

'TV AND MY CHILD' – MOTHERS REFLECT

Objective

To ascertain what mothers with children in the 8-14 age-group thought and felt about television and their children's relationship with it.

Methodology

We used the first-hand audience response and feedback method of investigation. This participatory research and appraisal with media users was entirely qualitative in nature and consisted of 11 Focus Group Discussions with diverse respondent groups in Delhi.

Universe & Sample of the study

As stated earlier, our respondents consisted entirely of mothers of children aged 8-14 years. Amongst them, nearly 60 % were homemakers and the remaining working women. Teachers abounded in the later category. Also significant here was the presence of women caretakers of children with disability. These children with disabilities of both mental and physical nature did not necessarily belong to the stated age-group.

FGDs and interviews were conducted through the second and the third weeks of May 2001 across localities in Delhi. Respondents were from the high and middle-income localities of Saket, South Extension, Gole Market, Ranjit Nagar, Rajouri Garden, and Preet Vihar, as well as from the low income localities of Joshi Colony (Indra Camp), Seemapuri, and Dilshad Garden. The study ensured a proportionate representation of respondents from the mid-income segment belonging to diverse socio-educational backgrounds. Thus respondents from the lower-, middle- and the high- middle income groups participated in discussions in separate homogeneous groups.

What the Study Indicates:

Viewing Habits

Hours of Daily Watching of mother with children	7-8 hrs (Holiday viewing)
Hours of Daily Watching by children alone	2 hrs
Favourite TV Slots of Mothers	12.30p.m. – 4.30p.m. & 8p.m. – 11p.m.
Favourite TV Slots of Children	5.p.m. – 7.p.m & 8p.m. – 11.p.m.

Positive Aspects

Children are watching a great deal of TV in the company of adults, particularly with the mother and in some households with grandparents. At prime time, they are now often joined by their fathers.

Prime time soaps are no longer watched exclusively by women. Men are quite willing to join the entire family in front of the box. Thus, family discussions on many television programmes are increasingly engaging everyone, including children. This implies that some of the barriers and inhibitions that exist between children and adults are being diluted, even dismantled. Mothers find they get many more opportunities to confer with children, discuss values and address their anxieties. Television is increasingly offering tangible situations for children to analyse adult behaviour and understand the adult world.

Not-So-Positive Aspects

Children tend to watch TV indiscriminately. A great deal of TV is watched by them particularly during the holidays. The stated reason is a veritable scarcity of other options for children. TV watching is a major and often the only form of recreation available to them. Mothers find that during holidays they are hardly able to offer alternatives for recreation or creative activity for children. Therefore, they are not in a position to effectively control the amount of television their children watch.

Observations and Concerns on Programming

The study clearly shows a mixed reaction to the available programme content. If they say they like a particular programme, it can not necessarily be taken to mean that they appreciate every aspect of it. This is evident in the observations enunciated below.

Positive Observations

Many of the prime-time serials, depicting the joint family structure have some advantages especially for children. Adults and children are able to discuss family structures and the quality of relationships that should exist within a family. In fact, the family as an institution is now being thoroughly analysed, and everyone in the family tends to have an opinion on it. To illustrate this point, one mother stated how her teenage daughters have

“real problems with characters like *Tulsi and Parvati*” (lead female characters in the serials, *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*). These are seen as too docile. The girls prefer the more independent-minded *KKusum* in the new soap, *KKusum*.

“We explain and discuss with our children about what is right and what is wrong and examples are taken from these serials to support our arguments”. In some instances, mothers said that these serials help “prepare the children to deal with complex life situations”. By tackling adult issues such as extra-marital affairs, TV serials often give parents an opportunity to discuss such subjects with their children in ways that does not cause embarrassment to either.

Critical social issues like widow remarriage, which is currently being depicted in the popular soap “*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*”, is now hotly debated within the family. In the light of many serials dealing with mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the relationship between them, is also being re-examined. Women on both sides are beginning to recognise how their attitudes to, and interaction with, each other need to change and become more tolerant.

Many of these serials can be watched in the presence of the entire family. These are engaging everyone's interest, bringing families closer together and enhancing a child's respect for the elders. There is also a mutual understanding of each other's concerns and anxieties. According to the mothers living in Seemapuri, another valuable feature of these serials is that they do not encourage violence – particularly amongst boys. Boys now sit at home and watch some of these serials too, instead of “going out and creating mischief”, they said.

Game shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati* are luring children to gain knowledge in return for huge cash rewards and may be even some recognition. Such a programme has not only inspired children to know more and boosted their self-confidence, but it has also encouraged families, especially, those with young children, to enjoy prime-time viewing together.

The children's familiarity with a range of consumer products, the different brands associated with each product and their knowledge about their relative attributes and features are being appreciated by parents. This, they feel, has been a positive outcome of advertisements.

The biggest gain appears to have been made by people living with, and affected by, disability. Some channels have become so representative that many serials have key characters depicting different disabilities, and this has given them an opportunity to engage with their circumstances and in a small way even helps them to come to terms with constraints therein.

Concerns

Across different parts of the city, mothers expressed various kinds of concerns around different aspects of television. While some of these relate to the broader issue of parenting where hard, personal decisions and choices have to be made by both the parent and the child, others have to do with more programme-specific aspects which mothers feel they have only partial control over. The latter includes problematic content, inappropriate visuals, coping with the impact of certain images and TV narratives on children and the lack of restraint in some programmes and advertisements.

What passes in the name of mass entertainment is being questioned and challenged by many mothers. Much of the questioning stems from women's personal experiences and the discomfort they have while watching TV. This is often related to many factors, in particular their milieu and circumstances. Therefore, this feedback is highly qualitative and majorly reflects the realities and challenges faced by viewers.

On the Portrayal of Women and Men, viewers observe that many of the so-called safe family serials, which hook the viewers with very identifiable situations and characters, too have their share of problems.

In some cases, the story line becomes highly illogical and unrealistic. Viewers attribute some of this to the way serials are being stretched without any clear sense of direction and purpose. In such situations, viewers feel they are being taken for granted and their intelligence insulted. For example, in *Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhie Bahu Thi*, they wonder how Anupam hasn't seen Mihir or his photograph! (Mihir and Anupam were business partners. Now after his death, Anupam is marrying Mihir's wife) ***“ Aise kaise ho sakta hai ki Anupam Mihir ke saath business kar raha tha, uski kirya par bhi aaya, uske ghar roz ata hai par phir bhi kabhie usko ya uski photo ko nahin dekha’***

Even more problematic is the manner in which key characters are depicted. The depiction is so lopsided that many of the characters are often one-dimensional, highly exaggerated, unrealistic and inconsistent. Besides, some female characters are portrayed in an extremely unconvincing manner, especially when portraying a scheming, unscrupulous and dominating character. Men are portrayed in a highly negative manner too and such negative behaviour is often glorified.

“Parvati ko to kuch jyada hi mahan dikhaya hain, Itna to real life mein koyi hota hi nahin hain. “Humare apne ghar mein bhi agar hum dono bahuon ko ek si importance na mile tho hamen acha nahin lagega, par Tv par to kuch jyada hi kheench dete hain” (The goodness of the elder daughter-in-law Parvati in *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* is stretched to the extent that she looks unreal)

In many of these serials, extramarital affairs, bigamous relationships are shown as a matter of routine, and in some cases extremely casually such as in sitcoms like *Kabhie Idhar Kabhie Udhar* and *Ghar Wali Uppar Wali*. This gives children the impression that these are normal, acceptable or even desirable situations and expected adult behaviour.

When much of the family, old and young, watch TV together it becomes essential to prepare the audience for the kind of visuals and treatment the programmes are likely to have. In many countries, programmes are properly classified and rated to help parents and their families make informed choices. In India, no such preparation takes place and in very unexpected and inappropriate moments, the family has to view scenes and advertisements which are embarrassing, often provoking children to raise awkward questions, thus often spoiling the atmosphere and the enjoyment of the programme. In the afternoon, some of these programmes or advertisements are used by mothers as an opportunity to address some of their child's natural curiosity. However, at prime time, in the presence of the entire family, these not only prove difficult, but often end up adding to existing tensions and problems. One mother shared that she heard her son saying while fighting with the younger sibling "*Mummy aap 'Goli' kha lete , kamsekam yeh paida to nahin hoti*" (If you had taken pills [contraceptive] at least she would not have been born)

In terms of the unnecessary and undesirable impact, one element that worries parents extremely is the manner in which children constantly imitate action-oriented programmes like *WWF* and, to a lesser extent, *Shaktimaan* or other similar programmes including films in both English and Hindi. Many of the stunts and fight sequences are imitated in a serious and often unsupervised manner, without understanding the consequences of these acts. Even the statutory warnings which are fleetingly shown before some of these programmes, have not deterred children from trying out the various stunts/actions, with older children often practicing on younger children to master some of these techniques. Some mothers are anxious about letting their children play in the neighbourhood because, very often, it is reduced to these kinds of highly rough and even dangerous forms of scuffles. "*Ek din maine dekha mera beta apne chote bhai par WWF ka stunt try kar raha tha, main itna dar gayi ki maine phir child lock use kiya*" (One day I saw my son trying out a WWF stunt on his younger brother, I was so terrified that I had to use the child lock option for this channel)

A similar concern was expressed by nearly all the parents about the disturbing impact of horror shows like *Aahat*, *X-Zone*, etc. The rescheduling to late night slots helped parents stop particularly younger children from viewing some of these shows.

Even cartoons are not considered entirely safe. An excess of violence and aggression in some programmes was observed by some of the parents. Similarly, very popular programmes like *Boogie Woogie* also came in for some amount of flak and resentment. In the name of depicting young talent, many parents found that the dance show was encouraging children to imitate very adult body movements and dances, some of which is outright vulgar and unsuitable for children.

Games shows including *Kaun Banega Crorepati* and *Antakshari* have created their own share of dilemmas for parents. Despite encouraging interest in general knowledge and developing interests in music, the cash and gift rewards are being viewed with some amount of concern by many parents. With elements such as gambling implicit in these

programmes, the mothers feel that it is unethical for them to support such programmes or encourage their children to watch these.

Some mothers did not think KBC represented a serious quest for general knowledge. In fact, many questions are posed in a manner to encourage participation or popularity of the programme rather than any serious pursuit of general knowledge. "*Hamare bachchon ko yeh itna lalcha rahe hain ki woh ek hi raat me amir banne ka sochte hain*". (Our children are getting so greedy that they want to become a millionaire overnight)

Finally, advertisements have a highly seductive effect on children with many of the ads deliberately using child models to appeal to children who then make impulsive and irrational demands from parents. They often insist of purchasing a product and are not willing to be talked out of it. Tantrums and even blackmail is used to force parents to give into their demands. "*Us din mera beta peechche pada ki mujhe MILO lekar aao, main badi khush hui , bazar gayi to pata chala ke uske saath ek ball free hai- Ball to mil gayee Par chaar din mein MILO me interest khatam ho gayaa.*" (My son was after my life demanding for Milo. When I went to the market I found it was because they were giving a ball free with it. He got the ball, alright but in four days flat his love for MILO was gone.)

Mothers are also finding some adverse impact on children's lifestyles and their quality of life. They feel children are getting increasingly prone to aggression and with no balanced recreation, there is a growing tendency towards a sedentary lifestyle and obesity. Children are unwilling to be creative, they have short attention spans, they are unable to concentrate on their studies seriously. "*Mere bachche chahtein hain ki saare din TV dekhte rahein, agar mana karo to ladne lagte hain. Kahin khelne nahin jate. Kisi ke ghar jana nahin chahte. Koi aa jaye to namaste tak karna nahin chahte, time par homework nahin karte. Kisi bhi kaam ke liye break ka intezaar karte hain*". (My children want to watch Television all day. If I try to stop them they fight with me. They don't go out to play or to other people's houses. If somebody comes to our house they don't even come out to greet them. They don't do homework on time. They wait for the commercial breaks for everything.)

They constantly demand attention, exhibit severe mood swings and in some cases are prone to addictive habits. Finally, they behave in a highly precocious fashion, acting and behaving much older than they actually are, adopting adult postures and mannerisms. In most Indian homes, the mothers are at the receiving end of such irrational behaviour.

Recommendations

- During the summer vacation all TV channels must plan special programmes keeping in mind the long hours children devote to TV. The objective of such a plan should be to combine entertainment with education.
- Best of regional and language literature including writings of literary masters such as Rabindranath Tagore, Mahadevi Verma, Premchand could be made into meaningful productions using popular programme formats like “Rishtey” and “Bestseller” to produce them.
- Even programmes like "Hasya Kavi Sammelan" would be good entertainment for children.
- Serials should be more rural and region based. This would help children to learn more about our own people and the kinds of customs, traditions and means of livelihood that people in different parts of the country practise.
- The animated format should be used more for epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana.
- With channels like Discovery and National Geographic becoming increasingly popular with children, other channels should realise that such educational programmes have great potential.
- Public service advertisements (Eg. CIPLA) should be shown regularly.
- Game shows and other shows should not be fundamentally money-oriented.
- Serials depicting extra-marital affairs and other complex issues need more sensitive handling and balanced portrayal.
- The serials must focus on social issues like widow remarriage. It is found to encourage necessary discourse in the families.
- Family dramas/serials should be reasonable in length and purposeful in terms of story line and not get dragged out unnecessarily to suit sponsors or other commercial interests.
- Celebrities should use their status to positively influence children.

Annexure 1

Top Ten Favourite Programmes as told by the mothers;

Mothers

C & S Households

Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki
Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhie bahu Thi
Kabhi Sautan Kabhi Saheli
Kaun Banega Crorepati
Koshish Ek Asha
Basera
Amanat
Shagun
Kalash
Aashirwad
Kundali

& Films

DD Housholds

Kabhie Sautan K S
Kundali
Nargis
Sambandh
Piya Bina
Alif laila
Kavita
Kaleeiren
Maan
Dushman
Surag

& Films

What mothers said were children's favourite TV shows

C & S Households

Kaun Banega Crorepati
Discovery Channel
Cartoon Network
Tu Tu Main Main
Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki
Kyunki Saas Bhi kabhie Bahu Thi
Shaktimaan
Small Wonder
Boogie Woogie
Sonpari
& Films

DD Households

Shaktimaan
Tele Tubbies
Cartoon
Shaka laka Boom Boom
Films
Mini Superstar
Mythologicals
Surag

& Films