

MEDIA HABITS OF THE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Within the parameters of mainstream media research, though many scholars have become much more aware of gender and other developmental issues, disability has remained a largely “invisible” issue. That, the disabled people are not constructed as “consumers” is reflected by the fact, that their lives have been overlooked by the media. In a globalised economy, where profitability is the ultimate criterion, the voice of the disabled remains marginalized. In instances where the voices have been heard and the lives have become visible, it has been with the images of dependency and a construction of the disabled person as the ‘problem’. This treatment was of course in congruence with the popular understanding that could not conceive of disability experience in the context of social, political, and historical factors.

The comprehension of disability has moved from a purely medical angle to a social constructional perspective in which disability is seen as a phenomenon created by society, which historically has had architectural, occupational, educational, communicational, and attitudinal barriers to prevent disabled people from being totally integrated in society.

Within this perspective, the focus shifts from an emphasis on physical difference vested in the person to an evaluation of societal structures that label the difference as ‘disabled’.

Forum of Viewers with Disability was formed in 1998. Since then it has been engaged with the media to create a dialogue regarding the disability issues. An essential component of the work since 1998 has been constant monitoring of the television to locate spaces as well as change the nuances of representation.

However, for such an activity to sustain itself mere reliance on the concern is not sufficient. Given the media’s compulsions of operating in a business world, the dialogue has to be backed by research endeavor. Consequently, in the present study the objective was to get an insight into the viewing habits of disabled viewers and their caretakers. The central premise underlying the study was that, it is extremely significant to understand the habits/views of the disabled people so that future interventions with the media can take their experiential reality into account.

The study thus sought to determine both quantitatively and qualitatively the preferences and observations of disabled people. Data were collected through a survey form developed by Dr. Anita Ghai and Sujata Goenka (2000).

The objective of the study was to get both the background information i.e. age, gender, education etc and information regarding the patterns of viewing. The survey data were supplemented by the in-depth interviews with some of the respondents. Care was taken to understand the emotive effect this media had on the participants and also to establish the

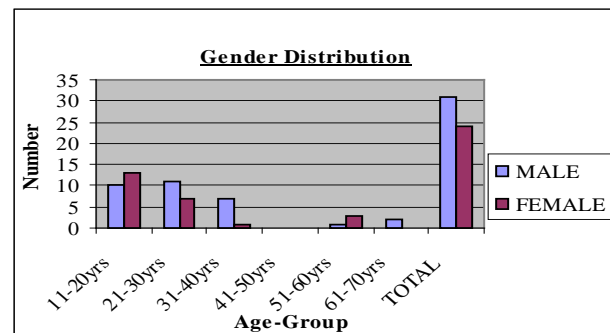
dichotomies that prevail between the portrayal of the disabled by the media and the reality as it exists.

THE RESPONDENTS

The respondents were 55 disabled people in the age range of 11-70, A sample of ten care takers was also included in cases where the disabled person was not the primary provider of the information

Age distribution

Out of the 55, 31 were males and 24 were females. Fig1.1 indicates the distribution of the sample in the six age categories. As is evident, the maximum percentage of respondents were in the age range of 11 to 40.



AGE	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)
11-20yrs	18%	23%
21-30yrs	20%	13%
31-40yrs	13%	2%
41-50yrs	-	-
51-60yrs	2%	5%
61-70yrs	3%	0%
TOTAL	56%	43%

Education

A total of 63.6 percent of respondents were high school graduates. The rest 36.3 of the sample had received college education including vocational training. Fig1.2 indicates the percentage of sample in the different categories .

Education Level	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)
Vocational Training	14%	13%
Middle	9%	18%

School		
Matric	13%	2%
Higher	7%	2%
Secondary		
Graduates/	16%	5%
Post		
Graduates		
TOTAL	60%	40%

Type of disability represented

Three disabilities viz., physically impaired, hearing impaired and developmentally impaired characterized the sample. Out of 55 respondents 25 were physically impaired, 19 were Mentally Challenged and 11 in the category of Hearing-Impaired.

Type of Disability	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)
Hearing Impaired	14%	5%
Mentally Challenged	16%	18%
Physically challenged	27%	18%
TOTAL	58%	42%

Average Viewing Time

The average viewing per day was two to four hours with, 76% of the sample (44% males and 33%) The maximum viewership was in the age range of 11- 30, with 23 respondents watching about two to four hours of television everyday. (These comprised mainly of the physically and mentally challenged)

The average viewing 1-2 hrs, only devoted to serials was a majority of 49% of which 29% male 20% female.

Average Viewing per day	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)	Total
2-4 hrs	44%	33%	76%
4-6 hrs	7%	5%	13%
6-8 hrs	2%	-	2%
8-10 hrs	-	4%	4%

Favourite Channel

Almost 58% of the disabled viewers watch Star plus(58%) followed by Zee T.V (42%) and Sony (40%) The disabled women did not watch sports, MTV, Discovery, Cartoon Network, ESPN, National Geographic and Discovery channel.

Favourite Channels	Male % (aprox)	% (aprox)	Total
Star Plus	34%	24%	58%
Sony	20%	20%	40%
Zee tv	18%	24%	42%
DD	2%	4%	5%
Metro	7%	5%	13%
Sports	5%	-	5%
Discovery	5%	-	5%
Astha	-	4%	4%
MTV	4%	-	4%
Star News	13%	4%	16%
Star gold	4%	2%	5%
Cartoon Network	4%	-	4%
Star Movies	4%	2%	5%
ESPN	4%	-	4%
Zee News	4%	2%	5%
Aaj Tak	7%	-	7%
National Geographic	5%	-	5%
Any Other B4U, Star World Aastha, V channel, etc.	9%	-	9%

Favourite TV shows

The next part of the survey wanted to ascertain the favourite serial. Out of the 20 serials/programmes included in the list, the results indicated that the ratings of disabled people followed a universal pattern The data indicates that almost all the listed shows are being watched by the disabled viewers.

In a way this yet again proves that they are like any other population having tastes that range in different directions.The only differences which can be noted are in the case of disabled women who do not watch programmes such as WWf Boogie Woogie Aaj Tak, cartoon, KKusum and the programmes on the discovery channel.

Males on the other hand had no interest in Kabhi Sautan Kabhi Saheli, Kora Kagaz, CID, Kaun , and Kora Kagaz. The fact that detective serials do not appeal to disabled male viewers is not in line with the patterns of general male viewers.

Favourite TV Show	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)	Total %
Bhajan Programmes	7%	2%	9%
KGK	4%	4%	7%
WWF	2%	-	2%
CID	-	2%	2%
KSBKBT	4%	7%	11%
KBC	7%	2%	9%
Boogie	2%	-	2%
Woogie			
Saans	5%	2%	7%
Kora Kagaz	-	2%	2%
Kundali	2%	4%	5%
Kaun	-	2%	2%
Aaj Tak	5%	-	5%
Sonpari	-	2%	2%
Kabhi Sautan	-	2%	2%
Kabhi Saheli			
Cartoon	2%	-	2%
Kusum	2%	-	2%
Discovery Programmes	2%	-	2%
Koshish ek Asha	13%	11%	24%
Choodiyan	2%	2%	4%
Mehendi Tere Naam Ki	-	4%	4%

As was to be expected, serials have an edge over other programmes. The disabled viewers are equally addicted to the daily soaps being aired by the different channels. Again a similarity can be drawn the high TRP rating of KYSBKBT has its takers in this section of the viewers too. As 11% voted this serial to be their favourite. One noticeable feature of the results is that the favourite serial is “*Koshish Ek Asha*”, which was watched by 24% of the 55 respondents.

The mentally challenged respondents appreciated the serial yet they were the 9% of viewers voting for the bhajan programmes were from this section.

KBC one of the popular game show got a high of 9% too. All sections of disabilities viewed this program.

The 5% watching Discovery and 5% watching the National Geographic comprised of the hearing impaired viewers.

A quantitative study indicated certain interesting reflections of the disabled viewers. However *Koshish Ek Asha* a serial with a disabled representation, some in-depth interviews were conducted to ascertain more information on this preference. The interview data revealed that of 76% of the total respondents were aware of the disabled character in the serial. However their attraction to the serial was not because of disability representation. They found the story line as **“intriguing”**. All the same Niraj, the disabled character was the most popular among them as his situation was a possibility they could associate with.

While they did appreciate the serial, they highlighted some of the problems about the serial. A general agreement was there with respect to the serial's authentic portrayal of the difficulties faced by the developmentally impaired people. All the respondents agreed that the serial did inform the audience about the living reality of a mentally challenged person. One of the members of the **“Forum of Viewers with Disability”**, Rekha thought it was “true that a mental deficient person could easily be cheated and deprived of his rights by family members.” Further in the in-depth interviews it was found that all the respondents had a soft corner for Kajol the wife who is one of the favorite characters in the serial *“Koshish ek Asha”*. Yet others, like Manish and Meenu, were also fond of Kajol's character as she nurtures her husband and helps him to regain normal functioning. However, none of them believed such a cure was possible.

“Not even the doctors in the States cannot work such miracles ”was Preeti's (viewers forum member) comment adding, “if such cures were possible then there would be no mentally challenged in the USA.” This is a pointer towards media's tendency to fantasise and thereby give an unrealistic solution.

Answering the question why they preferred the serial, *Koshish Ek Asha*, the respondents in the Focus Group Discussions clarified enjoyed the innocence of Niraj. They found his child like quality as very endearing and longer, “liked” him now that he was normal. Interestingly, they were drawn to the serial not because it had a disabled character but just because the story was gripping ... and had the suspense of a “who dunnit”. Another important factor was the momentum that was kept up by bringing in characters with new complexities.

A very small percentage just 4 of the 55 persons interviewed did not know about the serial but this was because they lacked cable facility. Even some of the hearing impaired were aware of *Koshish Ka Asha* despite the fact that they did not watch the serials regularly.

Another serial that was rated as the second favourite was *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*: The serial according to the disabled viewers, evoked a sense of bonding with the family. It has also made many of the disabled realize that even normal persons have to

face challenges in life though the nature of the challenge might be different. One of the respondents, Meenu, an orthopaedically impaired person liked Tulsi, “because of the way she handles problems.” Seema and Sangeeta, found that serial replicated the societal treatment of the women who always plays second fiddle to the husband.” The episode being referred was in which one of the *bahudaughter in laws* expresses a desire to join the family’s business. She is however, not granted the permission by mother in law on the pretext that she was needed at home to do the house work. These traditional norms were adhered to, despite the fact that the family was financially well settled and there were other women in the house to do the chores.

Depiction of the disabled character

In general media is often accused of representing people with disabilities in a paternalistic and demeaning way. In the present study the respondents were of the view that most disabled characters were depicted as dependent (40%), happy and active (36%) and most important within the family 58%. This depiction fits in with the Indian reality in which families are the sole providers for the disabled person. It also reflects that the construction of the disabled character has responded to the voices of the disabled viewers who have strongly believed that family is a central aspect of a disabled person life in India. Many serials such as *Koshish ek asha*, *Mehndi Tere Naam Ki*, *Gharana* and *Yeh Hain Mere Apne* are some of the examples in this direction. However, a bare 7% rated the constructions as indicating that disabled are independent. In addition 24% rated the disabled as non employed. The message that seems to be appearing is that disabled people are not being cast as contributing members of society. However despite the rating of dependency the depiction does not portray them as sad or inactive. On the contrary they are assessed as active and happy. Although the survey did not question them about the possibility of marriage for disabled people in general, the in-depth interviews did ask questions about the possibility of mentally challenged persons getting married. Each one of the respondents said NO. Yet when asked why they felt so, they said that they had come across rare cases of such marriages but the wife nearly always deserted the man. It was therefore felt that such portrayals should be avoided as it leads to misunderstanding. Once again it was a pointer against the society that does not accept such possibilities

Characteris ation	Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)	Total
With the family	34%	24%	58%
Dependent	25%	14%	40%
Happy	24%	13%	36%
Active	20%	16%	36%
Non-Employed	13%	11%	24%
Independent	2%	5%	7%
Sad	7%	7%	14%
Without Family	4%	2%	5%
Employed	7%	9%	16%
Inactive	5%	2%	7%

Identification of disability

A total of 76% respondents could identify the type of disability and 7%, however could not identify the disability. Some of the respondents did not even answer this question.

Male % (aprox)	Female % (aprox)	Total
45%	31%	76%
4%	4%	7%

Programmes/serial to be promoted

The respondents were also asked a question about the kind of programme/ serial they would like the media to promote. 42 % of the respondents wanted an increase in disability related programmes/serials. This indicates that they do want the television to mirror their lives.

Besides this desire, the Viewers wanted to promote comedy and informative/educative programmes. Respondents observed in the interviews that there was ample scope for many more programs related to disabilities. They also felt that with many new channels coming up serial makers should also research and represent the character with disability in a realistic manner because a wrong image could do more harm done than good.

Kind of programmes you would like to promote	Male % (aprox)	Femal e % (aprox)	Total
Disability based programmes	31%	11%	42%
Programmes based on social issues	7%	2%	9%
Family Oriented Serials	2%	4%	5%
Comedy	2%	13%	14%
Entertainment	7%	4%	11%
Informative/Educative	9%	5%	14%
Nearer to Reality	-	4%	4%
Disable based films	7%	2%	9%
Historical /Moral Values	-	2%	2%

Satisfaction with the disability representation

58% of the respondents are not satisfied with the disability representation. 13% of the viewer's find enough representation of the disabled in the media. The rest of the 29% did not know whether their representation was enough.

Recommendations

- ⇒ More programs with subtitles.
- ⇒ Disability related programs with information on jobs and medical aids for the disabled.
- ⇒ The mentally challenged are happy with the programmes they are viewing .
- ⇒ The physically challenged would prefer to recommend the producers to include the problems of daily living that they encounter when they include a wheelchair user. This would help sensitizing the general population about the conditions the disabled live in.

PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

The process of data collection deserves a special mention. In fact the at the very onset of the interaction with the disabled viewers some aspects of media inaccessibility become visible. As mentioned earlier Nineteen percent of the respondents were hearing impaired. All of them felt marginalized by the televised images as most of them were not accessible and user friendly.

This resulted in a loss of both the entertainment as well as information. The respondents all professionals with a viewing average of two hours said that they had to rely on visual and were not able to enjoy the serials because they did not carry sub titles. Many of the younger respondents meanwhile said that they primarily watch the news for the hearing impaired because it was conducted in sign language.

The in-depth interviews revealed that many of them preferred to watch action movies. Also they loved watching WWF. Their favorite was the Discovery Channel. The study in fact found that as many as 8 out of eleven of them were watching it because it had the maximum amount of visuals and the commentary was only supplementary.

The well known painter, **Prabha Shah**, for instance, said that she drew inspiration for her work from the Discovery Channel and that she watches it as much as possible. The hearing impaired voted Nana Patekar as the best actor who played a disabled character . Most hearing impaired had seen this movie as was discovered during general conversation with many viewers.

Among the **Orthopedic** impaired who made up for 42% of the study watched an average of two to four hours daily. Perhaps this is the only group of disabled viewers for whom media is fully accessible. Understandably, a wide selection of serials and programmes are watched by them. Much of the viewing was done in the evenings during prime time and

on Sundays the average goes up. The respondents, who comprised of professionals and students, had a marked preference for serials.

And, while the favorite was undoubtedly Koshish Ek Asha with a viewing of 24% perhaps because the main protagonist is disabled. The study revealed that the viewers were closely following the developments in his life and that they shared his basic concerns regarding marriage and his status in the family. But they all felt that the scriptwriter had not portrayed the social status in the right perspective. The shared feeling among them was that the mentally challenged in India are largely ignored and that even the physically challenged are often not given their place in the family hierarchy. The other big favorite among the serials was KSBKBT with a following of 11%.

The mentally challenged comprised a 32% of the sample. All of them belong to institutes imparting vocational training. Though they all watched television for about four hours everyday they were unable to provide general information, identify channels or answer in-depth questions regarding the types of disabilities that were represented. But they were able to provide answers related to personal viewing habits. They were for instance aware that Niraj in Koshish Ek Asha had a problem and felt that he should be made independent. They also expressed appreciation for his caring wife.

About **9%** among them watched the Bhajan programs aired by various channels and most of them also watched KSBKBT. Like everyone else they liked the couple “Mihir” and “Tulsi”(KSBKBT).

The interviews revealed that the Mentally Challenged watched movies largely on their own. *Punit*(respondent), for instance seemed to know most of the story lines and could discuss the personalities of his favourite actors. *Neha*(respondent) meanwhile loves serials and interest she shares with her mother. Television is apparently upper most in her mind when she returns home in the afternoon. When questioned about the characters in their favorite serials they were able to identify the characters in those based on mythology but were confused about the characters in the soaps.

Findings

- ❑ The most watched programs among the disabled are serials.
- ❑ The preferred programs among the mentally and physically challenged were Koshish Ek Asha 24% and KSBKBT 11%.
- ❑ Star Plus won hands down with 58% of the total respondents voting it as their favorite. It was closely followed by Zee TV with 42% votes and Sony with 40% votes.
- ❑ Those hooked to the serials are those without other entertainment options. Most of them reach home and switch on their television.

- ❑ A majority of 42% of the total respondents said that there should be more programs dealing with disabilities and that this would raise the awareness level of society about the disabled.
 - ❑ 14% wanted to promote more comedy programs because life, they felt had too many problems. Of them, 13% female participants and 2% male respondent wanted comedy programs to be promoted rather than information.
 - ❑ A 14% of votes came up for informative/Educative Programmes, where female Females constituted 5% and Males 9% respectively.
-