In developing countries, subtle education blended with entertainment could be the ideal enrichment programmes to substitute class room studies, especially for children and young people. Programmes should cut across social and economic barriers, appealing to the finer sensibilities of human beings.

22. Children are drawn to the Television very easily. If politicians have been able to win votes and rule with the power of the Television why not whole nations of children be educated with this powerful tool? "Television is a classroom without walls."

23. I recall reading about an experiment some years ago where four groups of students were given the same information on a new topic via four separate media, i.e. one group received it via radio, one from Television, one by lecture and one read it. The matter presented was same with no discussions. At the end of the exercise each group was asked to fill up a Quiz. It was quite a surprise that students with Television channel information stood first followed by radio, lecture and print.

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24. The same experiment with supporting features was repeated like the lecturer using blackboard and charts, the print using illustrations, the radio more effects and the Television allowed dramatisation and professional sound back. The result again proved the superiority of Television as an educational tool.

25. No wonder then, in the present context of our times private circulation book libraries are being replaced by video libraries - because the Television / Video is easier to be with. Giving a margin that most of the Video cassettes are popular films, the logic can be applied with better software for children.

26. In Television the audience involvement is greater, as being known within the precincts of a horn, a certain unbridled intimacy is cultivated with one's favourite programmes. It must be remembered that the small screen has more mid shots and close ups which also add to the intimacy. The popularity of home drama serials woven around common people in common identifiable situations and with canned laughter incorporated into the sound track, is perhaps the best proof of this intimacy. When the layman understands, he accepts - and that is the power of Television which is the 8th ART.

27. Programmes for children should be presented through various formats according to their age. Puppets, Muppets and Cartoons are ideal for the younger age group. Children accept, with their unlimited imagination, animals and birds acting and conversing in the same way as humans. Walt Disney's characters endeared themselves to children round the world, ever since their first appearance, because they were characters with feelings and humour. Indeed, more often than not, a child's best confidant is his pet dog. This intimate relationship lends itself excellently to make education and spreading of knowledge (which is distinct from teaching a pedagogic instruction) ideal tools for children's programmes.

28. Every child loves story. It allows him to participate and explore the universe along with the characters of the story he identifies with mostly. It agitates and excites his power of thinking and analysis. Children's Television programmes, presented through the format of stories has tremendous possibilities. We in the orient are great in this art of story telling with our ancient traditional collections.
29. The producers must however devote time to do research along with the content specialist, so that in the course of blending in the story element, false statements or wrong information is not inadvertently fed. The content load should be related to the target age group or be in accordance with their mental level.

30. Random cross sectional studies have revealed that there were definite behavioural changes for the better, especially in rural areas and economically backward areas where the ratio of school dropout is high, after regular exposure to good childrens programmes.

31. The greatest challenge is to make programmes for children interesting enough for them to see. The intimacy of the equipment allows them to switch off what is boring or just leave the room unnoticed!!

32. Making effective childrens programmes whether on film on Television, which elevates him, is a great task which all of us should address ourselves to seriously. But the most important thing is to remember that Television should be used rationally and not allowed to uproot other forms of interaction and communication which is necessary for a child's all round growth. The instrument cannot be a substitute to actual learning but only supplemental.

33. A surfeit of programmes, without rationals, may otherwise have a toxic result.

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