
Portrayal of Women in Indian Media

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Abstracts

Media is the buzz word of the era of globalization. In fact, the rapid expansion of term and the concept of present form of globalization has been made possible only through the information revolution throughout the world. It has been widely recognized that media can play a substantial role in promoting and disseminating information and are key players in the social and economic development of women. Therefore, media largely reflects the life styles, socialization patterns, participation levels, cultural boundaries, political maneuverings, religious manifestations, educational standards, social hierarchy, and of course, society images of any given society. Globalization is a multi-faceted, mutli-disciplinary topic in its broadest reaches. It includes not only economic topics, but also political, social cultural and ideological ones. Political scientist, James Rosenau defines it as a label that is presently in vogue to account for peoples, activities, norms ideas, goods, services, and currencies that are decreasingly confined to a particular geographic space and its local and established practices.”

INTRODUCTION :

The last few decades have seen tremendous changes in the lifestyles of men and women across all over the globe and particularly so in our own country. Globalization, market economics and above all, fast strides in technology have affected virtually all facets of life be it religion or education, politics or employment, fashion or health care. With the advent of computers and telecommunications, media has also undergone a sea of change. Media in India, which until a few years back used to comprise of the morning newspaper, the radio broadcasts and the sole television network screen images of “doordarshan”, comprises today of a dazzling and at times mind boggling array of communication devices. The media, which was earlier merely a reporting device, is today a vibrant means of shaping, molding and influencing public opinion.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH :

Mass Communication media in India, like every modern and advanced country, comprises of the radio, the film, the television, the press, publications and advertising besides traditional media. The magic persuasiveness of its visual presentation and its admitted superiority over other media for propagation of social and economic objectives have together

placed the television in India with great priority. Besides the Prasar Bharti owned Doordarshan, now we have around one hundred T.V. Channels which provide news, music, films, serials, sports, religious preaching, and education and so on. Information revolution, in its truest technical terms in India, is the latest phenomenon. During the phases of economic liberalization in last one and half decade, the overall scenario of media in India has changed tremendously. The depiction of Women in Indian media, be it films, television serials, news, media, visual advertisement, or modernized traditional media, is indeed an area of great concern for people having interest in social science research and studies. Some studies found have that social issues related to women (equality of status and opportunity) got less than nine percent while sensational stories relating to women which were invariably crime stories got between 52 and 63 percent of items in newspapers.

Newspapers give place to the news related to rape, crime, politics, scandals, sports and economics, serious debates and discussions on issues related to women in general are completely missing. The columnists of the newspapers are rarely females. Most of them who find place in the leader pages are political activists or so-called socialites. In vernacular press the depiction of women gets a share only in coloured pages where there is a lot of gossip about actress of T.V. serials or film stars alongwith some hot pick-up and pin-ups. The English press also dwells upon providing snaps of hot babes and erotic photo-gallery of party-mania in multi star hotels. Even the photos of sports stars are also provided in a manner that depicts their body attraction.

The T.V. Channels have plenty of young, good looking, smart women (most of the times girls in their teens) either as news presenters or as reporters. These channels keep on changing their presenters in pursuit of fresh faces. And one may very easily assume that these girls have been employed mainly because of their face value. Because so many times the homework, the pronunciation, the background knowledge, the language and the overall presentation gets shoddy. Nonetheless, T.V. new channels appear to be a female-friendly medium. But unfortunately there also serious debates and discussions on real issues facing the women in India are completely missing.

Advertisements in both print and audio-visual media once again depict conflicting images of the woman. Advertisements in the 1980s saw the woman as a homemaker to her macho man, in the 1990s arrived the sensitive, complete man but the woman was still a sex symbol. The advertisement world has also dared to tread where it dared not before, in creating the sexist, abusive, insensitive and hormone-driven female chauvinist bitch. While there are ads that show career women, young independent girls who know their minds and are no longer the coy girlfriends, who tease boys, advertisements like the fairness creams do continue to occupy airtime. Advertisements that are often timed around events like International Women's Day promote consumer items through a "liberated" career woman. Such advertisements hijack terminology, tones and concepts without actually addressing the larger issue of women empowerment.

As far as showing women in advertisements is concerned, things seem to have only worsened over time. In most of the advertisements of recent times too, a woman is either washing clothes and utensils, cooking, serving food to family members or trying to make her husband feel better who's at that time reading a newspaper or suffering from cold. A woman does all this even when she's headache or backache. These advertisements arguably encourage sexism. They reinforce the old belief that a woman is supposed to forgo her own comfort and keep on doing household chores without getting tired.

In other words, the portrayal of women in the Indian media oscillates between these two extremes: the “mother India” and the “glamour girl” image.

In the journey of 100 years, Indian cinema has come a long way and so the women character. Showing many shades, the portrayal of women not only touched the lives of the audiences but also showcased the strength, beauty and complexity that define a woman.

The status of women in India is indeed paradoxical and contradictory. On the one hand, urban women in India have achieved great heights breaking the proverbial 'glass ceiling' of a rather patriarchal male-dominated society. On the other hand, there is also severe civic outrage over issues of domestic violence, rape and molestation, dowry deaths and female foeticide, to name a few. But, there also exists a significant group of women in the ‘other’ India whose stories struggle to find space in the media, driven as it is by market dynamics.

For instance, media coverage of rape from early to mid-1980s through the “ new millennium is something of a mixed bag, ranging from serious, concerned and gender sensitive through glib, superficial and celebrity-oriented to sensational, irresponsible and intrusive”. (Joseph and Sharma) But, while ‘incidents’ of rapes and molestations have been reported by the print media, both in the English language press as well as the regional language press in the past as part of ‘crime reporting’, the brutal rape of a 23-year-old girl in the capital city of New Delhi on December 16, 2012 and eventual death of the girl in Singapore made the media don the role of an activist. Ethical journalistic norms, reinforced by law, do not allow media to identify a rape victim and this incident, for the first time, saw media go upbeat about giving a face to the victim with pseudonyms like “Nirbhaya” (fearless one), “Jagruti” (awareness), “Jyoti” (flame), “Amaanat” (treasure), “Damini” (Lightning after a 1993 Hindi movie that projects a woman fighting against rape) or the “Delhi braveheart.”

Studies have shown that Indian women have shared an equal status with men in the pre-Vedic and Vedic ages. The gradual dwindling of the status of Indian women is often termed by social scientists as a comparatively modern phenomenon with long Mughal rule. Efforts to emancipate Indian women by social reform movements since 1800s found a voice in the press of those times. Social reformers from all communities of the country addressed these issues. A Parsee journalist Behramji Malabari captured the attention of the British reading public with his articles in *The Times* on the evils of child marriages and the tragedy of enforced widowhood for young women.¹ With independence in 1947 and the Constitution drafted in 1950, Indian women got several progressive laws including the right to suffrage where Indian women voted since the first general elections in independent India.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that whatever the form of media, there has been a dichotomy in women portrayal passing on conflicting messages to consumers of news and views. It would probably not be wrong to assume that such conflicting images are a fall-out of the socio-cultural crossroads at which India is today -- liberalization and modernization of attitudes and consumer behavior versus what is perceived as traditional, conservative rich Indian culture. And media reflects reality. Notwithstanding the role of media, attitudinal changes and changes in the perception of women's issues can come only from a change in the mind-set of people -- men and more importantly of women themselves. In a diverse country like India, it is important to look at

¹ *The New Cambridge History of India -- Women in Modern India*, Geraldine Forbes. Cambridge University Press, 2000

the effectiveness of media coverage of women's issues in totality, incorporating both English and non-English language.

There is a need for media training institutes to incorporate specific development issues, including gender sensitization, in their curriculum so that new journalists could handle such issues in a more serious and sensitive manner. Also, a synergistic networking among NGOs/individuals working for women empowerment, the journalists who play a key role in information and knowledge dissemination and owners of media organizations who must be committed to in-depth and serious coverage of women's issues. This will enable media to become more proactive.

Women's issues need to be dealt with not just as gender issues but as an integral part of development concerns and processes. Proactive media participation in women empowerment is the need today, going beyond mere coverage of incidents to larger issues on a regular basis. To ensure sustained and effective coverage, all those working in the field of women empowerment must understand media needs too if media has to effectively disseminate information. It is equally necessary for organizations working in this area to understand the language and style of media presentation and to recognize the importance of timeliness - a basic tenet of journalism. Despite facing stiff commercial competition to sustain itself, media can act as effective agents of change and will never ignore people's issues. For, people's issues form the basis of media survival and purpose.

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